Strengthening ASIS&T’s Chapters by Enhancing Communication between Chapters and with SIGs

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EDITOR’S SUMMARY

While the ASIS&T Annual Meeting is an excellent opportunity for information professionals to gather, the special interest groups (SIGs) and chapters support interaction year-round. SIGs bring together members focusing on 21 areas of interest, while 20 chapters are organized by region, with 43 university-based student chapters. Each group operates under a governance committee or assembly, works through the year to deliver stimulating educational programs, projects and services, and to recruit and retain members, and submits annual reports on their efforts. A shared challenge rises from a tendency toward one-way communication to members from the Association, chapters, or SIGs, an obstacle that can be overcome through deeper use of the ASIS&T’s rich web content for members and involvement in chapter and SIG leadership. A number of resources are available to group officers to support SIG and chapter initiatives and administration. Sharing best practices through reports, awards, and virtual meetings strengthens all groups and the Association as a whole.

KEYWORDS

information associations communication channels meetings management leadership governance students engagement organizational communication Association for Information Science and Technology

The ASIS&T Annual Meeting [1] is a premier conference that brings together information professionals from North America and across the world. Many of the members have been coming to the Annual Meeting each year—some for more than four decades. It is such a wonderful community that when you come once, you want to keep coming. However, the meeting is not the only way for ASIS&T members to interact. They have two other avenues to make a difference and get involved throughout the year—the SIGs and the chapters.

What Are SIGs and Chapters?

SIGs [2] are special interest groups that focus on subject areas of interest in information science, such as education for information science, classification research, digital libraries, health informatics, information needs, seeking and use, and knowledge management. Each of the 21 SIGs has its own set of officers and organizes webinars, panels, symposiums, and other events during the year to engage its community. ASIS&T members choose one SIG with their membership but can be involved in multiple SIGs.

While the SIGs focus on areas of interest, chapters focus on geographical communities. There are two types of chapters—student chapters [3] and regional chapters [4]. Larger in number (there are 43 student chapters), the student chapters are housed in colleges and universities, largely in North America, but with a chapter each in Europe and at Taipei University. The regional chapters cater to professionals in geographical regions and cover areas across the United States and Canada. Reflecting the growing international nature and the name change of ASIS&T from American Society for Information Science & Technology to Association for Information Science & Technology, a recent Asia Pacific chapter was started, to join...
with the already active European and Taipei chapters. There are 20 regional chapters, 15 of which are currently active. Like the SIGs, both the student and regional chapters elect their own officers, hold membership drives and organize activities through the year. Unlike the SIGs, whose activities find an important place at the Annual Meeting (but can also continue during the year), the chapters organize their events and activities largely independently of the Annual Meeting and in their local campuses or regions.

**Governance of SIGs and Chapters.** The SIGs are overseen by a SIG Cabinet Steering Committee [2], which consists of the SIG Cabinet Director, the Deputy SIG Cabinet Director and a set of advisors. The chapters are overseen by the Chapter Assembly [5], which consists of the Assembly Director, the Deputy Assembly Director, the Immediate Past Assembly Director, a representative (or alternate) from each regional chapter and one assembly representative (or alternate) for all student chapters combined. The Chapter Assembly is advised by the Chapter Assembly Advisory Committee. The SIG Cabinet and the Chapter Assembly meet each year during the Annual Meeting.

**Annual Reports and Awards.** At a date before the Annual Meeting, each SIG is expected to submit a report [6] to the SIG Cabinet highlighting the efforts that the SIG has made in recruiting or retaining members, sponsoring and organizing programs to engage members either at the Annual Meeting or during the year, and creating publications and newsletters to reach out to members. In these reports, the SIGs can indicate if they want to be considered for the SIG-of-the-Year Award, which is decided by a jury. Similarly, the regional chapters are expected to submit an annual report [7] to the Chapter Assembly, highlighting efforts the chapter made to recruit new members, foster member participation in the chapter, retain current members and to follow-up with members who did not renew their ASIS&T memberships. The report also contains the meetings, projects and services organized by the chapter and the efforts made by the chapter to communicate with its members. The Chapter-of-the-Year Award is decided by a jury. Similarly, the student chapters report on their efforts in membership, activities/programming and communication areas through the year and are considered for Student Chapter-of-the-Year [8].

