I recently attended two very different conferences in two distant parts of the United States. However, each of them had elements that caused me to reflect on what lies behind the current status and technological advances in the areas of maintenance and reliability. And each one led me to consider what role such conferences might play in our professional development efforts.

**IMC Conference.** In December, I participated in the International Maintenance Conference (IMC 2003) in Florida. This conference was attended largely by manufacturing practitioners and those that work with, consult with, or sell to those practitioners. The keynote speaker, Paul Barringer, delivered a concise review of the evolution of Reliability Engineering, reminding me that an entire body of science and engineering principles lies behind where we are today.

Paul followed the keynote with a paper more specifically describing the utilization and application of some of those principles and tools in the real world of industry and business enterprise. I was reminded (and chastened a bit) when I thought of the many times I have used trial-and-error approaches or other off-the-cuff approaches to long-standing problems.

**RAMS.** In January, I attended the Reliability and Maintainability Symposium (RAMS) in California. This conference, now in its fiftieth year, featured quite a bit more academic participation, along with government program managers and company quality control people, and generally dealt with reliability and maintainability from a product quality perspective.

Numerous presentations concerned advanced statistical models, software diagnostic systems, and other mathematical and statistical tools. I was often over my head and struggling to grasp some of the finer points. But it also reinforced my awareness that there are basic scientific and mathematical principles underlying our manufacturing processes, and that we should understand and make more use of them as we grapple with our own maintenance and reliability situations.

**Commonality.** What the two conferences shared was that the attendees were taking advantage of an opportunity to develop themselves professionally. The keynote speeches, the other presentations, the tutorials, the workshops, the panel discussions, and the networking all served to provide significant professional development as individuals or teams shared their knowledge and experience. They learned from each other.

**Purposes.** In thinking about my experiences at conferences such as these two, or others such as the SMRP conference, or MARCON, or the upcoming MARTS, it occurs to me that while conferences serve many purposes, two particular ones stand out—to remind us of how much we do not yet know, and to remind us of how much we do know but do not utilize.

I am always amazed (and a little distressed at my ignorance) at discovering the new and exciting things that are occurring in maintenance and reliability technology and management of equipment and processes.

I am also amazed at discovering the old and exciting things that already exist and that I have simply forgotten or pushed out of my mind. The appropriateness of applying engineering and mathematical principles to eliminate problems rather than use seat-of-the-pants approaches to work on problems is one that often applies to me. Another is the reminder that there are other people with a myriad of tools that can assist us instead of our being caught up in the “I’m the only one with this problem” syndrome.

**Roles**. Conferences can play an important part in professional development, although only a part (we need other more specific development activities as well). They certainly offer some immediate knowledge and information to help us develop ourselves right then during the conference. But perhaps the bigger role conferences play is to remind us of how much we need to continuously work at developing ourselves. The maintenance and reliability world is built on basic principles that we need to embrace and utilize. But this world is also built on the rapidly changing implementation of those principles through different tools and systems. Thus, we also need to constantly keep ourselves up-to-date on those new tools.

**Your plans.** Let me offer these suggestions. Attend and participate in conferences as often as you reasonably can. Utilize them as one very important part of your personal plan for professional development. But remember to pursue more focused and specific development activities as well. **MT**