



Why Associations Need to Invest in Professional Development

A recent study shows that members are looking for education in a variety of ways. Associations need to do more to provide it.

Associations Now | Mark Athitakis | October 24, 2025

Association members still place a lot of value on their association and feel a lot of loyalty to it. But as with so much these days, it's best not to take it for granted.

Momentive Software's new survey, *Bridging the Gap*, sees a lot of positives in associations' relationships with their members. As I wrote in a story about the preview of the study, members give high satisfaction ratings and a strong majority intends to renew.

But it's worth drilling into one element of the survey that highlights a structural and technological shortcoming that associations need to consider. The report, based on a survey of 1,000 members and 200 staff professionals, shows that associations are offering less professional development than members desire, in fewer ways.

As the report puts it: "Association professionals are still missing what their members want most—career advancement support. While nearly half of members say job opportunities and

career development are ‘very important,’ fewer than 1 in 4 association Pros recognize this priority.”

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That disconnect reveals itself in the that associations currently deliver professional development. There’s a 35-point gap between members who desire short videos and associations that provide them, and a 41-point gap between those who want recommended learning paths and those that provide them.

To be sure, there’s still a fair amount of consensus: Both members and associations are in alignment around the value of multiday conferences and live webinars. But at a time when members crave flexible options, associations are playing it more conservatively, favoring the areas where attendance, tradeshow, and sponsorship revenue most readily overlaps with members’ educational needs.

This risks becoming unsustainable for associations who, in disrupted times, are looking for products and services that support their careers. As the report puts it: “Members place dramatically higher importance on job opportunities and career advancement than professionals recognize—gaps that have persisted year after year despite being recurring themes in member feedback.”

This challenge will likely grow even more acute as younger members with different expectations about learning content enter the workforce—and question whether a membership association is the go-to source for their learning. The report advises that associations develop a wider variety of education options: stackable microcredentials, “learning pods” on trending topics, more bite-sized learning, more on-demand content.

This will require a bigger shift for some associations than others. Many professional societies with complex processes for an official certification will have to determine how to get away from book-learning and in-person education. Others can make the leap more readily. But for the sake of preserving their member base, few can avoid rethinking what it means to provide the kind of education members need when they need it.

Associations have done much to earn their members’ loyalty, and to be fair, many are doing the necessary work: nearly 70 percent of professionals in the survey say they’re very likely to integrate video-based and on-demand formats in the coming year. But keeping it may require getting more comfortable with what those members need, not just what they’ve been provided with.