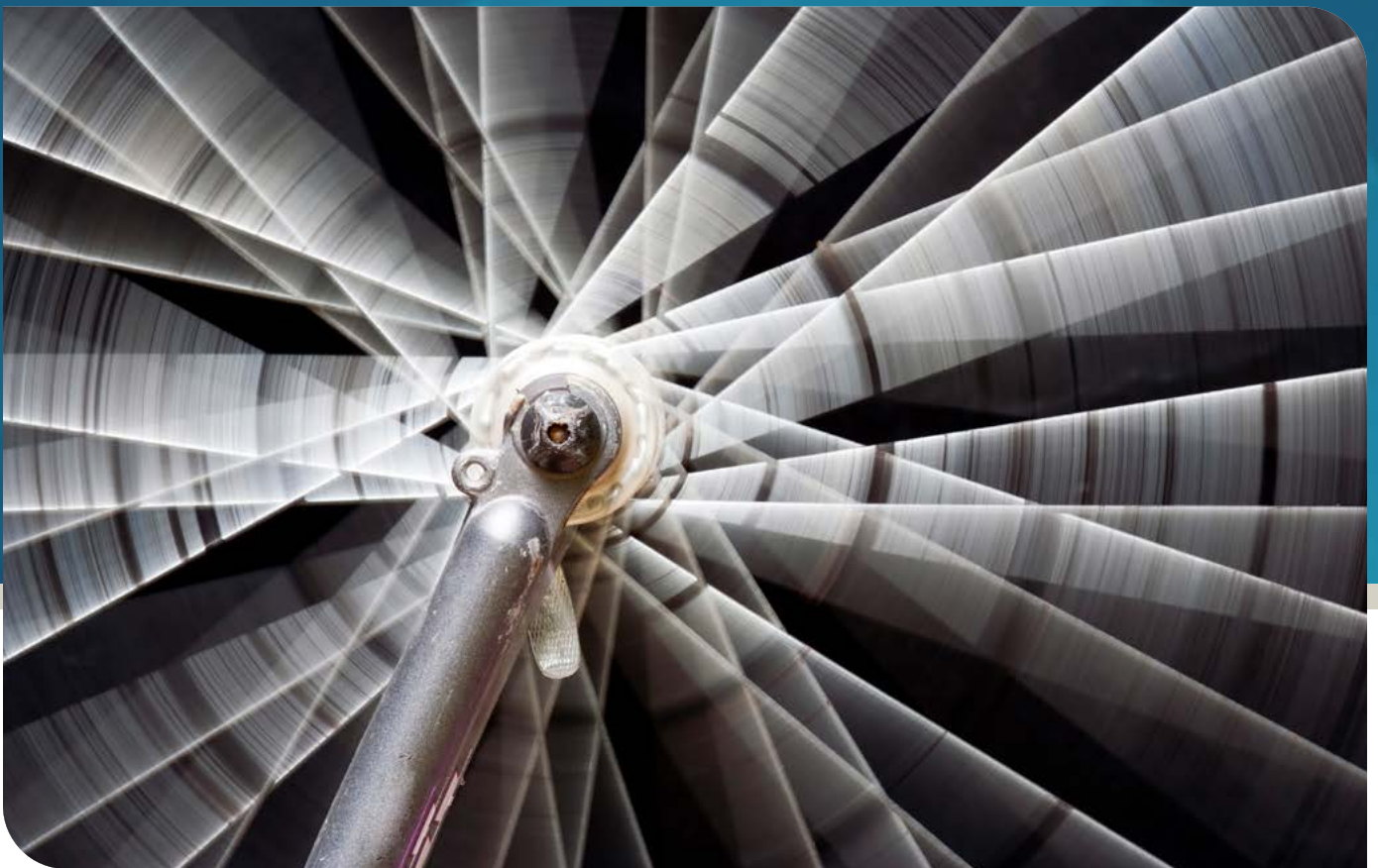


Unlocking Value for Members:

Perceptions and the Evolving Role of Associations



Unlocking Value for Members: Perceptions and the Evolving Role of Associations

Introduction

In an era of rapid digital innovation, shifting economies, and evolving workforce dynamics, associations remain vital forces driving progress across industries and professions. These organizations are integral to the fabric of society, enhancing both professional and personal lives, shaping industries, and contributing to social and economic well-being. According to the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), in 2022, the IRS recognized 60,500 trade and professional associations, generating \$116 billion in revenue and supporting a \$20 billion payroll.

However, the landscape for associations has dramatically shifted in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturns, and social and political shifts have necessitated rapid adaptation. Meanwhile, emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), are beginning to reshape the ways associations operate and engage with their members. As associations navigate these changes, opportunities continue to emerge for redefining their role, enhancing member experiences, fostering deeper connections, and expanding professional development offerings.

Despite these external pressures, our research shows many associations are getting it right.

