What ASIS&T Means to Me

by Naresh Agarwal

When I was pursuing my Ph.D. at the Department of Information Systems, School of Computing, National University of Singapore, my professor and mentor Dr. Pan Shan Ling told me, “You need to find your community.” When I inquired further, he explained that I needed to find a group of people across the world that is interested in and working on things that I’m interested in, a group that I could identify with. I, perhaps, didn’t fully understand him at the time; however, I went to a number of conferences and tried to mingle and fit in. Then, in 2008, I got to attend the ASIS&T Annual Meeting in Columbus, Ohio. Starting at the New Member and First Conference Brunch and continuing through all the sessions I attended and the meetings I had and noting the way I was made to feel welcome at every step, I instantly knew what Dr. Pan had meant about finding my community. ASIS&T was my community, and I knew it – the way I knew that this person was the one I was going to marry when I first met my wife years before. During that first meeting, I tried to soak in as much as possible about ASIS&T and its primary mission. I haven’t missed any meeting since then; that’s how I’ve come to know many of my favorite people who’ve been involved with ASIS&T for a long time. Like a bee attracted to flowers, I quickly got involved in a number of SIGs and in other roles within ASIS&T, such as being the Student Chapter Representative to the Chapter Assembly, leading to my current role as its Deputy Director. As chair of SIG/ED last year, my biggest sense of joy was to see it win SIG-of-the-Year (along with SIG/MET) in 2012, something that only became possible because I had such a great team. I see myself being involved in ASIS&T for a long time to come.

Naresh Agarwal, immediate past chair of ASIS&T SIG/ED and deputy director of Chapter Assembly, is the recipient of the 2012 James M. Cretsos Leadership Award. He is an assistant professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College, Boston. You can find out more about him at www.nareshagarwal.co.nr. He can be reached at agarwal<at>simmons.edu.
What I wish to share below is my advice for new members, some dos and don’ts, and my thoughts on some of the changes I would like to work toward and see implemented.

If you are a new member, the first thing you want to do is to try and attend the Annual Meeting. There are funding opportunities provided by different universities. Many SIGs (special interest groups) offer travel awards. You can also make use of online communities such as couchsurfing.org to find a local host in the city where the conference is being hosted. Other options include making use of the ASIS&T listservs to find people to share accommodations. The conference organizers could also help facilitate this undertaking – a need I’ve heard some students express.

Once you’re at the meeting, make sure you talk to people about your research and goals, about ASIS&T and about how you could get involved. Almost every person you talk to will be very helpful and will give you invaluable tips that will serve you for a long time to come. In addition to attending technical sessions and other open events, don’t miss the new members brunch, the leadership session and the secret students’ party (yes, there is one!). Say, “Hi” to many people but get to know three to five people well. In each subsequent conference, get to know a few more people, and soon you’ll feel yourself a part of the community.

The best way to feel at home is to find a way to contribute. Attend the planning meeting of one or more SIGs you’re interested in. I’ve also found it very helpful to attend the SIG Cabinet and Chapter Assembly meetings as well as the Annual Business Meeting. These meetings are very helpful in understanding the governance structure of ASIS&T. It is also helpful to get involved in the student chapter of your university and/or the regional chapter closest to you.

If you are a new officer in a SIG or chapter, it is easy to get lost. Since we are often busy with our studies, research or teaching, finding time to contribute requires discipline. One thing that I’ve learned through experience is it is best not to stretch ourselves too thin. It is best to get involved in one thing at a time. Each year, we can take on something else and gain experience over time.

Also, regular communication among team members is important. Often, a statement I’ve heard is that we come to the Annual Meetings and plan for the year, and then we come again the following year and plan. To avoid this syndrome, I’ve found it helpful to do two things right at the outset: 1) set up an email listserv such as Google Groups to easily email all officers (such sites also help archive all communication among officers for future committees); 2) set up monthly Skype calls to communicate among officers and to plan and carry out ongoing webinars and other activities through the year. Since most team members are dispersed geographically and often in different time zones, having avenues for synchronous communication, either through phone or Skype, is extremely important in helping establish a common context.

Each SIG and chapter should also think about issues of continuity and establish a mechanism whereby outgoing officers fill out a form with two columns to be passed on to new officers: 1) best practices (things that went well and that new officers would benefit from continuing) and 2) lessons learned (things that didn’t go well and that would benefit from change).

If a SIG or chapter aspires to win the SIG- or Chapter-of-the-Year award, it is helpful to go through the award criteria (available at the ASIS&T website) right before the first planning meeting and then plan your activities during the year accordingly. In order to enhance greater collaboration and knowledge sharing within and among chapters, SIGs and other bodies, the Chapter Assembly approved the following three changes at the 2012 Annual Meeting (something that officers of Student and Regional Chapters need to note):

1. Judging criteria for student and regional Chapter-of-the-Year awards will be modified to have 5 points allocated for collaboration with any SIG, chapter or a body within or outside ASIS&T. For the student chapter award, these points would be taken from the 40 points allocated for Chapter Activities.

2. We will create an opt-out (instead of opt-in) to the various lists for leaders. If you are a chapter leader,
you are automatically added to the key lists such as the list for all chapters and any other list.

3. From this point forward, all student and regional chapter annual reports will be made public (instead of them being viewed only by the jury), but only after the jury has decided on the award. A chapter submitting a report will have an opt-out option in the submission form if it doesn’t want the report to be made public.

In order to take on new challenges in an ever-changing world, I’d like to see ASIS&T become more agile and responsive to change, while retaining its core values. One area which I think requires urgent attention is the ASIS&T website. It needs to evolve from Website 1.0 to Website 2.0, making use of Web 2.0 functionalities such as Wikis, social networking, blogs, photos, videos and other collaborative features in the way it is envisioned, built and used. From a platform of information dissemination, it should evolve into a platform of information creation, contribution and shared participation. The various listservs are also largely used for occasional information dissemination by SIG and chapter officers. The members are often not aware of their potential for use for questions such as those related to their research, research methodologies or career advice. Logging on to the ASIS&T website (behind the walls of which lie many of the benefits of membership, including access to the archives of past webinars) requires remembering one’s membership ID, which may be hard for many members to recall easily. Members often don’t fully realize the benefits they gain by joining a SIG related to their research area or they don’t know the breadth of such benefits.

By calling for and facilitating increased collaboration and participation, we’ll find ways to provide members with their money’s worth in being a part of ASIS&T, as well as specific SIGs and chapters. I wish to contribute to this process of change and would like to invite all members to participate actively in taking ASIS&T to even greater heights.

I would like to thank all my letter writers and all those from within and outside ASIS&T who’ve inspired me. Thank you for accepting me as a part of this wonderful community and being a part of mine. As I try to pass on some of the kindness that I’ve received, I’d implore new members to do the same. If I can be helpful in any way to you or I can do anything to make your life any easier than it is, I’d be glad to help. Last, but not the least, remember to be happy always.