

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP

Q: I've been told to join a professional association but I don't know where to start. Do you have suggestions?

A: It's great that you have received advice to join a professional association. Despite the fact that it might seem hard to break in, professional organizations are a great way to meet people in your field. More specifically, involvement in a professional association will help you:

- *Become a known entity* – Active participation in a professional association is an important strategy for becoming known in your field. You will likely meet and learn from professionals who are farther along their career path or who may be accomplished experts in the field. As you get to know these professionals, they will get to know you and you will expand your professional network.
- *Discover job openings* – Employers often post job openings on organizations' listservs or websites. Additionally, by networking with association members, you are well-positioned to hear about job opportunities that may never be posted anywhere and are filled instead through word-of-mouth.
- *Continue your education and skill development* – Association conferences, brown bags and other events as well as newsletters and listservs are an opportunity to learn about new trends and products and learn from key leaders in the field. As an active member in an association, you can develop new skills such as project management, public speaking, budgeting, meeting facilitation, event planning, and writing.

WHICH ORGANIZATION SHOULD I JOIN?

If you are unsure which professional association(s) to join, you'll need to do a little research:

- *Ask others for advice* – Ask your colleagues, supervisor, or mentors which professional organizations they belong to or they recommend you join.
- *Review associations identified by the Career Center* – Review the list of professional associations listed in the Career Interest Groups on the [Career Center webpage](#) for a list of organizations related to your academic discipline.
- *Internet search by keywords* – Do a keyword search for your job title, career field, or industry on [LinkedIn](#) (you'll need to join LinkedIn first), and review the profiles of the people who fit your criteria to see what organizations they list. A quick Google search by keyword and the phrase "professional association" should also return a list of possible organizations.

- *Join state or local chapters* – Once you have found a national organization of interest, investigate whether there are local or state chapters in your area. Becoming involved on a state or local level is often much easier than involving yourself in the national chapter.

IT'S EXPENSIVE! I CAN'T AFFORD THIS!

- *Try before you buy* – Investigate the membership benefits and determine if they align with your interests and career goals. If an organization looks promising but you aren't convinced you want to commit, email a board member and ask if you can attend a meeting to try out the organization before paying to join.
- *Research options for reducing the cost* – Explore options for reducing the membership fees. Ask about a student membership rate, or the possibility of need-based scholarships to would-be members. Inquire if volunteer opportunities with the organization come with a discount on annual dues or conference registration fees. If you are considering joining a professional association related to the work you are currently doing, see if your employer will finance all or part of your membership.

OKAY, I JOINED. NOW WHAT DO I DO?

Become an active member. Professional organizations shouldn't just be a line on your resume or CV. To make them worth the membership fees, you need to participate. Here are some suggestions for active involvement:

- *Make sure you receive all organization communications* – Add your email address to the organization's distribution list, so you are notified about organization events.
- *Seek out in-person opportunities* – Attend monthly board meetings, roundtable events, or brown bag presentations the organization sponsors.
- *Participate when you attend events* – Ask a question at a roundtable discussion, or offer your perspective at a brown bag event.
- *Research leadership opportunities* – Volunteer to serve on the board or one of the board committees.
- Propose a presentation at the organization's annual conference or other continuing education forums.
- *Join a committee or present at a conference* – A common misperception is that professional associations don't need volunteers for their board or committees. Another is that the criteria for having a presentation accepted at a conference is stringent. Usually just the opposite is true – associations are always looking for energetic new members to join in, and conference organizers often scramble to find enough presenters to fill out their conference schedule. It

is much easier to join a committee or get a presentation accepted at a professional association conference than many people realize. (Remember to include any presentations you give on your CV.)

I'M STILL NERVOUS. HELP!

- *Seek out online opportunities* – If you are introverted, there are a number of ways to ease into involvement with a professional organization. After you've joined a professional association, see if the organization maintains a LinkedIn group, and join it as well. Start participating on the group discussion board, or asking and answering questions in the Q&A feature. Joining these online conversations can be a "safe" way to reach out to others in the organization.
- *Focus on individual connections* – Schedule informational interviews with a few key leaders as a way to learn more about the organization. Board members are a good place to start, and their contact information is usually listed on the organization's website. After you've connected with a member, ask if you can attend your first few meetings with them. Request that they introduce you to colleagues and friends as a way to meet people without having to introduce yourself cold.
- *Volunteer for a specific task* – Finally, consider volunteering for one-time engagements to test the waters before committing to board membership or other ongoing responsibilities. Volunteering has the added bonus of giving you something to do at an association event. Bonding with another volunteer over a shared task, or chatting with a conference attendee who asked you a question while you were working at the registration table is a great way to break the ice and help you feel more comfortable in group settings.

While joining a professional association can be intimidating, challenge yourself to work past your anxiety and get involved. Your career will thank you for it!