The Advantages of Association Involvement for Library Professionals

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Professional associations have a long history in the library world. Most national associations have existed since the first half of the 20th century or earlier, with many of the provincial associations having a similar longevity. This multi-generational history should prove that library associations are sustainable, but why should anyone put in the time and effort to be part of one? During the last couple of years I have had plenty of opportunities to experience what library associations are like and have benefited tremendously from my involvement in them. The following are some of the benefits that professional membership brings both to the individuals involved and to the profession more generally.

Educational Opportunities

Associations provide a number of opportunities, such as conferences and webinars, to learn from our field’s leading practitioners. Educational sessions are usually available to non-members as well, but often at a considerable price difference that makes a membership often a worthwhile investment for this reason alone. In Canada, one of the most important library education networks is the Education Institute which is associated with The Partnership, a group consisting of Canada’s twelve provincial and territorial library associations. These sessions allow you to shape your continuing education, learn from other people with similar positions and challenges, and shake up your perspective with new thinking.

There are also opportunities to share your knowledge by presenting the results of your own research or experience. These opportunities can be invaluable for advancing your career and making your name better known in the library community.

Advocacy

Library associations are important conduits for advocacy. Often this consists of writing letters to politicians and influencers on issues of importance to our members and our profession as well as talking face-to-face with politicians and other decision makers. The executive director and members of the association’s board use these person-to-person meetings with individuals within the cultural and political communities of the region to communicate the important part that libraries play in the education, literacy, and well-being of Canadians. By supporting your association you help keep the important work of libraries in the minds of decision makers at the federal, provincial, and local levels. What’s more, these meetings are not a one-shot instruction session.
Rather, they are long-term relationships built and nurtured through many interactions over many years and through the vicissitudes of political, budgetary and social change.

Since being on the board of the Saskatchewan Library Association (SLA), I have had the chance to discuss libraries on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s The Afternoon Edition radio show, talk with our provincial minister of Culture and Sport, and introduce myself and the SLA’s mission to one of our local Members of Parliament. Although it is not always measurable, I believe that these types of meetings play an important part in maintaining and growing support for libraries.

**Networking Opportunities**

At conferences, through the work of your association’s board and committees and at sponsored social events, we have a chance to meet other library professionals in our region or province. This is a very useful way of connecting with people outside your workplace. Relationship building can make inter-institutional cooperation easier, provide you with employment references and contacts, and create opportunities to collaborate with others that you would not usually have.

**Leadership**

Leadership skills are important in most, if not all, library positions: so is learning to work well with individuals—be they peers, managers or subordinates. Involvement in library associations gives you opportunities to experience leadership situations through board involvement. This development may take place through your participation as a committee member or chair, a member of the board or the executive, or as the manager of a program or project. Some of the involvement that I have had with professional associations since 2010 has included experience as conference co-chair, board member, and personnel committee member. I have had to deal with contractors, direct staff, and work with colleagues.

I believe that all of these experiences have made me a better manager at work, better able to persuade others of the merits of my opinion, and better able to work with individuals with diverse skills and personalities.

**Finally, before you get involved with your association you should consider the following:**

1. Be altruistic. Library association involvement can be beneficial for your career in the long run. However, much of the work you put in will give you neither glory nor material reward. Join only if you see the value of library associations for the profession, for your colleagues, and of course, for yourself.
2. Be realistic. There are only so many hours in a day. Be cognizant of how much time you can realistically give to your association. Some workplaces are willing to help your involvement by allowing you to use company time and resources to get association business done. Be sure, though, that your supervisor and the library’s management are on board with your involvement. If they are not, consider how much banked time, evenings, and similar sacrifices you are willing to make.
3. Be willing to forego perfection. G. K. Chesterton once wrote that “if there is anything worth doing it’s worth doing badly.” Being involved in an association in addition to full time paid employment and other life commitments is a sure antidote to perfectionism. Despite being run largely by volunteers—and the waxing and waning of commitment and available time by members—associations are able to survive and thrive in the long term. We get the job done! And when things go wrong (and they inevitably do), those who benefit most from our programs and efforts are often the least likely to notice the many small bumps along the way to the end product.

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