

I Am a Volunteer and I Do...

Tim James



What activities have you undertaken as part of your volunteering

I am a committee member of the Bristol Local Group (BLG) and have specific responsibility for communications and take my turn to organise events, along with other committee members. The purpose of the committee is essentially to put on talks and other events we think will be of interest to our local INCOSE membership.

As a committee, we try to meet every other month, and to put on an event between those meetings. This means we try to meet six times per year and to put on six events per year, but it doesn't always work out like that of course. I think we put on six events in the first six months of this year because we had the good fortune to find a series of speakers in short succession. We have given ourselves a bit of a rest over the summer, but are now beginning to plan events for the autumn.

What Originally inspired you to volunteer for INCOSE UK?

I first started attending BLG events in 2005 when I was working in the aerospace industry as a quality engineer. I had learned about Systems Engineering on the post-graduate course I had been doing previously and heard about the INCOSE local group through that. I found the events interesting and enlightening, and also enjoyed meeting the other community members. I wasn't a systems engineer though, so at that point didn't become a paid-up member. I just thought it was brilliant the group existed, and I was able to attend events for free.

By 2008, I changed industry to take on a leading role in an airport construction and logistics business and then when the recession struck I moved away from Bristol to be closer to the centre of operations at Heathrow and Gatwick. I then lost touch with INCOSE and the BLG.

After we sold the business and I moved back to the Bristol area in 2014 to take up a more socially focused role in the NHS, I picked up where I left off and attended a BLG event in early 2015.

It was here that, while giving the Parish Notices, Paul Handisides the BLG Chairman, said the committee could do with an additional member or two as they were short and needed more help. I wasn't particularly looking for something to be involved in, but at the time it just seemed like the right thing to do. I felt the local group was a fantastic thing to have available, and didn't want to see it suffer or disappear. I also thought it would be a great way to help me to develop my knowledge and understanding of all things systems engineering and systems thinking, as I'd spotted the potential for their use in the NHS.

What do you feel you get out of your volunteering?

I really enjoy it. I think it satisfies an entrepreneurial element of my personality that working in a large organisation can't satisfy as easily. It's a bit like we are running a franchise. We have to treat the INCOSE brand and ethos with respect and work to positively enhance it, but we get a good degree of freedom and autonomy to put on whatever events we think our members/audience will appreciate. It's been a lot of fun trying to find speakers, arranging the talks, working on developing how we promote talks and strengthening things like the standard templates we use. It is a bit like trying to develop and grow a business.

I've enjoyed the curatorial aspect of organising events. My particular interest and background is more in the area of services and organisations than hardware and products, so it's been nice to be able to find interesting speakers in those areas and to bring that flavour to the programme. Of course, we're always mindful to keep a balance in the programme and to cater for those who are more pure engineering in focus. Mixing things up a little has been interesting and seems to have paid off and we've attracted some big audiences.

I have also enjoyed working with the other committee members and getting to know the regular attendees at our events. I find the INCOSE crowd to be a diverse and interesting one, and have found it really helpful to be able to build a network of like-minded people. So inspired have I been with the field and the people I've met, that I've established a systems thinking learning group where I work, and several contacts I've made through BLG have kindly come to speak to us. I write up our sessions here: www.systemsthinkersanonymous.com.

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

Just do it. You have nothing to lose. You can do as much, or as little as you want.

I've discovered something about myself through doing this. That is, I am the type of person who volunteers and gets involved with things, and enjoys doing so. Previously, I'd always thought that applied to some other group of people, but not really me. Since stepping forward, and enjoying it so much, I've also become involved with a few other unrelated groups on a voluntary basis.

I think INCOSE membership is incredibly good value. I used to be a member of another professional membership organisation, and paid about four times the amount in annual membership, but felt I gained only a fraction of the benefit I gain from INCOSE.

Having said that, what makes the membership really fantastic value are the opportunities to get involved as a volunteer and the benefits you get from that. INCOSE is a well-established organisation, but as it and the discipline of Systems Engineering are relatively young, there is an opportunity to be part of a growing and developing thing and to be able to influence it and add to it. It's great.

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