Through the Maze: Careers in Association Management

Benjamin Butz
Executive Director, Inc
AARP

Beau Ballinger
AARP

Jennifer Connelly
American College of Healthcare Executives

Emily Crespo
TH Mgmt., Inc
Welcome to the Workforce, Millennials!

As a young professional, you have many career opportunities and choices to make. Through this maze of options, one career path you may not be familiar with is the world of association management.

**Association What?**
That is a typical response from most people working outside of the association world, but although you may not have heard of association management, you are impacted by associations every day. Associations help write laws, set standards, conduct research to inform the public, educate professionals, and provide them with a community in which to “talk shop” and interact with their colleagues.

Simply put, to work for an association is to choose a varied, challenging and rewarding career path that will give you a chance to grow professionally while helping make the world a better place.

If one thing is true, there is an association for every profession, cause, and need. Each one of these associations needs strong, smart, and committed staff members to help guide their volunteers and members to success.

They need people—persons and IT whizzes, financial gurus and meeting planners, database miners and freethinking marketers. This guide will help demonstrate that every type of skill set and knowledge-base plays an important part in making associations strong.

Whether you are starting your job search straight from college or looking for a more rewarding way to spend your professional life, we hope this guide will help you navigate the maze of the modern day employment journey and gain a better understanding of associations, their integral role in society and most importantly why you would want to pursue a career in association management.

Best of luck from members of ASAE’s 2010 Leadership Academy class.

**Beau Ballinger**
AARP

**Benjamin Butz**
Executive Director, Inc

**Jennifer Connelly**
American College of Healthcare Executives

**Emily Crespo**
TH Mgmt., Inc

---

**About ASAE CareerHQ.org**
ASAE is a membership organization of more than 22,000 association executives and industry partners representing more than 11,000 organizations. As the premier source of learning, knowledge and future-oriented research for the association and nonprofit profession, ASAE is committed to supporting young professionals, who are the future of our industry. ASAE membership provides resources, education, and ideas to help young professionals shine in the workplace and connect with a vibrant community. To learn more about membership, please visit: asaecenter.org/membership.

ASAE CareerHQ.org is the organization’s career resource center where association executives can enhance their careers by finding job opportunities, tips on career advancement, professional development programs, the Mentor Connector, and more. Learn more at careerhq.org.
While many understand the idea of a nonprofit that works for a charitable cause, it is often the case that this same group does not realize the importance of participating within a professional or trade association that represents the industry in which they work.

From the guilds formed in medieval times to the modern-day professional organizations, associations have been sewn into the fabric of our society for hundreds of years. The National Association of REALTORS®, National Association of Estate Planners and Councils, Financial Planning Association, and American Medical Association are merely a glimpse into some of the associations representing different professions.

Each association is designed to provide their particular industry with the tools necessary for succeeding. Whether focusing on education, lobbying, networking, research, or promotions, the association can be used as a catalyst for improving a professional viewpoint. Furthermore, each association provides current information that might affect an industry professional throughout the year.

‘The Power of One’
Separately, members of an industry might not have the ability to promote the industry or the needs of its members. However, as a collective whole, an association is able to promote both the industry and its needs.

According to Henry L. Ernstthal, author of Principles of Association Management, in 2000 the United States had more than 23,000 national associations. That number expands to 115,000 state, local, and regional, and 1,300 international organizations. Nine out of ten adult Americans belonged to one association, and one out of four belonged to more than one.
duties, such as keeping membership records, planning meetings, and recruiting new members directly. 

As associations grow, these tasks may become too large for just the board and the volunteer membership, which leads the association to hire an individual or group to ensure that the organization is operating efficiently. Depending on the size of the association, it may employ one staff member, or may employ thousands of employees to monitor and assist in all facets of the organization. Some staff members focus solely on one area of expertise for an association while others wear many hats.

**Careers in Association Management**

An association requires the education and expertise from a variety of different industries, because it is run like a business. An accounting background is necessary for ensuring that the financials are compiled, while a meeting planner assists in directing the conference and networking functions for members. An IT professional is needed to maintain a membership database and administer a website. Those in graphic design and marketing can assist in promoting to both prospective members and to the general public. A political background can assist in the lobbying required to prevent a raise in fees for a particular industry that would cause detriment to all members.

A more in-depth look at the different positions available in a typical association can be found in “The Different Roles in Association Management” beginning on page 5.

While many associations will employ staff members to work solely for their association, others do not need full-time staff and will hire an association management company (AMC). An AMC is a for-profit entity that is the headquarter of multiple associations. Staff employed at an AMC may work for multiple associations, or act solely for one association with the assistance of coworkers who work for multiple associations. Through an AMC, associations who might not otherwise employ staff have the resources of a much larger association and are able to grow.

Finally, many associations employ consultants to work on specific projects, such as a website redesign or a strategic planning session. The use of consultants by associations can both add expertise and an outsider’s perspective to a project. Because of the unique nature of associations, many consultants focus their work on one facet of the association management world and become true experts in their field.
Why You Are Needed in the Association World

In three years time the United States will have a shortage of six million degreed workers and this number will increase to fourteen million by 2020. These numbers are indeed sobering and only become more complex when you look at them from the perspective of recruitment and retention. The competition for highly skilled workers generated by these shortages will amplify the need for effective recruitment of top talent and new strategies for keeping them. That means opportunity for young workers looking to contribute to an organization.

Many association management positions require specific skill sets learned through a combination of education and experience. What follows is an overview of trends and strategies relevant to how associations recruit and retain their employees. It's important for you to understand these processes in order to determine how you might fit into an association.