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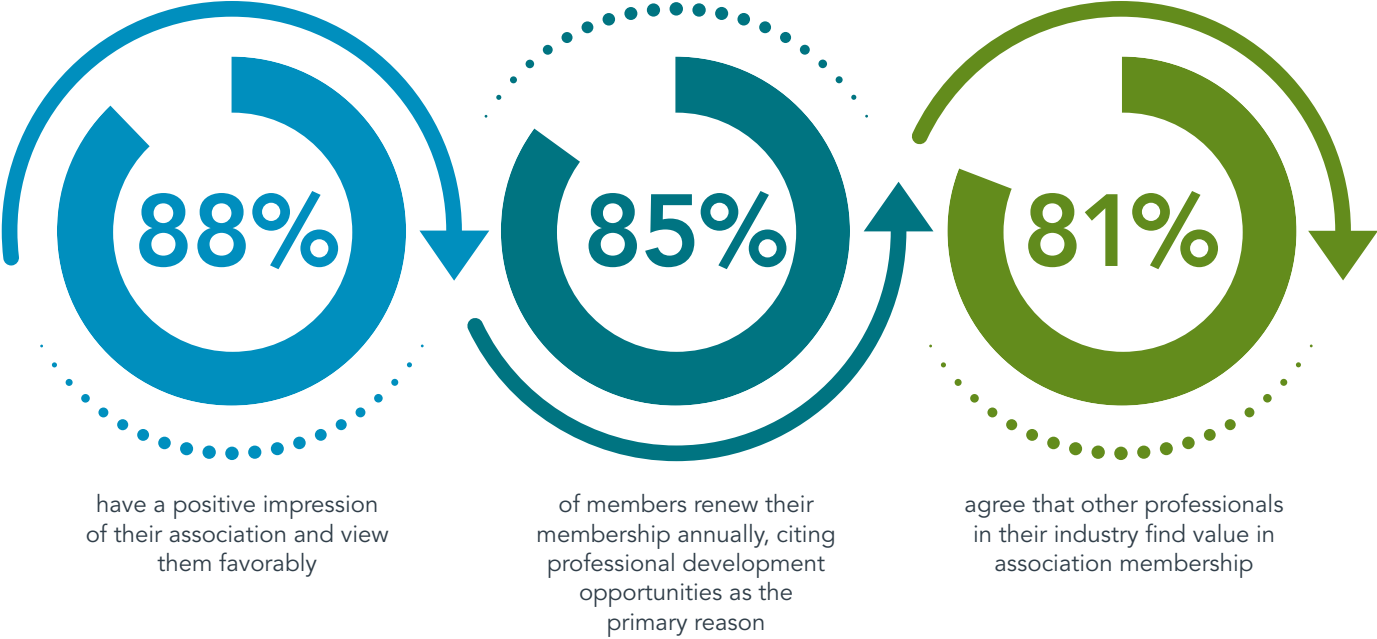


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Associations remain vital forces driving progress across industries and professions.

Recent research commissioned by Smithbucklin, surveying over 400 association members across various demographics and types of associations, finds that associations are largely exceeding members’ needs and expectations.

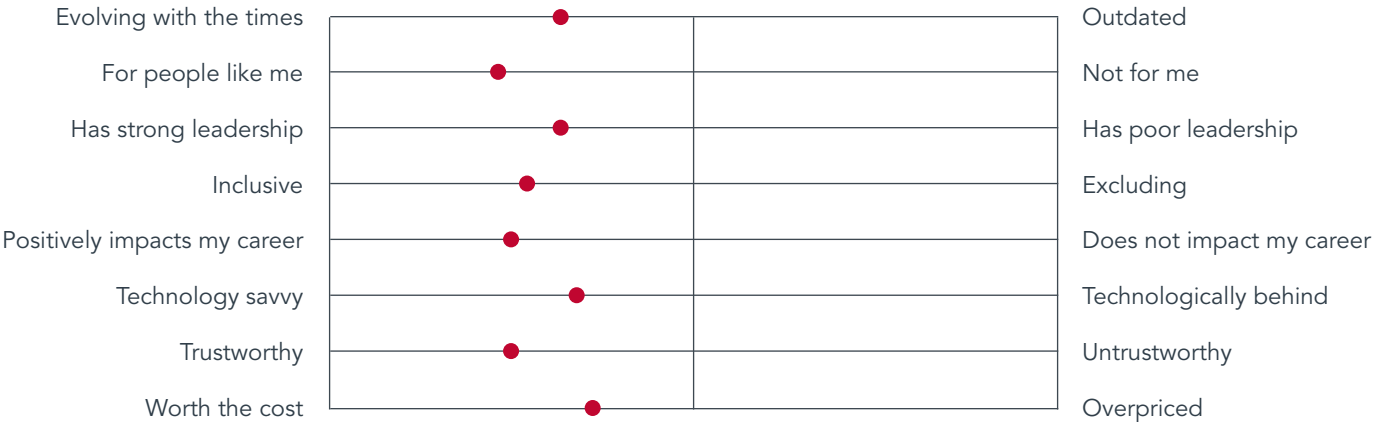
In fact, **88% of members have a positive view of their association, and 81% believe their peers value association membership.** Members place a high value on professional development, with **85% saying they are likely to renew their annual membership** to take advantage of these opportunities. Moreover, three-quarters of members agree that their associations actively support their personal career growth.



When describing their association, professionals use positive attributes – referring to them as “for people like me,” “trustworthy,” and “positively impacts my career.”

These findings underscore the essential roles that associations play—not just as guardians of industry standards and professional ethics, but also as dynamic hubs for career development, networking, and continuous learning.

