

association: modernization

starting transformation at the grassroots to re-energize the workforce for 21st century member demands

Today's associations remain focused on retention and growth. The name of the game is "engagement", but the playing field has changed and it isn't finished. Associations are recognizing the need to address the market differently, but they haven't comprehensively redefined requirements or acquired the skills that they need to cost-effectively meet the demand. Members now have many options and they won't wait around, so associations must quickly—and smartly—move to reinvigorate the workforce.



The evolution of technology in the 21st century has affected association member demands in at least three important ways:

1. Social networking is diluting associations' roles in developing and maintaining connections. Interactions that once relied on professional organizations can now be accomplished in, for example, communities like LinkedIn.
2. The market emphasizes "pulling" information more than ever. Members value on-line, on-demand access to data, best practices, research, educational resources, etc. They want associations to be "curators of industry information."
3. "Meeting members where they are" is a constant challenge. They aren't where they used to be, and aren't staying put. Sites like Facebook and Twitter are now the key engagement drivers, and require different outreach strategies.

As member options expand, being seen as essential to members is increasingly critical. Associations may be able to use existing brand power to attract interest, but will need to continuously adjust to keep their names relevant in the long run.

- Diversity, quality, and value of offerings is key to ensuring substance behind the brand. Departments responsible for products and services can no longer rely on "tried and true", and have to integrate, anticipate, and aggressively innovate.

- Current and potential members have to be made aware of what associations offer, and how it will benefit them more than the alternatives. On the front lines, Marketing needs a strong business analysis focus to be fully effective.
- Marketing has a unique level of access to information that can align and improve what associations provide. This can reinforce brands, but only if Marketing staff can interpret the data and are integrated into product and service planning.
- All association professionals need working knowledge of the technologies shaping today's market to continuously engage members. IT departments need to lead in identifying what is—and will be—possible, and be more involved in delivery.

Terms, methods, and tools for member engagement are changing, and they call for broader perspectives and modernized skills. In addition, traditional lines are blurring, and it is now essential that all staff have cross-functional knowledge. Most associations are not equipped for these conditions. In order to succeed and grow in today's environment, they need to reinvent their approaches, and build a workforce that can execute.

updating the workforce on the fly

Enterprise-wide transformation is needed in associations. It will occur—demographics indicate accelerating executive turnover in the next several years, and smart Boards will select visionary leaders who recognize the need for comprehensive change.

Members aren't waiting for executives to retire, however, and associations need to start modernizing now. Market conditions warrant fast action, and new strategies and associated workforce modifications can't be delayed while leadership transitions.

The urgency is felt most at the grassroots, in member-focused departments like Marketing, Membership, and Events. Some are adjusting by asking top performers to stretch their limits, learn new methods and tools, and become "in-house experts".

Such informal workforce adaptations help some associations to adopt new approaches, but aren't viable long-term solutions:

- They typically aren't tied to purposeful, broader strategies. In effect, they are simply driven by "trying new things".
- The in-house experts are doing yeomen's work. They aren't true specialists, though, so the benefits are limited.
- To augment capabilities, managers, stressed by the pace and scope of advances in their fields, are either:
 - Trying to replicate their in-house experts, even though these individuals are "unique", and lack "ideal" profiles

- Asking for broad skill sets, without adequately defining them or articulating how they will be used
- Resulting job descriptions don't attract who's needed, and it's nearly impossible to evaluate candidates who do respond.
- Also, roles that managers define do not necessarily represent the most cost-effective organization of work and skills.

In short, while they may be acquiring some new perspectives and skills, the actions that are being taken in many association departments now aren't building toward a strategy-oriented, cost-effective "workforce of today", let alone of the future.

A quick look at association job openings is revealing. Announcements are often "laundry lists" of functions and skills that aren't necessarily even complementary. Should appropriately qualified candidates even exist, the positions offered are at best undesirable given scope and expectations. Associations either settle or just don't hire, and don't get what they need.

taking transformation to the grassroots

Department managers need to step back from this patchwork approach. They can transform their own organizations for new requirements, planning for the need and then finding the best ways to transition through hiring, training, outsourcing, etc.



Initiatives to upgrade organizations and staffing won't succeed without informed strategies to guide work (e.g., target segments, techniques, tools, critical success factors). Even with the best people, the wrong strategies will produce suboptimal results.

Strategy requires context, so managers need to account for two things over which they have varying degrees of control:

- Others' capabilities affect department outcomes, and may be limiting. They may be open to change, so dialogue is key.
- Staff must execute the plan. With budget constraints, strategy and resourcing may need to be iterative until they align.

Defining and orienting the workforce for successful strategy execution must be done methodically. Departments should:

- Fully scope the work driven by the chosen strategy, including responsibilities and skills required to generate the outcomes.
- Organize work and associated skills into cost-effective roles and progressive levels, integrating disciplines as appropriate.
- Assess the labor market to evaluate candidate accessibility (e.g., availability, cost, fit with the organization's culture, etc).
- Determine the best approaches for obtaining resources, e.g., adapting roles, hiring, training, and/or outsourcing).

- Calibrate the business strategy and resource plan, adjusting one or both to assure solution viability.
- Interact with staff in HR, procurement, etc. so they clearly understand what is needed, and where to find it.

Infrastructure to support the workforce needed for strategy execution is critical. For example, if training is part of the approach, the department should have a structured regimen, ensure course availability, and manage learning activities. Similarly, if relying on outsourcing, the department needs the mechanisms and skills to manage contractors effectively.

getting help to get it right

While many are realizing they can't—and don't have to—wait, business unit managers need help. They need guidance to develop strategies that respond to where the market is heading, and help in adapting organization and staffing models.

The former need is likely best addressed with external expert guidance. For the latter, internal Human Resources (HR) is the logical first place to turn, especially given contemporary thinking about the strategic and consultative roles HR should play.

Few associations have invested in their HR functions, though, beyond transactional capabilities. Strategic HR perspectives are essential in the long run but, at the moment, association HR departments lack the skills or resources to answer the call.

As such, business unit managers may need to look outside for support in determining how to align and staff their departments. To get the greatest return, they should look to consultants who can help them to define both market and resourcing strategies.

The investment is well worth it. Research already indicates that modern marketing techniques and tools, for example, have the potential to greatly increase member retention and growth, and even "off-membership" (e.g., product) revenue. For many associations, returns are likely to significantly exceed what's spent on defining and properly executing an approach that is tailored to the target market, and is flexible to future changes.

find out more

Snowflake LLC works collaboratively with industry experts, helping associations start transforming at the ground level by working alongside department managers to develop 21st century strategies executed by a 21st century workforce. To find out more about how your association can benefit from these collaborations and ensure you're engaging members for retention and growth in a dynamic market, please e-mail info@snowflakellc.com. You can also get in touch with us by using the form at www.snowflakellc.com/contact.



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