**Employee Turnover is Expensive**

As the shortages of degreed workers increases there will be more need to focus on strategies for reducing turnover. The costs associated with turnover is one the biggest concerns. From a monetary perspective turnover is expensive because the total costs of replacing an employee can reach as high as 90–200 percent of annual salary. The costs examined in the table illustrate why associations want to retain top talent.

**Retention is Key**

Like most employers, associations want to avoid the costs of turnover. Much research has been done on the reasons why employees stay with an organization or leave it. Reasons for leaving can be grouped into four broad categories:

- General dissatisfaction
- Better alternatives
- Following a plan (i.e. going back to school, stay at home parent)
- Leaving without a plan—typically in reaction to a particular circumstance (i.e. denial of promotion/raise, dispute with colleague)

Most associations recognize these risks to losing top talent and use tangible and intangible means to implement effective retention strategies. Tangibles include things like pay, benefits, flex time, and recognition. The more

---

**Costs of Turnover**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Costs Associated with Separation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Staff time (HR, manager)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accrued time off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hiring temporary employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Production/service delays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Disruptions to work teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Loss of clients and relationship with clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Loss of diversity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Costs Associated with Replacement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• New hire salary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hiring inducements (signing bonuses, relocation expenses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Orientation time and materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Payroll, benefit enrollment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Formal training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• On the job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Productivity loss until mastery of new skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Herbert G. Heneman, III and Timothy A. Judge, Staffing Organizations (5e), Middleton, WI: Mendota House, 2006; p 675.
difficult elements are the intangibles related to workplace culture and managing effectively, which ultimately have the biggest impact on retention.

Research also notes compelling reasons why employees stay that organizations can use to retain employees amidst strong competition. Over time with an organization employees develop a sense of community with their co-workers, affiliates, and other parties that can be hard to leave. Essentially, employees become “embedded.” This is especially true for associations, which tend to attract professionals with similar ideals and a passion for the organization’s mission. Employers can strengthen this community by such things as establishing mentoring relationships, tenure based incentives, and employee referrals.

Associations are aware of the important generational considerations on the horizon as Millennials (born between 1977–1997) continue to enter the workforce. By 2014 this group will comprise approximately half of the world’s workforce. These young professionals place particular emphasis on work/life balance and flexibility in benefits and rewards, which is different from previous generations that placed more focus on policy and hierarchy.

Associations are a great career option for Millennials, because there is data to suggest associations are on the leading edge of this movement. According to data compiled by Association Forum of Chicagoland, in 2006–2007 Chicago associations outpaced other industries in terms of providing key benefits important to Millennials. For instance, 58.9 percent of associations in the survey provided flex time scheduling which compares favorably with the for-profit average of 25 percent. Similarly, 21.1 percent of these associations offer telecommuting to employees as opposed to 10 percent among for-profits. That’s a good sign for young professionals, as it demonstrates associations’ commitment to establishing good work/life balance.

Getting Your Foot in the Door

Before associations can focus on retaining you, they need to get you in the door. Entering the association management world requires an understanding of the types of opportunities available and a commitment to seeking out those that fit best. The simplest way to do this is by visiting an association’s website and looking for key information. This might include items like: mission, values, bylaws, and governance structure. Looking at these items gives a well-rounded perspective of an organization and provides criteria by which an applicant can judge fit.

A next step would be to read their publications (journals, newsletters) and explore the different components of the website to get a sense of the work being done by the association. This research contributes to an understanding of the association’s processes and how you might contribute to them.

It is also up to the association to portray information about their organization and job opportunities in a way that is honest and attractive to potential employees. Approximately 35 percent of American workers leave their jobs within the first six months of employment and much of this is due to post-hire shock experienced as a result of misleading information disseminated during the interview process.

While you are pursuing positions in the association world, pay attention to key hiring processes that can help you identify those opportunities that can advance your career in association management.

• Is the organization asking you to complete personality assessments or any other kind of personalized testing? Asking you to complete these instruments suggests a commitment to determining if you are the right fit for the organization and the specific position.
• Are specifics given about the culture of the organization? For instance, an interviewer might state that the organization thrives on blunt communication and ask a question to this point. This suggests the organization has an awareness of its key cultural traits and seeks to identify applicants that fit in with this culture.
• Does the application and hiring process seem rushed? This suggests an employer may be looking to fill openings quickly to avoid the costs associated with empty positions instead of paying attention to identifying the skills and talent necessary for the position.

With the multitude of opportunities available to young professionals it is easy to become overwhelmed. The key is to understand that associations have a lot to offer and with a little patience you can find the right fit for you with many paths that can lead to a long-term career.
The Different Roles in Association Management

The association world holds opportunities for people looking to become both specialists and generalists. As an executive for a small association you may expect to prepare budgets, write a brochure, staff committee meetings, and keep the website up-to-date. Working for a larger association you may be focused solely on writing grants or working with hotels planning meeting space. The choice of which direction you would like to go is up to you, and the possibilities are limitless!

What follows is a description of the most common job functions found in association management. Sometimes one person covers multiple functions (such as a membership and marketing director), while other associations have a person working specifically in one job function (meeting planner). As each association is unique; so is the way that it is organized.

Job Functions

Administrative
Positions that fall under the administrative job function handle the operations of the organization. Just like for-profit companies, associations need people to handle such tasks as human resources, customer service, and facilities management. Since jobs in this function have interaction with many different areas of an association, administrative support positions are a good place to start and see what area of association management you may enjoy.

