“What I Wish I Would’ve Known”
Personal Stories from Association Executives

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A special thank you to ASAE CareerHQ.org for sponsoring this resource for young professionals.
Welcome to the Workforce, Millennials!

There are many different ways that people enter the association world—from unconsciously applying to strategically paving the career path after college. The journey to and through associations is one that can be exciting and varied, and truly a journey of learning. The lessons learned come from experience, on-the-job training, personal introspection, and interactions with peers.

ASAE strives to meet the needs of association professionals at all levels of their career by providing accessible virtual resources, such as this publication on navigating the many paths of association management. Those early in their career have a unique set of challenges. ASAE’s Young Association Executives Committee (YAEC) is charged with identifying the needs of this demographic and finding ways to meet those needs through online resources, in-person networking events, educational tools for professional development, and other resources for personal and career growth.

Additional support for those looking to further their careers is available through ASAE CareerHQ.org. This is a great source for information on topics such as strengthening your resume, being the best employee you can be, professional development opportunities, and available positions in association management.

What follows in this publication are stories from association executives at all levels sharing what they wish they would have known at the beginning of their career. For more insight from association executives, visit asaecenter.org/YAEresources or careerhq.org.

Sincerely,
Young Association Executive Committee
“What I Wish I Would’ve Known”

Personal Stories

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Falling into the Association World:
What is an Association?

Ashley Hodak Sullivan
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“So how did you end up in the association world?” We all have an origin story of how we fell into the business. None of us actually major in “association management.” Many of us didn’t plan to work in nonprofits. Few of us even knew what an association was. My story is no different...

In October 2008, at the height of the recession, I was like most recent graduates—still looking for a permanent job. My nights and weekends were dedicated to writing cover letters, revising my resume (yet again), and researching job openings for any and everything. I would get an interview here and there, but nothing was coming through.

One night, I stumbled across a blind job posting by a staffing company. I submitted my information and hoped for the best. I landed the interview.

“Do you know what an association is?” That question, posed by the association’s executive director, stopped me in my tracks. No, I had not a clue. I improvised some answer I thought sounded coherent, but he saw right through and called my bluff. I tried my very best to recover, highlighting the relevance of my Arts Administration degree and my limited portfolio, but I was thoroughly convinced I had blown it.

As fate would have it, my boss saw something in me, and I had a job offer by the end of the day.

It’s been almost four years since that auspicious moment, and this experience has been one of the most trying and deeply fulfilling of my life. True, when I was a little girl, I dreamed of being a princess/journalist/veterinarian, not an association professional, but this career has fed my lifelong need to affect change and help others (though that crown would have been nice).

I work for a cause I am passionate about, in ways that challenge and excite me. What started as a basic publications job has flourished into one where I can impact the strategic direction of my association daily and have the freedom to try new projects and ideas. There are days when I am shaken and face immense challenges, but the passion for my association, its members, and staff reminds me why I do it every single day.

There are so many professionals like me. While we have all come from different paths, we all share the same deep commitment to serving our members and our industry. It doesn’t matter if you majored in sociology, Russian literature or marketing—it is your heart and intuition that will make you shine.

To those who now find themselves in my shoes, I leave you some advice that has helped me along my way:

1. **Find passion in your association’s mission.** Having a job you are passionate about gives you the gusto to hop out of bed and give it your best every single day, through the quality of your work and service to your members.

2. **Go beyond your job description.** Be willing to try new ideas or explore new projects. Your risk today could be your success tomorrow.

3. **Avoid silos.** Do not stay confined to the parameters of your department. Through your work with other departments, you will not only increase your knowledge of your association as a whole, but also enrich your own personal knowledge of the association world (and possibly find a new passion along the way).

4. **Never stop learning.** As with most things in life, this industry is ever-changing. Never miss an opportunity to reach out and learn something new. Whether it is on Twitter, on a blog, in a book or from a speaker, every opportunity is a chance to make your career and association better.

5. **Use your network.** The association community is a wonderful, talented and warm group of people, who will happily reach out and help (more often than not, they have experienced the same problem). Getting the right answer can be as simple as using Twitter or Collaborate (ASAE’s social network).
Falling into the Association World: Law to Lobbying

Stefanie Reeves, MA, CAE
Senior Legislative and Federal Affairs Officer
American Psychological Association

Like most of my colleagues, I stumbled into association management. The summer before my junior year of college, I interned for a nonprofit with one staff person. Outside of my administrative tasks, I was able to accompany my boss and her colleagues in the scientific community to Capitol Hill for visits and hearings. This is when I discovered government relations. At the time, my plan was to go to law school and study employment law. However, it was this internship that led me to my current career in government relations.

