

Guilt Free

Why go to conferences? With access to databases such as IEEE *Xplore*, there's no need to attend a CDC or CCA or ACC to read the latest papers; everything ends up on the Web, sooner or later, usually pretty soon.

I admit that sometimes I'm ambivalent about attending conferences. From my computer I can access hundreds of journals and millions of documents—more than I can ever hope to read. I don't even need to leave my chair. On the other hand, attending a conference requires serious time and effort, not to mention cost. I need to physically move myself (by car and airplane) and sustain myself (through food and lodging) for the duration of the trip. That's real gas, real food, and real hotel rooms (which sometimes cost as much per night as the airfare), all so I can listen to some talks that will be available on my PC if I simply wait a few days. In addition, the three to five days it takes to attend a conference is three to five solid days of work I can get in by sitting right where I am now. And I can choose from millions of documents to read while I'm waiting for another thousand to get added to the bunch. Why go?

I won't try to argue that a conference is a vacation. It's work. Sure, if the venue is nice, I might skip some talks to sit on the beach or go a day early to see a city that I've never visited before. But it isn't a vacation when I'm in the presence of 1000 experts in systems and control theory. There's simply too much to talk about.

Talk? I can "talk" to almost anyone I wish to over the Web from all over

the world. A quick technical question to someone in India. A comment to someone in Brazil. An update to a coauthor in the U.K. Still sitting.

So why go to a conference? When I worked in industry, it required some effort to get permission to go to a conference. Even if I had the funds on a contract, I needed to get multiple levels of signatures. Management needed to show the auditors that my jaunt was approved by the sponsor, else overhead would be forced to pay the price.

So I developed a certain "guilt" in taking such trips. Did I bring anything back that made the trip worthwhile? Was the week away from my desk warranted?

But something happened once that changed my view of conferences. I

was working on a problem for some time, and during a conference I happened to mention my current project. The person I was speaking with casually mentioned, "Oh, you mean the suchandsuch problem that soandso's been working on." That information saved me months of effort and made what I was doing more relevant and meaningful. All it took was a chance conversation that wouldn't have happened if I hadn't made the trip. In terms of "gain," a few days input was amplified to a few months output. The benefits were staggering.

Information resides in documents, which we painstakingly write for publication and dissemination. But documents are only one form of communication, and they're static. In a



Dennis Bernstein on the coast of Maine.

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presentation at a conference, the speaker gives you a spontaneous explanation that goes beneath and beyond the dry verbiage of the paper. What motivated the work? What was interesting, surprising, or challenging about the project? What insight was crucial? Information resides in documents, but unwritten—hidden—knowledge resides in people. Access to hidden knowledge requires live presentations and hallway conversa-

tions, which is what conferences make possible.

On December 12–14, 2007, the IEEE Control Systems Society (CSS) will host the 46th IEEE Conference on Decision and Control. Think of the conference as a three-day opportunity to soak up the kind of hidden knowledge that would be virtually impossible to glean from static publications. Use the conference as an opportunity to benefit from the wisdom of a gathering of experts

who, through casual conversations, can provide valuable help and advice.

CSS has about 9000 members, and typical attendance at a major conference is around 1000, which includes many non-CSS members. Think of the conversation that we'll have when all 9000 members and an equal number of nonmembers show up. See you in New Orleans.

Dennis S. Bernstein



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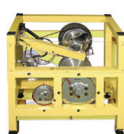
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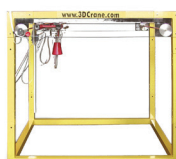
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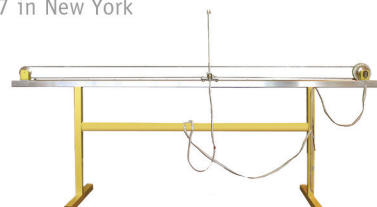
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