

The Value of Professional Organizations

Keeping a network of contacts current is an investment in yourself

By Laura Raines

For the Atlanta Journal-Constitution

When employment goes down, membership in industry associations and professional organizations generally goes up. Job seekers come to meetings to meet new contacts and possible employers and market their skills.

“Some people wait until they get a [termination] notice to reach out and build a network. Then it’s almost too late,” said Elizabeth Wysong, director of human resources technology for Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta. People shouldn’t wait for a career crisis to join, she said.

“You want to get involved and start building your network all along, because there are so many benefits from it. Membership is an investment in yourself and your career.”

When Wysong started her career in human resources at St. Thomas University in Miami, a colleague suggested she join the Society for Human Resource Management as a way to network and build knowledge about her profession.

“I found it to be a tremendous opportunity to meet people who were similarly focused and wanting to learn the same things I did,” Wysong said. She also joined the local chamber of commerce and co-chaired the human resources committee.

“I have not found a better vehicle [than associations] to build up my body of knowledge and establish great relationships in the community,” she said. “When I had challenges at work, I knew people who had been there and done that who could give me a different perspective and advice.”

She’s also found it a great way to hone and display her skills.

“I’ve only worked for three employers, and my last two career moves came from my direct involvement with local SHRM chapters,” said Wysong, who has worked in human resources in education, banking and health care. “I never had to market myself to find a job. Opportunities came to me,” she said.

“Because they came from people I trusted, it was easier to leap into a new organization and industry.” She’s stayed with her original association, however.

“An association is a great place to be mentored in whatever skills you need to learn,” she said.

Career development

A lot of people join an association the way they do a church, said Paul Terlemezian, president of iFive Alliances LLC, an Atlanta firm that helps companies make strategic alliances.

“They go to a service and notice that other people seem to know each other and be getting more out of it. It’s not until they join the altar guild or become an usher that they start making a circle of friends and become a part of the community,” Terlemezian said. “People tell me that they are waiting for their career to get better and I say, ‘Why are you waiting?’ Be proactive. If you want to grow and increase your value, join an association and get involved.”

A professional association is a place to:

- Network

“It’s a great place to get to know people and be known. You can sell your product or your skills, find a job and make friends,” he said.

- Find professional development

“Associations often offer low-cost ways to sharpen your skills, stay abreast of industry trends, and earn



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certifications needed to advance in your career,” Terlemezian said.

- Give back and make an impact on the industry.

“It’s difficult for any one company to change an industry. An association serves as the voice of an industry, which means it gets heard by legislative bodies,” Terlemezian said. When the 6,000-member Technology Association of Georgia speaks, it is representing industry interests. People listen.

Terlemezian joined the American Society of Training and Development because it gave him a chance to learn about emerging technologies, to gain leadership experiences, and take that knowledge back to his company. He served as president of the 600-member Greater Atlanta chapter in 2008.

Seek roles that match

“When you join an organization, be intentional about your involvement and seek out roles that match your skills and abilities, or ones where you can learn new skills,” said Tom Darrow, principal of Talent Connections LLC, an Atlanta-based professional service and recruiting firm. “If you’re not intentional, you may get a volunteer job that is a mismatch and then you’ll just check out of participating. Think about what goals you want to accomplish.”

There’s no reason why benefits shouldn’t go both ways when you volunteer time and talent for an organization. “I’ve had business development and career opportunities because people have told me that they liked the way I worked in an organization,” Terlemezian said.

Follow your passion

“As long as I’ve had my career, I’ve been interested in associations. In fact, I started my business at an

association meeting,” said Peggy Hutcheson, president of the Odyssey Group, an HR consulting firm. She was talking to a friend about wanting to start her own consulting business at an organization meeting, when a corporate project manager passed her his card. “When you decide to do that, call me. I’ve liked what I’ve seen you do here,” he told her. “I had led a couple of volunteer projects and in his mind that validated my skills,” she said.

Hutcheson started with the Greater Atlanta chapter of ASTD while working in internal communications at Rich’s. When the group needed a newsletter, she knew how to do that and volunteered. She took her passion for career development to the national level of ASTD and ended up serving on the board. “I met people that I would never have met otherwise — people whose books and articles I’d read in graduate school, became friends.”

A client suggested that she think outside the box because IEEE, an engineering, technology and telecommunications organization, could use her skills. “As chair of their employment and career services committee, I’ve run conferences and developed a Webinar series. I was also asked to be part of their steering committee on innovation,” she said.

Last year she spoke at a global conference in Quebec and led a career fair in London. “As a small-business person, I would never have had access to this level of leadership were it not for the association,” she said.

Hutcheson admits to being a “radical” advocate for association membership and involvement. “Let people see what you can do, and as long as you’re learning something you’ll see career growth,” she said. “Start by committing to short-term projects where you can see results and then follow your passion.”