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1999

SIG Directors Present Plan to Restructure ASIS Special Interest Groups

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SIG Directors Present Plan to Restructure ASIS Special Interest Groups

*Editor's Note: As mentioned in **Candy Schwartz***'s The President's Page, ***Michael Stallings**, Deputy SIG Cabinet Director, and **Samantha Hastings**, SIG Cabinet Director, present the following plan to the ASIS membership for consideration.*

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to explore how to reorganize SIGs so they better serve the Society.

Problem

The ASIS Board of Directors recently engaged in a systematic development of plans to strengthen the Society's services to membership. The Board has also worked to increase the perception of the Society as the organization that speaks directly and authoritatively to everyone who works with information and technology. As part of the planning effort, the Board charged the SIG Cabinet Director and Deputy Director with the task of investigating how best to re-organize the SIGs to ensure their vitality and help them be more flexible in meeting the needs of the Society.

For ASIS to thrive in the 21st century, it must seize professional and intellectual ground in the major sub-disciplines of information science. As it competes with other associations for mindshare and membership, the Society needs to respond quickly to changes in and around the profession. In order for it to attract members, subscribers and conference attendees, it needs to take leadership positions with new topics like knowledge management and show its longstanding commitment and understanding of topics that the outside world is looking at for the first time, like classification research.

SIGs are obvious resources for this ongoing effort, because SIGs are by definition ASIS' expression of these sub-disciplines. Unfortunately, the SIG framework has not been strong or agile enough to make a credible response to these challenges. There are two facets to this problem: scarcity of leadership and a SIG culture that does not encourage timely response to the Society's needs.

Scarcity of Leadership

There are 18+ SIGs in ASIS, each requiring 2 officers (chair and chair-elect) to be fully staffed according to bylaws. In addition, most SIGs aren't successful without at least 4 or 6 more interested, involved members who form an informal steering committee and resource pool. This adds up to at least 6 seriously involved members needed to make it possible for

a SIG to be successful. For ASIS to support 18 successful SIGs, that in turn adds up to over 100 strong, committed leaders who are willing to shoulder the burden of creating and maintaining successful SIGs.

Lack of Responsiveness

ASIS' SIGs have grown up in a laissez-faire environment of autonomy and independence. The membership forms up a SIG when it seems like a good idea, usually long after a hot topic has cooled, and undertakes supporting initiatives when it is inclined to do so. This is a friendly environment, but not a productive one. In recent history, a SIG is considered responsive if it contributes a couple of sessions to Annual and Mid-Year Meetings and regularly publishes a newsletter or updates its Web site. It is considered wildly successful if it also creates a publication occasionally. Even by this minimal standard, only about half the SIGs today are successful, and only CR is wildly successful through its annual publication.

This is not enough. When the Board of Directors or the Program Advisory Board detects a hot topic that the Society can leverage to its benefit, it needs to be able to assemble and package a response within a matter of months. The present organization of SIGs operates with a different energy level and on a different time scale, a level that does not support the need for ASIS to be a leader in areas like digital libraries and knowledge management.

Solution

To answer these two problems, this paper proposes two new models for organizing ASIS around sub-disciplines. The first model creates a divisional structure that uses SIGs when they are effective and bypasses them with the power to form task forces to do the work when they are not. The second model enhances the existing SIG Steering Committee to provide greater oversight of SIGs by making the Steering Committee board appointees.

Model 1 – Organize SIGs under divisions

The divisional model concentrates leadership into fewer organizational units and makes it clear from the outset that the leadership is expected to respond to the Society's needs more like a Technical Program Committee than like a present-day SIG. Divisions will be required to respond to Board direction rather than be requested to respond, as SIGs are today. SIGs will be a resource (but not the only resource) that divisions can use to do work, but SIGs are not required to do work. The divisions will provide platforms where *every* ASIS member has a voice.

Divisional leadership will be motivated to take their positions by increased status and visibility within the profession and by increased resources (due to concentration of leadership in fewer organizational units). The model is similar to SLA's division/section structure.

DIVISION STRUCTURE

1. An appropriate number of divisions (five? eight?) are created around broad information science subject areas. SIGs are grouped under these divisions.
2. A division has one primary purpose: to meet the Society's needs in its subject area. "The Society's needs" can be proactively discerned and met by the division, or they can be stated to the division by the Board as directives to take certain actions. The kinds of actions a division might take or be directed to take include starting a listserv on a hot topic, producing a publication or planning programming for a conference.

