



Do we really want innovation?

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I was pondering the meaning of innovation, and I had some questions. What is innovation? A thesaurus only offers us words like novelty, improvement, and originality. The dictionary isn't any more helpful, yielding: the act or process of inventing or introducing something new.

But what is something new? If it is new to you and I, is that new? Is new innovation? If I paint my house a new colour, that's a new look. But am I being innovative? Do improvements yield benefits? Maybe to me, but what about my neighbours who might not like my bright "new" yellow house? Perhaps most importantly when it comes to product innovation, does my innovation translate into something someone would want to buy?

Every year, colleagues of mine and other industry experts ponder, discuss, and even argue some of these points and related concepts around innovation. Every April, we convene at a unique conference in the wilds of Scottsdale, Ariz. The conference, COFES — the Conference on the Future of Engineering Software — is not your typical rubber chicken and mashed potatoes venue. Unlike a typical conference, it is not open to the great masses. Nor is it a "join a society and pay your entrance fees" conference. It's a conference, and if I may be permitted to use the word I'm examining, that is truly innovative.

Attendees pay a registration fee for all the fun and games, but you must be invited. It is a short list of invitations with a limited capacity by choice.

What makes this conference unique — and innovative — is the way organizers conduct it and the backgrounds of the people that are asked to attend. Attendees are privy to some thought provoking presentations, offering discussion points that other conferences also try to offer. What's different here though, is that attendees are asked to do real work. You pay for the privilege to work at a conference. Now you may question your sanity at the thought of doing something like this. Many attendees that I've talked with, however, say they want to return. Many tell me this has been the best conference they've attended and that they have derived more value in the four days of COFES than they have from years of conference attendance.

Now the work is not hard in the traditional sense. You're not asked to assemble a truck or dig a new swimming pool or contemplate the Theory of Relativity. But it is difficult because you are asked to think.

You aren't asked to think about your day-to-day job, or the bills you have to pay or how to solve world peace or feed the world. You are asked to think beyond your normal constraints of your engineering job and experiences. You're asked to take what you know and throw it out the window and at the same time use it.

During the event, there are times you will hear truly inspiring presentations from key thought leaders in industry, and times for working sessions when people are asked to get together to discuss important topics in the field of engineering. These ideas are collated and presented to the group. There is also ample time to engage in the much-neglected area of schmoozing.

I started this column with the notion to discuss innovation, and you might wonder why I ended up discussing an engineering conference. But the conference proves that many of us really do want innovation. We all want to find ways to solve our complex problems more completely and are always eager to find new tools to help us out.

COFES is an innovation in conferences, because it addresses many of the things we all hate about conferences. This is one of the reasons conference attendance for most trade shows and professional organizations continues to dwindle or consolidate into mega-shows. We all know what it's like to attend Mega-Show 200X, wander the floor and fill our bags with paper we soon toss. Looking, looking for something, looking for innovation in a sea of variations and simple product extensions. But we're not looking for new for new's sake. We're looking for a reason, even if we don't recognize it.

Our search for innovation is not a search to be different just for the sake of being different. We want to make things better. For example, some smart people solved the problem that caused songs to skip and dance while joggers jog. They can now continue on in perfect step because designers eliminated moving parts using flash memory. The MP3 player is an innovation, truly new and improved, that many are interested in purchasing.

So to sum up, I truly believe that we desire innovation to help solve problems that more completely match how we want them solved, and the future state we'd like to be in.

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