Sitting in a standards working group meeting or at a conference about standards, I am easily reminded with one glance of the room that this is a sphere dominated by the baby boomer generation. These individuals have brought tremendous knowledge and experience to standardization. The number and depth of standards created has been unprecedented. The benefits towards trade, health, safety, and well-being brought to the world have been remarkable.

Yet there is a glaring issue. Many of these experts are likely to retire in the next ten years. Of all human resources trends, baby boomer retirements have been identified as having the most significant impact on the workplace over the next decade. The hole the baby boomers will leave behind is not just about individuals occupying seats. They will leave a gap of know-how and experience that is extremely difficult to fill.

The push to get more young people involved and coming up the ranks therefore is seen as a necessity. But the challenging question is how to get more young people involved. Standards bodies everywhere are grappling with this issue. The problem is further complicated by the fact that standards often are not a subject studied in school, or one into which young people directly launch their careers. Most standards professionals enter the field as a result of their industry experience.

There is hope, though, and I say that from what I have witnessed. I became involved with the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) in 2008 and participated in their first Young Professionals (YP) program in 2010. After being selected as one of three global young leaders of the group, I gained the opportunity to speak with a number of the YPs, asking them probing questions such as: Why join standards work? Where do you see the future of standardization? What will keep you interested? Their answers were fascinating.

As an entrepreneur, owning my company REfficient, I have developed a pretty good instinct for opportunity. As such, I am convinced that the issue of getting more YPs involved is not actually a problem. Rather, this is an opportunity for the standards world to grow, evolve, and prosper. This is the awakening into its next phase of evolution. By sharing the lessons learned, all standards organizations can benefit, as well as the standards world as a whole.

In the rest of this article, I will discuss the IEC YP program and key feedback from the YPs on why they have chosen to get involved in standardization. I also will discuss lessons learned and considerations for any YP program. Finally, since all of us in the standardization field are responsible for the success of the industry as a whole, I will provide suggestions on how to take action.

IEC Young Professionals Program

IEC launched its first YP program in 2010, with a workshop in Seattle, Washington in conjunction with the IEC General Meeting. In that inaugural year, 53 participants from 27 countries took part in the workshop, with the age range being from 25 to 35 years old. The level of experience with standards varied, from individuals who had been part of writing standards for many years to those who were completely new to the industry. Regardless, the purpose was to reach out to the younger generation to encourage long term participation in standardization and conformity assessment.

The YP workshop was held over three days, and included lectures, interactive sessions, and an industry visit. YPs also observed a working group meeting as well as a Standardization Management Board session. Questions were encouraged throughout the workshop, and YPs used the opportunity to get clarification and to ask probing questions. Social events also took place, as well as YPs being recognized at the major events of the IEC General Meeting, such as the opening and closing ceremonies. The YPs also had
an opportunity to choose three leaders to represent the group going forward.

Following the workshop, 100 percent of YPs said the workshop had been valuable and 96 percent planned to get more involved in IEC work. It was clear that enthusiasm was garnered at the workshop, yet it was more than that. Something had taken root. Eight months later, when a survey was conducted to measure the results of the YPs’ involvement, 62 percent said they already had experienced an increase in standards participation. At that time, 38 percent had experienced a change within their National Committee or IEC positions. Furthermore, 97 percent said they had shared information about standardization and about IEC with their colleagues.

While there were many lessons learned following the 2010 workshop (which I will discuss later), the 2011 IEC YP workshop had a similar impact. Thirty National Committees sent 59 YPs to the workshop in Melbourne, Australia, which took place during the 2011 IEC General Meeting. The workshop had a similar format to the previous year, although it also included observing the Conformity Assessment Board meeting and the opportunity to provide insight into IEC issues, such as the future of IT tools. After the workshop, the participants revealed that 90 percent of their expectations were fulfilled, and 91 percent said they wanted to become more involved in IEC work. While it is still too early to measure the results of continued involvement from the 2011 workshop, it was clear that IEC did something very well: they tapped into why YPs would want to get involved and got them engaged.

Why Young Professionals Get Involved

After being chosen as a YP Leader, I conducted interviews with YPs to find out more on why they got involved in standards work and in IEC, and to get their feedback on the program moving forward. While some individuals had their own unique reasons for participating, common themes became clear. These themes crossed over backgrounds, nationalities, and gender, as well as interests and professional industries. The reasons YPs got involved in standardization included:

- To see how standards are developed: YPs were keen to understand the process that goes into creating a standard, from the conception and working group stage to the final publication. Many YPs had been involved in some level of the standards process, but had only seen a limited view of the bigger picture. When YPs learned the overall process of standardization, they gained an insight into the greater impact of their involvement. This was a key motivational factor for YPs—that their involvement mattered and they could make a difference in a large way.

- To ensure that their companies’ interests are considered: YPs saw both opportunities and challenges within their companies when it comes to standardization. They wanted to ensure that they had a voice and that their considerations were included.

- To understand upcoming standards, industry trends, interoperability requirements, etc.: Especially in today’s global age, YPs knew that their companies, or even their countries, were not isolated from what happens around the world. Rather, a global system is at play, and the outlook of YPs reflected this. To have their products work in other jurisdictions, YPs knew that they needed to understand the requirements of other countries. YPs also understood that while standards take time to create, the world does not wait. Therefore, it was important to keep pace with upcoming trends and innovations.

- To advocate on a national level for international best practices: Understanding what is happening on an international level is one part of the equation for success. YPs recognized that it is important to advocate for international best practices on their national levels. This allows them to compete more effectively on a global level.