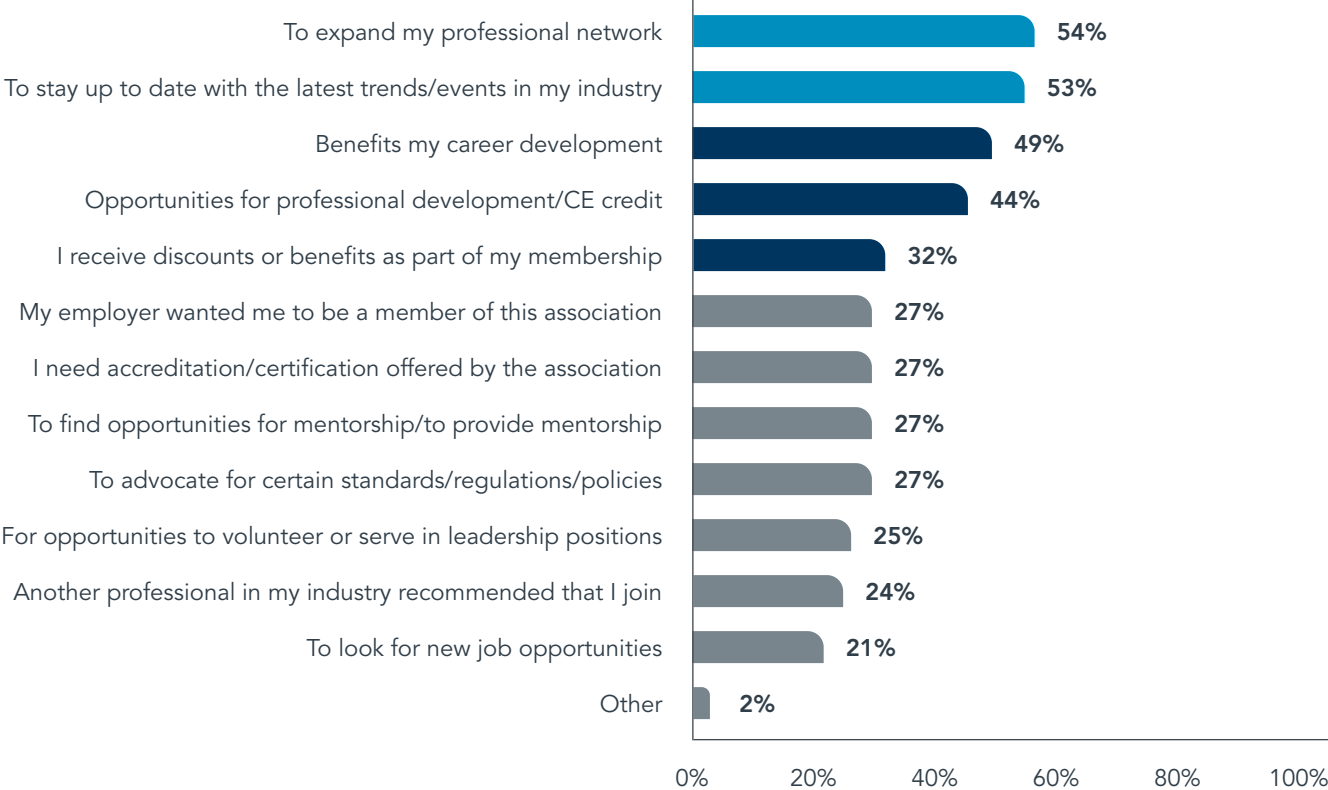
How People Describe Their Associations



Associations as an engine for career growth

Associations serve as vital hubs for education and community, offering members unparalleled resources for networking, learning, and career advancement. **Notably, 54% of members join to expand their professional networks, while 53% seek to stay aware of industry developments.** Nearly half (49%) are driven by the desire to advance their careers through professional development, with 44% specifically seeking continuing education (CE) credits in industries where CE credits are offered.

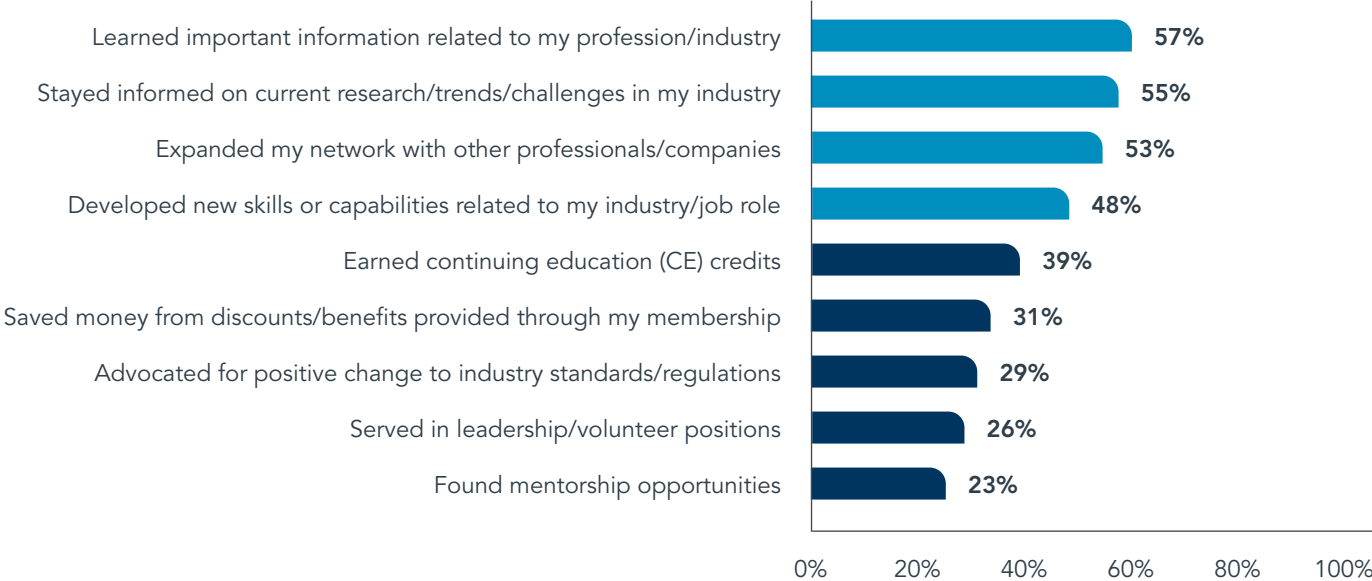
Career Reasons for Joining an Association



Members' commitment to professional growth is evident—many are willing to pay extra for educational opportunities beyond their membership fees. Professional development ranks as one of the most utilized benefits, with 58% of members actively engaging in the learning opportunities provided by their associations.

