

I Am a Volunteer and I Do...

Mike Wilkinson



What activities have you undertaken as part of your volunteering

I've been an INCOSE volunteer for over 10 years now, and in that time I've done a wide variety of different things—finding that one thing leads to another and then another in a fairly unplanned fashion.

Highlights for me include taking on some of the senior 'managerial' roles, like UK Chapter President and Academic Director, as well as more technical roles, particularly in the area of system architecture. My volunteering began in 2006 as a UKAB representative, and as part of that role I was asked to look at whether there should be a UK Chapter Architecture Working Group (AWG). When the answer came back 'yes', I was to be a Co-Chair, a role I still perform (and which celebrated its 10th birthday last year). The AWG led to me getting involved in some international architecture activities and then

being appointed as Co-Lead for the international AWG in 2008, which I subsequently became Chair of in 2015.

Back in the UK, I was appointed Chapter President in 2010, and after that I took on the Academic Director role in 2013; altogether I spent a total of six years serving on the UK Council. During my INCOSE journey I've also been involved in several other Working Groups and Local Groups and have regularly participated in both the UK and international events. You might think I'm a hopeless serial-volunteer – perhaps you're right!

What Originally inspired you to volunteer for INCOSE UK?

My first job out of university was with a small company established by a physicist who'd been introduced to the emerging discipline of Systems Engineering while working in the USA. Although I was deeply involved in doing Engineering, I'm embarrassed to confess that for a long time I didn't think INCOSE had much to offer me, despite the company being involved in some of the original meetings establishing the UK Chapter!

My decision to join INCOSE and then to get involved in its activities came only later on, after INCOSE and Systems Engineering had developed a little.

My employer at that time was aware that Systems Engineering was gaining in prominence and many of our customers were interested in it—were many of our competitors—naturally the company wanted to understand whether there was "anything in it for us". After attending a few INCOSE UK events it became clear to me that there was a great opportunity to work with others, through INCOSE, to build a better corporate capability and to help shape and mature this still young discipline.

What do you feel you get out of your volunteering?

From a "satisfaction" perspective, I've always enjoyed intellectual challenges, particularly when working collaboratively with intelligent and creative people; so it's not surprising that I've really enjoyed participating in the technical Working Groups, especially when we've focussed on advancing the "state of the art".

I have greatly benefitted by learning from experts, and I've also found it satisfying as I've become more knowledgeable to be able to provide some technical leadership and share my own insights and experiences with others. In the senior management roles, what I wasn't expecting so much when I first got involved was the sense of satisfaction that comes from doing something that is primarily for the benefit of others—other words from 'giving something back'. This might sound a bit cheesy but I suppose it's what attracts many people to voluntary work, not just in our field.

Looking back, I feel very lucky to have been welcomed into the INCOSE community, which has been a key factor in my personal and professional development, as well as the source of many enduring friendships.

Do you have any advice or feedback to offer anyone who is considering volunteering?

Volunteering does take time and effort, so if you are thinking of volunteering I recommend you work out why you want to do it and what you hope to get out of it. It will probably help if you can articulate the benefits to your employer (as

well as yourself), as you will most likely need your employer's support to commit significant time.

I would suggest participation in a Working Group as a good first activity as it's relatively easy to see the benefit and it's not too time consuming... The most important thing is to make sure you balance your enthusiasm to get involved with your capability to deliver your promises!

If you are thinking of doing one of the 'bigger' roles you will probably need to make a business case to convince your employer—which case it would be worthwhile having a chat with someone who's already done it; there are plenty of us around.

I would advise anyone who's wavering to just give it a go and get stuck in. After all, what have you got to lose?

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