3. The Board of Directors appoints division chairs.
4. Division chairs report to the Division Cabinet Director, a position parallel to today's SIG Cabinet Director.
5. Division chairs form a division council similar to today's SIG Steering Committee.
6. Other division officers are elected by division membership and may include
   Chair-elect
   Secretary
   Communications chair
   Professional development chair
   Membership chair
   Archivist
   International relations chair
   Networking chair
   Strategic planning chair
   Web master/listserv owner
7. Division leadership terms should be a minimum of two years to provide stability.

SIG STRUCTURE

- SIGs can be anything they want to be within the divisional structure. At one end of the scale, a SIG might aspire to be nothing more than a loosely organized social group that organizes Dutch-treat dinners. At the other end, they might have their own publications and meetings, like SIG/CR. The more work they take on themselves, the less there is for the division to do.
- Existing guidelines for forming, dissolving, renaming and belonging to SIGs still apply, with the following changes:
- SIGs only have to have one officer: a chair or "organizer"
- SIGs need to register yearly. "Register" means to note accomplishments and membership; maintain a method (like a newsletter) for communication with members; and declare the subject area to be covered by SIG activities.
- The Society grants the divisions greater leeway in dissolving SIGs that do not meet the Society's needs.
- Membership in a SIG gives corresponding membership in that SIG's division.
- For each division members belong to, they are assessed a division fee. They are only assessed the division fee once, no matter how many SIGs they belong to in that division. They are still assessed a SIG fee for each SIG they join.
- SIG Steering Committee and SIG Cabinet are replaced by Division Directors and Council of Divisions.

HOW WORK GETS DONE

A division has two primary means of doing its work: through a SIG or through an appointed task force.

Working through a SIG

If a SIG exists, is robust enough and is willing, the division leadership can request that SIG to do the work. The decision to do the work is up to the SIG. The primary pressure that a division can bring to bear on a SIG to do the work is the idea that the division may create a task force to take up the work if a SIG declines. Creating a task force is a clear signal to the rest of the Society that the SIG is abdicating its leadership position in its area. This should be enough pressure for most SIGs.

Another pressure a division can bring to bear is to dissolve the SIG if it isn't performing.

Criteria for dissolution will be similar to existing criteria with the exception that a ballot of all SIG members will not be required. Since the division has the option of creating a task force to do its work, dissolution will be a last resort, as it is today.

Working through a Task Force

When a SIG does not, of its own volition, meet the Society's needs to take a leadership position in its subject area, the division chair can turn to or create a task force to do so. Task forces may overlap a SIG in its subject area. This will only be the case if the SIG is not meeting the Society's needs. A task force's lifespan can range from the time it takes to complete a special project to an indefinite time if the need is ongoing. The task force will only be asked to serve for the time required to accomplish a clear and stated objective.

Task forces are chosen from the membership of the Society at large. Task force chairs and members do not have to belong to the division for which they are working.

Since the tasks that generate task force appointment are likely associated with hot topics in the profession and will likely result in output of some visibility within the profession, it should be relatively easy to attract task force members.

Benefits of Model 1

- Moves administrative burden of meeting the Society's needs off of SIGs and lets them respond in their own way given the circumstances of membership, interest and leadership in a given area.
- The greater visibility and status of a division chair provides a reward system that helps compensate for the burden of leading a division.
- The concentration of leadership in divisions should provide a good system for ongoing mentoring of new leaders.

Challenges of Model 1

- Significant changes to the bylaws.
- Maintaining division-to-division collaboration.

Model 2 – Use SIG Steering Committee as virtual division leaders

This model does not create a divisional structure, but instead organizes and expands the SIG Steering Committee so each committee member is responsible for a group of SIGs. The main difference between this model and the model in effect today is that Steering Committee members will take a much more active role in communicating the Society's needs to SIGs. Backing up that more active relationship is an enhanced ability to dissolve SIGs.

SIG STRUCTURE

1. SIGs are organized under four to eight Steering Committee members. There is no formal association of subject area with a Steering Committee member, but the SIGs can be grouped in a way that makes sense.
2. Steering Committee (SC) members are appointed by the Board of Directors rather than elected by the SIG Cabinet.
3. The nature of SIGs does not change from what it is today, except that they will be getting more intense oversight from SC members.
4. SC members will build great relationships with the SIG leaders as a platform for requesting work from them.

5. The Society grants the SC greater leeway in dissolving SIGs that do not meet its needs.
6. The SC needs to reference criteria for SIG dissolution when a SIG fails to meet the needs of the Society, acting in much the same way as the SIG Cabinet does currently.
7. The SC will want to use dissolution appropriately and only as a last resort.