Being completely naive to the world of lobbying, I began looking for a job that would teach me the ropes after graduation. I took a job at a small association as the administrative assistant to the director of government relations. Because my job also included relieving the receptionist at lunch, I had to learn about different aspects of our association, from membership to finance.

I discovered that I liked working in an association. The hours were better and the pay was great compared to what other 22-year-olds were making at the time. I also had the opportunity to dip my toe into other aspects of association management. Sixteen years and three jobs later, I love being an association lobbyist.

My advice for others:

1. If you’re looking to do government relations for an association, be willing to start at the bottom. I started my career as an administrative assistant and currently serve as a senior lobbyist.

2. Network, network, network! Identify colleagues and potential mentors in the field and have a conversation with them. Even now, I still make it a point to get together with colleagues to talk about lobbying and association management.

3. Join ASAE and/or your local society of association executives. The contacts and education provided through these groups are valuable to developing your association lobbying career.

4. Don’t be afraid of social media. It’s a great way to connect with association government relations colleagues within and outside your issue area.
Falling into the Association World: Passion Meets Profession

Jim Way
Director of Membership Marketing
Association of Corporate Counsel

Marketing, flying, and associations. They add up to something. Follow along. Trust me.

I wanted to go into advertising. In New York. In the 1990s. As many in that industry might attest, that wasn’t a good idea. I got a couple of offers, but I would’ve had to accept both simply to afford rent and some ramen. Fortunately, through personal connections, I landed a good paying position with a management consulting company focused on bankrupt and troubled companies. Since I majored in business management in school, this was a pretty good spot for me but not what I wanted to be doing further down the road.

Since the pay was decent, I was lucky enough to be able to start flight training toward my private pilot’s license. I already knew (due to my eyesight) that I couldn’t be a professional pilot, but it’s something I’d wanted to do all my life and aviation was in my blood, so this was step one. I also started to think about step two: without being a professional pilot of some sort, how could I get into the industry?

As a pilot, several associations wanted me to join their ranks, and it got me thinking. After a bit of investigation, I found that many were based in the Washington, DC area. So after I’d had enough years of management consulting, I packed my bags for DC. I didn’t have a job, but I was determined to get one in some type of aviation association.

With a list of associations, I began literally going office to office with résumé in hand, looking for an opening. Eventually, I came to the National Aeronautic Association (NAA). I presented myself to the admin up front and she kindly walked my paperwork back to a director. She then started asking me lots of questions. I answered, wondering why she was asking, but I assumed it wouldn’t hurt.

As it turns out, with a staff of six, everyone can make a difference. She disappeared for a few minutes and, next thing I knew, I was talking with the membership director and then the president, all in the same visit. I was hired less than a week later. Eventually, I became director of membership and enjoyed my four years with them.

While my stint with NAA demonstrated the benefits and pleasures of an association career, not to mention meeting my heroes and role models, I chased money and prestige and moved to a dot-com startup and then to a larger company in the travel business. However, I made my return to the association world at my current position as the director of membership marketing for the Association of Corporate Counsel. No, it’s not in the aviation industry, but it’s an association and that matters a lot. Why? I work with great people and get to use my skills in marketing to help people do their jobs more effectively.

That precisely is the great thing about working at associations. It all comes down to purpose and people. With an association, there’s a reason we exist—to help people do their jobs. I’m constantly surprised at the level of contact I get with all kinds of members at all levels of their profession, something I never got from any other work. Working for an association, I get both a sense of purpose and a connection with the members. It’s my own little personal ROI. The work I do is reflected in members’ satisfaction and appreciation of what we provide.

If you’re lucky enough to be able to match your passion with your skills, that’s great. Wouldn’t it be even better to do that with and for people, both staff and members, who share that passion? Associations can offer that, and more. As many of us know, there’s an association for everything, so with a bit of persistence and passion, you can hit the trifecta of passion, skills, and people, and have an extremely satisfying career. Go for it. I did.
What I Wish I Would’ve Known:
Business and Marketing

Cecilia Sepp
Vice President
Association Laboratory, Inc.

