What Does ITE Need to Do to Find and Fulfill its Noble Purpose?

By:

The Noble Judges LeadershipITE 2016 Group

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Introduction: What is ITE’s Noble Purpose?

When the 2016 LeadershipITE class first assembled at ITE headquarters in January 2016, they received an overview of ITE at the international level. Members of the International Board of Direction and executive headquarters staff, responsible for the strategic direction of the Institute as a whole, observed that ITE is in a period of transformation along with the transportation industry itself. With ITE welcoming its first new Executive Director and CEO in 41 years, leadership explained that ITE’s mission and activities were going to be closely examined in 2016 to determine how they might better align with changing industry trends and the needs of the membership.

In considering ITE’s future, LeadershipITE program leader Glenn Tecker posed the question of defining ITE’s noble purpose to the class. A noble purpose speaks to the human element that drives people’s desire and willingness to be part of something bigger than themselves, such as a volunteer association. He gave Engineering Without Borders as an example of an organization with a clear noble purpose, with its mission, “Engineers Without Borders builds a better world through engineering projects that empower communities to meet their basic human needs and equip leaders to solve the world’s most pressing challenges.”

Tecker stressed the importance and value of finding and telling your organization’s noble purpose. No one in the room was able to clearly articulate ITE’s noble purpose. Thus our group determined our project topic would be, “What Does ITE Need to Do to Find and Fulfill its Noble Purpose?” Analyzing member survey results as well as conducting our own survey of ITE leadership would help inform our recommendations for this project, as outlined in this white paper.

ITE’s History

To understand what drives people to be members of ITE and determine how ITE’s noble purpose can guide its future, it helps to first revisit ITE’s history and origin. In the 1920s, streets in the United States transitioned from horse-drawn carriages and pedestrians to streetcars and automobiles. The traffic engineering profession emerged as civil engineers, electrical engineers, and planners took an interest in providing safe and efficient traffic movement, as pedestrian fatalities and congestion rose with the predominance of automobiles. Those interested in these issues met informally at National Safety
Council and American Society of Civil Engineers national and regional meetings. The need for an organization that dealt specifically with traffic engineering prompted them to work on creating a professional society for individuals seeking to reduce accidents and facilitate traffic movement. Their work and interest was not limited to automobiles—they were also working to facilitate pedestrian and street car movement and parking. These men wished to establish an organization for gathering and disseminating data and techniques, promoting standards of traffic engineering, and encouraging the establishment of traffic engineering departments in city and state governments. The Institute of Traffic Engineers (ITE) was born based upon their discussions in October 1930 at the National Safety Council’s Annual Convention. At a follow-up meeting on January 20, 1931, the founding members adopted a constitution and by-laws, making ITE a reality. What began 86 years ago with 19 men in the United States is now the Institute of Transportation Engineers, an international community of nearly 13,000 men and women working as transportation professionals in more than 90 countries.¹

Looking at the 2014 ITE’s Strategic Plan, the following mission and core purpose statements outline why ITE exists today:

**ITE’s Mission:**

“To be the principal source of professional expertise, knowledge, and ideas promoting transportation science, principles, and advocacy internationally.”

**ITE’s Core Purpose:**

“The purpose of the Institute shall be to enable transportation and traffic engineers, transportation planners, and other professionals with knowledge and competence in transportation and traffic engineering to contribute individually and collectively toward meeting human needs for safety and mobility.

The core purpose of the Institute is to advance transportation knowledge and practices for the benefit of society.”

Looking to the Institute’s future, the strategic plan outlines the following goal:

**Big Audacious Goal**

To bring together transportation’s body of knowledge and professional voice for the benefit of society.

*-ITE Strategic Plan, 2014*

As we neared the completion of our project, our group determined that ITE’s noble purpose is found within its core purpose:

“To contribute individually and collectively toward meeting human needs for safety and mobility.”
Our group believes that meeting human needs for safety and mobility speaks to the essence of what all ITE members strive for and is the foundation upon which ITE has been built to serve its membership and society.

**ITE and the Transportation Industry Changing**

Today we recognize that the transportation industry is on the cusp of its biggest transformation since automobiles were first introduced, with the emergence of automated and connected vehicles, changing demographics, and mobile technologies that have created on-demand transportation services and a new share-economy model. With a symbiotic tie between ITE and the transportation industry that its member serve, ITE’s success in fulfilling its mission, core purpose, and goals depends upon not only staying current with industry changes, but anticipating and even leading them.

