



# Research Brief

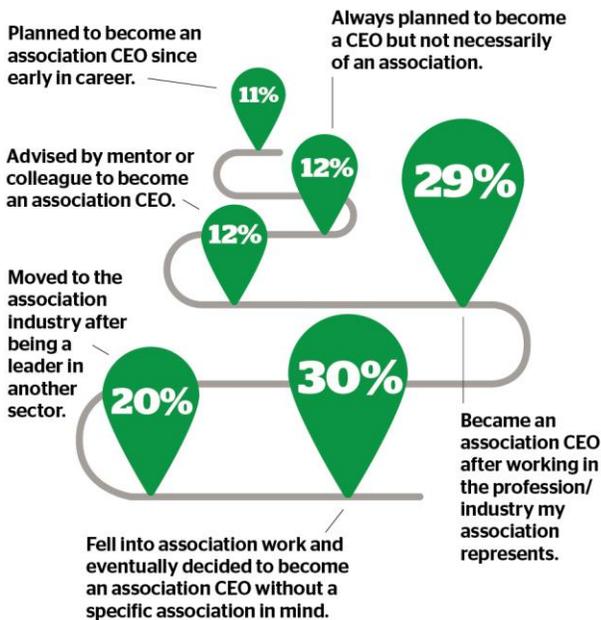
## Pathways to CEO Success

How Experience, Learning, and  
Networks Shape Association CEO  
Careers

No single set of experiences defines an association CEO. The association CEO community is extremely diverse, and CEO career paths resist easy subdivision into the “right” steps to follow. With that in mind, this report seeks to illuminate the different experiences that provided current association CEOs with the knowledge they needed to obtain their first CEO position, and share advice from CEOs to those aspiring to hold the position in the future.

In spring 2016, the ASAE Foundation surveyed current association CEOs to understand their career paths and identify potential career milestones for aspiring CEOs. As a group, the CEOs who participated in the survey had much in common, including a wide range of work experience and a strong commitment to acquiring knowledge. The participating CEOs cohered most around their identification of the activities that advanced their careers, including cultivating an informal professional network and continuous learning.

The clearest divide among the respondents relates to their professional identification. The majority of association CEOs who responded to the survey identified themselves as association management professionals. After comparing this group to the second-largest group of respondents—professionals in the industry served by their

**FIGURE 1****Personal Career Path to CEO***Respondents checked all that applied.*

SOURCE: The ASAE Foundation

association—some distinct differences materialized, particularly between career paths and the activities each group found beneficial. This professional identification is likely both a result of their career path and a driver of growth along that path.

**RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS**

This report draws on the survey responses of more than 400 association CEOs.

- Forty-five percent of the participating CEOs represent professional associations, while 38 percent are leaders of trade associations, and 17 percent lead organizations that are a combination of professional and trade.
- Fifty-six percent of the respondents are men, while 44 percent are women.
- The participating CEOs are from all over the United States, but the areas with the greatest representation are the mid-Atlantic region (29 percent), the Great Lakes region (19 percent), and the Great Plains states (13 percent).

**CAREER PATH****Work Experience**

Though a number of new association CEOs participated in the survey, the participants generally had extensive experience both inside and outside of the association industry. At the time they responded to the survey, the respondents averaged 31 years of full-time experience in the workforce. They averaged 20 years of that experience in the association industry and served as an association CEO for an average of 12 years.

