

Learning through professional associations

By Anne McDonagh

What do accountants, information technologists, fundraisers, interior decorators, law clerks, quantity surveyors or administrative assistants have in common? The answer is that, like most professions, they all have a professional association. Wikipedia defines a professional association as “an association of practitioners of a given profession. It is a non-profit organization seeking to further that particular profession, the interests of individuals engaged in that profession, and the public interest.” Most professionals belong to a professional association because it:

- Creates the opportunity for members to exchange knowledge and experience with one another**
- Shares the latest research and expertise with its members**
- Provides lifelong learning through various continuing education and professional development programs, recognizing that up-to-date knowledge is necessary for a successful career**
- Advocates for their profession**
- Lobbies to change public opinion and/or to affect government policy.**

Apart from the above reasons for joining a professional association is the opportunity to network or to access the job boards that most associations have. Over the past several years, Wendy Terry has written a series of articles for Learning Curves on the value of professional associations for networking purposes—especially for newcomers. She noted that you do not have to have finished your training or to be certified in a particular profession in order to join and participate in its association.

Many associations have student and associate memberships and these are usually available at a lower cost than the regular membership fee. Only a limited number of associations have licensing restrictions as the PEO (Professional Engineers of Ontario) does, whereas there are many membership-based associations. In other words, you do not have to have earned the certificate or completed the degree to join a membership-based association. In the case of engineers, there are membership-based associations for many specialties: chemical, electrical, electronic, civil, mechanical and so on.

Wendy wrote a total of five articles featuring associations for engineers, computer professionals, business support professionals, lawyers and health professionals. She contended that by joining associations and networking, newcomers could find job leads and use the associations' job banks. She concluded that it is one of the best ways for professionals to find a job. These five articles will be featured for the next little while on our website at www.weacanada.ca and click on *Articles*

There is another reason to join an association in your field and that is the educational and training opportunities it makes available to its members. A professional association monitors the formal education its members receive, provides continuing education for its members and offers many opportunities for its members for informal learning.

Many associations offer certification programs through universities and colleges. The most valuable certification programs are profession-wide such as the Chartered General Accountants of Ontario. These programs may be delivered by an educational institution such as a community college or university but the content is developed and monitored closely by the professional association although, as you will read in our interview with a CGA, the entire CGA program can be done by distance learning through the CGA association. Another example is CIPS, the Canadian Information Processing Society, the information technology professional society in Canada. The society certifies and regulates the Information Systems Professional (I.S.P) designation in most provinces. The society also performs accreditation of computer science and software engineering programs at Canadian universities. CIPS is responsible for defining the Canadian IT body of knowledge.

These two associations—like most associations—thus maintain a uniform standard of competence and are constantly upgrading the courses in order to increase the level of practice. The certification is portable to all places where the certificate-holder might work. Earning the certification from a well-respected association such as the CGAs of Ontario or from CIPS is a great achievement and is in fact a passport to good jobs in the future. This is the formal education/training that an association provides.

To continue to hold a good job and to advance in your career using the skills you learned in a certification program require constant—or

lifelong—learning. The professional associations offer professional development courses. For instance, the Canadian Payroll Association this year offers many two-day three-day and five-day professional development seminars on topics such as Complex U.S. Payroll Issues, Employment Standards or Payroll Administration in Quebec and many, many more.

Professional development can also be in the area of soft skills like stress management or developing assertiveness or in the area of generic skills like managing employees or conducting interviews. Continuing education and lifelong learning are extremely important to professional associations. For most associations a certain number of professional development courses per year are mandatory or you may lose your certification.

Then there is the informal learning that takes place when you meet someone in your field at an association meeting who is willing to share information or expertise, perhaps become a mentor. Needless to say, you learn from guest speakers, who are experts in the field. There is the opportunity to learn from newsletters. There may be a discounted price on national magazines and other “perks.”

Organizations like professional associations are always looking for volunteers. You can learn to be a leader yourself by volunteering to head up a fundraiser, for example, or perhaps you can hone your writing skills by contributing an article to the newsletter. Volunteering is a way to advertise your skills—your energy and your willingness to go the extra mile—to the right people, those in your profession. It can also be a tremendous learning experience.

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