

Moving Forward

By Raja Chatila

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There are two things I would like to share with you as I begin my term as president of our Society.

First, the IEEE Robotics and Automation Society (RAS) is a Society of the IEEE. Three times per year, the IEEE Technical Activity Board (TAB) holds meetings, bringing together the presidents of the 38 Societies, seven councils, six communities, ten Divisions, and ten geographical regions. The IEEE is basically a volunteer-based organization (people like you and me), but it relies on a staff

that enables the operation of an organization of over 400,000 people spanning over 160 countries.

The TAB meeting is a unique place where robotics and automation meets computer and intelligent transportation systems, of course, but also oceanic engineering, microwave theory and techniques, or social implications of technology. You can imagine that topics of discussions abound.

The meeting itself, prepared by the IEEE Board of Directors, focuses on strategy and future directions: what are the main scientific and technological challenges for the future? Is the

future in smart cities or rethinking the computer “from soup to nuts”—an initiative coined “rebooting computing”—or life sciences? However, many discussions are also on organizational issues (e.g., new Societies), publication policy (e.g., open access), and conference sponsoring (should it be financial or technical only?). Decisions made at the TAB meeting will shape the general orientations of each individual Society.

The other (very satisfying) issue I would like to share with you is the growing penetration of our Society.

As you know, our membership is steadily growing, and the latest statistics from December 2013 show a total of 12,602 members. This is already an indication of the liveliness of our field and the efficiency of our efforts to serve our members.

But beyond individual membership, our Society is also locally organizing new Chapters in various countries and regions to promote robotics and automation. Since last December, 12 new Chapters have been approved and formed: one in China, four in India, one in Sri Lanka, one in Australia, one in Colombia, two in Mexico, one in Egypt, and one in Jordan. We should be particularly proud of reaching out to countries where robotics and automation were not all that developed.

Our field is growing, but its frontiers are getting fuzzier. This is due to its pervasive nature and its penetration in var-

ious application areas, from new manufacturing paradigms and processes to self-driving cars but, at the same time, to the fundamental questions we are addressing, e.g., how to build an autonomous machine. Such issues are interdisciplinary by nature. Hence, it is very logical that we have to reach out to other research areas to exchange information about common topics of interest. Artificial intelligence and computer vision have always been very close to robotics, and we envision engaging in the near future, in joint events with organizations in these areas in the near future.

The IEEE International Conference on Robotics and Automation (ICRA) 2014 in Hong Kong is being held 30 years after the first ICRA was held in Atlanta in 1984. As we move forward, we are also reexamining the operations of RAS. Two of the main services to our membership are conferences and publications. The new teams working with the Conference Activities Board and Publication Activities Board, with Vice Presidents Oussama Khatib and Antonio Bicchi, are already discussing new prospects for our journals and sponsored conferences. It is indeed important to keep our publications and conferences not only at the highest possible standards but also able to meet the challenge of the growth and diversity of our membership and field.