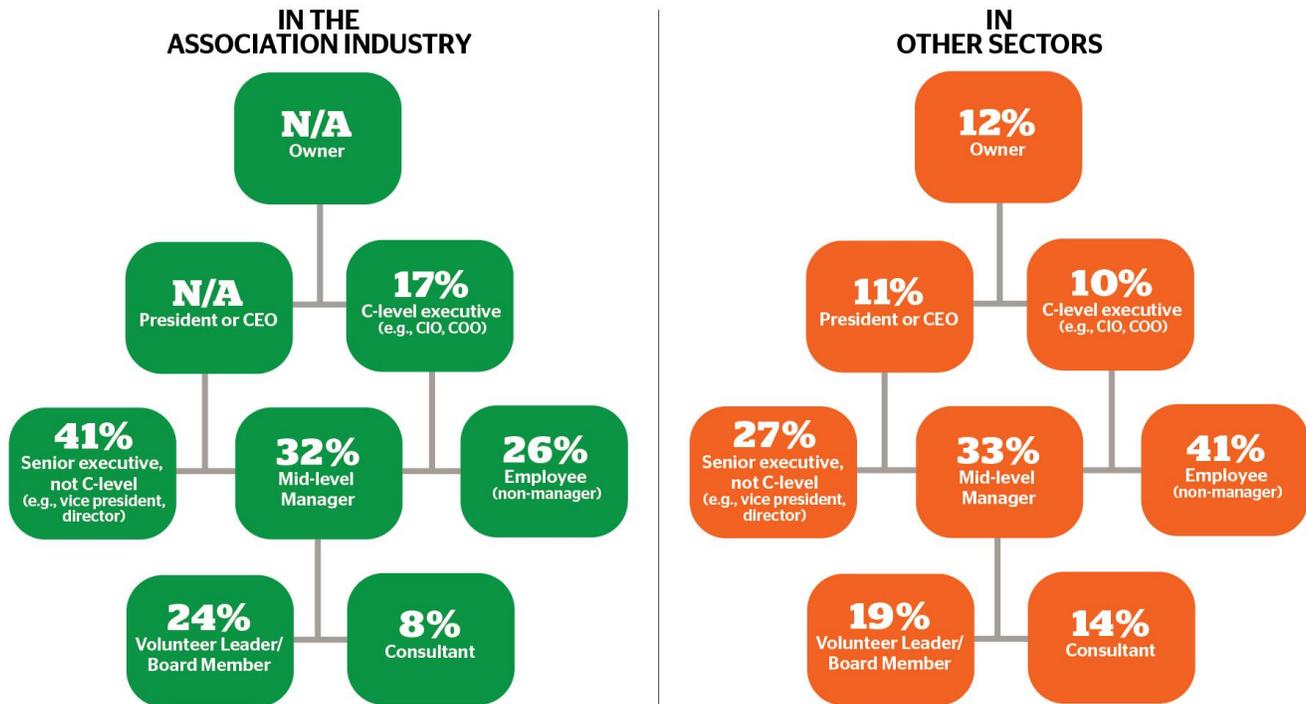
When asked about their path to the CEO role, 30 percent of respondents reported they fell into association work and then decided to become an association CEO without a specific association in mind. Industry work was the second most common path, with 29 percent reporting that they became an association CEO after working for the profession or industry their association represents. This response was most common for CEOs with educational backgrounds in healthcare or the law. Many respondents stressed the importance of obtaining a variety of work experiences en route to becoming an association CEO, including work in other sectors and industries and experiences at different levels of an industry. This advice is certainly borne out in their own paths. Sixty-four percent of survey participants reported working in other industries before becoming an association CEO.

The survey respondents were increasingly likely to have found themselves in the association sector as they moved up the professional ladder. Forty-one percent of the respondents had senior executive positions at associations prior to becoming a CEO, while 17 percent had previous experience at the C-level within an association. Twenty-eight percent of all respondents worked at the same association and then were promoted to CEO.

Their work experiences gave respondent CEOs solid training and relevant knowledge for their roles as leaders. They reported advanced experience in a wide range of functional areas before becoming association

**FIGURE 2**

Positions Held Prior to First Association CEO Position  
*Respondents checked all that applied.*



SOURCE: The ASAE Foundation

CEOs, with administrative (48 percent), executive and senior management (48 percent), communication/public relations/PR (47 percent), financial, budget and operations (45 percent), and government relations/public policy (40 percent) being the most commonly cited areas of advanced experience. The respondents reported advanced experience in an average of five functional areas each before becoming CEO.

**Age**

Survey respondents first became an association CEO at an average of 41 years of age, though certain segments of respondents were younger on average when they became CEOs. Association experience is correlated to earlier CEO appointments. Respondents who were promoted from within or who worked at an association prior to their appointment as CEO got to that position at