The impact of career growth is undeniable: nearly all professionals believe they are more successful in their careers because of their membership. They view learning important information related to their industry (57%), staying informed on current industry events (55%), expanding their network (53%), and developing new job skills (48%) as key benefits. This data underscores the transformative role associations play in shaping professional journeys and driving success.

Benefits of Association Membership Towards Career Success

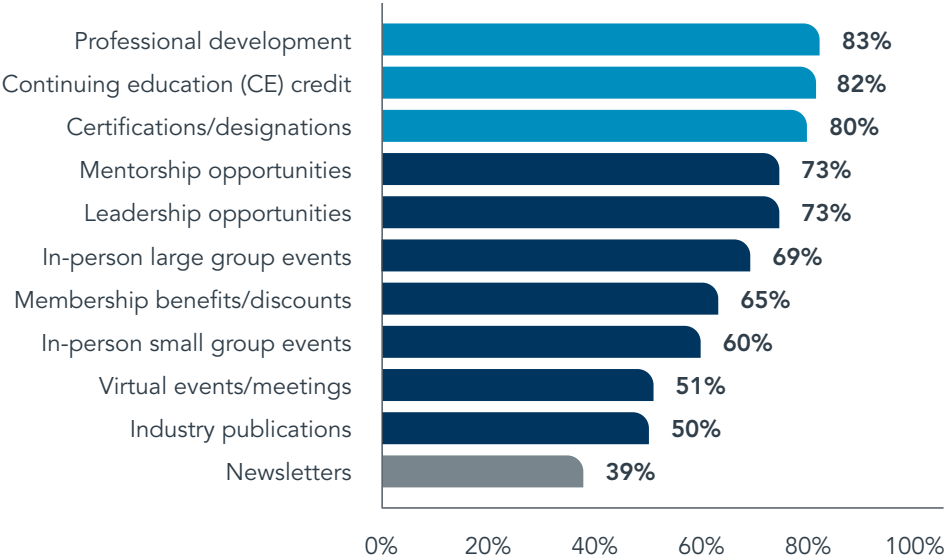


Early career professionals find the most value in professional development, continuing education (CE) credits, and certification/accreditation programs.



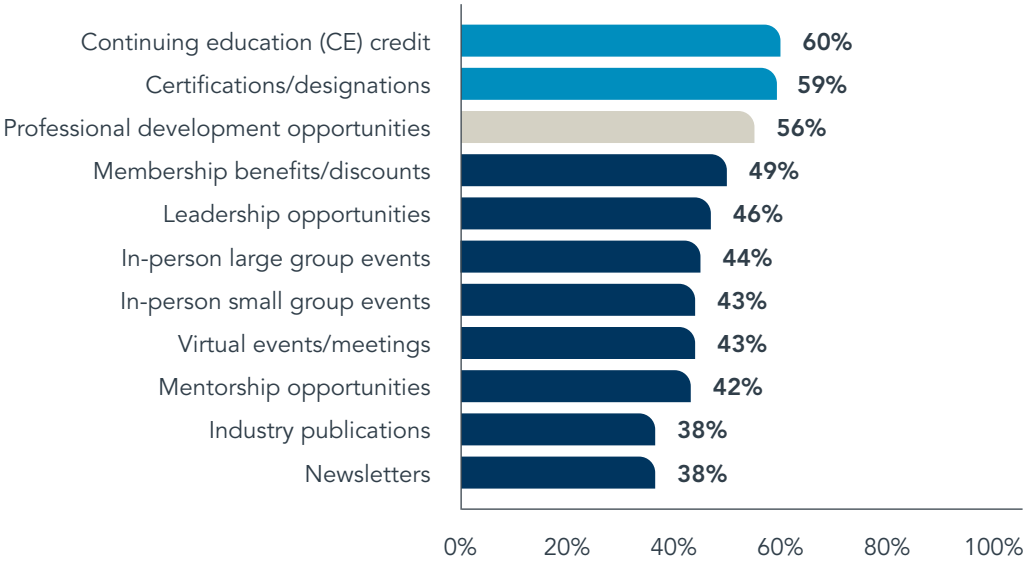
Once they join, members place the highest value on tangible offerings like **professional development (83%), continuing education credits (82%), and certifications/designations (80%)**. These benefits are considered the **most valuable part of association memberships**, with more than two-thirds of members expecting their associations to provide them.

Value of Offerings



Members are also willing to invest beyond their regular dues, **with 60% willing to pay for CE credits, 59% for certifications/designations, and 56% for professional development opportunities**—illustrating the demand for career-enhancing benefits that drive individual and industry advancement. Certification programs, in particular, align closely with the mission and purpose of many associations, serving as powerful tools to elevate both the profession and the practitioners within it. By offering certifications that uphold industry standards, associations solidify their role as leaders in advancing their fields while meeting members’ needs for continuous growth.

