

George Beers

EFITA – Developing a Platform for Professionals

While preparing this editorial I was wondering to what extent the ZAI readers know about EFITA. As president of EFITA I thought it might be a good opportunity to inform you about this organization, its activities and my vision on how EFITA should adjust to what happens in the world around us.

The acronym EFITA stands for European Federation for Information Technology in Agriculture, Food and Environment. Of course you can find some formal information about EFITA on our site www.efita.org. EFITA is what I would like to call a 'platform for professionals'. EFITA is a federation of national organizations like GIL, VIAS (Netherlands) or BAITA (UK). Individual professionals are members of these national organizations, the cooperation between these national organizations is formalized in the federation EFITA. At the moment there are 13 national organizations member of EFITA, two organizations (Portugal and Turkey) will join very soon. All in all around 2000 professionals are forming the EFITA community.

The most important EFITA activity is its biannual conference, the last one was held last September in Bonn and the next one will be in France (Montpellier June 18-20, 2001). Other activities are the maintenance of a European farm software catalogue, a low profile E-journal and of course a website with information on events relevant for our community. Since the beginning of this year the EFITA board and its members are discussing on how to develop EFITA, how to create more added value for the members and what activities should be initiated by EFITA. The intention of this article is to involve you as a member of the EFITA community, in this discussion.

Professional Platforms

I think that the importance of platforms like GIL and EFITA is growing. Knowledge has become our most important production factor. Our knowledge intensive society has made that we have high level knowledge that is available at people that are very much specialized. On the other hand the challenges that we face in society are usually very complex. Professionals are more and more forced to integrate specialized knowledge into practical solutions and to cooperate with others. More particular the activities in business and academics become, for various reasons, more integrated. This especially is true for the ICT domain. The speed in which development in technology and the knowledge to use the technology takes place, is tremendous.

The ability to find the right people for the right job is becoming a basic asset for a professional whether in academics or in business. This is what I see as an important driver for the emerging network economy. On this development I think professional platforms are increasingly important. However they have to be tuned to this particular role; an important challenge is to make the professional platforms also attractive for professionals from the business community.

Changing position of agriculture

Within the field of ICT the GIL/EFITA community is very special because of their well-defined application domain. However, this domain is undergoing very drastic changes. Farm and crop management systems used to be the dominant application in our domain. Nowadays our attention is more and more asked for issues like food safety, supply chain management, the farm as a rural enterprise, landscape preservation, consumer concerns, agricultural branding and so on. The concept of the farm is stretched in a vertical way by integration with suppliers and clients of the farmer. From this movement of demand driven production we can see that ICT-application has developed towards logistic planning systems, tracking and tracing, E-commerce, quality assurance programs and a lot of information systems concerning characteristics of product and production process used for product differentiation. The farm concept is also stretched in a horizontal way, by integration of the farm as part of the rural area; e.g. landscape preservation programs, recreation on the farm or the 'care farm'. Though no prominent examples of applications (maybe GIS, environmental IS) can be given it is obvious that the information processing on the farm will follow this development.

I think it is important that these changes in our application domain are also effectuated into platforms like GIL. Important implication is that we have to look carefully to our members. For instance following the vertical dimension more people from food industry and trade companies should be interested for participation. Also the themes for conferences and for special issues of our journals have to be in line with what happens on our application domain.

Internationalization

The context of food production and consumption is more than ever international. The market players buy and sell their goods all over the world. Consumers are more and more using exotic products and world production of bulk goods are moving towards the production areas with the best conditions. This movement towards internationalization is very important especially for EFITA. EFITA will create her specific added value by focussing on the international dimension of the professional platform. In this way EFITA is striving to be complementary to her national member organizations. EFITA will focus her activities on being a facilitator for exchanging information and experiences between countries. To expand on this competency, the EFITA board is working on alliances with sister organizations in Asia (AFITA) and North and South America. Core competence of EFITA should be that 'professionals from different countries can learn from each other'.