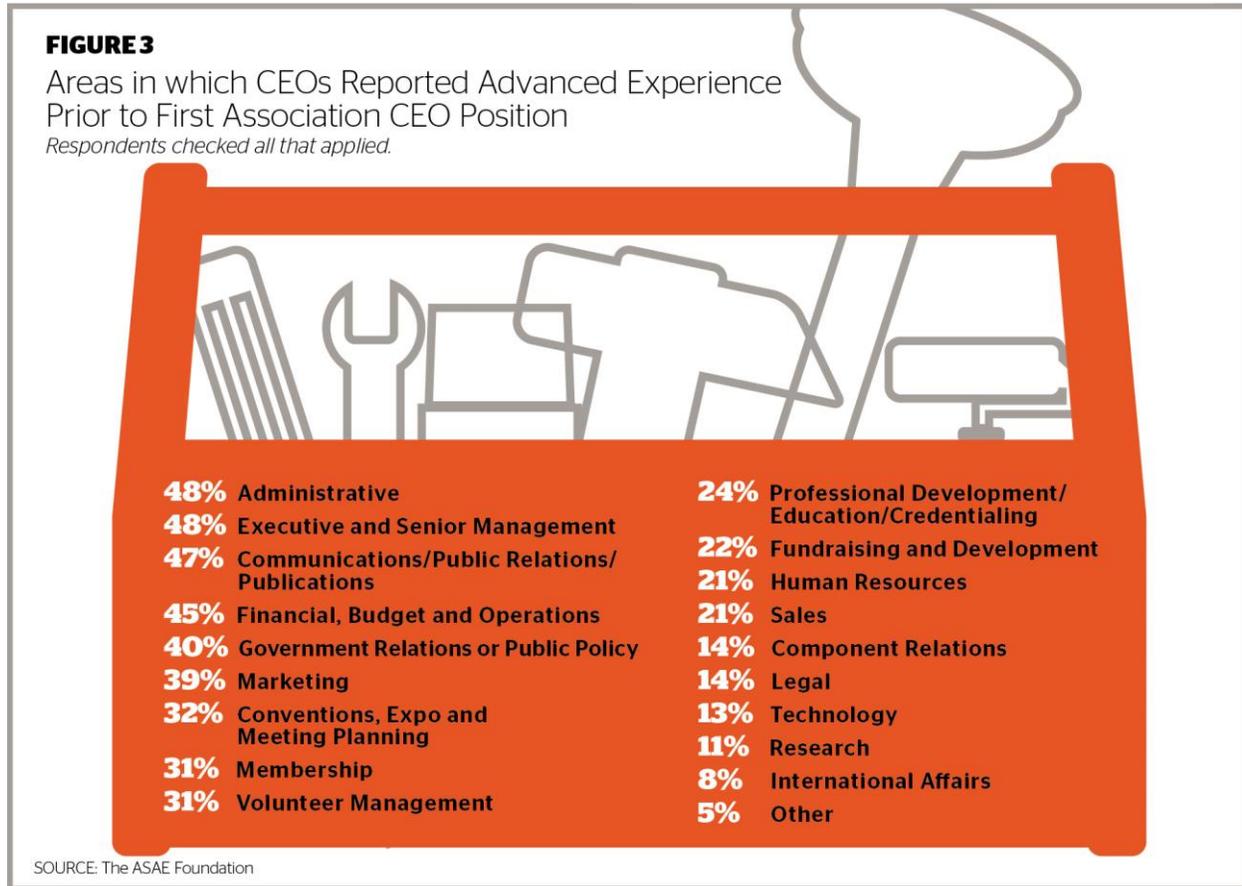
a younger average age (41 and 40 years of age, respectively) than those who worked in their association’s industry (44 years of age) or served as a volunteer leader for that association (43 years of age) prior to their appointment.

Additionally, those respondents who knew early in their careers that they wanted to be an association CEO were younger first-time CEOs (at an average of 38 years of age), while having a mentor or colleague who advised the respondent to become a CEO also correlated with becoming a CEO earlier (at 39 years of age).

**EDUCATION**

**Educational Background**

The survey participants’ responses reveal that association CEOs are well educated. Ninety-seven percent of survey participants completed at least a



bachelor's degree before becoming a CEO. Forty-nine percent of respondents had graduate degrees at that stage. Moreover, a number of CEOs continued their education after obtaining their first CEO position. Eight percent of respondents earned a degree and another four percent earned a graduate certificate offered by a college or university after becoming CEO.

Those who pursued graduate degrees were more likely to report that the level of their degree positively influenced their first CEO appointment. Sixty-five percent of respondents who had a master's degree, 60 percent of those who had a professional degree, and 87 percent of those who earned a doctorate degree prior to becoming CEO felt that their degree benefitted their selection to some degree. Of those respondents, forty-eight percent rated their advanced degree as important or very important to obtaining their first CEO position.

