



JOSA A topical editors S. Avramov-Zamurovic and A. Marino speak with authors and reviewers at FIO 2019.

OSA

CAREER FOCUS

The Benefits of Volunteering

Active committee work can open doors and create positive first impressions for early-career scientists.

Alan Eli Willner

It is often said that the golf course is the center of many business interactions, whether making deals or evaluating potential partners. One can learn much about a person's ethics and attitude in a seemingly mundane setting. Are they kind, encouraging, hard-working, humble, even-tempered, honest, helpful and fair? These are qualities that are difficult to turn on and off, at work or on the golf course, and they are crucial in developing goodwill with colleagues.

Volunteer committee work to an engineer is like golf to a businessperson: You are being observed by

others and fostering relationships. Furthermore, I think committee work has certain aspects that are uniquely advantageous to building a scientific career.

In a nutshell, volunteering is an opportunity to demonstrate that you work hard, strive for excellence, and are a great team player—all for the benefit of others and in a nonconfrontational environment. Volunteer committee work can take many forms, be it as a member on an OSA conference technical committee or an organizing committee for a team retreat at your company. Importantly, volunteering can start while one is

still a student, such as organizing an activity in a local OSA student chapter or at school.

Perhaps the key attitude in committee work is the sincere desire to serve the larger group, which requires leaving any personal agenda at the door. For example, if you are a member of a conference committee and other people think you are advocating for your own or your friends' papers, you can lose respect. On the other hand, I have often seen a person compliment a competitor's paper—and felt my own admiration and trust for that person grow dramatically.

Why volunteer?

Committee members experience camaraderie that often engenders bonding and warmth, and one can build lifelong relationships in the service of others. I see people years after serving with them, and I acutely remember the joy of working with them. Committee work can also be personally satisfying—you may learn new technical topics, nominate people for invited talks and be the bearer of good news.

Besides these warm and fuzzy feelings, what else is there to gain? Plenty. For example, after you help others, they tend to be predisposed to helping you. As OSA Honorary Member Milton Chang once said in an FiO plenary talk, "give to get." Chang was discussing business, but the advice holds true. Additionally, volunteering often means that activities are publicized with your name on them. One's professional reputation is significantly enhanced by joining a conference committee or journal board. Moreover, being part of such an activity means that someone felt you were good enough to be invited to join.



A. Willner (right) with T. Heinz at FiO 2010. Willner and Heinz worked together on OSA's Tech Council, Board of Editors and more.

Courtesy of A.E. Willner

One of the most important volunteering benefits for a young person is the chance to hone their leadership skills.

An obvious benefit of volunteering is that it increases the number of people who know you and your work. Indeed, the committee environment provides a very natural networking forum. Furthermore, volunteering allows one to develop sincere, trusting relationships with people who may become important in the future—such as the vice president of engineering at a company or the dean at a major university. Such interactions are much harder to foster once those people are sought after by everyone.

One of the most important volunteering benefits for a young person is the chance to hone their leadership skills. In one's day job,

leadership opportunities can take years to present themselves. In volunteer committee work, on the other hand, you can gain invaluable experience fairly quickly in management and organizational skills, team and consensus building, chairing events, and initiating and championing activities—such as a topical meeting or a journal special issue. You start to see where your strengths lie, in a very friendly environment.

Getting on a committee

How does one begin the process of engaging in volunteer activities, whether in a company or a professional society? Here's how I would approach it:

If asked to be on a committee, say "yes" quickly and enthusiastically.

You can easily get a reputation of saying "no." Early on, do things you don't necessarily love, and maybe next time they will ask you to join an activity that you do like. OSA Fellow Jim Coleman likes to say that people

Publish Rapidly in *OSA Continuum*

With a median time of 62 days from submission to publication, the Journal offers rapid dissemination of sound research across all areas of optics and photonics.



EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Takashige Omatsu
Chiba University, Japan

osac.osa.org

OSA | 100

who serve the community have a gene that doesn't let them say "no."

Enjoy the process. It's nice to have a prestigious position on a committee, but you really must enjoy the process and do a great job. As Steven Sample, former president of the University of Southern California, USA, used to say, "many people want to *be* president, but few want to *do* president."

Don't be concerned with honor. I remember someone being asked to serve on a committee, and they responded, "How about putting me up for vice president?" In that organization, I don't remember that person ever being asked to serve again. If prestige is your main goal, people can smell it.

Get your name out there. Whether inside a company or within OSA, let your mentors and other people know that you are interested in volunteering for committee work. Speak with company administrative staff and OSA staff, who often know a great deal concerning committee openings, timings and nuances. Staff can give insightful advice, and perhaps put a good word about you in an organizer's ear.

Go and actually volunteer! Don't forget that you are often doing the organizers a favor by volunteering, especially for something that might seem mundane.

Patience and positivity

I have a few final pieces of advice. One is to have a positive attitude. It is easy to be a nay-sayer as to why something cannot be done; instead, find reasons why something can be done. If it were easy, someone else would have already done it.

Also, treat staff with respect. This is their job and they are dedicated to it, so show appreciation, care and efficiency. Just like anyone, they respond to kindness and don't take well to being bullied. Staff provide a service that has guidelines, and

ignoring deadlines and emails makes their job harder. A pain in the neck doesn't get asked back, and a committee chair will often hear from staff about a problem.

Lastly, what about becoming chair of a committee? Credentials are built one step at a time, and no single path exists, but the typical route takes patience. Take journals, for example—good reviewers become topical editors, good topical editors become editors-in-chief, good editors-in-chief become Publications Council members and members of the Board. You get the idea.

Volunteer committee work can enhance your career in many ways, both personally and professionally. By helping others, you are helping yourself. **OPN**

Volunteer work can enhance your career, both personally and professionally. By helping others, you are helping yourself.

2016 OSA President Alan Eli Willner (willner@usc.edu) is with the University of Southern California, USA.