EFITA activities

Following the guidelines as given above, the EFITA board has proposed a set of activities that could be implemented to

give added value to EFITA membership. The status of this 'plan' is that the EFITA board has asked all national member organizations to identify the activities in which they are interested and to bring forward names of individuals that can and want to be member of the initiative group for one of the activities. Our call for participation is on the following activities:

1. Upgrade the EFITA papers

There are several options for upgrading our current EFITA papers. One way is to develop a good and well-defined E-journal. Another option is to create a platform for the various editors of the national member journals, in this articles could be shared and the member journals can be improved by some international input. It is also thinkable that an EFITA group defines theme numbers complementary to the national journals in which the different countries bring in articles on the subject.

2. EFITA annual review

This activity concerns a publication (book), commercially published with a selection of the most interesting papers. The selection will be done by an international committee recruited from the EFITA community.

3. Facilitating EU projects 5th framework

Hereby we are thinking on organizing meetings with individual EFITA members and officers from the Commission. EFITA can also play a role in partner search.

4. Facilitating International Student Exchange

EFITA could facilitate student exchange by matching supply (students) with demand (companies and other organizations with apprenticeships). A database on the EFITA site could be a first step but it could be expanded with an active broker function and e.g. facilitation for standard contracts, reports and recommendations by students etc.. This activity could be enforced by interaction with student exchange centers on other domains.

5. Seminars on ICT themes

Organization of meetings aimed at a high professional level in which a specific recent development in ICT is discussed. Objective can be to bring in ICT knowledge from outside (non-agriculture) into the EFITA community. Seminars can be organized under EFITA patronage, using EFITA mailing lists. In line with the speed in our domain, organizing such a seminar should be able within very small time. To give the seminars a more formal status the objective can be focused on producing a 'white paper' document describing the implications of a specific actual issue for the EFITA community.

6. Farm software catalogue

This concerns the maintenance and possibly the upgrade of the current farm software catalogue. In line with the changing definition of the farm this activity should be expanded towards agribusiness and rural enterprises.

7. EFITA Summer School

Under EFITA patronage universities from different countries can develop an international e.g. 3-week course with professors from a variety of countries, giving lectures on developments in the different countries on the EFITA domain. We can think of different levels of ambition; a course for business people and/or for graduate students.

8. EFITA website and mailing list

The website can be seen as infrastructure for EFITA activities and has to be in line with the other activities. All national member organizations are operating websites for their own purposes; EFITA can facilitate the development of professional NMO websites.

A mailing list to all individual EFITA members will make EFITA a more 'lively' organization. In order to give a good example of our professional skills on ICT, we have to think on mechanisms and structures to avoid 'garbage mail'.

EFITA as a platform for and by professionals

EFITA chooses to be a broad platform with easy access and we have to avoid burdens like high membership fees. This implies that EFITA is not a rich association with a large budget and an overall business plan for her activities. Each activity within EFITA context has to be self-supporting. For each of the activities there has to be a separate business plan including the financial coverage. Making the activity attractive for business will open the door for sponsorship. Activities that require resources should generate their own funds not in the least to guarantee that there is 'demand'. EFITA can assist in recruiting manpower, can help in finding sponsors and can also help to give an 'official status' to support the people that launch an initiative.

In September the board will take stock of reaction on the call for participation on the activities given above. Selection will be quite straightforward; if for a specific activity no individuals are interested in participation in the initiation group, the board will drop the activity. For the other activities the board will take initiative to launch it. If you as member of the EFITA community are interested in helping us to make an activity work, please feel free to identify yourself with a reaction to the president or secretary general of EFITA.....

Learning by doing.....

At this stage in development of EFITA we think it is important that we are flexible in choosing and experimenting with a variety of activities that add value for EFITA members. We choose for a role of EFITA as a facilitator of initiatives with an international dimension. The list of activities as mentioned above is permanently open for additional ideas and all EFITA members are invited to put forward new ideas and initiatives. Let's make EFITA work!!

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