Willingness to Pay for Offerings Outside of Membership

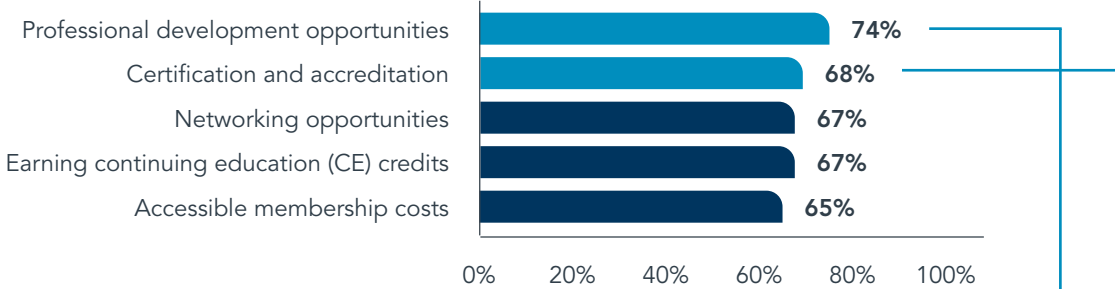


Early career, big ambitions

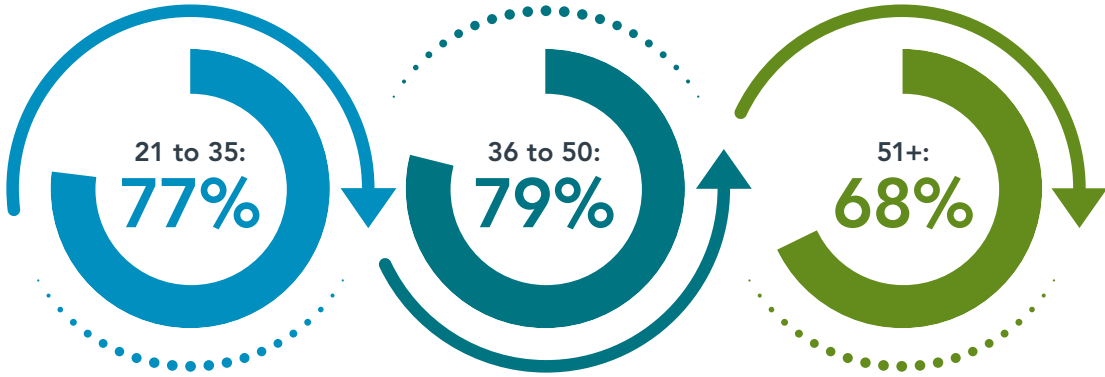
Of note in this area is that **early-career members place an even higher value on professional development (77%) and certification and accreditation (73%), compared to their late-career counterparts.** While networking and staying current with industry trends are key motivators, early-career professionals find the most value in professional development, continuing education (CE) credits, and certification/accreditation programs.

These resources are pivotal in attracting and retaining early and mid-career members, who are eager to advance and more inclined to invest in professional development opportunities beyond their current membership fees. In contrast, late-career professionals tend to prioritize these opportunities less.

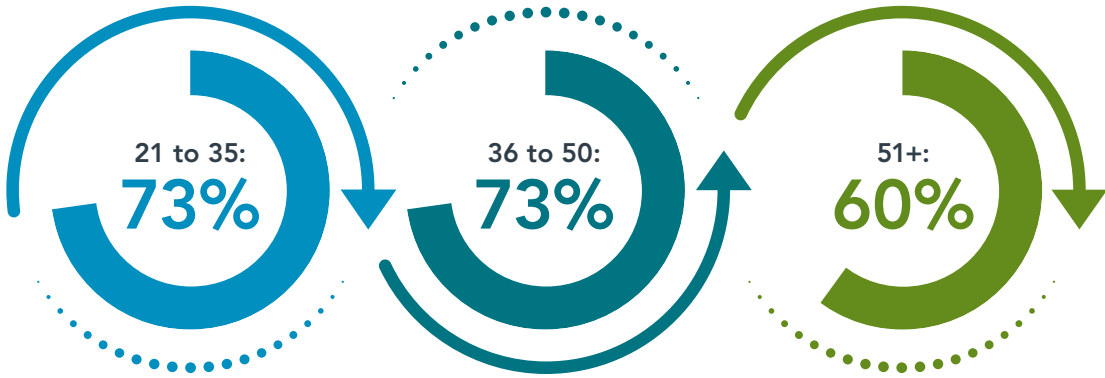
Importance of Association Offerings



Professional development opportunities by age group



Certification and accreditation by age group



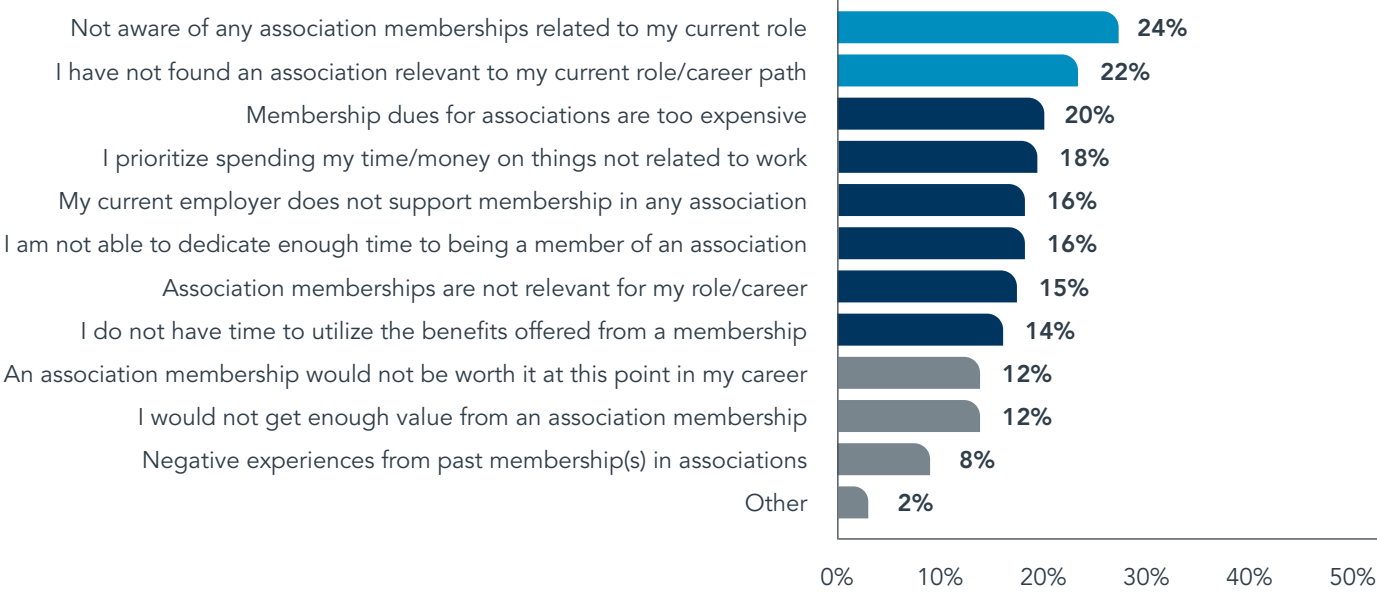
Opportunities to break down barriers to reach non-members