How work gets done

SC members are charged by the Board to meet the Society's needs to take leadership roles in certain areas of information science. Tasks are parceled out to SC members according to whether they are in charge of a SIG that would be likely to take it up. "The Society's needs" can still be proactively discerned and met by SIGs, or they can be stated to an SC member by the Board as directives to take certain actions. The kinds of actions the Board might ask for include starting a listserv on a hot topic, planning programming for a conference, creating a continuing education program, producing a publication or maintaining a Web site for a specific subject area.

Benefits of Model 2

- Is not as unsettling to membership as the division model.
- Doesn't require as many bylaws changes as the division model.

Challenges of Model 2

- Still relies on the overworked and slow-to-respond SIGs for most of the work.
- Doesn't address the issue of scarcity of leadership.
- Rewards of being a leader in information science subject area are not as clear as they are in Model 1 because SIG Steering Committee doesn't have the same cachet as Division Chair.
- There is no explicit way to form task forces or working groups to help meet the needs of the Society when SIGs don't perform. If you create a way to do this, you have in effect created the division model.
- There is no officer group (like membership chair, communications chair, etc.) to support the SC.

Model 3 – Existing system of SIGs with no changes

SIGs are independent and autonomous as long as they meet a couple of requirements:

- Have a chair and a chair-elect.
- Contribute programming to at least one meeting per year.

Benefits of Model 3

- No changes required to the normal flow of ASIS life.
- Doesn't require any bylaws changes.

Challenges of Model 3

- All the existing problems are still in place. The Society is unable to keep up with the rapidly changing and evolving set of issues surrounding information science.

Conclusion

Model 1 makes the cleanest break with the past and makes the clearest statement about the direction the organization will take to meet the challenge of leadership within a rapidly changing environment. Model 2 appears to be less effective, but is also less jarring to the membership because it preserves more of the SIGs' importance and autonomy. Model 3 changes nothing.

It is the recommendation of the SIG Cabinet Director and Deputy Cabinet Director that ASIS pursue an implementation of Model 1. With a clear blueprint for making the organization more responsive, implementing divisions will help drive ASIS to the front ranks of information science.

Next Steps

The next step in the reorganization of ASIS Special Interest Groups is dependent upon the response we receive from the general membership. So far, the position paper has received input from the ASIS Board of Directors, SIG Steering Committee and SIG Cabinet. Suggestions and revisions from these groups have been incorporated into the paper where applicable. Now we need to know what you think!

If you think this is a feasible and practical approach to improve the vital role that SIGs play in our Society, let us know. If you think there are so many holes in the proposal that we need to go back to the drawing board, let us know. If you think we can move ahead with some revision and ask SIG Cabinet to approve the proposal to introduce divisions into our structure then we will do so at the Annual Meeting in Washington, DC. If the motion passes from Cabinet, it will be carried to the Board of Directors for approval. Then the work to get a working plan for deployment starts. So you can see how integral your comments are to the process. Please respond to ASIS-L or individually to Mike Stallings at mstall@microsoft.com or Sam Hastings at hastings@lis.unt.edu.

SIG REORGANIZATION - MODELS IN ACTION			
Situation	**Model 1** **SIGs organized under divisions**	**Model 2** **SIG Steering Commitee as virtual division leaders**	**Model 3** **No changes**
Board notes new subject area in the profession, like Knowledge Management, that isn't covered by a SIG. Board feels ASIS needs to develop a presence in that area by creating programming for the next Annual Meeting, starting and advertising a KM listserv, and contacting other organizations who might be interested in partnering with ASIS in this area.	*Result*: Board tasks appropriate division with its requests. If there is no robust KM SIG, division sets up task forces from Society membership, along the lines of the way the Society selects programming committees. Division may attempt to start up a SIG/KM along with these other activities. *Expected Effectiveness:* GOOD for getting the work done because the division can bypass weak or non-existent	*Result:* Board tasks appropriate SC member with its requests. SC member goes to most likely SIG, if one exists, and encourages it to meet the challenge. If the SIG does not respond, SC member threatens it with dissolution. If there isn't a KM SIG, SC attempts to get one going. It starts life with the tasks requested by the Board. *Expected Effectiveness:* FAIR to POOR for getting work done. VERY POOR for creating dissension within the organization, because	*Result:* Wait for critical mass of membership to decide this is a worthy area and form a SIG. Then wait for the SIG to form. Then wait for it to do something that creates a presence in that area. *Effectiveness:* POOR