Typical Jobs: Office Manager, Human Resources Director, Receptionist, Systems Administrator, Chief Operating Officer

Communications
Communicating with both your members and the public is a crucial component of a successful organization. Those working in the communication department of an association will draft news releases; act as spokespersons; edit or write for the association’s magazines or journals; manage the organization’s website, Twitter account, blogs and other social media sites; and create a unified message for their association.

Typical Jobs: Communications Manager, Editor, Writer, Webmaster, Spokesperson

Component Relations
Associations have a wide variety of populations they serve requiring specific staff to cater to their unique needs. Depending on the association, component relations professionals manage a diverse range of volunteers including board members, elected officials, chapters, student groups and special interest groups. Staff ensures the association is meeting the needs of each specific group and gives them the resources to serve effectively as part of the governance structure and/or as advocates for the association.

Typical Jobs: Director of Board Relations, Regional Director, Chapter Relations Specialist, Special Interest Group Manager, Volunteer Manager

Education
For many professions, continuing education and standards are maintained by associations. Those working in the educational area of an association work with content experts to make sure those standards are continually upheld. They develop educational classes, certification programs, and white papers to help disseminate knowledge to both their members and the general public.

Typical Jobs: Director of Education, Education and Training Manager, Certification Manager
Finance
Like all businesses, associations are responsible for reporting their financial position to the IRS. Professionals working in the financial area of an association are responsible for keeping the books of the association and preparing any and all necessary financial statements.

Typical Jobs: Chief Financial Officer, Director of Finance, Accountant, Accounts Manager

Fundraising
In order for an association to function, they must have the money to support their activities. Fundraisers may focus on writing grants, working with corporate sponsors or soliciting contributions from both members and the general public.

Typical Jobs: Development Director, Grants Manager, Sponsorship Manager, Fund Development Manager, Campaign Manager

Government Relations
Associations and their members spend a great deal of time working with legislators and government officials on public policy, regulations and information sharing. Association professionals working on lobbying will spend time developing the legislative agenda for the association, speaking with elected officials and developing grassroots campaigns on issues central to the association’s mission.

Typical Jobs: Lobbyist, Director of Government Affairs, Public Policy Director, Campaign Manager, Director of Advocacy

Marketing
A good marketing plan is as important to an association as it is to a for-profit company. Marketers for associations research the association’s markets, develop the brand and work on promoting the different products—from meetings to books—offered by the association.

Typical Jobs: Brand Manager, Marketing Manager, Researcher

Meeting Planning
Very important aspects of many associations are the meetings where members have a chance to network with colleagues and learn about the latest trends affecting their profession. Meeting planners work with cities, convention centers and hotels to book space for these meetings. From picking menus to designing room layouts, a meetings planner job is focused on every detail of a meeting.

Typical Jobs: Meeting Manager, Exhibit Manager, Program Coordinator

Membership
The members of an association are crucial to the continued existence of the organization. A professional working in membership will field inquiries from prospective and current members, develop recruitment and retention campaigns and make sure that members needs and concerns are addressed.

Typical Jobs: Membership Director, Member Services Manager

Technology
From websites to membership databases, the association world relies heavily on technology to spread their message and track their members. Technology professionals are the crucial piece between communications, marketing and administrative functions that allows everyone to do their jobs more efficiently.

Typical Jobs: Web Administrator, Data Processor, Information Technology Specialist

Job Opportunities
As was described earlier, associations are in need of a new generation of strong leaders to help continue the important work of advancing professions and advocating for members. Groups like ASAE have put continued emphasis and resources behind developing this next generation of association leaders.

When you enter association management you will quickly learn that instead of the fierce competition you find in the private sector, the association world is full of professionals willing to mentor you, help you grow and push you to your limits. Expect to be exhausted at the end of the day, but also satisfied with knowing you helped make the world a little better.
In Their Words: Profiles of Association Management Professionals

What follows are profiles of real association management professionals. These narratives showcase the benefits, variety, and ample opportunities available through a career in association management. Although each person’s experience and story is different, we uncovered some common themes that will help young professionals as they begin their career paths in association management.

These anecdotes demonstrate the importance of mentoring, networking, volunteering, professional development, passion, flexibility and ultimately a desire to make a difference in the world. The interviews were conducted between June and July, 2010.
Carol Vargas, CAE
Director of Industry Relations
American Society of Civil Engineers

Carol Vargas was familiar with associations from her work in academia, where she was involved in associations for student leaders. However, she had never really considered the idea of working for an association until she moved to Washington, DC, where the organizations abound. Carol, who earned three Master’s degrees during her time in academia, was ready for a career change. Her husband had taken a job at an association, and her new location encouraged her to seek employment in that world herself.

Fourteen years have passed, and Carol has worked consistently in association management for two associations during that time. She spent eight years at American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA), where she re-designed and implemented an initiative to further encourage support from corporate members. When she started, the program was earning less than $500,000 in revenue from corporate members and dropping. Carol’s foresight, diligence, and hard work grew the program to more than $1 million in revenue in eight years. The program delivered an unrestricted revenue stream for the association while fostering a community for AIAA’s corporate members. This experience allowed Carol to develop a deep understanding of association management as she worked to create value for the corporate partners. She developed a value proposition, planned events, programmed educational sessions, and was involved in many other facets of association management.

In 2006, Carol joined American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) for an opportunity to develop and cultivate another corporate program—this time with a specific focus on creating an individual membership model for large corporate partners. As the program has grown and changed with the organization, Carol has taken on more responsibilities, new titles, and new directions, but her core focus continues to be on building strong relationships with senior leaders in the industry.