The survey respondents to this study were individuals who are currently members of an association. However, a second data set of non-members of whom we asked an abbreviated set of questions provided some insights into the barrier to people joining an association.

The primary obstacle to membership is a lack of awareness about relevant associations. Nearly a quarter of professionals surveyed (24%) are unaware of associations related to their current role or industry, and 22% have not found a relevant association for their career path. The most compelling motivator for non-members to join is discovering an association aligned with their current role or industry (33%).

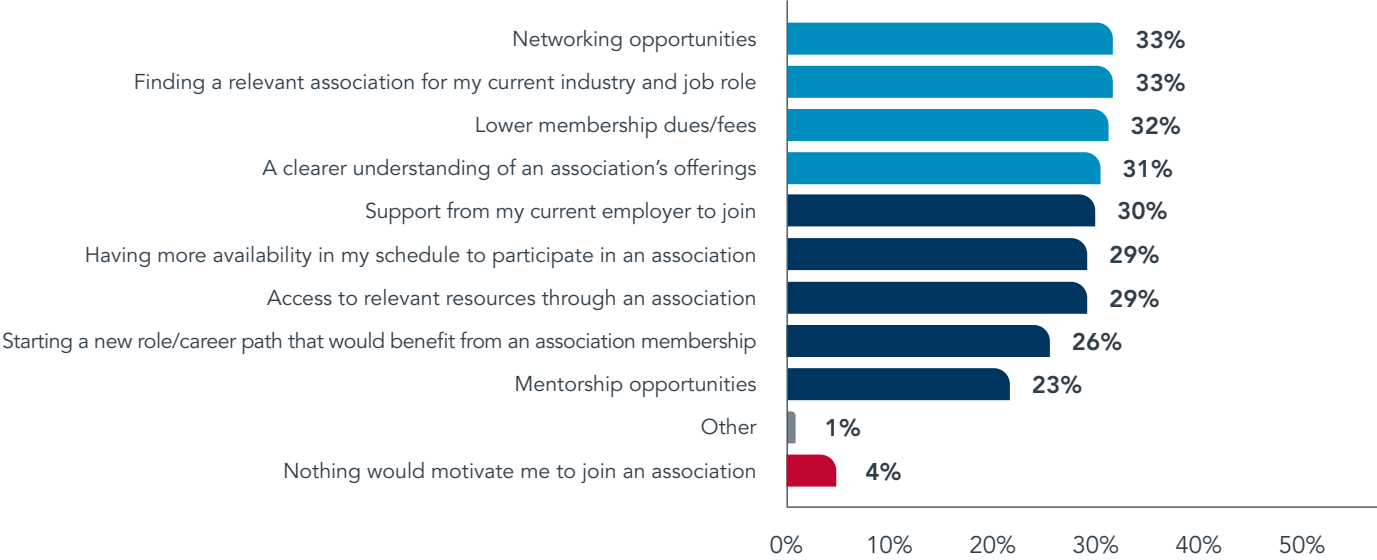
Resource limitations also pose significant barriers. Twenty percent find membership fees too expensive, 14% lack the time to fully utilize membership benefits, and 12% question the value of membership.

Reasons for Not Having an Association Membership



Despite these challenges, the potential for growth is substantial, **with only 4% of professionals stating that nothing would motivate them to join an association.** By addressing awareness and resource concerns, associations can tap into this unrealized membership potential.

Motivations to Join Association in the Future



Despite these challenges, the potential for growth is substantial, with only 4% of professionals stating that nothing would motivate them to join an association.



Four fundamentals to show your association is addressing member needs

The following four fundamentals are key to building on what we know to be the needs and expectations of association members today.

1) Emphasize Career Growth to Attract New Members

Career growth is one of the most valued outcomes of association membership. To attract new members, showcase the real-life success stories of your existing members. Here's how you can effectively tell these stories to draw in new members:

- Assess career impact of membership in your association:** Consider conducting a survey on member career growth, highlighting statistics like "85% of our members report career advancement within two years." Share stories with members and prospective members through marketing materials, your website, and social media.
- Promote transformational experiences:** Highlight stories and share testimonials from members who have advanced their skills, expanded their networks, or gained access to exclusive opportunities. Beyond promotions, focus on achievements such as leading high-profile projects, earning certifications, or contributing to industry advancements.
- Highlight mentorship opportunities:** Showcase the value of mentorship programs in marketing efforts by showing relationships built through mentorship. Emphasize how these programs help members build confidence, navigate career challenges, and achieve their goals. Leverage technology to facilitate these connections through online platforms, making it easier for members.

