

Share The Wealth of Knowledge

You might learn something from a competitor. But only if you're willing to reciprocate.



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ALL GOOD THINGS begin with a concept. I think that PCB designers understand this better than anyone, because they are the ones who take that concept and develop it into a viable design. But board fabricators have not been far behind. Manufacturing a new design is where the rubber meets the road, separating success from failure. Both the designer and the fabricator are involved at the cutting edge of technology and manufacturing, and they are often the first to experience the future of electronics.

But the past few years have been extraordinarily rough for the designer and the fabricator. The paradigm that served us all well for decades shifted. For some, the shift appears to have been to places like India and China where the quest for lower costs has made being competitive look new and foreign. To others, the shift appears to have been adding layers to the supply chain, making the decision tree more cumbersome and reducing the relative importance of any one layer to the end-product's overall value. To all, this paradigm shift has caused confusion, uncertainty and often a loss of confidence.

While this shift has been taking place, our industry has been going through a process similar to grieving. First came disbelief that our world was changing. Then we cast blame, usually upon the rise in outsourcing or the uneven global playing field. The industry seems to have evolved into the next phase of the process – seeking a new course on which to take action and move forward.

But as new approaches to fitting into the shaken-up industry are considered, I encourage everyone to step back for a second and think about getting back to the basics.

In many ways, the industry is beginning to look like it did when it began. With the exception of those in Asia, most of the design firms and fabricators are smaller, entrepreneurial companies that focus on niche markets. Before e-mail and Gerber data, many smaller firms focused on servicing local customers. While location is not critical today, technical expertise is and the niche play of today revolves around the ability to conceive, design and fabricate quality, cost-effective product within specific technological parameters or for specific end applications. Most volume production takes place in low-cost parts of the world. This leaves an industry that is primarily comprised of smaller, specialty companies and a greater number of design firms filling in the void caused by OEM outsourcing.

What is needed is collaboration between the remaining smaller players in our industry. Designers need to share their knowledge and help each other gain visibility on the world stage. Fabricators need to share knowledge as new processes and technologies are demanded by a global customer base. Designers and fabricators need to help each other better understand the changing demands of technology and help each other with more mundane commercial issues, such as controlling fixed costs and recruiting and training technically competent people.

Over the past decade, some have stopped attending industry meetings and now view their local design and/or

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fabrication neighbors as merely “the competition.” Such an attitude only accelerates the rate of the industry's decline and reduces our competitiveness. When the industry was flourishing decades ago, our predecessors took great effort to share information and help one other. At this juncture, that same attitude and spirit is what is really needed.

The fact is, you must be world-class to succeed in a global market. Designers need to be able to stand toe-to-toe with any designers in the world, and be able to conceive, design and deliver cost-effective designs that incorporate the best available technology. To be world-class designers, individuals need to work together to make sure that skills and technology transfer are indeed world-class.

Fabricators who are niching may still want to service customers with a broad array of technology. World-class companies know their specific areas of excellence and know when to partner with others who have complementary skill sets. To understand who offers the capabilities that you lack, stay in regular contact with your peers.

It all begins with a concept. The concept of working together to ensure the highest level of competitiveness is a good one. Players in our industry must gather – locally, regionally and globally – to share, learn and help each other grow to into the world-class players we all can and must become if we're to survive. **PCD&M**

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