Carol sees associations as a valuable addition to the economy and the world. She understands that groups and industries need help having their voices heard at all levels and that associations provide this service. She says the training and studying process for the Certified Association Executive (CAE) certification helped her come to this realization. The certification gave her a foundation for what associations provide and the ideology of how they’re organized.

As an avid learner Carol is not blasé about continuing education. It’s never been a question for her; it’s just something she does—a way of life. She feels fortunate to have had many mentors throughout her career who have encouraged her to grow and provided feedback when faced with challenges. Her mentors run the gamut, from colleagues to members, former supervisors to contractors. She has engaged in one-way mentoring, group mentoring, and reverse mentoring relationships, and she notes that each relationship is unique.

One mentor encourages her to read new books so that they can discuss the concepts and ideas from the readings. She meets another mentor for lunch a few times a year to talk about general career direction and to hold each other accountable for goals. She’s also not afraid to admit when a mentoring relationship isn’t working. She realizes that you have to be honest about a mentoring connection and be willing to discuss expectations, change the structure, or sometimes end the relationship.

When giving advice to young professionals entering the field of association management, Carol suggests they focus on what they really like—whether it's working with people, writing, research, travel, or something else—and look for work that plays to that passion. Associations provide a cause to rally around that’s beyond the financial gain of a corporate company. If you have an internal motivation to the mission, working for an association can provide an emotional connection you won’t necessarily have when working for a corporation.

She challenges young professionals to be flexible and open to new opportunities because you never know where they might lead. She encourages them to never give up and to pursue the CAE certification. The credential may help them eventually decide what they really want to do and give them the framework needed to choose their direction intentionally. Young professionals should take a personal inventory of their skills, strengths, and interests. They should examine any gaps between their interests and the skills needed to pursue those interests. Taking an honest assessment of your personal inventory will provide valuable insight about how best to move forward along an association management career path.
Garry Polmateer
Product Manager
NimbleUser

In college Garry Polmateer took a job with a consulting company to help pay for school. Several of his clients were associations and he enjoyed being able to work with a variety of organizations. When he encountered some scheduling conflicts between his consulting work and school, one of his clients offered him an in-house job. The client, a union, provided a more flexible work environment that would accommodate his class schedule, so he took the offer.

He worked for the union for six years, initially in member services and eventually transitioning into information technology. Garry’s association management experiences at the union prepared him for the position of IT director at the Northeastern Retail Lumber Association (NRLA). He spent three years at NRLA and oversaw a massive database and website conversion. During that process he discovered a love for heavy-duty project management, and when the conversion project ended and his team entered maintenance mode, he found himself craving the intensity of managing a large undertaking. This realization spurred a move back into the consulting world. So he joined NimbleUser in 2008, where he specializes in helping associations navigate website and database conversions.

Regardless of whether an in-house employee or a consultant, Garry says his favorite benefit of working in association management is the feeling that he’s helping people. Sometimes that means helping members directly and sometimes it means helping staff to help their members, but either way he feels like he’s making valid contributions to society. He touts associations as organizations full of passionate people, inspired ideas, new endeavors, and endless opportunities to learn.

Early in his career, Garry very much considered himself an IT professional who happened to work for a union. But when he began working for NRLA he had the opportunity to attend the Association Leadership Academy (ALA), a nine-month program developed and administered by the Empire State Society of Association Executives. In the ALA he began to learn about the different disciplines of association management and he appreciated NRLA’s support of his leadership training.

This professional development experience proved to be a pivotal moment in Garry’s career, and he began to combine his newfound knowledge of association management with his technical IT training to set out on a career path that best suited his skills and work style. He is eternally grateful to mentors like Rita Ferris, CAE, the executive director of NRLA. She was the number one supporter of his growth in leadership and association management and made sacrifices to support his participation in the ALA. Garry’s involvement in the ALA led to more payoffs than just knowledge and leadership training—he immediately built a strong network of fellow classmates and course presenters.

As a consultant Garry enjoys being able to work with associations from a variety of industries. He has encountered a number of interesting niches served by associations, which has opened doors for dialogue both inside and outside the industry and has demonstrated to him that association management can provide limitless possibilities.

He encourages new professionals coming out of college with specific technical skills, like IT, accounting, event planning, or marketing, to consider working for associations. The association environment provides young professionals with a lot of variety in their day-to-day work while still allowing them to hone the skills they gleaned in college.

Associations breed go-getters and reward smart, ambitious people. Garry has been privy to a number of anecdotes related to association management which have led to his conclusions that associations are open to ideas, leave room for imagination, provide accelerated experience and growth, and offer fun environments in which to learn.

He encourages young professionals to experience the other side of association management by serving on local nonprofit boards or volunteering within their own professional associations. It’s a quick, sure-fire way to learn the ropes from the inside and is a great way for new professionals to explore association management before committing to a career.
Maggie McGary
Online Community and Social Media Manager
American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

Maggie McGary didn’t grow up dreaming of a career in association management. In fact, she wasn’t even quite sure what associations were until a placement agency set her up with the job of media relations assistant at the U.S. Council for Energy Awareness (USCEA – now the Nuclear Energy Institute). Once the door to the association management world was opened, Maggie pursued positions at various organizations that aligned with her interests. Associations are a major industry in the Washington, DC, area and they have been a steady source of employment for much of Maggie’s career.

Following her stint at USCEA, Maggie took an administrative job at the American Forest and Paper Association (AF&PA). She spent three years at the organization and became a project manager during that time. Maggie has an English degree and was responsible for writing a lot of content at AF&PA. She decided to use her experience and skills to become a freelancer so that she could work from home and raise her children.