Increasing membership through marketing educational offerings



INTERNATIONAL NURSING ASSOCIATION for
CLINICAL SIMULATION and LEARNING

Working with Smithbucklin, INACSL's volunteer membership committee set out to create a plan to enhance the organization's awareness and interest, grow membership, and support member renewals. Considerations included promoting specific educational products to launching institutional pricing for education products. Plus, the importance of engaging international members was recognized as pivotal for growth.

The International Nursing Association for Clinical Simulation and Learning (INACSL) wanted to expand its membership.

The result?

- With this feedback, INACSL and Smithbucklin reshaped the association's messaging platform to accentuate INACSL's value to simulationists. New resources, such as marketing kits, a print-on-demand brochure, and social media and e-mail marketing campaigns, were designed to reach new audiences, including international members.
- As a result of its work to redesign its marketing and communications, INACSL saw a 16% membership increase in less than two years, demonstrating the power of effective communication and targeted member engagement efforts.

Showcasing the success of members can help to attract new ones to an association.

2) Create Tailored Professional Development and Networking Opportunities

To remain indispensable, associations must continually refine their educational and networking offerings to meet evolving member needs. To do that, associations can regularly collect member feedback to understand their educational needs and preferences. Collect demographic data, including geographic location, age, career stage, gender identity, and race and ethnicity, to shape programs to “meet people where they are” and update and expand offerings in real-time, ensuring relevance and value. Here are some considerations:

- **Create persona-based learning paths:** With a multi-generational workforce that consumes information differently and has varying career goals and engagement behaviors, it’s essential for associations to define their target audience and tailor learning accordingly. Survey findings show members value professional development but have diverse needs. Associations can enhance engagement by creating persona-based learning paths tailored to career goals, learning styles, and aspirations, meeting members where they are for greater impact and satisfaction.
- **Consider more “micro” opportunities:** Provide short, focused micro-courses and bite-sized video tutorials ideal for busy professionals. Tease select content for non-members, while offering full access and micro-credentialing exclusively to members. This not only supports flexible learning, but also incentivizes membership with tangible, career-enhancing benefits. Micro-credentialing gives members the opportunity to earn small, specialized certifications that recognize specific skills, knowledge, or competencies.
- **Offer professional coaching:** Some organizations are expanding upon mentorship programs and bringing in professional coaches for members. Coaches can offer one-on-one coaching sessions tailored to an individual member’s needs in areas such as career advancement and leadership. Coaches may also offer group sessions or workshops on topics such as navigating change, effective communication, and managing teams.
- **Facilitate tailored networking opportunities:** Members value being able to spend time with people at the same career stage or who have other lived experiences. Consider developing groups for early career professionals, women, and members of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities. These dedicated spaces allow members to connect with peers who share similar experiences, fostering open dialogue about relevant issues and opportunities. Plus, they help to build membership and engagement. For example, BISA, a leading financial services industry association, added a Women’s Networking Luncheon to its annual conference, which has grown in popularity and size over the



years. It is also credited for drawing more women to attend the conference overall. What's more, the organization's *Black Voices Unmuted* member community is not only serving to raise awareness of issues of diversity in banking but also drawing a more diverse set of members to the profession.

- **Create Body of Knowledge programs:** Created to define essential skills, domains, competencies, and behavior traits necessary for success in

various fields, professions, and industries, Body of Knowledge programs serve as way for association professionals seeking to improve their skills and knowledge at every level. By creating these programs, associations can deliver more personalized value, foster deeper member engagement, and position themselves as essential career partners.

Body of Knowledge reaches learners at all levels



The Legal Marketing Association (LMA) created and launched its Body of Knowledge in 2014, after identifying

the need for more professional development pathways in the legal marketing and business development profession. Working with an advisory council, education director, legal marketing experts, and Smithbucklin leadership, LMA identified domains of expertise such as business development, business of law, client services, communications, marketing management and leadership, and technology management. These domains further define unique competencies and necessary skills, making the Body of Knowledge program an invaluable guide for self-assessment, growth, recruitment, and team management.

Access to these Body of Knowledge programs is an exclusive member benefit and its utility extends beyond personal development by supporting tasks like employee assessment, writing job descriptions, onboarding, team management, and more. Members have complimentary digital access and print copies can be purchased. Supplemental resources, like a Body of Knowledge Assessment Tool and Competency Analysis Tool, provide ways to assess knowledge levels and identify areas for further development.

Since the program launched aligning education resources with professional growth milestones, LMA has seen increased engagement, higher satisfaction rates, and stronger member retention.

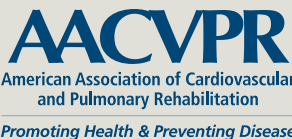
Body of Knowledge programs serve as a way for association professionals seeking to improve their skills and knowledge at every level.

3) Leverage Technology to Enhance Engagement

In today's fast-paced digital world, associations must adopt technology that supports positive member experience and engagement.