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**So, What Are the Difficulties?**

In an association as wonderfully connected as ASIS&T is, the difficulties largely arise from lack of communication – not having the right information at the right time (at a time of need), not knowing whom to contact and when the information is there, not knowing how to act on it. While there are various channels of communications, ranging from physical meetings [1] to webinars [9], newsletters, listservs [10] and Facebook groups, the communication is largely one-way dissemination from the association to members or from a SIG or chapter to its members, as opposed to two-way and multi-way interaction. The forum at which multi-way interaction is most visible and thriving is at the Annual Meeting, followed by mostly one-way dissemination of information during the year. An individual ASIS&T member or officer in a SIG or chapter is often not able to comprehend how all the pieces fit together. It is only when a member is continuously involved in the activities of the Association for a few years that the pieces start to fall together, and you finally have more answers than questions.

The following are a few among various useful things that individual ASIS&T members should know:

- Apart from a subsidized cost of attending the Annual Meeting or participating in webinars, you are not making full use of your membership if you are not logging on to the members only area [11] of the ASIS&T website. This area allows access to the ASIS&T digital library/ *JASIST* and to recorded webinars on many timely issues in information science and technology pertinent to one’s professional development. You can also search for and connect with other ASIS&T members based on particular SIGs, chapters or areas of expertise.
- If you’ve forgotten how to log in [12], the default for your user id is simply the first letter of your name, followed by last name. For example, the user id of John Doyle would be *jdoyle*. If your name includes a middle name, for example, John Robert Doyle, your user id would be *jrd Doyle*. The password is your six-digit ASIS&T membership number. However, you can change either of these once you log in.
A member can easily get involved as a SIG or chapter officer (you can write to the chair of any SIG, go to the SIG planning meetings held at the Annual Meetings or contact a chapter chair, officer or advisor). Your involvement can pave the way for professional engagement and years of fruitful relationships. Often, the roles include that of chair, chair elect, secretary/treasurer, communications officer and so forth.

**Difficulties Faced by SIG or Chapter Officers.** Once a member is elected an officer in a SIG or chapter, the degree to which s/he is aware of the duties and responsibilities depends on whether and how much information has been passed on from the outgoing chair. Some officers do a good job of passing the baton, but, at times, owing to a variety of factors or timing, this transfer falls through the cracks.

Each year a small number of SIGs and chapters submit their annual reports and may opt to be considered for the SIG/Chapter/Student Chapter-of-the-Year Awards. Generally, the SIGs or chapters that do well continue to do well each year, while others often struggle in various ways – ranging from filling officer positions to getting new members to organizing activities. Five of the 20 regional chapters are in need of revitalization. And while the major awards recognize nominations and are given out during the awards luncheon at the Annual Meeting, there are often no nominations for the other awards for regional chapters such as publication, event, innovation and member.

Active chapters may also face difficulty contacting their members due to the tedious process of obtaining membership data, which they receive in spreadsheets that may not always be clean or up-to-date or have clear demarcation about status of membership. If an officer wants to reach all his/her members, then s/he has to manually copy and paste member email addresses in order to create a mailing list with which to reach members. Individual officers are not always clear on the management of mailing lists.

The following are a few among various useful things that SIG or chapter officers should know:

- The ASIS&T website and the resources and documents listed under the respective pages for SIGs, regional and student chapters are a very useful source of information.
- There are few key people one can contact for questions and advice related to
  - SIGs – SIG Cabinet Director or Deputy Director;
  - Regional and Student Chapters – Chapter Assembly Director or Deputy Director;
  - Student Chapters – Student Chapter Representative or Alternative Representative;
  - anything one is unsure of – the Executive Director.
- The ASIS&T bylaws are a must-read and contain the answers to most questions one might have about the workings of the Association. For the latest copy of the bylaws, look on the ASIS&T website under About ASIS&T/Mission & Vision.
- An incoming chair of a SIG/chapter needs to be aware of the format of the group’s annual report at the start of the year to be prepared when the time comes to submit. Juries use the report when deciding the awards for the SIG/Chapter/Student-Chapter-of-the-Year. An awareness of the annual report and judging criteria can be very helpful in planning SIG or chapter initiatives for the year.
- There are funds that SIGs and chapters can apply for.
- A SIG or chapter cannot achieve much if its officers do not supplement asynchronous means of communication (email) with regular synchronous communication (online meetings or conference calls between SIG officers) and face-to-face or online meetings between chapter leaders and advisors. This interaction helps establish common context and helps set deadlines for individual accountability.
- Webinars are easy to set up with a quick email and write-up to ASIS&T headquarters, and they make for excellent programming.