When she was ready to return to the workforce she answered an ad for an editorial assistant position at the American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition (A.S.P.E.N.), and eventually worked her way up to editor of the association’s journal. After a while she transitioned into the role of executive assistant, where she gained exposure to governance and board dynamics. She began dating a colleague, whom she later married, and left A.S.P.E.N. for a communication position at a nonprofit. She was hired to write for the nonprofit’s website, and she quickly learned how to code in HTML.

Maggie began a personal blog in 2006 and soon had many followers from the association management world. She was looking for a job with good work/life balance, and had read about the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) in the Washingtonian’s “best places to work” issue. After keeping an eye on ASHA job openings for four years, Maggie found the position of web content developer and joined ASHA two years ago. Maggie was a huge advocate for the use of social media, and it wasn’t long before her job changed to focus strictly on social media. Many associations accommodate such shifts in an effort to retain staff and allow good ideas to emerge.

One of Maggie’s favorite things about associations is expanding her knowledge in fields she otherwise wouldn’t have known about. At USCEA she was able to meet the creators of The Simpsons after the CEO invited them on a tour of a plant in an effort to educate them on nuclear power (Homer Simpson works in a nuclear power plant in the show). At AF&PA she became a student in “paper school” and saw the inner workings of the paper industry. Throughout her association management career she has enjoyed meeting and interacting with people who are so passionate about their field that they’re willing to volunteer their personal time (and sometimes money) to advance their profession.

Although Maggie has never really had a mentor, she believes she would have benefited from a mentoring relationship. If she could go back and change one thing in her career it would be to develop such a relationship early on. She has attended a few conferences and webinars on association management, but most of her knowledge has come through reading, experience, networking with smart people, and participating in online communities. Her husband is the COO of an association and they’re able to discuss issues and bounce ideas off each other as well.

For young professionals entering the workforce, Maggie has these words of wisdom: if you have an interest in a particular industry, or if quality of life and organizational culture is important, don’t get hung up on a title. It’s more important to get in the door, gain some experience, and move around once you get in. She recommends that new professionals not turn their noses up at low-level positions, as associations are notorious for providing both lateral and vertical growth opportunities. She also recommends joining ASAE and getting involved in the community. The resources available through ASAE can help with career advice and inspiration, particularly for those just starting out.
Gerry Romano, CAE
Editor-in-Chief, IR Update magazine
National Investor Relations Institute

Upon graduating from the University of Georgia’s journalism school, Gerry Romano sought any type of writing position that would put her degree to good use. Associations weren’t on her radar until she saw an ad in The Washington Post for a writer/editor position at the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD). She applied for the position and was hired, thus beginning her 26-year storied career in association management.

Gerry’s next position was at the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries (ISRI), where she launched Scrap magazine and served as its editor. It was during her three years at ISRI that Gerry began to view herself as an association professional, and at that point she became involved in ASAE’s Communication Section.

From ISRI Gerry moved to the American Counseling Association (ACA), where she launched American Counselor magazine and served as executive editor. Gerry’s broader interest in association management then led her to a staff position at ASAE. She spent nearly nine years as senior editor of Association Management magazine, and during that time earned the Certified Association Executive (CAE) certification. That cemented her commitment to the association community and she set forth on an intentional career path in association management.

Following ASAE, Gerry became editor-in-chief and managing director of communications at the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO), then moved to an even broader senior marketing and communications position at the Club Managers Association of America (CMAA). In early 2010 she founded Romano Communications and soon was hired as a contractor to serve as the editor of IR Update for the National Investor Relations Institute (NIRI). She now serves as the magazine’s editor in chief, and provides communications services to additional association clients.

Throughout her association management career, Gerry has taken on broad responsibilities across the communications field, from publishing to public relations to marketing. At this stage in her career she is less concerned about career advancement and more interested about pursuing any interesting projects through which she can help associations enhance their communications. Gerry believes that this focus will afford her continuous opportunities to do challenging and rewarding work within the association community that she loves so much.

When asked about the learning-curve challenges of publishing magazines for a variety of industries, Gerry says that she is always very intentional about making sure she works with associations that have subject matter experts on staff who are excited about the organization’s publication. This philosophy has allowed her to thrive as an association magazine editor, and her collaborative nature and skills are transferrable to any association, regardless of the industry it serves.

Gerry loves that the association community is large enough to offer plenty of job opportunities, but small enough to form meaningful relationships. Regardless of the association in which she works, Gerry feels very fulfilled knowing that she is always learning something new and is teaming up with staff colleagues to help members do their jobs.

Many of Gerry’s supervisors and CEOs have encouraged her growth. Her involvement in ASAE volunteer groups, educational programs, and networking activities has taught her a lot and allowed her to contribute to the profession. She enjoys reading books by industry thought-leaders, and she reads Associations Now cover to cover. Add in the fact that her husband is an association attorney and an ASAE volunteer, and it’s apparent that association management is Gerry’s lifestyle.

Most recently Gerry became involved as a mentor to a student in ASAE’s Leadership Academy. She has found the experience beneficial for learning about younger generation perspectives. She has also learned from working for people younger than she is. Her previous supervisor was about 15 years younger than Gerry, and the relationship offered her a major positive learning experience.