Respondents viewed certain fields of study as more

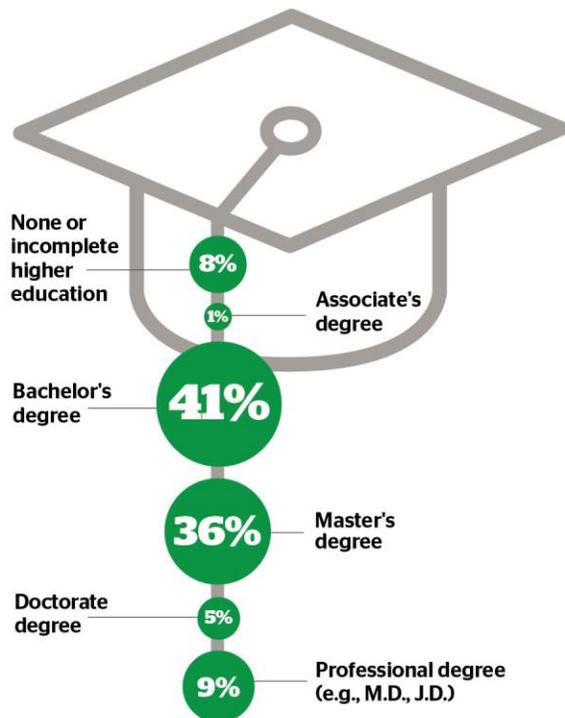
beneficial than others. More than half of those with an educational background in law (56 percent), STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields (54 percent), or health (52 percent) thought that their fields of study positively influenced their first CEO appointment. Business and public administration fields were actually the most popular choices for the highest degree completed (36 percent of respondents), but those CEOs were not as likely to connect that degree to getting their first CEO position as CEOs with law, STEM, or health degrees did.

#### Degrees Versus Credentials

In providing open-ended advice to aspiring CEOs, respondents were divided on whether an MBA or other graduate degree would be more beneficial than a CAE or other management professional credential to obtaining a CEO position. Some considered one more important than the other, while several noted that both offered value for getting and succeeding in the CEO role.

**FIGURE 4**

Highest Level of Education Completed Before Becoming CEO



SOURCE: The ASAE Foundation

8% of respondents earned a degree after becoming CEO.

10% of respondents have a professional or graduate certificate awarded by a college or university (7% before, 4% after CEO appointment).

**FIGURE 5**

Major or Field of Study for Highest Level of Education

*Respondents checked all that applied.*



SOURCE: The ASAE Foundation

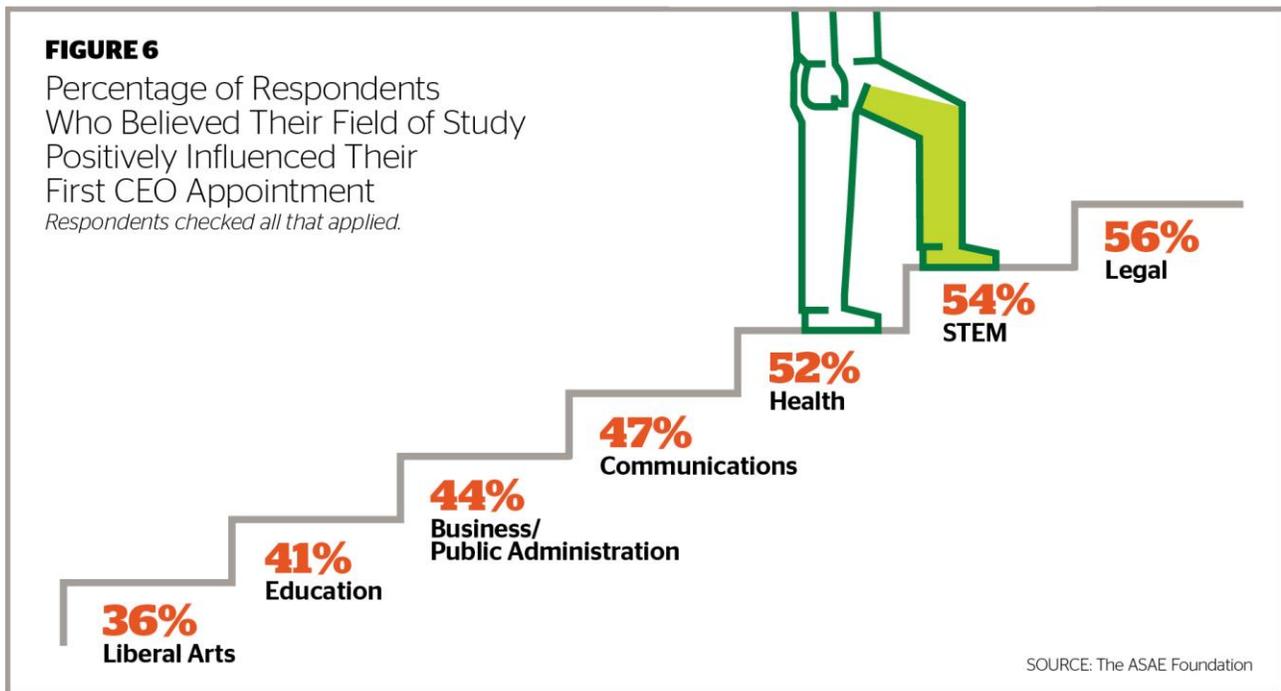
Individual preferences may be attributable to industry-specific factors, as well as to what the respondents knew about their associations' ideal candidate during their hiring process. Regardless, the survey respondents affirmed that continuous learning—through degrees, credentials, networks, professional training, and regular reading—is a necessity for CEOs and aspiring CEOs.

