

EFITA – DEVELOPING A PLATFORM FOR PROFESSIONALS

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EFITA is de federatieve koepel waar ook VIAS deel van uitmaakt. Het lijkt echter binnen VIAS aan een ondergewaardeerd bestaan. Reden voor de AI redactie om een bewerking van een artikel van George Beers te plaatsen.

While preparing this article I was wondering to what extend the AI readers know about EFITA. This might therefore be a good opportunity to inform you about our 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 the our site www.efita.org. EFITA is what I would like to call a 'platform for professionals'. It is the federation of national organizations like VIAS, GIL (Germany) or BAITA (UK). At this moment there are 13 national member organizations, two (Portugal and Turkey) will join very soon. In total the EFITA community comprises over 2000 professionals in IT in agriculture, food and environment.

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

Professional Platforms

The importance of platforms like VIAS and EFITA is growing. Knowledge has become an important production factor, but on the other hand we meet complex challenges in the world today. Professionals need to cooperate and integrate specialized knowledge into practical solutions. The speed at which technology develops is tremendous, requiring an ever up to date knowledge on use and utilisation of technology. Networking has become crucial and networks of excellence, communities of practise or whatever buzz word may be glued on it, the ability to find and meet the right people has

become a basic asset for a professional, both in research and in commerce. Therefore I think professional platforms are increasingly important.

Changing position of agriculture

Within the field of ICT the VIAS and EFITA community benefit from their well-defined application domain, although it is subject to drastic changes. Farm and crop management systems used to be the dominant application in our domain. Nowadays attention is focussed on food safety, supply chain management, the farm as a rural enterprise, landscape preservation, consumer concerns, agricultural branding and so on. The farm concept is stretched vertically by integration with its suppliers and clients. The movement to demand driven production shows a development towards logistic planning systems, tracking and tracing, e-business, quality assurance programs and many information systems concerning production processes and product differentiation. The farm concept is also stretched horizontally, by considering the farm part of rural area; e.g. landscape preservation programs, recreation or the 'care farm'. Though no prominent examples of applications (except maybe in GIS) can be given it is obvious that the information processing on the farm will follow this development.

I think these changes in our application domain have an impact on platforms like VIAS. For instance following the vertical extension more people from food industry and trade companies should be interested in 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. (red.: VIAS doet het derhalve niet slecht!)

Internationalization

Food production and consumption is more than ever international. 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. Internationalization in our domain gives EFITA specific added value by focussing on the international dimension of the professional platforms. EFITA will focus her activities on facilitating the exchange of information and experiences between countries. To expand on this competence, 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 proposed 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 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 national member journals, where articles could be shared and the member journals can be upgraded with 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 framework collaboration

We are thinking of organizing meetings with individual EFITA members and officers from the Commission. EFITA can also play a role in partner search and network development.

4. Facilitating International Student Exchange

EFITA could facilitate student exchange by matching supply (students) with demand (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 without high membership fees. Therefore EFITA is not a rich association with large budgets or an overall business plan. Each activity has to be self-supporting and EFITA initiates and facilitates. Making the activity attractive for organizations (universities, companies) will open the door for sponsorship. EFITA can assist in recruiting manpower, can help in finding sponsors and can give an 'official status' in support to the people that launch an initiative.

At this stage we think it is important that we are flexible in choosing and experimenting with a variety of activities. EFITA wants to be a facilitator of initiatives with 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!!