Along with the surface transportation industry changing, so are the professionals engaged with the transportation network’s planning, design, and policymaking. Information technology and telecommunications specialists, web application developers, community planners, architects and landscapers, and automakers are all playing an increasing role in a field once dominated by engineers. While engineers and planners still plan, build, maintain, and operate transportation infrastructure, the rules about how to use the system are changing, often by professionals outside of the traditional transportation realm who are using IT to create transportation network companies and automated vehicles.

What does this expansion of professional involvement mean for ITE’s identity as an organization for transportation professionals?

ITE members stand poised to guide the next generation through the design, implementation, guidance, management, and operations of transportation systems that will carry goods and inform travelers using autonomous and connected vehicles. ITE members also are working to support the increased presence of pedestrians and bicyclists to once automobile-dominated streets, with active transportation modes on the rise. Through complete streets and context sensitive solutions that focus on not just accommodation but emphasizes all travel modes, road diets, and reclaimed uses of urban spaces through parklets, ITE members serve all users, including those who cycle, walk, drive, use transportation network companies, and take transit.

**Is ITE Having an Identity Crisis?**

In some ways, ITE’s core mission, purpose, and big audacious goal may be at odds with each other. On one hand, ITE’s purpose identifies specifically serving “transportation and traffic engineers, transportation planners, and other professionals with knowledge and competence in transportation and traffic engineering to contribute individually and collectively toward meeting human needs for safety and mobility.” This targets a very specific type of transportation professional and his/her knowledge base. On the other, the core mission and big audacious goal suggests engaging a much broader professional base in “advancing transportation knowledge and practices” and “bringing together transportation’s body of knowledge and professional voice for the benefit of society.”
The ITE website defines ITE as “a community of transportation professionals including, but not limited to, transportation engineers, transportation planners, consultants, educators and researchers.” The website also states: “A network of 13,000 members, working in more than 90 countries, ITE is your source for expertise, knowledge and ideas.”

In his presentation “ITE Today,” ITE Executive Director & CEO Jeffrey Paniati stated that ITE is embracing a broader mission and constituency. In discussing a broader constituency, the name ITE itself is called into question. While ITE today stands for the Institute of Transportation Engineers, its original meaning was the Institute of Traffic Engineers. The International Board of Direction changed the name in 1975 to reflect that membership was not limited to traffic engineers, embracing all transportation engineers, planners, consultants, educators, and researchers. For the past decade, the International Board of Direction has discussed whether the name ITE should be changed to remove the word “engineer” entirely to reflect its broader transportation professional base. Names such as the Institute of Transportation Professionals have been proposed. An alternative to renaming ITE has been to incorporate taglines beneath the logo that elaborate on ITE’s core purpose and constituency, such as:

- “A Community of Transportation Professionals”
- “Providing Solutions to Today’s Transportation Challenges”
- “The Source of Global Transportation Information, Insight, and Solutions”
- “Serving Transportation Professional Globally”

The question has remained, should ITE change its name to truly reflect serving a broader membership base that goes beyond transportation engineering?

In the ITE all-member survey (2016), 60 percent of participants do not think ITE should change its name to reflect a broader mission. A Noble Judge survey of ITE leadership (chapter, section, District and International Board of Direction) indicated that almost 70 percent of the responding leadership representatives would choose to keep the name ITE. Further that nearly one-third of the ITE leadership supported change and that this was over twice as likely as the general membership. Just over one out of four members were indifferent to a name change. Together, these results show that throughout the ITE structure there is a strong allegiance to the current name and that the path forward needs to recognize
Is ITE Constituent or Content-based?

The *LeadershipITE* class learned that ITE would be conducting an all-member survey in February 2016 posing questions related to ITE’s name, identity, and value proposition to help guide decisions for the strategic direction of ITE moving forward. Incoming 2017 International Vice President Michael Sanderson spoke to the class about ITE’s brand, asking whether it is constituency based or content-based. The answer to this fundamental question would help drive ITE’s strategic direction into the future. With current activities aimed at broadening ITE’s membership base, he noted that the opposite course of action, narrowing ITE’s scope to focus on engineers and engineering content, should also be considered with advantages that could promote membership growth. Just as the path had appeared clear to embrace a broader mission attracting a wider member-base, “doubling down” and focusing on ITE’s roots specializing in transportation engineering also was presented a way to strengthen ITE through clear branding and purpose. Should ITE expand by making a “bigger tent” and becoming more content-based, or should it become more elite by focusing efforts and resources on its traffic engineering members?

To provide answers to this question, our group first established the following initial questions that relate to ITE’s noble purpose and how it can be fulfilled:
1. Who does ITE serve?
2. Why are people members of ITE?
3. What do members want for ITE’s future?