	SIGs and create task forces.	there is no clear power over the SIGs other than the threat of dissolution.	
Board feels ASIS needs to create an instrument, like a listserv, to address better a particular subject area.	*Result:* Board directs division to create listserv. Division works with appropriate SIG first. If that fails, division creates listserv through its own communications chair. *Expected Effectiveness:* GOOD	*Result:* Board directs SC member to create listserv. SC member works through appropriate SIG to get listserv created. If that fails, SC member notes this as a reason to dissolve. If other reasons to dissolve accumulate over time, the SIG will be dissolved. *Expected Effectiveness:* POOR	*Result:* Board makes request through Cabinet Director. SIG complies or not, as it wishes. *Effectiveness:* POOR
Program Advisory Board wants membership to contribute and design specific content to tightly focused "Institutes" in a subject area like knowledge management.	*Result:* Board requests specific contributions from division. Division works with appropriate SIG first. If that fails, division appoints a task force to do the work. *Expected Effectiveness:* GOOD	*Result:* Board requests specific contribution from SC member. SC member works through appropriate SIG to achieve goal. If that fails, SC member notes this as a reason to dissolve. If other reasons to dissolve accumulate over time, the SIG will be dissolved. *Expected Effectiveness:* POOR	*Result:* This hasn't happened yet, but it's difficult to see a SIG responding in a short time to this kind of request. *Expected Effectiveness:* POOR
Program Advisory Board selects a theme for Annual Meeting and wants the membership to develop sessions for that theme	*Result:* Divisions plan and propose sessions; or divisions seek help from SIGs; or divisions form a programming task force. *Expected Effectiveness:* GOOD for getting work done. Although SIGs aren't threatened with dissolution for not creating programming, they will still probably be interested. In addition, the divisions have the option of doing programming themselves or farming it out to task forces.	*Result:* SC members request programming from the SIGs. The SIGs will respond because this is one of the criteria for being in good standing. *Expected Effectiveness:* FAIR to GOOD for getting the sessions planned; POOR in that it still strains the capacity of SIG leadership	*Result:* SIGs plan and propose sessions. They know that if they don't they'll be considered in poor standing. *Effectiveness:* FAIR to GOOD for getting the sessions planned; POOR in that it strains the capacity of SIG leadership.
SIG leadership changes as officers' terms expire. New leaders are in need of	*Result:* Division could have a standing leadership committee that oversees transition. In addition, the longer term of division leadership	*Result:* Same as Model 3, with the slight improvement that the SC member in charge of a SIG will be a more visible point of contact with the SIGs. This will provide some stability, but one SC member can't undertake	*Result:* In some cases, passing the torch works well; in most cases, the torch is flung at the new leaders as the old ones run out the door.

mentoring.	provides some ballast. *Expected Effectiveness:* GOOD	the same kind of leadership effort that a division task force can. *Expected Effectiveness:* POOR to GOOD	*Effectiveness:* POOR to GOOD
Subject area that a SIG covers becomes outdated, and Board wants to eliminate efforts expended in that area or combine it with another area or rename it.	*Result:* Same as Model 3, except that since SIG leadership will be smaller, the effort expended in an area is smaller to begin with, so there is less need to dissolve the SIG to save effort. *Expected Effectiveness:* FAIR	*Result:* Same as Model 3, except new rules will make it easier to dissolve SIGs if they aren't performing, and it is likely that an outdated subject area will be accompanied by a non-performing SIG. *Expected Effectiveness:* FAIR	*Result:* In the case of a moribund SIG, the Board waits for SIG's vital signs to flatline, which sometimes takes years. Then the SIG is dissolved by the Steering Committee. In the case of a combination or renaming, the Board waits for the change to spontaneously arise from the SIG or requests it from the SIG. *Effectiveness:* FAIR to POOR
SIG has an idea for a session at upcoming Annual Meeting.	*Result:* Same as Model 3. *Expected Effectiveness:* GOOD	*Result:* Same as Model 3 *Expected Effectiveness:* GOOD	*Result:* SIG plans session and proposes to conference planning committee. *Effectiveness:* GOOD
Individual member has an idea for a session at an upcoming Annual Meeting.	*Result:* Same as Model 3, except the individual can also plan and propose the session through a Division task force. *Expected Effectiveness:* GOOD	*Result:* Same as Model 3 *Expected Effectiveness:* GOOD	*Result:* Individual member works through a SIG to get the meeting planned and proposed to the conference planning committee, or the member plans and proposes the session as an individual. *Effectiveness:* GOOD

SEARCH   COMMENT

How to Order