



You know the classic comedy routine where the military commander lines up his troops and asks for volunteers for a suicide mission? The one where, instead of stepping forward, all the smart ones take a giant step backward, leaving the dim-witted heroes as unwilling volunteers.

Very often, those “volunteers” end up saving the day by using skills and talents they never knew they had. Volunteering can be like that. It forces you to grow and puts you in positions you may not have thought you were ready for. But in the end, the payoff can be big.

A lot of important activity in the gear industry—like most industries—is run by volunteers. They serve on countless committees and special work groups under the auspices of AGMA, ISO, SAE and many other organizations. These are not paid positions, but their work is vitally important to the ongoing success of the manufacturers and industries they serve.

Many of you probably feel that volunteering would be just one more duty piled on an already full plate of obligations. Your work schedule is already hectic. When you get home, you want to spend time with the kids, the grandkids or the dog. You’d spend time with your spouse if you could just finish all the things on the honey-do list. You’re wishing you could just watch a ball game or go fishing.

Volunteering for one more thing would be like signing up for a suicide mission, right?

I’ll admit, these volunteer projects take up a lot of time. But I’ve always believed that learning is a never-ending process. And few experiences provide the tuition-free learning opportunities that working on industry volunteer projects offer.

For example, you might be a very good gear designer or manufacturing engineer. But getting involved in one or more of the AGMA technical committees would force you to develop a much broader understanding of the areas you work in. Instead of working only on your company’s products, you’d be helping develop standards that cover a wider variety of applications and configurations. Working through the meticulous details and talking with other engineers over the course of many weeks, months or even years might make you not just a very good gear engineer, but an expert.

Recently I spoke with a corporate executive at a major worldwide gear manufacturer, and we got to talking about the value of working as a volunteer for industry organizations. He told me that his company’s VP of engineering had been involved with AGMA’s technical committees for many years. In the beginning, he was the committee gofer—the one who grunted through all the hard mathematical work that no one else wanted to do. Over time, he gathered a significant body of knowledge and understanding that made him one of the foremost experts in his area of gearing. I asked the corporate executive if this man could have risen to his present

position if not for his experience on AGMA’s technical committees. Probably not, the executive said.

For many years, I served as a volunteer for the Machinery Dealers National Association. As a volunteer, I took on a lot of responsibilities that had nothing to do with my career as a machine tool dealer, but which broadened my experience and gave me new opportunities. Most importantly, I got my start in publishing as publisher of the *Locator*, MDNA’s directory of used machinery. That experience gave me the background I needed to launch *Gear Technology*.

In the engineer’s case, and in my case, volunteer work was vital in developing knowledge and expertise. But it can also help you develop in other ways, particularly with leadership and people skills. Most of us come out of school with training in engineering, accounting or management. But there’s no college degree in how to deal with, lead and inspire people. Working on volunteer projects can help you build those skills.

When you’re on a committee with other volunteers, you’re working with people who aren’t beholden to you. They can tell you to take a flying leap if they don’t like your attitude, your approach or your solution. So even if you think you’re right, you have to listen to them, find ways of convincing them, and communicate your vision. Those are skills that can be valuable down the line, especially when you find yourself in a leadership position. You can lead employees instead of just having them follow your orders.

Although volunteer projects can be extremely valuable in developing knowledge and expertise, perhaps most important is the sense of accomplishment and self-worth you get from being involved on an industry level and seeing projects come to completion. When you take on these roles, you begin to see yourself as much more than just a worker with a particular job title. When you look in the mirror, you’re proud of the person you see staring back. The knowledge you gain, the leadership skills you develop, the broader vision you acquire and an improved self image stay with you, long after you leave the volunteer position.

When you see an opportunity to volunteer, don’t be the one who steps back from the line because you’re afraid to take on the challenge. Recognize the opportunity and be the one who steps forward. You can help not only your industry and your company, but yourself as well.

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