

Quality Qorner

So Many Ways to Learn

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It makes me really sad when laboratory professionals tell me they are bored with their careers. I offer this quote: "Being bored is an insult to one's self." I don't remember where I first saw this quote so many years ago, but it resonates with me to this day. If you're weary from being in a job situation you feel is dull, uninteresting, or monotonous, you'll stay that way . . . unless you make the effort to look for new challenges and opportunities. Learning new things—whether it be about laboratory medicine or a personal interest—is the best way to get out of a mental rut.

One of the most exciting new learning opportunities is the *ASCP Leadership Exchange*, scheduled for March 2–3 in Chicago. The *Exchange* is specifically designed for those at every level of the laboratory who want to learn and grow in their careers. You see, if you're bored with your present job with all its nagging problems, and you change jobs just to relieve the boredom, you are simply exchanging familiar faces for different ones—while the basic laboratory problems usually stay the same. On the other hand, obtaining new knowledge and developing new problem-solving skills are, themselves, boredom-busters, and they also can provide new solutions to those pervasive old problems. In addition, having more knowledge and skills provides you with a solid basis for advancement in your present location or in a better job. You may not currently be a formal leader by title, but you certainly can lead by example!

Springtime is also the season of other national meetings for laboratory professionals. The *CLMA 2007 ThinkLab* is being held in Houston from March 24–27, another learning experience with plenty of opportunities for professional interaction. Baltimore is the host city for the *CLSI* (formerly *NCCLS*) *Annual Leadership Conference* on April 18–20. No special membership is needed to attend this conference, which provides a participant with the opportunity to attend a *CLSI* subcommittee or *CLSI* area committee meeting of his or her choice. In addition, a fee-supported workshop on "Practical Approaches to Evaluate Analytical Performance" will present information on how to use *CLSI* documents to meet *CLIA* requirements for introducing new test methods in your laboratory. Yet another venue for interactive laboratory education is the *COLA Spring Symposium* May 2–5 in San Diego, which will focus on quality management in the laboratory environment.

Springtime is a busy season for many state and local educational programs sponsored by various laboratory professional organizations that may be closer to where you live. At the regional level, the *ASCP* offers *Workshops for Laboratory Professionals* offering a range of technical and management programs delivered by experienced faculty. You don't have to be a member of the organizations mentioned to take advantage of their learning opportunities, although you may pay a registration premium—which is why membership has its benefits.

One of the most significant advantages of face-to-face meetings is engagement with other laboratory professionals—in the group work of learning sessions, at the refreshment breaks, at

lunches and evening receptions, and after you've exchanged e-mail addresses to contact someone later. Swallow your shyness, turn to a person near you, and introduce yourself. That encounter may provide you with a professional friendship that can last a lifetime.

Advances in communication technology provide even more learning opportunities than ever before. Did you know the *ASCP* has more than 25 years of teleconference education experience for medical laboratory professionals? I remember delivering my first audio conference in the early 1980s from a room at the former *ASCP* Chicago headquarters that had been converted to house the "bridge" apparatus allowing us to manually connect to a whopping 20 sites at one time by plugging in cords like the old-time telephone operators. Now, through sophisticated telecommunications systems, *ASCP teleconferences* and those of other laboratory professional organizations reach hundreds of listeners at well over 100 sites, simultaneously. Each audio conference provides the valuable interactive quality of being able to ask the speaker questions. After the live program has ended, laboratory professionals can also benefit from an interactive discussion of the program topic and its impact with their fellow employees. The low cost-per-person of audio conference programs is an additional benefit to tight laboratory budgets.

If you can't travel to regional or national meetings and your laboratory doesn't subscribe to audio conferences, there is yet another way to receive interactive education. The *ASCP's eCourses* provide a "you-and-the-computer" approach to the learning experience. In the eCourse environment, interaction takes the form of moving the mouse around the computer screen to view the material, take notes, review additional information, download forms and exercises, and answer quiz questions. The *ASCP eCourse* library is growing to include more offerings for laboratory professionals as well as pathologists. These courses are inexpensive compared with onsite meetings and also offer continuing education credit.

Laboratory leaders should provide learning opportunities for their staff members or they are neglecting both the staff and the medical laboratory profession. However, each individual laboratory professional also needs to take personal responsibility to create his or her own learning opportunities. Stimulation does relieve boredom! Although this Quality Qorner column usually discusses quality practices in the medical laboratory environment, we need to remember that quality starts and ends with engaged and knowledgeable *people*. We need quality people, too!

This Month's Quality Quote:

"Live as if you were to die tomorrow; Learn as if you were to live forever."

—*Gandhi*

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