As I write this column we are preparing for our annual ASIS&T Board of Directors retreat where the members gather for almost two days of discussion and planning. It might seem old-fashioned in the age of distributed working and collaborative meeting tools that we come together as a group in person, but in my view the face-to-face gathering is essential for our work. While basic examination and commentary on routine proposals and committee reports can be productively handled remotely, the retreat is an opportunity for the leadership to talk openly about the issues facing us as an association. Through co-location in a hotel or meeting space (this time generously donated by the School of Information Studies at McGill), members can focus without distraction on the important matters and gain a better sense of the collective view of issues than can be easily enabled through conference calls.

This year, in addition to the usual standing reports, we are allowing open space each day for discussion of the most pressing matters facing ASIS&T. Without revealing the precise agenda, I view all the discussion topics as fundamentally addressing the mission of ASIS&T in the coming years. Whether it is the experience of membership or the organizational structure of the society, all our conversations will explore where ASIS&T is heading.

EDITOR’S SUMMARY
As the ASIS&T Board of Directors prepares for the annual planning retreat, critical issues face the organization. Despite the centrality of information in the digital age and the focus, mission and international scope of ASIS&T, the decline in membership numbers since 2000 raises concerns about the association’s future and economic sustainability. To survive, professional associations face demands to streamline operations and justify services. The structure and processes of ASIS&T and its effectiveness at serving the professional community must be open to scrutiny. All members are encouraged to offer their thoughts on what works, what drives involvement and how to add value to reinforce ASIS&T’s position as the primary association for information professionals.

KEYWORDS
professional associations
strategic planning
If you read this column regularly (and that is a big “if” in my mind, given how few regular columns, presidential or otherwise, I read myself) you will know that ASIS&T is not a growing society, at least in terms of membership. In fact, the long-term trend (since 2000) shows a slow, steady decline in membership that raises important concerns about our long-term future. While it might be fun to imagine a smaller ASIS&T where each member knows the others by first name, such a model is unsustainable economically. We’re not there yet but the data are unarguable, and we need to address the matter now, not in a few years time.

That we face such issues when everything else information-related is the center of attention is, at first blush, somewhat odd. I do not see a better-positioned scholarly and professional society out there than ASIS&T, and the recent name change to reflect growing international interest surely strengthens our claim to hold the pole-position. Yet one must ask, given the data, is there still a need in today’s world for professional associations such as ours? In Race for Relevance, management consultants Coerver and Byers (2011) argue that the days of traditional professional associations are numbered, and they propose a radical makeover for survival. Their approach requires greatly streamlined boards, significantly empowered CEOs, robust technical infrastructures and rationalized services aimed directly at a clearly targeted demographic. Like so much management work I read, there is more than the occasional superficial analysis behind some claims, but the major points seem well taken, at least from my vantage point.

I have my own views on our structure and the rather complicated processes we appear to follow for even the most routine of actions, and I will be keen to hear from my fellow board members what they believe we should do. I also wonder, in a push to be taken seriously as a scholarly association, whether we might have overlooked the needs of the professional community. Surely we can serve both. I am really keen to hear directly from members themselves about how they see value in ASIS&T and what keeps them involved or lessens their interest in membership.

The term of a president is short, and drastic measures are not required, but this is an ongoing set of discussions that will be perhaps uncomfortable for some but are necessary for our future. If you want to have a say, don’t wait for a survey or the business meeting at the Annual Meeting. I’ve argued, and will continue to argue, that we need a better means of information sharing, be it a forum or other, for ongoing constructive dialog among members. Until that time, I encourage you to make your views known to me or any other member of the board directly. Over the years, ASIS&T has become my primary professional association, and I am committed to ensuring its longevity. I suspect you feel the same. The challenge then is for us to find the best means of adding value to our ASIS&T experience, and I suspect if we can achieve this goal, the future will take care of itself.