As a student of political science, the obvious place for me to live was Washington, D.C. Newly married, my husband and I moved to the area and started our careers. I began as an assistant at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, a place I was happy to work because of all the exposure to politics and policy analysis. After a few years, I worked my way up to policy analyst/lobbyist position in the Labor & Human Resources Department. I loved the policy work and talking with members and the media, but I hated the lobbying and the political jockeying. It really turned me off. However, since the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is a nonprofit trade association, I had the chance to learn about association management as well.

Eventually, I moved on to a professional society where I started off using my policy and media background but then moved into the area of component relations. This was my entry into the wider world of nonprofit business management and how I made it my career. That’s how a dissatisfied wonk became a happy association executive (who later became an even happier consultant).

I have always known I wanted a career in the world of associations. My first exposure to associations was at Walt Disney World at my dad’s Annual Meeting. We went to support him and I participated in the kids program that was part of the meeting. I was immediately hooked and knew right away that this is what I wanted to do. I always have enjoyed helping people and enjoyed business; the association industry was perfect as it combines those two passions. We help people become better at what they do for a living. From that moment on I would help out every year during his Annual Meeting and take every opportunity through internships to learn more.

As I started to prepare to head off to college, I asked people what I should major in at school. The general response I received was a business degree. I started out in marketing and moved into business management with a focus on purchasing. Looking back, if I had to do it all over again, I would have done a double major in marketing and business management with a focus in nonprofit management.

A business management degree is important to give a broad overview of running a business. It is also important because many associations’ members run their own businesses, so having an understanding of what goes into that helps you relate to members. The piece that was still missing for me was marketing. I have worked on both the meetings and membership side in associations and marketing is used in any role within an association.

Another aspect to association management that always appealed to me is the networking and friendships that are developed in this industry. We all may work for different types of associations but ultimately we are able to go to each other to ask for help as we deal with the same type of questions. Everyone is always willing to take a moment and help out a fellow association industry professional. I learned through watching my dad that developing those relationships is the key to moving to the next level in your career and growing as an individual.

There are associations for every type of industry. It can be a very broad association or it can have a narrow focus. I thought it was important that I like and know something about the industry of whatever association I would work for; I quickly realized I was wrong. One of the aspects of the association world is learning about other industries that you wouldn’t have explored otherwise. It is important to learn about the industry our members are in and the appreciation of that industry develops quickly when you see the passion of the members each day. It is through this that I have developed an understanding and passion for the industry of our members no matter what the association is.

I feel very lucky to be a part of such an amazing community. While I wish I had studied more marketing, I know there are lots of great resources and fellow association staffers I can go to for advice and questions. Best of all, I am always learning about other people’s passions and helping them take their passion to the next level. I may have wished I knew more, but overall this is exactly where I always wanted to be.
What I Wish I Would’ve Known: Make Your Mark With Credentials

Lauren Hefner, CAE
Director of Membership, Marketing & Communications
Laboratory Products Association

My first job was as a part-time admin in high school, working at the association my mom has worked for since her 20s. Apparently it runs in the family, because after college I continued down the path, getting a full-time job as a programs coordinator for a national professional association. Before long I noticed that it didn’t feel like ‘just a job’—I had a passion and talent for membership and communications, and I realized that I planned to stay in the industry for the long haul. My next job paid for my ASAE membership, and I joined a committee as a way to grow professionally and meet others in the industry.

As I got more involved as an ASAE volunteer, people kept asking me when I planned to take the CAE exam. My mind was blown; I’m still in my 20s. How could I be a CAE? I put it out of my mind and continued to attend as many ASAE events as possible, immersing myself in the knowledge and networking that it afforded me. But finally when someone I knew who was my age took the exam, I began to research the requirements. At some point I realized that I qualified, and that even if I didn’t feel “good enough” to be a CAE, the education I’d gain from preparing for the exam could only benefit me.

So at age 29, after months of rigorous and stressful preparation, I successfully took the CAE exam. I wish I had known from the start how much I could gain from the preparation—my knowledge in my own area has increased exponentially, as has my understanding of the profession as a whole. I have a new respect for the fiscal, leadership, and administrative areas of association management. I encourage anyone who qualifies to look into the exam—and anyone new to the profession to set this level of excellence as an aspiration.

On the other end of the spectrum, professionals may choose the CAE later in their career or other certifications.

