Editorial

What Exactly is Information Technology?

Recently, I attended a working lunch with volunteers who are organizing a new topical conference for the 2003 Spring National Meeting — Using Information Technology (IT) to Increase Profitability and Productivity — and the question came up, "What exactly is IT? This wasn't an easy question to answer, since I believe that IT has a dynamic definition, much like that of chemical engineering. I'm not alone in this line of thinking. Richard Gilbert, chemical engineering professor at the Univ. of South Florida (USF), and Anthony Llewellyn, professor of chemical engineering, director at USF, noted, "Information technology is so multi-faceted that it is now very difficult to describe."

IT impacts both industry and academia, which is why the topical conference includes sessions titled, "IT in R & D and Education," "Driving Profitability with IT" and "Rewards, Opportunities and Challenges for Implementing IT Systems in the Plant." In academia, for example, IT can enhance the education experience by offering the capability of virtual learning. However, there are some caveats. This is a subject that will be explored by USF's Gilbert and Llewellyn.

In industry, IT, in a sense, has its own language with the multitude of acronyms that are used to describe solutions that are expected to increase productivity and profitability. For example, we have SCM (supply chain management) solutions, ERP (enterprise resource planning) systems and CRM (customer relationship management) solutions. The challenges and benefits of implementing these solutions will be addressed at the topical conference. In the area of SCM, Ken Evans from i2 Technologies and Letty DeUngria, will share their experiences with applying SCM solutions to the oil and gas industry.

The one area that I am interested in learning more about is application of wireless communications in the chemical engineering industries. Covering this in detail will be David Hrivnak, associate analyst at Eastman Chemical. He will discuss how Eastman Chemical built a warehouse automation system from standard, inexpensive computing hardware by combining an iSafe Pocket PC handheld computer, bar-coding technology and an 802.11b wireless LAN, directly interfaced with SAP's ERP system. He will give overviews on wireless LANs and WANs.

IT is a rapidly growing area in a mature chemical engineering industry. Staying informed on the current technologies can offer an advantage to your company. However, as with any technology, it comes at a cost and a potentially steep learning curve. Weigh in what the speakers at this new topical session have to say, and see what is right for your company.

For more information on this topical conference, visit www.aiche.org/conferences/spring/topicals/infotech.htm. And if you aren't well-versed in IT, a short course is available.

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