In examining who ITE serves, our group discussed associations as being either constituent-based (focused on the needs of the members) or content-based (focused on an overall subject area, in this case transportation.) Data provided by the Institute of Transportation Engineers revealed that the current membership base is more than 75 percent engineers.

If ITE’s purpose is to serve its members, then the argument could be made for the association to pursue a more elite, focused membership base that supports the current core membership of transportation engineers and their exclusive needs. If ITE’s noble purpose was to be content-based in advancing the transportation safety and mobility, it would seek to become more inclusive reaching to all people involved in the industry, going beyond engineers to the many types of professionals involved in delivering global transportation systems.
With two possible directions for the future of ITE— constituent-based or content-based—our group began by analyzing each option individually to determine which approach might best identify and help fulfill ITE’s noble purpose.

**Constituent-based—Focus on the Members**

A constituent-based direction for ITE would focus on strengthening the benefits and services for existing members of ITE to better meet their needs.

**Advantages**

When it comes to the members of a constituent-based ITE, the organization can better manage the expectations of those members to improve the value of membership. This direction also leads to the development of a smaller more connected community with stronger connections due to more common fields, interests, and ultimate goals for the organization. The internet age has allowed people to connect more easily and to be able to casually share ideas and reach out for advice. It should be ITE’s responsibility to be the catalyst for this communication in the transportation engineering community for the ITE members. Once the development of a connected community is successful, the organization can then focus on expanding the number of memberships while ensuring the same value of membership is being met.

As a volunteer organization, it is vital for the members to believe that being a part of ITE is rewarding both personally and professionally. Members with a passion for ITE are more likely to continue membership, promote the organization to potential members, and become more engaged in the organization to make the future of ITE even stronger. A constituent-based focus would allow ITE to focus resources to provide more value to each member and attempt to fulfill all needs of current members rather than provide a diluted effort for fulfilling the broader needs of an expanded, larger group. Associated with this is the concern that resources could get spread out too much that paying members won’t be able to get what they need from the organization and will either need to reach out to another organization to fill the needs or not see the value of continuing membership.

One of the biggest advantages of the constituent-based direction is that ITE will be less likely have to compete with other existing organizations for members, dues, meeting topics and other resources. To promote connections with other professionals in the transportation industry, ITE could focus on teaming up and holding joint meetings with other organizations for special events, networking activities where topics of interest overlap. Combining efforts with other organizations to outreach to high schools and colleges would allow students to be introduced to a broader range of professions and topics all within the transportation industry. The Noble Judges’ survey to the ITE district and section leadership representatives selected having ITE members speak at student chapter functions (92%) and providing networking opportunities to students (92%) as the most beneficial ways for ITE to outreach to colleges. Other top options included a mentorship program between ITE members and students (76%) and to involve students in local projects (65%).
Disadvantages

The most significant disadvantage of being solely a constituent-based organization is that professionals in the transportation engineering field may have other organizations that are of interest to them, specifically for those whose work straddles different fields and this competes for their attention and resources. It is likely professionals and companies will have to choose or divide between different organizations. Constituent-based memberships may also lead to smaller chapter and section memberships and this could result on decreased revenue from a decline or lack of growth in memberships. Based on personal observations, membership seems to be one of the biggest concerns for many of the ITE chapters.

Content-Based—Focus on Transportation at Large
If ITE embraces a broader mission and constituency, this approach could position ITE as a content-based organization. Embracing all aspects of transportation more broadly could expand ITE’s membership base to reflect a diverse range of professionals involved in transportation going well beyond the traditional base of transportation engineers, planners, and academicians. ITE’s core membership base of transportation engineers (which now make up 75 percent) would expand to incorporate all professionals involved in planning, designing, building, maintaining, and operating surface transportation systems.

**Advantages**

One of the biggest advantages of the expansion in a content-based organization would be increased networking and exposure opportunities for members (and their employers and projects), opening the door to new partnerships beyond traditional channels and cutting across industries into health and information technology fields. This would raise ITE’s relevance as an international association and earn broader industry recognition and status. With a more diverse network of professionals engaged in common goals of transportation safety and mobility, ITE could position itself as the go-to organization for all surface transportation related information, working toward its big, audacious goal. With increased prominence, recognition, and relevance, ITE would have increased opportunity to affect policy direction.

A content-based organization would provide a new opportunity to attract industries and non-traditional experts, some of whom do not employ engineers but have staff responsible for decisions that affect transportation. ITE would be able to provide a baseline of knowledge and support across related disciplines, helping to ensure that transportation-related projects are supported by sound engineering practices and judgement regardless of the background of those implementing them. Financially, attracting more members would produce more revenue to improve and expand the member services needed by a broader content-based constituency.