### THE IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Given the role of associations in credentialing, it is no surprise that association CEOs find personal value in professional credentials. Thirty-one percent of respondents earned at least one professional credential

on their path to becoming a CEO, and 40 percent of those individuals rated their credential(s) very or extremely valuable to obtaining their first CEO position. Obtaining credentials, and in particular the CAE, figured prominently in the advice the current CEOs would give to aspiring CEOs.

However, survey participants rated other professional activities as even more important in getting their own CEO role. Respondents valued cultivating an informal professional network the highest for positive impact—56 percent of respondents who developed a network considered it very or extremely important to earning their first CEO position and 90 percent thought it had at least some positive influence on their selection. As stated previously, earning an advanced degree was considered very or extremely important to getting their first CEO job by 48 percent of the respondents who had



such a degree, while association-based continuing professional education and training were rated very or extremely important by 41 percent of respondents who pursued that avenue.

#### ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT PROFESSIONAL VERSUS INDUSTRY PROFESSIONAL

When analyzing the data, two distinct pathways to the association CEO position emerged. These routes share a number of characteristics, but they are primarily defined by how the CEO views himself or herself—as an association management professional or as a professional in the industry his or her association serves. The distinct choices of each group, and the activities on which each group places value, can provide guidance to professionals with similar backgrounds.

Association CEOs who identified themselves as association management professionals made up 74 percent of respondents, which is not surprising given the length of time many of them have spent in the association industry. While this group matched the overall average of 31 years of full-time work, they had more experience in the association sector than the

overall average (22 years versus 20 years) and had averaged more time as an association CEO (13 years versus 12 years). This group represents professional associations at a higher rate than the overall average.

Those who identified themselves as association management professionals were more likely to have had multiple CEO positions both within and outside of the association industry. They were also more likely to have worked their way through multiple levels of association work, reporting higher percentages of experience at all levels of association work than the overall average.

Self-identified professionals in the industry served by their association made up 17 percent of respondents. They had fewer years in the association industry than the overall average (14 years versus 20 years) and fewer years as an association CEO (eight years versus 12 years). These industry professionals were much more likely to have held positions in other sectors at all career levels. Their role as an association CEO was more likely to be their first and only CEO position. This group represents combined professional and trade organizations at a higher rate than the overall average.

**FIGURE 7**

### Impact of Professional and Career Development Activities on Obtaining First CEO Position

Table shows the average rating for each activity's importance (on a five-point scale) and the percentage of respondents who rated each activity a 4 ("very important") or a 5 ("extremely important").



SOURCE: The ASAE Foundation

CEOs who identify as association management professionals become an association CEO at a younger age—an average of 40 years of age compared to 46 years of age for those who identified as industry professionals. This difference may be explained by the fact that self-identified association management professionals were much more likely to report an interest in becoming an association CEO from the early stages of their career (14 percent compared to one percent of industry professional CEOs and 11 percent of respondents overall).

Those who consider themselves association management professionals were only slightly more likely than industry professionals to have professional credentials at the time they first became a CEO, but they were much more likely to consider those credentials very or extremely important to obtaining their first CEO

position. Nineteen percent reported having their CAE credential before becoming CEO, which accounted for 59 percent of the credentials obtained by the group by that time.

Those who consider themselves professionals in the industry their association serves, while only slightly less likely to have obtained professional credentials earlier in their careers, were markedly less concerned with obtaining their CAE credential. Only three percent of industry professionals were CAEs before becoming a CEO, accounting for just eight percent of credentials earned by the group at that juncture.

