

Staying engaged: Community involvement for industry professionals

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Bridging the gap from campus to career

As professionals within the industry, our time is largely devoted to the demands of our respective organizations, alongside personal responsibilities and recreational pursuits. These competing obligations often limit our capacity to engage in volunteer efforts that support and advance the global optics community.

The change from life as a student, where SPIE Student Chapters make staying involved easy and fun, to professional life can be startling enough that many abandon the larger SPIE community entirely. (This challenge is also true of academic professionals, of course, yet they tend to remain more involved as community engagement is more traditionally seen as within the scope of their official duties.)

The goal of this short article is to help industry professionals stay engaged or re-engage with the community by highlighting the personal benefits and showcasing strategies for convincing employers that they, too, will benefit from having engaged employees.

Personal reasons to engage with professional societies

Engagement with professional societies such as SPIE offers a wealth of personal benefits that extend far beyond technical development.

Networking

- SPIE provides chances for you to meet interesting and innovative individuals from around the world who can connect you with new job opportunities, find a mentor, or introduce you to ideas you've never considered.

Leadership opportunities

- Whether serving on SPIE's governance committees or chairing a session at a conference, getting involved with SPIE provides a multitude of personal growth opportunities through leading different efforts. Collaborating and deliberating within SPIE committees with individuals from around the world provides business acumen and **increasingly valued** soft skills.

Impacting others

- Volunteering provides satisfying opportunities to benefit the lives of other members of the community, whether through teaching courses or participating in scholarship selection committees. Students at these events are always hungry to hear perspectives and career advice from industry representatives.

Strategies for convincing your company

To successfully advocate for your involvement in SPIE activities, it's essential to frame participation not only as a personal or professional development opportunity, but as a strategic advantage for your company.

Supplier and partner meetings

- Conferences provide a cost-saving opportunity for a company by gathering the community in one place, enabling you to meet with many people in person in a few days that would otherwise have required many trips. Be prepared when you pitch event attendance so you can highlight the customers who will be attending or the key conference topics that are relevant to your business.

Business intelligence

- Public presentations by academics, customers, and competitors share important information on new technologies, upcoming needs, and risks for your business. Your presence at the conference and the notes you take and share around the company afterwards offer very valuable insights to future directions your company may pursue. Offer to present a recap of the conference to your colleagues to ensure the information is absorbed.

Community goodwill and increased company visibility

- Your participation in SPIE committees and conferences makes your company look good to the community and helps with name recognition. This is a less tangible benefit, but it's worth mentioning when selling the idea of participation to leadership. Posting about your involvement on LinkedIn can help amplify this effect.

How to get started

Most of the time, organizations are happy to recruit new volunteers, so getting involved isn't as difficult as it may seem! Reaching out and indicating your willingness is usually all that is needed.

Conferences

- If there is a conference attend frequently or a topic you are passionate about, go introduce yourself to the conference chair at the event and share your interest in contributing. Serving on a conference committee can be a compelling reason to convince your company to attend in person.

Committees

- SPIE's website lists out the main governance committees and includes an email link for how to indicate your interest. Most committees are for three-year terms with relatively low time commitments over the year.

Your network

- Reach out to someone at your company or someone in your network who you know is involved and ask them for advice on how they stay involved and how they were able to convince their company to support it.

Finding support

- Ask your manager where conference funding comes from in your company and seek the source out. Find the right value proposition from the strategies suggested in this article, or tailor them to your own company's needs. Keep following the money chain of command until you find someone with the right pool of funds willing to support your time and travel costs.

A smart investment for you, your company, and our larger global community

Staying involved in the community is personally rewarding, smart for businesses, and still possible for industry professionals despite all our other commitments. Ask anyone in optics, and they'll all tell you that the optics community is small and close-knit, where a chance encounter at a large event may become a valuable connection to you or your business in the future.

No matter where you are in your career as an industry professional, consider pursuing a volunteering opportunity with SPIE to help grow yourself and our shared community.