## Price Versus Value: A Perspective On IEEE Membership

Tom Coughlin, IEEE-USA President

I recently chaired an Ad hoc subcommittee for the IEEE Board of Directors that attempted to look at whether lower basic IEEE dues would increase IEEE membership and if any increased IEEE membership would pay for the revenue loss from decreased dues. I wanted to talk about what our subcommittee determined based upon data and discussions and then thank you all for letting me be your IEEE-USA president this year and wish you a great holiday season and a great 2020.

IEEE dues (particularly with the various assessments that are dependent upon one's location) are on the slightly higher side compared with some other professional organizations, but there are several professional societies with higher dues. IEEE basic dues have increased about 19% from 2008 to 2018 but the US Bureau of Labor Consumer Price Index has increased about 17% over the same period, so there is perhaps a 2% normalized to the cost of living price increase for IEEE basic membership over this period. Also, for those not living in the US, the US\$ to local currency rate of exchange changed over this same period (depending upon where the member lives).

In order to look at the possible impact of membership price on membership trends the chart below shows higher grade (HG) membership (non-undergraduate student) membership trends (without life members whose dues and assessments are waived) and the non-inflation normalized base membership dues by region from 2008 through 2018.



The figure shows that the biggest losses in dues paying higher grade membership have been in Regions 1-6 (the US). Region 10 (much of Asia) has shown the biggest growth (with much of this growth in student members). Region 7-9 (when we exclude life members) have increased or declined by a small amount over this period. Region 7 (Canada), membership has increased by 1.2% (in non-life higher grade membership). Canada had an unfavorable exchange rate

change with the US of over 25% over this period, meaning that the normalized IEEE higher grade membership cost in Canada increased by over 25% over this period but Canada experienced a small membership increase. So, it seems that the price of membership, although arguably important, may not be the biggest factor in IEEE higher grade membership loss, particularly in the US.

So, what is the cause of this membership loss? There are a number of likely contributing causes, including the nearly flat U.S. electrical engineering workforce and declines in student enrollments over the past decade Automation-related advances in productivity accelerated by robotics and AI are reducing the need for engineers in many traditional manufacturing fields. Technical jobs have been offshored and outsourced. We are also seeing a generational shift in the U.S. workforce from the Baby Boomers and GenX to the Millennial generation, which is carrying more educational debt at lower relative inflation-adjusted wages than their predecessors.

All of these factors play into the consideration of membership price and value. If you don't have the time or support from your employer to engage in the types of career networking and professional development that IEEE provides, then engagement in the IEEE will be difficult for you and you may get little value from IEEE membership At the same time, much of the membership "value" in terms of technical information and learning resources that IEEE provides can be gleaned through the Internet through an employer's Xplore subscription or for free.

Lastly, there is the fact that IEEE's membership offering is essentially "one-size-fits-all" whereas individuals are increasingly looking for customization and specialization to meet their specific needs. If we are to grow again in the US we need to create membership value for today's technical community.

US IEEE HG member recruitment generally declined about 15% between 2008 and 2018. Overall HG membership retention declined less than 1% over this period. However, retention of newly graduated Young Professional (YP) HG members over the first 5 years of membership is very poor in the US, which has resulted in a steady increase in the average age of IEEE members. Keeping and recruiting YP members is probably the biggest opportunity to help reverse IEEE membership loss in the US.

In fact, our committee determined that the IEEE is missing out on many opportunities in increase the potential pool of IEEE HG YP members by increasing our addressed pool of student members. We appear to only have about a 4% penetration of the potential market of student members (those who are studying in our fields of interest in the US). Furthermore, many students in the US are now graduating from two years in community colleges before transferring to finish their last two years of education in more expensive 4-year colleges, in order to keep their education costs down. IEEE has very little penetration or visibility at the community college level.

Our Ad hoc committee members supported a motion for the IEEE Board of Directors, that was adopted by the board, to do geographically dispersed pilot projects to extend the period of time over which recently graduated YP member dues increased (models to be tested include gradual increases in new YP HG membership over 5 years or a flat lower priced membership over 5 years). These measures may help our new YP members, but I feel that we must do more, particularly at the local IEEE section level.

Our local IEEE sections are where most IEEE members interact with the IEEE. They are the face of the IEEE to most IEEE members in the US. Our sections include our student branches and student branch chapters. IEEE section leaders should promote active local IEEE participation in their student branches (including working to organize student branches at 2-year community colleges), working with and encouraging the local branch counselors to let students know that IEEE is more than a student club and that they can look to IEEE to be their professional home, helping them advance and prosper during their entire career.

In addition, IEEE MGA should provide materials such as presentations focusing on what IEEE offers student and graduated YPs that local section leaders can present to IEEE student branch meetings. Research has shown that the more engaged members are with the IEEE the greater the retention rate will be—engaging with our student members should be our first effort to increase member engagement within the US. A concerted effort by our local volunteers and the various organizational units (OUs) of the IEEE to engage and recruit student and YP members can reverse the trend in declining and aging IEEE membership in the US.

Enough of that. December is the last month of my IEEE-USA presidency. I want to thank everyone who voted for me and for those who didn't, I hope that I fulfilled your expectations. I have enjoyed playing this role and getting a chance to communicate, visit and work with many of you over this year. I started a few things and got some things done during my presidency and will work to complete this work as IEEE-USA past president, working with 2020 President, Jim Conrad next year. Together we can make a difference and I look forward to working with you, our engaged IEEE volunteers, in the future. Best wishes to you and your family and I wish you much happiness and prosperity in 2020.

Excelsior!



Tom Coughlin

(Photo is me in front of Coughlin's Law in Pittsburg, PA during 2019 EVO)