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Driving Professional Development through Associations

Wednesday, 20th May 2015 By [Andrew Clark](#)[« Subscription Articles](#) 

Abstract

Andrew Clark, president of the Pharma Documentation Ring (P-D-R) and active member of SLA, explains how being an active member of a professional association can help to enhance your career and keep your professional development continuous in order to meet the changing requirements that affect the information industry today. He offers some useful guidance on how to choose the right association for you and the major benefits that can ensue.

Article

Learning and Professional Development through Association Membership

If we take an inside-out view on the information industry, we know that this has changed significantly in recent years. As professionals working in the sector, I'm sure we have all been challenged about how to deal with the changes and how we can ensure that what we do in our daily responsibilities remains at the fore, to ensure we deliver with value and impact.

Perhaps we ourselves have questioned whether we have the right skills and learning to meet the changing information requirements asked of us, or wondered how the department strategy can be evolved in an innovative way that might be as visible as those departments that command larger budgets, more resources and top level reporting lines.

Whether you are new to the field of information services or someone who has been in the industry many years, an evolving information landscape is a given. Whether we like it or not, as professionals we also have to face the reality that we may be judged on our capabilities or benchmarked against our peers.

Explore New Ways of Learning

It is also very apparent that not everything can be learned in the classroom and that nothing can really prepare us for the information world of today, for work, fulfilment and success.

Unlike studying in the classroom, the goal posts in the workplace can keep moving. This might be because of new technology, customer demand, legislation or simply because there is a new chief executive with a different vision. All these changes will invariably have implications on the workforce.

Many companies are good at providing learning opportunities when there is a direct benefit to the organisation but what's offered may not always be in line with what is really needed for your career.

Take Responsibility for Your Career

Having been in the industry myself for nearly 20 years I've learnt first-hand that the responsibility is on the individual to expand their knowledge base in creative ways.

Individuals do this differently, whether it be secondments, volunteer work or further study. The rise



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of social media has also offered many new ways to connect with people of similar minds and the role of networking has become even more crucial today.

One thing is clear, that as information professionals we need to think about our employability and take charge of our personal development.

A great opportunity to do this and that is often forgotten is considering a membership of a professional association, which can offer deep insight into how the industry works, tips on how to navigate it, as well as professional development opportunities.

Choose the Right Professional Association

There are many associations for information professionals, some of which are global with many hundreds of members and others which may be local and significantly smaller in size.

Choosing the right association to belong to is critical and I would describe these as falling into two broad categories:

1. Associations that have a broad, diverse membership such as the [Special Libraries Association \(SLA\)](#) where there are many chapters and divisions which represent individuals with wide-ranging responsibilities and interests.

SLA is an international professional association for library and information professionals working in business, government, law, finance, non-profit, and academic organisations and institutions. Founded in 1909 it has over 9,000 members.

2. Domain-specific associations such as the [Pharma Documentation Ring \(P-D-R\)](#), where the emphasis is on a specific industry and niche requirements.

P-D-R is an association whose members represent the scientific information departments of the leading international R&D-based pharmaceutical corporations. With a distinguished history that goes back over 57 years the P-D-R has an annual conference open to all members and a number of strategic working groups which meet regularly during the year.

Jan Sykes' recent article "[Information Skills Development - Incorporating Resources from Industry Partners](#)" also provide some useful thoughts on professional associations.

Questions to Ask

Regardless of the type of association, becoming an active member can have far reaching benefits that even the largest of membership fees will never be able to buy.

In considering the right association for yourself some key questions to ask include:

- What areas of your job do I find most difficult or want to improve?
- What skills am I looking to develop?
- What am I looking to learn?
- How can association membership add value to what I do in the workplace?

Benefits of Joining a Professional Association

Joining a professional association can have many benefits:

- *Job opportunities*: either hearing of vacancies through the network, the opportunity to access association job listings, or simply self exposure through active participation in association meetings and events
- *Mentoring*: a real strength of belonging to a professional association is the ability to learn from peers and there is often opportunity to sync up with someone much more experienced, sharing learning, further understanding and talking about what we do as information professionals
- *Professional development*: industry knowledge aids learning and is enhanced by understanding competencies, ethics, trends, salary and other surveys. Knowing the association and what it can offer is key so that you can reap maximum benefits. Many associations offer professional development via courses, workshops, publications and information on their website shared only with members. Develop new skills, expand your knowledge, gain confidence and have fun. It shouldn't be forgotten that professional and personal development is a lifelong process.
- *Networking*: connecting with other like-minded information professionals, industry experts and potential employers is critical for success. Many organisations have an annual conference which creates opportunities to interact both in formal and informal settings.

Next Steps: Keep Your Professional Development and Learning Continuous

Keeping your professional development continuous is critical and as professionals we need to ensure that we remain on top of our game. Belonging to an industry association is a great way to do this and I want to conclude with some practical tips on maximising these opportunities.

- Reflect on your professional goals to ensure that the association will be an effective way at advancing your professional objectives or strategy in the workplace
- Take advantage of orientation opportunities to learn more about the association you might have joined. Have a call with the membership secretary, ask if there is a network for other recent new members
- Use social media and mobile apps as a method for connecting with other association members. Does the association have a distribution list, blogs, or discussion forums for keeping up to date on latest information?
- Focus on variety and step out of your comfort zone to be part of a working group that perhaps you have had minimal experience with in the past. This might help you to discover a new passion, resource or opportunity. Focus not only on extending existing knowledge and expertise but also growth.
- Understand distribution channels for learning about all parts of the association you have joined - is there a monthly bulletin or online news items posted regularly?
- Actively participate - talk about a challenge, suggest a solution, give an example, reflect, engage and engage others. Be an active rather than passive participant. Understand how you might be able to volunteer to help organise a meeting or co-ordinate a working group.
- Make notes during webinars or conferences and apply key learnings in the workplace. What are the key takeaways? Be determined to take away at least one idea, tool, concept or bit of information that can be applied to your daily practice. Ask for meeting materials such as hand-outs that can be used for future reference.
- Share what you have learned with your colleagues in the workplace. Surface key learnings during departmental meetings or consider debrief lunches.
- Remain engaged with your association network and reach out to others to look for ways to share and collaborate on new projects. This can be a great way to form and strengthen professional networks over time.
- Keep your management informed as to how the association is benefiting you professionally and note your own professional growth and accomplishments. You will be amazed at what you have done, who you have met and what you have learnt!

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