Gerry’s favorite aspect of association management is that you can easily and instantly become part of a close-knit community that offers you the education you need and the network of friends you want. She has not erected firm boundaries between work and home life. Letting them flow together has made her profession feel like a wonderful part of her life, not just a job. This lack of firm distinction between work and home life has permitted her to produce ideas about her work from everyday events and stay open to insights from unexpected sources. She suggests that you allow yourself to enjoy your work so that you don’t have to put it into a box that gets closed when you leave the office.
Dawn Bibbs-Morrissey, MBA, CAE
Director of Business Development Initiatives
American Health Information Management Association

Dawn Bibbs-Morrissey always had an interest in not-for-profit organizations but had never really made a distinction between associations and other nonprofits. She had worked for both nonprofits and corporations, and after being laid off from Motorola nine years ago, she reconnected with a colleague from a previous organization who brought her on as a contractor at American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA). She’s been there ever since.

Her journey began as a marketing manager, which allowed her to use her technical skills and expertise to work closely with various divisions within the association. Due to a restructuring, the association’s customer relations department was moved into marketing, and it wasn’t long before Dawn found herself in charge of the call center. She became involved in web-based training, and while marketing the call center she dabbled in direct sales. She loved the experience, as it allowed her the opportunity to meet and visit with members, and ultimately led to Dawn overseeing membership as the director of marketing. Changes in the healthcare industry spurred AHIMA to create and expand a business development group, and it wasn’t long before Dawn transitioned from membership and marketing to business development.

Needless to say, Dawn has never been bored working for the association. She finds that her temperament and career goals lend themselves to working in association management, and AHIMA is the perfect fit given her passion for healthcare. She enjoys the ample career opportunities that AHIMA has provided, and with 150 staff and 57,000 members, she’s been able to get involved in a little bit of everything.

Working at AHIMA has allowed Dawn myriad opportunities for growth—it’s an organization with many cross-departmental teams. Her job has offered incredible amounts of day-to-day variety in an industry that is constantly changing. Industry-wide challenges have led to organizational and personal challenges that keep Dawn engaged and moving in the right direction.

One of her favorite benefits of working for an association is that associations tend to focus on the professional development of their staff. When her new boss started, Dawn became aware of the concept of association management. Her boss had recently earned the Certified Association Executive (CAE) certification, and he was really the first professional she’d worked with who came from an association background (many of her colleagues hail from the healthcare industry with corporate backgrounds).

With encouragement from her boss, Dawn pursued the CAE certification and earned the credential in 2009. She found the curriculum interesting and the immersion course helpful for reinforcing and enhancing her knowledge. In the readings she found applicable, relevant content related to her job responsibilities. The coursework suited her broad interests and helped her discover best practices for doing her job.

Dawn’s relationships with mentors and colleagues like her boss have opened the doors to many professional development and career opportunities throughout the years. In fact, she currently works with a colleague whom she met in her first job out of college, and their career paths have crossed multiple times over the past 20 years. It was this same colleague who hired her at AHIMA.

Dawn often finds herself in the position of talking to people who are thinking about getting into the association world. She draws upon her varied career path, and although she feels there are many similarities among associations, nonprofits, and corporations, she offers a few key pieces of advice to future association management professionals: learn about board governance and understand that associations often operate under tight staffing situations.

That means you may have to take on responsibilities that aren’t officially part of your job description. But she sees this as an opportunity and encourages new professionals to embrace these challenges and view them as learning experiences. If you’re passionate about advocating on behalf of a membership and advancing their professional skills and development, association management might just be the perfect fit.
Jeffrey N. Shields, CAE
Executive Director
National Business Officers Association

Jeff Shields’ foray into association management was a conscious decision…sort of. He had been working in higher education in Baltimore, but wasn’t content. In talking to a colleague about a career change, he connected with a mutual acquaintance who had left higher education for the association world. Jeff soon learned the power of networking, as he landed a job at the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) within two weeks of meeting with the acquaintance.

Realizing how important connections are in the association community, Jeff made a concerted effort to get involved in the Greater Washington Society of Association Executives within the first 30 days of his new job. He volunteered for projects, met association leaders, and immediately began building relationships within the community.

At NAHB, Jeff learned as much as possible about association management. He was quickly promoted to the director of his department and began putting his knowledge and expertise to good use. After five years at NAHB, Jeff thought he might want to check out the corporate world, which led him to the strategy and technology consulting firm of Booz Allen Hamilton. His brief stint at Booz Allen Hamilton confirmed for Jeff that his passion lie in working with associations and nonprofits, and it’s when he began to realize that he was destined for a career in association management rather than purely in training or leadership development.

Upon this realization, Jeff called upon one of the many friends he had in the association world and was able to secure an interview (and ultimately a job) at National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO). Jeff worked his way up the ladder at NACUBO, ultimately serving as senior vice president and chief planning officer. The association had an appetite for innovation and experimentation, which allowed Jeff to try new things and to work closely with the board of directors. After 10 years at NACUBO he was ready for the next step: the role of executive director.

Jeff knew that the National Business Officers Association (NBOA) was searching for a new executive director, and he knew his experience at NACUBO would make him a perfect candidate. After completing the traditional search and selection process, Jeff was hired as NBOA’s executive director on March 1, 2010.

From the start of his career in association management Jeff saw the value of getting involved in the community. As his career progressed he began giving presentations at ASAE meetings, serving on section councils and ultimately earned the Certified Association Executive (CAE) certification in 2002.

Jeff says he enjoys association management because he’s a generalist—he likes variety, creativity, program management, and governance. As executive director he understands that he helps set the culture of the association and enjoys operating with fewer boundaries. This allows him (and his staff) to identify new initiatives, create change, and spur organizational development. He retains his technical skills, but uses them as a foundation for his broader responsibilities now.

