



Member Value

Still first after all these years

LISA R. HARRISON, SR/WA, R/W-URAC, R/W-RAC, R/W-NAC



During a recent e-mail exchange regarding our newest Chapter in Nigeria, International Vice President Wayne Goss, SR/WA asked an interesting question: Do you think Frank C. Balfour and the other IRWA founding fathers imagined that our Association would become the global leader that it is today?

I suspect that Mr. Balfour, without knowledge of the technology to come, never dreamed we could have achieved such growth in both size and relevance around the globe. The question, however, sent my mind racing about how things have changed and to what extent our current actions will impact the member value for the Association in the future.

I imagine that Mr. Balfour and a small group of his contemporaries started meeting for lunch to chat about the issues facing them at work. The interaction was so enjoyable, informative and perhaps cathartic that each one told another who then joined the mix until they ultimately formalized and created the inaugural chapter of what is now the IRWA. Mr. Balfour and his fellow members shared information, developed professional and personal relationships, and created educational/employment opportunities through their membership. Their communication model was based on the circumstances and norms of the time. They held face-to-face meetings, luncheons, met for happy hour or dinner and played an occasional round of golf.

As more members joined, distance became an issue. Lunch hours were limited so you had to live or work within a certain area in order to get the most from your membership. As a result, the Association evolved and new chapters were formed in other locations. The membership now had the capability to discuss local issues yet share with other locations in order to develop best practices and expand the networking opportunities, thus creating more member value.

Nearly 80 years later, we have a membership of nearly 10,000 from multiple countries, including two chapters on the continent of Africa. Our global growth potential is unlimited thanks to the tools afforded us by technological

advances. Yet, I believe member value continues to be based on the same things Mr. Balfour and his colleagues wanted: information exchange, the development of professional and personal relationships, and access to education and credentials and thus, employment opportunities.

The communication model is what differentiates us from our founders. Distance no longer has the same impact it once did. Technology allows us to communicate in so many different ways that geography is no longer the primary way we connect and/or identify ourselves. We can connect with others in our industry from around the globe, whether it is oil and gas pipeline, public agency, transportation or electric/utilities, through the specific industry committees and our member network. In addition, we can connect with others in our discipline whether you are from Nigeria or Canada by becoming active in the communities of practice. Even consultants have a place to connect via the Right of Way Consultant's Council.

If it is true that we crave from our membership the same things our founders were seeking, does that mean that the Association's future members will define its value in much the same way? Can we anticipate and prepare for the new methods of providing that value? I think we can to some extent. My thoughts: it all rests on the degree to which our members are willing to participate, willing to share, willing to invest, willing to evolve and willing to work; the leadership is organized, committed, open-minded and cooperative; and the staff is dedicated, loyal, experienced and educated.

I have had the pleasure of working closely with the hard-working staff that numbers less than 25 people who provide excellent customer service to our large membership. I can assure you they meet the above criteria in spades! Our current leadership is the most cooperative I have experienced during my tenure. The willingness of this group to try new things and have creative, respectful dialogue that results in action is both productive and energizing. So the rest is up to each of us as members. Are you willing?