



Next-Generation Professional Development **Expanding Program Impact through Technology**

Member education and professional development are core services of most associations. And they should be — developing current and future leaders is an invaluable service that associations are well positioned to provide. But new technologies are paving the way for approaches that may disrupt the business-as-usual approach. An emerging group of innovators are embracing new models that elevate the impact of existing programs, increase member satisfaction, and create new revenue models in the process. Here's what they're doing.

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Contrary to its title, this article isn't about technology.

The last thing you need to read right now is an article from two software executives on the technology of discussion boards or e-mail lists or Webcast tools or any other tool.

This article is about what really matters when it comes to technology: the transformative impact that technology can have on advancing an organization's educational programs and business goals. To understand this impact, it's important to understand the different ways that technologies can be used. And to understand what's possible, you need to look to the industry's innovators, at the individuals and the organizations that are pushing the boundaries. We've compiled a few examples, but they're really just the tip of the iceberg — everywhere you turn you see new and exciting uses of technology.

Leading by Example

When the American Public Transportation Association's (APTA) human resources committee decided to conduct a virtual town hall meeting, Joe Niegoski knew he was creating a new model for his association, not to mention for his members. As director of educational services at APTA, an association serving the needs and interests of the \$37 billion a year public transportation industry in North America with approximately 1,500 organizations as members, Niegoski knew he had to go beyond providing simply another Webcast. He still needed to provide new information and content to members, but he also recognized that peer-to-peer networking, best-practices sharing, and collaboration were equally, if not more, important.

With continued support from APTA's human resources committee, Niegoski transformed the vision into reality. An online event with various activities that spanned a two-week period, APTA's virtual town hall meeting blended prerecorded, streaming PowerPoint presentations; team breakout rooms; real-time Web conferences with industry experts; and member networking opportunities. Key leaders from APTA's human resources committee and member organizations served as moderators and presenters, lending credibility to, contributing content to, and creating buzz

for the event. With the exception of a few prescheduled live Web conferences, participants could attend at their own pace, from anywhere and at any time.

The virtual town hall, says Niegoski, was "an easy way for members to find the time to share, communicate, and reflect together on key topics in our industry." APTA member organizations selected delegates to participate, giving them access to a secure, collaborative Web site. The online space enabled members to create personal networking profiles, discuss a range of topics, share best practices, and make new connections with industry thought leaders and members of other member organizations (to view the actual online overview presentation that was provided to the virtual town hall attendees, visit <http://www.conferences.icohere.com/presentations/apta/aptaoverview5/player.html>).

According to Pam Boswell, vice president of APTA's program management and educational services division, "the virtual town hall represents APTA's next-generation approach for member education and leadership development." Boswell says because the approach brings together member organizations from around the country, it helps move the industry forward through collective problem solving and collaboration.

A Growing Trend

APTA isn't the only organization that is breaking new ground in applying technology to professional development. More and more associations, nonprofits, and educational institutions are embracing online technology in service of individual- and group-development activities.

Online events and programs have many obvious advantages, including lower overhead and financial exposure, options for participants to attend at their own schedules, the ability to expand the potential pool of participants beyond those who can afford the time and cost of attending a face-to-face meeting, and others. APTA's Niegoski is the first to admit that online interactions aren't meant to entirely replace face-to-face development opportunities. But the fundamental premise behind APTA's new model addresses a growing belief: that education and training professionals can enable development through online technologies by providing more than just

talking-head Webinars, and this can be achieved by giving members structured opportunities to connect, collaborate, learn from, and build relationships with both experts and peers.

Part of this trend is due to the growing recognition that the "expert model" so widely applied to professional development has its limits. For example, according to the Institute for Research on Learning, 70 percent of what people need to know to be successful in their jobs is learned outside of formal training and development — at the water cooler, from informal mentors, from peers, and through practical experience. This informal learning results in what those in the knowledge management world call "tacit knowledge," knowledge that resides in people's heads and isn't readily accessible through formal presentations, training materials, courses, documentation, or other means.

Tacit knowledge results from "informal" social interactions. Many of those involved in next-generation education and professional development initiatives focus on facilitating what on the surface seems to be a paradox — creating a formal structure to foster *informal* communication, interaction, and collaboration.

Next-Generation Applications

In 1919, sociologist Daniel Bell said, "Technology, like art, is a soaring exercise of the human imagination." Today's innovators are applying technology in ways that are now — because of the flexibility of today's online tools — only constrained by the creativity of their facilitators.

Beyond fostering both structured and less formal interactions between participants, these new approaches share a number of characteristics that benefit both the participants and the providers of the education and development programs, including the ability to

- Connect people together across a community, organization, or broader system who might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact, either as frequently or at all;
- Provide an expansive, shared context for people to communicate and share information, stories, and personal experiences in a way that builds understanding and insight and, as a result, creates or deepens respect and

appreciation for diverse opinions, capabilities, and perspectives;

- Enable dialogue between people who come together to explore new possibilities, solve challenging problems, and create new, mutually beneficial opportunities;
- Introduce collaborative processes to groups and organizations where existing structures and constraints inhibit the free flow of ideas and exchange of information;
- Stimulate self-reflection through serving as a vehicle for authentic communication, mentoring, and coaching;
- Capture and diffuse new knowledge that expands awareness of a larger system of possibilities and advances the development of an individual, group, organization, or industry;
- Help people organize around purposeful actions that enable and expand the flow of ideas, feeling, and energy into a changing world.