Jeff’s commitment to continuing education and lifelong learning is unwavering. He encourages professionals serious about a career in association management to pursue the CAE certification, which he believes provides structure to the continuing competencies needed for the job. He is a strong proponent of ASAE conferences. He finds them energizing, enlightening, and rewarding. They also provide an unparalleled opportunity to reconnect with the peers and colleagues with whom he has developed professional and personal relationships over the years. Jeff’s commitment to the association community led to his selection as an ASAE Fellow in 2008.

Managing relationships with the board, staff, members, consultants, and other external partners is instrumental for success in association management. Jeff believes that great relationship management skills can help association professionals work through deficiencies in other areas. Having a focus on relationships helps him assess the needs of all constituents, address their needs, and make informed decisions that result in satisfaction for all.

He is excited to see enthusiastic young people entering the profession, as it reminds him of why he loves working for associations. His advice is to exercise creativity, share ideas, enjoy the membership, and connect with the association’s mission. If you’re service-oriented, focused on fostering relationships, and passionate about the association’s mission, you’ll find a wonderful career opportunity in association management.
Cherilyn Cepriano, JD, CAE
Executive Director
The Kidney Care Council

Cherilyn Cepriano found her way into the association world through politics, policy and government relations. As an undergraduate she studied government and health policy and spent two summers as an intern in Washington—one at The White House and another at the US Department of Health and Human Services. Those specific experiences, combined with intensive academic work focused on Medicaid and welfare reform, left her wanting to work with states and governors in the field of health policy and led her to the National Governors Association (NGA), where she served as a legislative associate. She feels fortunate to have landed the gig at NGA at such a young age, as it allowed her to fulfill her desire of doing substantive policy work instead of answering phones on Capitol Hill (although she was quick to point out the importance of putting in your time on the Hill).

At NGA she thought she was signing up strictly for a policy job, but it soon became clear that the job required an inherent element of association management and she found a natural affinity with her skill set for being able to broker deals among association members. She, like many others, had come to association management to do something else, but found that she enjoyed it and was good at it.

In an effort to open the door to more career opportunities, Cherilyn left the association world to pursue a graduate degree and ultimately decided to go to law school full time, graduating from George Mason School of Law in 2005. She tinkered with practicing law in the traditional sense, but didn’t love it. Before long she found herself drawn back to the association world as a managing director at The Emergency Department Practice Management Association (EDPMA). She quickly worked her way up the ladder to become executive director of EDPMA while simultaneously serving as associate vice president of The Coulter Companies. In 2009 she took the helm as executive director of The Kidney Care Council (KCC), where she manages strategic and daily operations for the trade association, including government relations activities. What may stun you is to know that she accomplished all of this before age 30.

When asked about her favorite benefits of a career in association management, Cherilyn quickly narrows it down to three: executive responsibility, upward mobility, and flexibility. She likes having the ability to make decisions, set policies, devise governance structures, and manage talent that produces successful results. Association management presents new challenges and problems each day, with limited resources for solving them, and that keeps Cherilyn interested and engaged. Plus, she enjoys bringing people together to reach common goals.

Cherilyn notes that associations provide opportunity and upward mobility dependent on quality and quantity of work and ambition, not just tenure. Associations tend to be leaner and flatter organizations that allow young, hard working, intelligent people (whom she dubs “smarties”) to gain considerable experience and rise more rapidly to the top.

Flexibility is also a major benefit. As the mother of a young child, she appreciates not being forced into a nine to five stint at her desk. She thrives in an environment where she can work when and how she is most productive—and take the time to hit the gym or shuttle her son to the pediatrician when she needs to. As an executive director, Cherilyn sees the value in offering flexibility to her employees and she notes that a flexible work environment is a great way for associations to compete for talent.

Professional development is important to Cherilyn, and hers has been profoundly impacted and improved by senior colleagues who gave her a chance, invested their time to teach her, provided feedback and criticism, and encouraged her upward path. But her education has also played a critical role in her success. Her Juris Doctorate (JD) gives her an edge, both in concrete substance as well as perception, and she is proud to have earned her Certified Association Executive (CAE) certification in 2008. She believes that the CAE certification has led her to some of the best continuing education opportunities where she has learned practical skills to bring to the workplace.

Associations have far more impact in the world than most people realize, and Cherilyn feels strongly that it is incumbent upon association professionals to promote what they do in ways that people understand, one conversation at a time. She encourages new association professionals to take their jobs seriously, act with enthusiasm, and to be on board with the organization’s mission. She notes that association management companies offer a great opportunity for young professionals to learn the ropes. She also reminds us that associations are run as businesses, and if you are eyeing the top spot as a career goal, it’s important to arm yourself with both the soft and hard skill sets needed to compete.
Jeffrey Morgan, CAE  
President & CEO  
National Investor Relations Institute

Jeff Morgan entered the association world by chance, which he considers pretty typical for the profession. He graduated from college in the early 80s, when computers were starting to become available to smaller businesses. With a double major in finance and computer technology, Jeff was armed with a unique pairing of knowledge and skills that made him very marketable in the business world—he could speak the technical language of computers as they became ubiquitous, and he understood business operations.

In 1990 Jeff received a call from the National Association of Professional Insurance Agents (PIA), a $50 million, 100-staff organization that needed someone to develop technology systems and strategies. Jeff entered PIA in a role that oversaw information technology and left 10 years later as senior vice president of finance and operations.

Around that time, Jeff realized that he’d like to be CEO of an association someday. He knew he needed to do two things: first was to find a professional association that would allow him to round out his advocacy and operations skills, and second was to pursue a Master’s degree. This clear goal and direction led him to the position of chief operating officer at the Futures Industry Association (FIA). During his almost nine years at FIA, Jeff gained valuable experience with advocacy, political action committees, fundraising, and foundations. He also attained a Master’s degree in nonprofit administration.

