

ISA: What Is There to Do?

This will be the third straight month I've written about ISA. I am sure many of you, especially since so many of you aren't ISA members and see no relevance in becoming ISA members, are getting tired of this. So am I. So is former ISA Executive Director Glenn Harvey, who expresses himself quite forcefully in his letter in our Feedback section this



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month. Of course, in fairness to the people who have been leading ISA since he left, many of the problems that face ISA were created by Glenn and his management team. Glenn feels that it is quite possible that ISA has outlived its usefulness, and because of its inability to reinvent itself, ISA is doomed.

Glenn may be right. After all, as I pointed out last month, less than 0.3% of all potential ISA members worldwide actually belong to the Society. This is beyond irrelevance.

The single biggest problem ISA faces is members. Not lack of membership, but the existing members, each of whom has a vote at the Council of Society Delegates meeting. Granted, the votes are representative, so that the section delegate acts like a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, but they're responsible to vote the way their members want them to. That's why it took Dr. Tom Stout and me about a decade to get the bylaws changed to permit legislative advocacy, which ISA is now doing quite well, thank you. That's why it took Steve Huffman and Kim Miller Dunn and a whole band of intrepid leaders over a decade to get the silly name change done.

Major change in the Society must be agreed to by the membership, most of whom won't sit still for major changes. Many simply like their ISA the way it was.

There are some things a dynamic leadership can do, if they want to, that would circumvent the need to ask the membership—things that need to be done right away. One of the most important is to abandon the abortive Automation Federation. Now that ISA has Automation in its real name, the AF is irrelevant and a duplication of effort. The compliance institute effort needs to be abandoned or cut loose of ISA to live or die. Sometimes you just can't do all the good ideas,

More staff needs to be cut. Sorry, many of them are my friends, but it has to be done. ISA staff is still far too large for its membership. There are many things that ISA does because they have always done them, rather like the children's song, "We're here because we're here, because we're here..." Now is the time to do ruthless triage on these things. ISA might want to outsource some of these things, such as publishing books, training, etc. for a royalty or a percentage. Other people simply do these things better than ISA can afford to. I talked about membership last month. But, the Council of Society Delegates is about as likely to vote itself out of existence as the U.S. Congress is.

ISA has another problem—it isn't really "international at all." ISA has had great difficulty getting traction in many parts of the world. Some places have their own automation societies, and have no use for ISA. ISA needs to meet this head on.

There have been calls lately for ISA to spend a significant chunk of money (\$300K to \$450K) on an outside consultant to tell them what to do. Come on. ISA has been doing studies since Glenn was running it, and the end result is the classic rearrangement of the deck chairs. ISA's executive board needs to hire a business turnaround specialist, not another association manager or do more studies—or divvy up the money and go home.

It is possible that Glenn Harvey is right. But if ISA dies, we'll have to invent another society to help keep automation a real profession. Maybe we should do that anyway. ■

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