**How Can Chapters and SIGs Be Strengthened?**

Chapters and SIGs can be strengthened by enhancing communication among the SIGs, among the regional chapters and among student chapters, as well as between regional and student chapters and between SIGs and chapters. It is only when communication is decentralized and moves to interaction rather than dissemination that the true potential of ASIS&T and
its members can be realized. It requires implementation of knowledge management approaches (see Agarwal & Islam [18]) in the working of the Association, its chapters and SIGs. These approaches are crucial for knowledge retention, sharing and transfer between outgoing and incoming officers. The Chapter Assembly has embarked on a number of approaches to enhance greater collaboration and knowledge sharing within and among chapters, SIGs and other bodies.

**Rewarding Collaboration.** The Chapter Assembly at the 2012 Annual Meeting voted to modify the judging criteria for student and regional Chapter-of-the-Year awards to allocate five points for collaboration with a SIG, chapter or other body within or outside ASIS&T. For the student chapter award, these points would be taken from the 40 points allocated for chapter activities. Suggestions for collaboration could include inviting regional professionals to keynote events, co-branding events with other library organizations or having regional chapter leaders mentor student chapters and provide additional resources for programs. The SIG Cabinet could similarly vote in and change its annual report to build in an expectation of collaboration with other SIGs or with chapters.

**Making It Easy to Contact Chapter Leaders.** The Chapter Assembly recently voted to create an opt-out (instead of opt-in) to the various lists for leaders. Regional chapter officers are added to chapters-l@asis.org and student chapter officers to students-l@mail.asis.org.

To make it easier for chapter officers to update/find current contact details of officers in other student or regional chapters, a shared spreadsheet was created [19], and chapters are encouraged to populate it with the name, designation and email of current officers. The officer contacts updated by chapters were also added to the chapters-l mailing list (based on the opt-out mechanism discussed above).

Regular communication with the chapters using the listservs includes informing chapters about the names and contact details of the Chapter Assembly Advisory Committee [5], Chapter Awards, Chapter Funds [17] and deadlines for annual reports [7], [8].

**Sharing Best Practices and Lessons Learned among Chapters.** The Chapter Assembly decided to make all student and regional chapter annual reports public [20] (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 or can contact the Chapter Assembly Director or Student Chapter Representative [5]. The idea is to share examples of best practices and to provide inspiration to other chapters. The reports serve to document best practices and lessons learned in three areas: 1) gaining and retaining members, 2) communication mechanisms and 3) ideas for events and activities.

**Increasing Interaction through Virtual Synchronous Meetings.** Regular (monthly or bi-monthly) online meetings of the Chapter Assembly Advisory Committee [5] have been instituted and are held using Skype or GoToMeeting. These meetings are helpful in establishing a common context in the work of the Chapter Assembly. Rather than just meeting once a year at the Annual Meeting, the Chapter Assembly has decided to hold quarterly online meetings of regional and student chapter leaders. The first virtual meeting/webinar of regional and student chapter leaders was held February 25, 2014. Collaboration and sharing of best practices was an important theme in the virtual meeting, with these questions raised to chapter leaders:

- Which student chapters are currently working with regional chapters?
- What was one recent successful program that the chapter organized and the lessons learned from holding the event?

The meeting was recorded [21] and made available for the chapter leaders or advisers who could not attend.

**Grouping Regional and Student Chapters for Greater Synergy.** Within ASIS&T, the term chapter means regional chapters, as evidenced by the Chapter-of-the-Year Award. Student chapters are referred to separately. At the 2013 Annual Meeting, Chapter Assembly discussed the role of student versus regional chapters – particularly in light of the fact that some regions with no chapters often had active student chapters. Others have active regional and student chapters where collaboration is encouraged. The
Assembly decided that it is important to harness the energy in the student chapters to help grow regional chapters. Rather than looking at regional and student chapters as separate entities, an attempt was made to color-code/group both regional and student chapters by geographical region for possible collaboration [19]. Both types of chapters could be strengthened if they support and collaborate with each other, as well as with SIGs. This relationship could be further strengthened if there is a representative from the student chapter in the local regional chapter’s leadership and vice versa.