I interviewed three professionals at various career stages to explore their lessons throughout their careers.

Louise Miller, MA, CAE, executive director of the Northwest Developmental Officers Association. Louise worked her way up through several associations and became an executive director after 11 years in the industry. Six years later, at the age of 47, she took and passed the CAE exam.

LH: What made you decide to take the CAE exam?
LM: The association management company that I worked for at the time highly encouraged senior staff to earn their CAE. Not only was the company supportive by paying for the professional development courses leading up to and including the exam, but also gave employees a raise when the credential was earned. Several of my mentors had taken the exam and so I always assumed that I needed to as well so I could grow up and be like them.

LH: You waited 17 years to take the exam. Why the long wait?
LM: It takes a while to earn the qualifying credits once you decide you want to do it. I don’t think I ever thought about going for my CAE before I became an executive director. That position was my goal before I focused on certification.

LH: What have been the benefits of being credentialed?
LM: My CAE has benefitted me both fiscally via salary increases, and mentally by giving me a sense of pride in my accomplishment, feeling like I’m in a somewhat exclusive club, as well as a sense of ownership in my chosen career. I’m proud to be a 24-year veteran of this great profession.

LH: Can you give any advice to young professionals thinking about the possibility of taking the exam?
LM: I would only do it if you plan to stay in the profession for the rest of your working career. Otherwise, why bother? Also, don’t be afraid to reach out to people you know who have been
through the exam to ask for study tips, to bounce ideas off of, etc. Although it is a semi-exclusive club, it is welcoming of all new members!

Terry Monroe, CAE, director of membership & external relations at the International Association of Fire Chiefs, has worked for both trade and professional associations for 15 years. Originally, Terry felt that pursuing an MBA would be more valuable for him than the CAE credential.

LH: What were your expectations of being credentialed, and how did the CAE credential affect your career?
TM: I didn’t have big expectations when I started the process, but I must say studying for the exam was a real eye-opener. We were warned in the CAE prep class that we had to think “the ASAE way”; not necessarily the way we were used to doing things. Studying for the exam really gave me a much better appreciation of what it means to sit in the chief staff executive chair. I learned a lot about legal issues that I didn’t know before as well as association best practices. I started applying ASAE’s best practices before the exam and continue to do so today.

LH: Why did you wait so long to take the exam?
TM: Part of it was just being busy with life and the other part was questioning the value of sitting for the exam at this point in my professional career. Having taken the exam (and passed!), I’m now glad I did it.

LH: Any tips for young professionals contemplating taking the exam?
TM: Yes, seek out individuals who have passed the exam. They can provide good studying tips and test taking strategies. And get in a study group! It helps keep you stay focused and provides a great support network. Also, if you feel comfortable doing so, see if your chief staff officer is willing to share his/ her real-world experiences dealing with leadership situations. Our CEO did this for several of us who were studying for the exam and it was really helpful to see how he dealt with the scenarios that are put forth in the practice test questions.

LH: How did you hear about the association industry?
ME: I am second generation in the association profession. My dad started as an association executive back in the early 1970s. One of our earliest family vacations was to an annual conference where we set-up tables and chairs in the exhibit hall. I also remember during high school and college helping in the mailroom and moving offices around.

LH: Why did you decide to go into the association industry?
ME: I was really headed toward a career with IBM and didn't have any interest in going into association management until I was in graduate school in Washington, D.C. and was approached to run a trade association that was having legislative and regulatory issues. I thought that it sounded exciting and stayed in the position for 10 years. Then, 18 years ago, I joined my family at Association Management Center.

LH: If you were doing it all over again what is one thing you would do differently?
ME: If I could go back, I would hope to have more patience and to learn from the experience of others rather than so much trial and error on my own.

LH: What is one thing that you did that you would recommend to someone else going into the industry?
ME: Working in an association management company environment allowed me to have a lot of peers under one roof. So, I recommend a strong peer group and sharing experiences while networking. It is also very important to know your values from the start because, as in any profession, they will be tested from time to time.

LH: Is there any other advice you would give to someone trying to start a career in the association industry?
ME: I really believe in the concept of multiple mentors and gleaning the best from a variety of professionals; you capture the best from each of them and adapt it to your personal style.

Note: ASAE does not recommend nor endorse any study programs; for more information on the CAE exam, eligibility, or resources visit www.whatiscae.org.