

A Preliminary Investigation of
Information Consumption, Production, and Need in
A Minority-Serving University Student Organization:
A Case Study of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Section
of the Society of Women Engineers

SUMMARY

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EXECUTION

- When interviewing students, the academic schedule must be taken into account. Engineering students in particular tend to have grueling weeks leading into exams.
- Forcing people to read and sign the consent form is a good way to lose volunteers. Some people flip out when they see phrases like *you should not experience any risks from participating in this research other than those encountered in everyday life or without penalty or loss of the benefits to which you are otherwise entitled...your decision will not affect your grades or status at this university*. My three volunteers had no problem with me interviewing them, but seemed very put off by the wording of the consent form and being forced to sign a formal contract.
- I learned that, at least in SWE, members tend to congregate in the office at the beginning of the school year to meet one another, then as they become more involved with committees and subgroups within the organization, tend to stop spending as much time in the office. This made finding members to volunteer difficult.
- Some of the underlying questions turned out to be somewhat nuanced and it is not clear whether expanded interviewing would be able to tease out those nuances, or if it would be necessary to deploy an online survey to run in conjunction with the interviews and gather a more representative sample of the organization.

THINGS LEARNED

- For members, the committee mailing lists are the most important source of information, since participation for active members revolves around these committees. The SWEekly mailing list is the major way in which members and officers alike keep tabs on what is happening elsewhere in SWE. The major reason cited for the importance of these two mediums is their “push” nature.
- The Web site fared very poorly as a source of information, attributed by interviewees to the fact that it requires explicit action to seek out needed information, versus SWEekly’s compact version delivered right to their virtual door step.
- Fair to speculate that regular users of the Web site fall into the demographic of the most active SWE members who use it to supplement their knowledge of the current “state” of SWE.
- Online calendar was the least-used resource, even among active users of the site. Despite its less intuitive presentation format, the SWEekly’s compact form and push nature won it the place as the primary information source for event dates.
- The Web bulletin board emerged as the most useful potential information technology addition for the SWE web site. It would encourage true dialoging and ongoing discussion and its transparency has the potential to encourage greater fluidity in the roles that members play in the organization.
- Previous literature has found that official information channels need to be supplemented by forums in which members can interact informally and engage in multiway dialog. Interviewees found that Web bulletin boards could provide many of the same benefits as face-to-face meetings in addressing these needs.
- Those involved with outreach recognize a need for differentiating local and remote audiences and this need translates to separate branding for the national site. However, as suggested in previous literature, the need for a consistent external identity means that a separately-branded national site must have strong ties back to the local site.

IMPLICATIONS

- Redesigning the SWE site (or at least offering a special version of it) to better address the needs of “power users” is one such modification that might promote greater use by making it more relevant to the needs of those who use it.
- It is apparent that the calendar in its present form is not sufficiently useful to active SWE members. If the calendar were to be redesigned to allow members to integrate it with their personal calendars that they check on a more frequent basis and hence make it into a more “push” modality, then it might be possible to increase its utility.
- Finally, the enthusiastic preliminary response regarding Web-based bulletin boards suggests they have the potential to change a number of ways in which committees conduct business and offer a way to allow members to participate in the organization in a far more fluid role than previously possible. They open the door to a far more democratic and fluid organizational structure, in which members can float between committees, participating in any event that appeals to them, rather than restricting themselves to a single committee.