



President's Column

Alan E. Willner



“LEOS is Our Professional Glue”

“The Force ... is an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together.” Obi-wan Kenobi, *Star Wars*.

“Through the Force, things you will see. Reaches across time and space it does. Other places. The future... the past. Always in motion is the future.” Yoda, *Star Wars*.

(OK, so it is a stretch to compare LEOS with the “Force” from *Star Wars*.)

What will your career look like in 5 years? 20 years? These are common questions if you take a strategic view of your professional development. How many of us know what path we will want to take in 5 years? How about next year? Life changes, our choices change, we change.

One key element to long-term planning is simple – do the best you can in your present position. By doing wonderful things, it enhances your reputation and your skill set. Hopefully, the people inside your own organizations will appreciate your contributions. However, those same internal people might or might not be able to help you towards your next career goal. External contacts are critical for solidifying your reputation and widening your strategic career options.

In general, we all try to meet people from other organizations, participate on professional committees, give conference presentations, and/or publish journal/newsletter articles. Not coincidentally, this is the bread-and-butter of LEOS, and we provide a high-quality forum that “surrounds” and “binds” our community. Our activities do seem to transcend both space and time. Space: people can migrate to a different institution but are still anchored with a distributed set of colleagues. Time: we can relate to papers published 30 years ago, and we know that our present work will stand the test of time and have a life 30 years from now. LEOS is our professional address, one that has permanency to it.

Let me raise an example that is bittersweet and that might seem a bit controversial. When I was a student, many of the seminal papers that I embraced came from the *Bell System Technical Journal (BSTJ)*. Today, the *BSTJ* is no more, and many of my students have never even heard of it. Does this diminish the long-term archival value of those papers? Unfortunately, I think yes. How would you feel if *JQE* or *PTL* ceased to exist in 5 years? Would you regret having published in these journals? LEOS members can feel secure that LEOS will be around for decades, as will our venerable journals.

A Fundamental Value of LEOS

“In risk perception, humans act less as individuals and more as social beings who have internalized social pressures and delegated their decision-making processes to institutions. ... Institutions are their problem-simplifying devices.” Mary Douglas & Aaron Wildavsky, *Univ. of California Press*, ‘82.

Your professional reputation comes from many ingredients, including: (a) the quality of your work, and (b) your ability to work and communicate effectively with others. These two items can make or break most of your future career options. In many ways, our journals, conferences, and volunteer committee activities help shape people’s opinions of you in these two critical areas.

In an “ideal” world, you would be judged simply on your objective merits, and everyone would form an opinion based on fair criteria that they would meticulously evaluate. Many times, unfortunately, this is probably not true. People’s opinions tend to form based on many subjective factors. Let’s take a scenario of a “Dr. D” trying to decide which researcher should be invited to speak at a conference. The guiding principles are that Dr. D wants: (i) the highest quality technical work, (ii) that is presented in a clear and professional manner, (iii) by someone

who will be relatively straightforward to interact with. Let's examine a few general characteristics of our decision maker, Dr. D:

1. People are busy and time is at a premium. If Dr. D is already personally familiar (through LEOS-related interactions) with a very good choice, will he expend much more time to search for a choice that might be a little better? Maybe, maybe not.
2. There is too much information at our fingertips, we rarely know all the facts, and we need help to judge the best quality. Dr. D has narrowed his decision to two choices, but one choice has many LEOS awards, journals papers, conference invitations, and committee chairmanships. Will Dr. D partially base his judgment on the LEOS stamp of high quality? Maybe, maybe not.
3. People tend to be risk averse. The last thing Dr. D wants is to be criticized for inviting a speaker who turns out to be a "dud" or too contentious. Therefore, will he invite a researcher that he has personally heard present, or will he invite someone just based on their published results?

You can effectively market yourself through active participation in LEOS-sponsored activities.

Membership: Avoiding "Out of sight, out of mind"

LEOS activities help the decision makers pick you. Even in our Web-based world, "face time" (e.g., conferences) complemented by "quality assurance" (e.g., peer-reviewed journals) is crucial.

There's an old expression that "it's what you don't know that can hurt you." Was your name mentioned as a potential candidate for a position, invitation or award? Was there anybody around the table who could say, "I know that person and she is dynamite"? Did somebody say, "Gee, I invited that person before but he was always so hard to track down"? Maybe even, "That person would make a great editor, but unfortunately he is not a LEOS member". You'll probably never know the answers to these and similar questions.

In some respect, this whole argument is somewhat contrary to our web-based culture. However, just like salespeople still value seeing the customer face-to-face, the same is probably true (if not more so) when you are trying to sell yourself and your ideas. In many ways, there is incredible value in a sit-down or hallway chat at a conference.

I want to emphasize one final point. Being a volunteer on a LEOS committee is a wonderful opportunity to interact with others towards a common goal. A unique feature of a LEOS committee is that it provides a neutral and non-threatening forum to showcase your organizational skills without any hidden agenda (hopefully).

The bottom line is that being an active LEOS member puts you in a position to see and be seen. Respectfully submitted,

Alan E. Willner

University of Southern California

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