**Disadvantages**

Expansion could result in an initial loss of membership if the needs of the core existing members are not being met once resources are spread across several fields with common interests. Members who deal strictly in transportation engineering could splinter off to remain focused on engineering if content becomes too diluted through the participation of non-engineers. In trying to serve too many types of professionals, content could become too general to be of enough practical use for those with technical knowledge needs and requirements.

Expansion could also lead to competition with existing industry organizations for members, topics, and resources. With some ITE sections and districts already operating at capacity for their events, expansion might mean having to turn away paying members from events if the growing number of those interested cannot be accommodate. Finally, rebranding again becomes an issue, as a true change to embrace all transportation related professionals could require the removal of “Engineer” from ITE’s name to attract non-engineer members and truly embody a group that represents transportation professionals at large.

**Survey Results**
Based on our survey results, we believe that finding and implementing ITE’s noble purpose requires ITE to focus on a staged approach to implementing a combination of constituent- and content-based models.

After discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the two directions for ITE and reviewing the results of the multiple surveys that were conducted, the Noble Judges determined that it was not going to be an either/or decision but a combination of the constituent-based and the content-based path. This outcome will be most effective if evaluated through a staged approach in order to determine which actions are effective and to not overwhelm the members with too much change at once.

The February 2016 all member survey showed that 51 percent of respondents think ITE should target professionals in technology and innovation as an area of membership expansion. The survey results also show the top reasons people are ITE members as:

a) Networking (50%)

b) Stay current on information and news related to transportation industry (46%)

c) Technical resources and publications (35%)

The Noble Judges’ ITE Leadership survey showed nearly three-quarter of the participants (District and Section leaders of ITE) preferred ITE being a combination of both content and constituent-based.
The Noble Judges have spent the last seven months exploring the pros and cons of two different models (constituent-based and content-based) for the future of ITE that would help the association define and fulfill its noble purpose. Using the international ITE survey from February and the smaller surveys that their LeadershipITE group conducted, the Noble Judges have prepared several recommendations for upper leadership in ITE to consider when moving forward. Our main recommendation is for ITE to define and fulfill its noble purpose by becoming the catalyst for information in the transportation industry. While ITE doesn’t have to take ownership of all of the professionals and information in the transportation industry, ITE can be the one-stop-shop that professionals, policy-makers, and the public reach out to for transportation information, serving as a central point for how to get the information they need.

The Noble Judges’ research shows that ITE Board should consider a staged approach to maintaining and expanding its membership to fulfill its noble purpose. This would allow for time to see the direct result of new initiatives and avoid too much change at once, which could spread both volunteer and staff time too thin to be effective. The interests and reasons that influence membership in either a constituent or content-based model can be varied as the members themselves. There are definite opportunities for ITE to offer different products and services to all members, but a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. ITE must consider the particular interest and concerns of each side – including the types of benefits and services that will resonate with each group and the types of communication channels that will be the most effective at reaching members.

In addition, ITE should also identify the top priorities for retaining members and attracting new prospects to their association, increasing the perceived value of membership. This is especially true today – when economic struggles may lead many members to consider dropping out of organizations to avoid paying dues.

**Recommendations**

Moving forward, a starting point would be to initially focus on improving the value of membership for existing members then look to expanding topics and the membership pool into areas where current needs are not being met.

Below are ways that the Noble Judges recommend ITE can improve the value of membership:

- **Be the catalyst for information in the transportation industry.**

  Increasing connections with other organizations will allow ITE members to network and share ideas with other professions connected to the transportation community. To achieve this, all levels of ITE could establish outreach committees that reach out to the international and local
chapters of other organizations including ITS, WTS, YPT, ASCE, FHWA, APTA, NACTO, IMSA, APA, and other organizations where transportation professionals and topics overlap. This outreach could also include reaching out to lawyers, contractors, police departments, and future technology developers.

- **Increase support of local ITE chapters.**

  The resources and offerings from local chapters are the most direct connection to the members. The Noble Judges anticipate that increasing support for local chapters to improve the value of membership will encourage more professionals in the area to become members.

  One way that this can be achieved is by hosting a webinar where section and district chapter winners discuss some of the initiatives that they have implemented and what makes these initiatives successful. An open line of communication between chapters will benefit ITE as a whole and allow other sections to get input about how to implement new ideas and learn from ideas that were not successful. While it is important for sections to compete to be “the best,” ITE should consider that it is the support of the members and the member’s willingness to be more involved that should be commended, not that one group has more creativity or better ideas.