With the Internet, global dialogue, learning, and collaboration become possible across time zones and social, eco-

nomic, political, and cultural divides. When used in the service of individual and group development, technology becomes a natural support system for the very interventions that educators, trainers, and facilitators use every day.

We see four application areas for next-generation professional development:

- Virtual town hall meetings;
- Online conferences;
- Online workshops;
- Communities of practice.

To various degrees, each of these applications emphasizes the characteristics noted above. And each potentially represents a new model for delivering a value-added development to members while either reducing the cost of the delivery or creating an entirely new revenue stream for the sponsoring organization.

Virtual Town Hall Meetings

Virtual town hall meetings provide the opportunity to blend face-to-face meetings with member organization or cross-chapter online collaboration. Individual chapters, for example, assemble dele-

gates who begin by making personal introductions through a secure Web site. Prerecorded presentations on a variety of themes are available online and, once viewed, individuals have the opportunity to post comments or ask questions.

Each chapter also organizes several face-to-face meetings of its participants, during which time the groups participate in a live teleconference or Webcast where they hear a formal presentation from an expert in the field. These live “integration points” allow participants to engage in the town hall as a defined cohort so they experience the benefits of in-person dialogue; at the same time, this cohort works together in the context of a larger community effort with individuals being able to follow up and discuss a variety of topics with other individuals across chapters through the secure Web site.

Online Conferences

Earlier this year, the American Society of Association Executives’ international section conducted its Associations Make a Better World conference online. Because

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of the significant challenges involved with coordinating international meetings — including travel costs, time investment, and conflicting schedules — ASAE chose to replicate the experience of a traditional conference as closely as possible, while leveraging the advantages of technology. Members and nonmembers from numer-

ous countries registered for the event through ASAE's Web site, just like they would for any other meeting. But unlike a traditional conference, the 175 attendees were provided with an ID and password that allowed for participation over three days in an online learning community.

Many associations already conduct

Webcasts or Web conferences, one-hour events in which an expert makes a presentation and answers questions at the end through online chat or teleconference. While these events help share content, they do not provide opportunities for true peer-to-peer learning. When facilitated artfully, online conferences allow attendees to obtain compelling content from presenters, but they also can get questions answered, network with other attendees, and share practical resources and information. To support all this, for example, ASAE configured an online environment that included prerecorded PowerPoint presentations linked to discussion boards and live chat sessions to allow for group dialogue. Just as with traditional conferences, online conferences enable professional development when attendees engage “in the hallways” with presenters and other attendees.

Online Workshops

The American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) recently decided to develop a series of workshops focused on developing the



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business skills of its members. The choices for these workshops seemed clear: Conduct a Webcast or develop self-paced e-learning modules. What AIC settled on, however, was far different from these more static, purely content-focused models. Riding the wave started by online universities such as the University of Phoenix and others, AIC elected to create a series of three-week, facilitated, online workshops.

Online workshops are a vehicle for members to participate in structured development led by a content expert over a period of time. Just as in a traditional course, reading materials and other information are provided as background. In addition, because workshops are typically delivered over a period of weeks, participants can get to know each other through online discussions, chat meetings, and teleconferences. At AIC, an online facilitator partners with the content expert to structure questions and activities that encourage peer-to-peer sharing and mentoring.

Communities of Practice

While virtual town hall meetings, online conferences, and online workshops represent events with relatively short life spans, a community of practice (CoP) represents a group of people who possess a longer-term interest in sharing, learning about, and advancing a specific domain of knowledge. According to the American Productivity and Quality Center, CoPs “are groups of people who come together to share and to learn from one another face-to-face and virtually. They are held together by a common interest in a body of knowledge and are driven by a desire and need to share problems, experiences, insights, templates, tools, and best practices.”

Educause, one of the largest associations focused on technology in higher education, established a community of practice called the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (NLII). Focused on how leading-edge technology can be used to transform teaching and learning, NLII created an online community of practice to support its goals. Like online conferences and workshops, NLII’s online environment combines opportunities for formal learning through live and recorded presentations. But it also is a place to work; the facilitators of the community create struc-

ture activities through online discussions, chat meetings, and teleconferences in which members collaborate to create new models, tools, templates, and other deliverables that can be used by fellow community members in their everyday jobs. NLII’s community is not time-bound; the passion and desire of its members to collaborate together is persistent, and their online tools are vehicles for advancing their field.

Looking Ahead

Professional development is a core offering that is here to stay. But the delivery method that educational and development programs take is rapidly changing. The innovators are just now forging new models such as virtual town hall meetings, online conferences, online workshops, and communities of practice. Opportunities now exist to further push the boundaries of our approaches by using a variety of technologies and tools to support our processes and business goals.

Technology now enables more than just the dissemination of content. It is now possible to foster real relationships over large distances and enable the kind

of connections that tap into the experience, know how, and wisdom that can only emerge through collaborative interactions. Just as important, these approaches allow associations to address the challenges related to geographically diverse chapters as well as the “downtime” between face-to-face meetings. By doing this, associations can take online education and professional development to the next level, greatly expanding the impact of their programs and creating new value for their organizations in the process. **X**

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