The Chapter Assembly also discussed the need to reexamine its configuration that gives each regional chapter one vote at the Chapter Assembly, and all student chapters one combined vote. The Assembly will explore this further and, at the least, consider giving voice to those student chapters without regional chapter representation.

Creating Shared Collaborative Spaces/Enhancing Knowledge Retention across Years. A common Wiki for SIGs and chapters [22] provides a space that leaders of the Chapter Assembly and the SIG Cabinet can easily edit and keep current with useful information/links. Individual chapters are encouraged to collaboratively edit the Wiki and use their personal spaces [23] to transfer knowledge to future officers and share working documents, email drafts, links to Dropbox folders and other resources with other officers, chapters or SIGs.

Each SIG and chapter should think about issues of continuity and establish a mechanism whereby outgoing officers fill out forms 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).

This information can be kept in the Wiki space for individual chapters. Apart from the Wiki, a shared cloud space solution could also be implemented for SIGs and chapters to share the documents they create.

Simplifying/Providing Support with Annual Reports. Chapters are encouraged to get started on annual reports early rather than waiting for the end of the year. A space was created in the Wiki for chapters to indicate their plans for the year on membership, communication and events [24]. Once the annual report forms are simplified, the report writing could be integrated within the Wiki itself.

The report template (for both student and regional chapters) can be modified to address

1) rewarding collaboration (discussed above),
2) integrating the application for other regional chapter awards within the report itself, rather than requiring separate applications,
3) adding fields with plans for membership, communication and events that can be filled out at the beginning of the year (with what was accomplished filled at the end of the year) and
4) simplifying as much as possible.

In the first virtual meeting of regional and student chapter leaders, volunteers were sought, so chapters could share ownership of this process.

Orienting New Chapter Leaders. An orientation mechanism needs to be built for new chapter leaders (to provide support as they join). This orientation could be integrated with the first quarterly virtual meeting right after the Annual Meeting.

The Chapter Assembly has begun work on updating the Chapter Officers Manual [25]. A Wiki or Google-docs based mechanism could be adopted whereby the manual for new officers could be easily updated and kept current.

Increasing Chapter Presence at the Annual Meeting. While SIGs are actively involved and represented at the Annual Meeting, the only activity involving chapters is the Chapter Assembly Meeting (along with a traditional secret student party organized by the Student Chapter Representatives for the Chapter Assembly).

At the 2013 Annual Meeting, chapters were represented for the first time at the New Members’ Brunch, where the Chapter Assembly Director and the Student Chapter Representative spoke. The presence of chapters can be enhanced in the Welcome Reception.
Making It Easier for Chapters to Contact Their Members. An opt-out mailing system can be implemented for regional chapters (and possibly also for student chapters). The system needs to ensure that members are automatically added to chapter mailing lists, with an option to opt out, and that the mailing lists are kept current. When someone joins ASIS&T and selects a regional chapter, s/he should automatically be added to the mailing list created for that chapter. This addition should be done retroactively for old and ongoing members, thus for every ASIS&T member. A complete and up-to-date list would make it easier for all chapters to reach out to their members.

Reviving Chapters and Starting New Chapters. A mechanism needs to be adopted to revive the defunct regional chapters or to convert them into virtual chapters. Building on the model of the newly created Asia Pacific Chapter, new chapters could be created in Africa, Middle East, India, China and other regions. A phased plan for this expansion needs to be worked out.

Other Ways of Sharing Best Practices. Along with the Annual Meeting and the quarterly synchronous meetings of/with chapter leaders, chapter officers can brainstorm other ways of sharing best practices, including the Wiki, Dropbox, Google Drive or other cloud-based spaces, listservs, social media such as Facebook and Twitter, blogs, YouTube videos and Google hangouts.

With its name change, plans to hold Annual Meetings outside North America and creation of an Asia Pacific Chapter, ASIS&T is now a truly international organization reflecting membership of individuals from more than 50 countries. We have begun the process of redesigning our website and using social media for outreach and member engagement. Our hope is that ASIS&T and its SIGs and chapters will evolve from a platform of information dissemination to one of information creation and contribution and of shared participation.