- Select technology platforms based on real usage:** With mobile devices in nearly everyone's hands these days, it may be tempting to put everything on a mobile app. While that may serve some organizations, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Consider looking at membership data and demographics to better understand how members wish to consume materials and emphasize the channels (mobile, web, learning apps) they prefer. Digital analytics from your association website and social media accounts are also filled with insights into what content and resources are most popular with your members. Adjust—and even test pilot—offerings based on data to ensure continued relevance.
- Leverage online communities and virtual peer networking:** Integrating tailored professional development and networking opportunities is a dynamic, value-adding entity. It shows you understand the evolving needs of members and adapt to meeting them. This can include video-based networking events where members can connect in real time through icebreaker activities, member-led discussions, or moderated Q&As with industry thought leaders. You might also consider complementing these meetups with ongoing, member-only discussion forums in an online community portal or app. Members can continue to collaborate by posting questions, sharing resources, or revisiting key takeaways from the live sessions.

Driving connection and discussion online



The American Association of Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Rehabilitation (AACVPR) has had an

online member community for many years through the Higher Logic platform, and it was used informally by its affiliate societies. In 2020, the organization revamped and relaunched the online community as AACVPR Central, complete with a robust discussion forum known as The Pulse and a resource library.

The Pulse is designed for peers to share, seek, and learn clinical advice and best practices from one another and discuss other programmatic topics.

Since the relaunch in 2020, The Pulse has over 5,700 discussion threads from 3,200 members. It's highly active and receives an average of 12 new threads each week, ranging from asking for advice on a patient to how to run a cancer exercise program. The Pulse is regularly rated as one of the most valuable AACVPR member benefits.



4) Get to the Heart of What Your Members Really Value

This research shows that members place high value on networking opportunities, the ability to stay ahead of industry trends, and boosting their professional growth through learning, including earning continuing education (CE) credits, certifications, and understanding industry standards and regulations. To elevate member satisfaction, you must go deeper into understanding the unique needs and expectations of your members.

Hearing directly from your members is the best way to evaluate how well you are meeting their needs, uncover opportunities to enhance your offerings, and how to elevate member experience.

Feedback mechanisms should align with your strategic plan, ensuring that the questions you ask not only assess current satisfaction but also test new ideas and drive strategic priorities. You will likely find that members are eager to offer their feedback to you. You can also boost member participation by making the process appealing and rewarding. Offer incentives, such as early access to new resources and events, exclusive content, or professional development perks, to encourage participation.

Additionally, take an evaluative approach to membership and programs to measure impact and guide future decisions. Consider the following:

- **Surveys:** Conduct regular, confidential surveys via email to assess satisfaction across events, resources, and overall value. Ensure questions are tied to your strategic goals and use the feedback to make visible improvements. Also, consider short online “pop-up” surveys for instant feedback on new ideas or initiatives.
- **Focus groups:** Host small, interactive focus groups where members can share insights and brainstorm solutions. Align topics with strategic priorities to uncover actionable opportunities for engagement and growth.
- **One-on-one interviews:** Engage with key members through confidential interviews. These conversations can provide deep, nuanced insights into member expectations while testing concepts tied to your strategic plan.
- **Report on findings:** After gathering this feedback, you can also share success stories to highlight how member feedback has driven substantial change. This shows the tangible value of member input and emphasizes how their unique perspectives contribute to your association's goals.

The best way to know what members want? Ask them.



The National Demolition Association's (NDA) Southern California

Chapter has been a cornerstone of the organization for 45 years. Its success is attributed to its model for local networking. In 2023, NDA wanted to replicate the chapter creation process through re-evaluating member needs. Together, NDA and Smithbucklin developed surveys to identify new benefits for potential chapters.

Primary insights from member surveys revealed a high value placed on in-person networking amongst demolition and construction professionals. Following successful local networking experiences from the Southern California Chapter, NDA created the Florida and Michigan Chapters with a focus on social engagement and educational opportunities.

To encourage member engagement, NDA did not charge additional membership dues for chapter participation. Instead, it opted for event fees and scholarships to be funded by members.

NDA allowed these chapters to offer unique experiences and benefits, fostering a more personalized approach to member engagement.

The local chapters' establishment significantly increased member engagement, and additional scholarship revenue was generated in the first six months. Today, NDA members in Texas, Colorado, and New England are eager to launch a local chapter in their regions. This underscores the importance of an established and effective member recruitment strategy to grow your association and drive impact.

Closing

Associations are addressing member needs amid a changing landscape by focusing on member value, offering personalized learning, and facilitating connections. With these strategies, associations can grow, remain relevant, and **positively impact members, industries, and society**.

Methodology

This research surveyed 402 working professionals in the United States who are current association members to explore their perceptions of and attitudes toward professional and trade associations. The online survey, conducted by Hanover Research, examined key factors influencing membership, including the value professionals derive from associations, barriers to engagement, and motivations for continued participation. Respondents were aged 21 and older, employed full-time, part-time, or self-employed, and represented a balanced mix of age cohorts (21–35, 36–50, and 51+) as well as individual and company-sponsored membership types.

In addition to the primary survey group, 1,381 professionals who are not currently members of an association were asked an abbreviated set of questions to provide some insights into the barriers people have to joining an association. Their responses provide complementary insights into the factors influencing non-membership.


The survey's design prioritized data quality and representativeness, employing rigorous cleaning and validation procedures. The findings have a margin of error of $\pm 4.9\%$ for association members, $\pm 2.6\%$ for non-members, and $\pm 2.3\%$ for the total sample at a 95% confidence level.

About Smithbucklin

Smithbucklin is a leading professional services company serving non-profits and industry associations. Through full-service management, meetings, sales, and strategic marketing solutions, we unlock the power of human networks that move every industry, field, and profession forward.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following key contributors: Steve Biernacki, Peter Finn, Denis Janis, Adam Swietek, and Stephanie Yanecek.



Together we unlock the power of human networks that move every industry, field, and profession forward.™



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Let's Grow!

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