As planned, Jeff’s dedication to expanding his knowledge and developing his skills positioned him for a leadership role, and he took the helm as president and CEO of the National Investor Relations Institute (NIRI) in January 2008.

Earning a Master’s degree was essential for Jeff to advance professionally. In addition to the knowledge he gained, it gave him credibility. He also earned the Certified Association Executive (CAE) certification in 1993. Jeff’s mentors informed him that the CAE certification would be a great asset in the association community. He was encouraged to earn the credential by PIA, which regarded the CAE as both a commitment to the profession and a confirmation of one’s capabilities. Jeff found the CAE studies and exam useful tools for gauging what he knew and what he didn’t know about association management.

Through the CAE certification, Jeff got involved in ASAE and began writing articles, speaking at conferences, and volunteering to lead section councils. Jeff’s commitment to the profession was eventually recognized through his selection as an ASAE Fellow.

Jeff believes that each day in association management presents different challenges and opportunities, particularly as you expand your leadership role. He enjoys the flexibility and variety of his work. Jeff acts as a steward of NIRI and takes pleasure in knowing that the organization is advancing a cause and benefiting its members through advocacy and education. He is surrounded by staff, board members, volunteers, and members who continue to inspire him.

One of Jeff’s favorite benefits of working in association management is the strong, friendly community of professionals willing to share best practices. Associations are faced with similar challenges and struggle with similar issues, but because associations from different industries do not directly compete with one another, many professionals are open to sharing ideas, resources, and tricks of the trade. However, that transfer of knowledge is not a one-way street, Jeff says. To build effective relationships within the association community, you must not only be willing to absorb knowledge from others, you must be willing to share your knowledge as well.

Jeff believes that networking is critical for succeeding in association management, as is the desire for continuous learning. Associations are constantly changing and transforming, and just when you think you have it all figured out, he says, something new pops up. He challenges association professionals to not only learn from each other, but to stay in tune with businesses and other entities to keep improving and serving your organization.

Just as computer technology served as a catalyst for his entry into the association world, Jeff views social media as an opportunity for young people to enter the profession. It has the potential to change how associations interact with their members and is often an area in which young professionals thrive. He encourages new professionals to find the right fit for them. There are a lot of associations out there, and many will let you expand your skill set and adjust your role and responsibilities, Jeff says, if you’re willing to work hard and are committed to the organization’s mission.
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank ASAE for its development of the Leadership Academy for Young Association Professionals and American Express for their generous grant to sustain the Academy.

We would also like to thank our current and former employers for their commitment to our professional development and support of our involvement in the Leadership Academy: AARP, American College of Healthcare Executives, Executive Director, Inc, Investment Management Consultants Association and TH Mgmt., Inc.

Lastly, we would like to extend a special thank-you to Elizabeth Engel, MA, CAE, director of marketing and sponsorship at National Association of Children's Hospitals and Related Institutions and a volunteer on ASAE’s Membership Section Council, for her tireless efforts in mentoring our group, soliciting interview candidates and taking diligent notes during the interviews.

About the Authors

Beau Ballinger currently serves as a project manager, financial security, in AARP's education and outreach group in Washington, DC. Previously he was membership and communications manager at Investment Management Consultants Association (IMCA) in Greenwood Village, Colo. Prior to his position at IMCA, he spent three and a half years at the Financial Planning Association in Denver as public relations manager and membership recruitment manager. He serves on the ASAE Young Association Executives Committee as chair of the Content Subcommittee and is a graduate of the inaugural class of ASAE’s Leadership Academy. He received a bachelor of Arts in communication with a specialization in public relations from Michigan State University in May 2004.

Benjamin H. Butz is an associate executive director at Executive Director, Inc. (EDI), one of the top five association management firms in the U.S. providing professional services for national and international medical, trade and scientific associations. As a staff member of EDI's client, the American Association of Medical Society Executives, Ben has worked in numerous areas, including the development and administration of webinar series, educational content for national programs, websites, grants and compensation surveys. Ben received his Masters of Public Administration from the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee in 2007. Previous to that, he completed his undergraduate work in business finance in 2004. Ben is also certified as a grants performance manager from the Council for Nonprofit Innovation and is a graduate of the inaugural class of ASAE’s Leadership Academy.

Jennifer L. Connelly is regional director with the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE) in Chicago. ACHE is an international professional society of more than 30,000 healthcare executives who lead hospitals, healthcare systems and other healthcare organizations. She has been with ACHE since 2004. Through her numerous positions with ACHE Jennifer has expertise in the areas of component relations, volunteer management, communications, marketing, faculty/student relations and membership. She is also a graduate of the inaugural class of the of ASAE’s Leadership Academy. She holds a bachelor’s degree in political science from the University of Iowa and a master’s degree in public service management from DePaul University.

Emily Crespo first joined TH Mgmt., Inc. as an intern in June of 2000. Upon graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a double major in political science and interpersonal/organizational communication studies, she became a full time employee in November 2003 as the member services liaison. While at UNC, Emily gained insight in working with both non-profits and for-profits through her educational and volunteer activities both on and off campus. Over the years, Emily has worked with each of TH Mgmt.’s clients in some manner, giving her the experience needed to become a great resource for membership questions. Her multi-faceted job has given her the ability to understand the efficiencies of an association management company. She is a graduate of ASAE’s Leadership Academy and is currently pursuing her MBA at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.