  Another way that ITE can support local and district chapters is by providing resources to help chapters increase their presence on the internet. A template for a website and app for conferences would allow local chapters to connect to different levels of ITE and other chapters more efficiently.

  Local chapter and district conferences are another resource that has historically been contained to the area that it supports and represents. ITE could encourage attendance by surrounding districts and chapter members by providing financial support or discounts in order to establish connections to other ITE groups. ITE could survey members what they would like to hear about at upcoming conferences and ITE could help cover expenses of speakers to attend from different districts.

  Even if ITE international could not offset the cost to the local or district chapter, they could encourage those conferences to offer a scholarship, free registration, or a speaking opportunity to bring in someone from another chapter.

- **Encourage involvement at all levels of ITE, especially through mentorship.**

  ITE, especially at the local level, is entirely dependent on members volunteering to improve the value of membership. Since a volunteer is only as beneficial as their passion for the topic, finding where an individual wants to be impactful is extremely important. An excellent way of allowing people to choose where they want to volunteer is holding an “open registration” for committees at all levels. Many members don’t even know what committees exist and
specifically which ones need volunteers at their local chapter and especially at the district and international level. All of this information could be provided through the websites.

ITE should focus on retaining its existing members and growing its membership by providing mentorship and sponsorship with existing members. Younger members are one of the biggest un-tapped resource for committees at the district and international level because of their possible fear of over-reaching or not being useful. To encourage their involvement, those that show interest in a committee could be paired with an existing committee member to “mentor” the young member and allow them to bounce ideas and split responsibilities with. ITE can promote “active” members in local chapters that can assist with new programs that help retain and grow the membership.

- **Include a set number free webinars to those who have paid membership dues.**

  One of the main reasons for membership is PDH opportunities. There are years when budget and schedule conflicts can restrict membership from attending conferences. Adding a certain amount of “free” opportunities for webinars could be accomplished either through ITE choosing specific webinars that are included in a membership or by providing each member with a set number vouchers to choose which webinars they can attend free as part of their membership. Alternatively, ITE could offer the webinar for free for all participants, but only paying attendees could receive PDHs. If someone could learn something new about a topic but doesn’t have the resources to pay for all the webinars that are applicable to their job, ITE should consider their role in hindering the opportunity to share ideas across the nation. The “free” webinar could be also a sponsorship opportunity for a consultant or vendor, providing another revenue stream that could help grow ITE programs.

- **Increase online access to resources.**

  The internet is the most powerful tool available to connect the different levels of ITE and to share and distribute resources. ITE should attempt to make ITE-developed resources more easily accessible for paying members in order to increase the value of the membership possibly including an online archive of webinars, conference presentations and journal articles from non-ITE journals related to transportation engineering. Leadership would need to consider how much of an increase in membership dues would offset providing some of the fee-based ITE resources for free to paying members and how those members would react to the increase in dues to the perceived value of membership.

In focusing on the stage of expanding ITE through content-based strategies, ITE could leverage the strengthened, solid foundation of transportation professionals to provide mentorship and knowledge about ITE to civil, electrical, software, IT, and planning students. ITE could be the leader in demonstrating how transportation affects these related industries.

ITE’s survey identified that collaboration with other organizations is of significant importance to all transportation professionals. More than 40 percent of respondents report ITE should collaborate or
partner with similar transportation associations to fulfill its mission to become the principal source of transportation professional experience, knowledge, and practices.

Emerging areas, like connected vehicles, safety, and technology, should provide networking and information sharing opportunities from both ITE, auto industry, software, etc. ITE can build that bridge. This can increase membership expansion regardless of experience in transportation. The ITE survey found 88 percent of respondents believe that ITE’s membership expansion would not adversely affect their decision to join or renew.

**Conclusion**

What does ITE need to do to find and fulfill its noble purpose? We need to focus on our membership, increasing value and meeting member needs. The recommendations we have outlined can be considered as a means to doing that. Once today’s membership needs are met, ITE can expand to deliver more content-based expansion, becoming the catalyst for transportation.

**When should ITE change to define and fulfill its noble purpose?**

NOW!

References

1. ITE’s 85th Anniversary: Celebrating ITE’s Past, Present, and Future. ITE Journal August 2015. [http://library.ite.org/pub/b965d9f0-034d-1384-75ec-b8ea17c88e03](http://library.ite.org/pub/b965d9f0-034d-1384-75ec-b8ea17c88e03)
2. Attachment 1: IBOD Survey Results
3. Attachment 2: District and Section Leadership Survey Results