Participants diverged in their valuation of a number of other professional activities. Both groups had high percentages of respondents who considered cultivating an informal professional network and earning an

advanced degree very or extremely important to obtaining their first CEO position. However, association management professionals were much more likely to connect continuing education through ASAE and other associations to getting that CEO role, while industry professionals were more likely to connect volunteering for an association or nonprofit and serving as a board member to their successful bid for their CEO position.

A person's career path undoubtedly shapes his or her identification as an association management professional or an industry professional as much as that identification shapes his or her path, but both routes offer great value to CEOs. However, the experiences of a single path may not be enough to earn a CEO position. In becoming an association CEO, a professional must represent the bridge between the association management professionals in their organization and the industry professionals they serve. Aspiring CEOs would do well to learn from the experiences and interests of both perspectives to get a complete view of the CEO role. This report's "Top Ten Recommendations for Aspiring CEOs" offers advice to potential CEOs from both pathways.

## TOP TEN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ASPIRING CEOS

Circumstance dictated career paths for many of the participating CEOs. A number of respondents decided to become association CEOs only after falling into the association industry, while others became CEOs after lengthy careers in other industries. Nevertheless, the survey yielded specific effective practices for aspiring CEOs culled from the research findings and the respondents' open-ended advice.

**1. Build a professional network.** Ninety percent of respondents found a professional network beneficial to obtaining their first association CEO role and it came up repeatedly in the advice respondents would offer to aspiring CEOs. As you build your network, find a mentor. Talk to people you admire and who you think are great

leaders and learn from their approaches and experiences.

**2. Keep learning.** Whether it is an advanced degree, a professional credential, or other training, most respondents felt that the steps they took to advance their own knowledge were positively influential in getting that first CEO position. If you know the association or the association industry you want to work in, learn which degrees or credentials are considered valuable or essential to its CEOs. Above all, read to stay up to date on industry and association trends, management best practices, and other knowledge areas.

**3. Volunteer.** CEOs recommend getting the member and volunteer perspective. Be an active member of an association, be it ASAE, a state society of association executives, or another industry association. Serve on committees to get experience advancing association work with a group of volunteers. Serve on a board. Serve on multiple boards. Learn the ins and outs of governance and how different groups deal with leadership questions and resolve issues.

**4. Familiarize yourself with a variety of association functional areas.** CEOs may not be experts on everything, but the respondent CEOs agreed they are expected to know at least a little about many operational areas, especially at small associations. If you are already working in an association, pursue experience in a variety of functional areas or volunteer for cross-departmental projects. If you are in another industry, volunteer for a variety of committees for your industry's association to learn more about the blood and guts of association work. Key knowledge areas for CEOs: finance and budgeting, senior management, human resources, governance, membership, government relations, and fundraising.

**5. Develop leadership skills.** Current CEOs suggest cultivating the skills necessary to lead both a staff and a volunteer-driven organization. Those skills include

delegation, talent management, change management, consensus building, and emotional intelligence. Also important: listening—to staff, to the board, and to members—and making actionable connections between the things you learn.

**6. Communication skills are also key.** Public speaking, facilitating discussions, and developing professional relationships were all suggested as significant facets of the CEO role. Experience in these areas, as well as strong written communication skills, will not only help you build your network and increase visibility, they will also prepare you for a lot of the “on the ground” work of association CEOs.

**7. Know the association and its industry.** You may not know which association you want to lead at the beginning of your career, but as you put yourself in a position to apply for a CEO role, get to know the association and the industry it serves. Explore literature on industry trends and find out about what the association’s members look for from the association. It will not only give you a leg up in interviews, it will also help you understand what you can bring to the role and whether the position is right for you.

**8. Understand the role is about the members.** Becoming an association CEO is a career achievement, but ultimately that role is about member service, say current CEOs. The skills you develop will be required to manage and staff and lead an association, but the goal is always to serve the industry or field of your association, so that goal must be at the forefront of your work.

**9. Be authentic.** Participating CEOs underscored the importance of being true to yourself. They advised talking to mentors and questioning what you want out of the CEO role. Make sure you want the job, not just the title. That passion will be evident not only to your network and mentors but to interview panelists, too.

**10. Patience and persistence will help you find the right position.** A number of the CEOs surveyed advised patience. The right fit will almost certainly be better than jumping at the first opportunity, especially for CEO positions. However, when a great opportunity presents itself, go for it!



**THE ASAE FOUNDATION THANKS NAYLOR ASSOCIATION SOLUTIONS** for its commitment to enhancing the association management knowledge base through research.



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