- To share and get knowledge: YPs saw that there was a valuable opportunity to share the knowledge and insight they had acquired from their own experiences, as well as to get that from others. YPs particularly saw value in becoming informed about the challenges or trends in others’ countries or companies. In this sense, they appreciated that a two-way community was being built.

- To expand their professional network: YPs saw involvement in standardization as a unique opportunity to get to know other individuals in their industries with similar interests and positions. This was particularly true for individuals within the same industry but living in different countries. YPs would not otherwise have had the opportunity to connect. In many cases, the connections that were fostered during the YP workshop have continued.
As I interviewed the YPs, it also was clear that they wanted their voices to be heard. Some interviews lasted for an hour and the YPs were happy to provide insight on how they could become more involved moving forward. While some of the points consider the international perspective of standardization, there are many lessons to be learned for standards bodies on any level.

**Turning Key Lessons into Action**

Where do we go from here? How do we turn these learnings into action? The YPs had many suggestions about what they would like to see, the barriers that would need to be addressed, and how the program should move forward. The following are steps to mobilizing participation of YPs through a formal program.

1. **Ensure that there is a well-known point of contact to get involved.** Creating a point of contact that YPs can approach and get connected with opportunities is vital. This individual or department then can match YPs with suitable opportunities as well as provide a sounding board for questions and concerns. While this seems simple, this is a crucial step that is sometimes missed. For example, within the IEC program, we realized that for YPs to get further involved in standardization, it actually would be at the national level. Therefore, it is important that YPs have the ability to connect with their national committees so they can have hands-on opportunities.

2. **Use various communications platforms to keep YPs involved.** YPs are used to using technology and expect no less when it comes to standardization. YPs want to use a variety of communication tools to keep connected, such as email, webinars, wikis, blogs, shareweb tools, etc. Their key reason was to allow individuals to identify similar areas of interest, connect with others, and allow for discussion. YPs also identified other areas where they would like to see technology integrated in future—for example, allowing people to work on the same standards document simultaneously was a key suggestion.

3. **Mobilize social media.** The statistics for the use of social media today are staggering. There is no question—YPs are using social media. Still, even they identified that there was an appropriate use of social media in the standards domain. A consensus from the YP group was that social media was a medium to connect and stay informed on what is happening, but it was not a place to publicly share opinions or debate issues.

4. **Connect YPs with the bigger picture.** Given a generational characteristic of being achievement-oriented, YPs want to see the greater result of their actions. Giving them the opportunity to connect with the bigger relevance helps them to get engaged and keep motivated. This could include giving the opportunity to provide input into key documents, shadow a meeting normally beyond their scope, or invite them to an exclusive event. In the process, future leaders may be identified to nurture throughout the system.

5. **Educate about the benefits of standardization.** Standards play a vital role in global trade, as well as for human and environmental well-being. Still, a surprisingly large number of people remain unaware of standardization and its significance. It is therefore important to educate young people about the benefits of standardization. This includes having measurable results and case studies of how standards have helped. But that is not all. Marketing these benefits to drive awareness is equally important. The workshops have shown that when you connect people with the higher order, their interest is sparked and they become more engaged. “Make standards sexy” and YPs will become more involved.

6. **Solicit their insights.** Ask for YPs’ feedback and take them seriously. The world is changing at breakneck speed. With the continued infiltration of social media, young people have more of a voice than ever before. Their influence does not stop there; even Google now considers social media activity into its algorithm for search results. It is therefore important to solicit the opinions of YPs and take them into consideration. Whether you set up a focus group, send periodic questionnaires, or use another mechanism, YPs want and expect to be heard.

7. **Provide related training.** Professional training is necessary to keep people informed about industry developments. YPs are no different. They want opportunities to improve their skills and learn about new advancements. Accordingly, providing events and courses to YPs is important. As technology is increasingly being leveraged to reduce costs, webinars are a great option to provide training to YPs on a low budget. Such trainings are also a great way to keep YPs engaged in the long term.

8. **Deal with the real questions straight on.** In the YP interviews, many key questions that YPs were facing came up repeatedly, such as “How do I convince my employer that participation in YP standardization programs is worth it?” Given that such issues were potential barriers to participation, we decided to create a manual written by the YPs themselves to address these questions and to be used as a resource. After all, when we understand the real benefit to our company, our country, and our society, participation becomes easier. The standardization industry needs to get better at measuring results and benefits, and communicating the results.

9. **As an employer, get engaged.** While some YPs reported that their employer had asked them to do a presentation or write a report, many employers did not follow up. This is important due to knowledge transfer and motivation to keep involved. Create opportunities for YPs to become involved and share what they have learned.

10. **Set aside funding.** To ensure successful standardization succession planning, standardization bodies and employers should set aside funding to nurture YPs. This could include funding to allow YPs to participate in standards meeting, conferences, and events as well as time to participate in webinars, etc. By setting aside funding, you are in part investing in your company’s future, and beyond.

11. **Have a mentorship program.** For anyone starting out in standards development, questions are bound to come up. By connecting young people with an
Wanted
Young Professionals for the 2012 IEC YP Program

Both the Standards Council of Canada (SCC) and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) currently are looking for young professionals for the 2012 International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) Young Professionals program.

Canadian YPs should contact Lynne Gibbens at lgibbens@scc.ca for further information about participating in the IEC program. Young Professionals in the United States should contact Charlie Zegers at czegers@ansi.org; nominations are due by April 30, 2012.

For additional information about the IEC Young Professionals Program, go to www.iec.ch.

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Succession planning for standardization is especially critical. This issue does not have to be a negative; rather it is a positive opportunity to usher in a new era of standardization. Given the speed at which the world is changing, mobilizing YPs can encourage the standards world to grow stronger together.