

# Emerging Leaders of Gaming Program – Retrospective on a Vision

*by Michael Soll, President, The Innovation Group*

## **The Idea**

Emerging Leaders of Gaming™ (ELG) was formed by The Innovation Group in 2012 as a means of giving young professionals a domicile for collaboration and shared experience, and an extra advantage in the already competitive gaming industry. The program relies on grass-roots action by its participants to foster dialogue on industry trends, innovation and governance through the lens of a new generation of professionals. The Innovation Group's collaboration with the American Gaming Association (AGA), Global Gaming Business (GGB), Reed Exhibitions and countless gaming operators over the last five years has helped broaden the program's reach and impact.

When ELG launched, nominees were selected by a small group of industry stakeholders and then granted access to the array of resources and connections that The Innovation Group has been building for more than 25 years. That year, The Innovation Group also hosted the first Emerging Leaders networking event at Global Gaming Expo (G2E). In 2013, The Innovation Group and G2E joined forces to expand the opportunity, and GGB magazine launched its "40 Under 40" series. A formal nomination process dawned as The Innovation Group and G2E hosted the inaugural ELG Scholarship program and provided additional networking and career advancement opportunities that brought emerging leaders closer to senior-level professionals.

The ELG vision has been organic, and led by The Innovation Group's own young professionals with their counterparts in operations, marketing, development, Native American enterprises and the most recently added segment, data analytics. The goals remain simple:

- Expand interaction among younger leaders in the gaming industry
- Foster productive professional relationships between emerging leaders
- Channel content to feed the forums in which leaders interact
- Provide networking opportunities at industry events and conferences
- Recognize the notable contributions of emerging leaders

## **The Leadership (R)Evolution**

As industries go, the gaming industry is still young. Its first generation of leadership is just now looking back at over two decades of experience – half a professional generation – and seeing those they have mentored begin to thrive. Our early leaders had the difficult task of building legitimacy, maintaining responsibility, and promoting advancement in design, breadth of offering, and marketing strategies. These feats were accomplished by executives within legacy companies where leaders like Terry Lanni, Colin Reed, Steve Wynn and Stanley Ho led the way. There were also great leaders among Las Vegas family "locals" brands like Station Casinos, Binion's Horseshoe Casinos, Boyd Gaming, and Coast Casinos, and in the gaming equipment companies and their counterparts, as well as in the testing labs who reinforced innovation and accountability.

A secondary wave of leadership emerged during the regional market expansion of the 1990's and early 2000's, when over a dozen regional gaming companies arrived on the scene along with pari-mutuel operators and hundreds of Native American enterprises. Gaming in the U.S. and Canada was now led by many executives outside of the traditional casino industry. They came from high-ranking jobs in marketing, real estate and entertainment.

The footprint of these leaders has now yielded to a broader global platform of professionals involved in technical innovation, reinforcing the positioning of the gaming industry as entertainment versus vice. The accomplishments of early leadership have paved the way for the development of massive integrated resorts in Australia and Asia, and more understated industry expansion in Latin America and Europe. As internet, mobile and video gaming and traditional casino gaming converge, and our equipment and technology companies become gaming operators, the lessons of accountability have come full-circle to meet the needs of the industry's pioneers of today.

Today's emerging leaders are bringing their own generational nuance to the industry in a big way. Defining the relationship between players and technology, places and cyberspaces, and the utility of data and information are on their minds at every turn. Social responsibility is no longer a route to acceptance but a best practice. And forging communication between the generations of leaders is truly a work in progress.

### **The Future of Our Emerging Leaders Program**

Capturing the essence of gaming's first generational shift in leaders in today's world is what ELG is all about. As the industry's first generation of leaders increasingly turns to emerging leaders for strategic guidance and insights, a platform for thoughtful and targeted professional development is even more important than it was when the ELG program began. Together with our partners, ELG remains committed to providing such a platform. The ELG program is designed to foster further progress in the areas most important for today's leaders and their protégés: innovation and disruption, next generation customers, operational efficiencies, development, recruitment and corporate social responsibility. With a firm foundation to build upon, The Innovation Group hopes to continue its work to create opportunities for our industry's next generation of leaders to connect, engage and educate themselves about trends and successes in these areas. We will engage new voices from inside and outside of the industry; we will identify and advance trends before they emerge; and we will create new opportunities for the broader gaming industry to support and hear from this important class of individuals.

### **Chronology of Emerging Leaders of Gaming**

#### ***2012 - Emerging Leaders of Gaming™ is formed by The Innovation Group***

##### **G2E 2012 - First ELG Meeting:**

- A small meeting of industry leaders under the age of 40, marking the first opportunity for young members of the gaming and casino community to interact with peers instead of with superiors or elders in the industry
- That meeting spawned the formation of a database and a social media following on LinkedIn where members could connect online

**2013 – The Innovation Group Partners with Reed & AGA at G2E**

- Introduction of ELG scholarships
- the recognition of a small group of emerging leaders in the industry
- the creation of *Global Gaming Business* magazine's recurring feature, "40 Under 40", which highlights up-and-coming young leaders.

**2014 - Mentoring opportunities are introduced at G2E**

- "40 Under 40" leaders recognized
- Scholarships extended to emerging leaders who can't normally attend G2E
- Networking event sponsored by The Innovation Group/Reed/AGA
- Event includes mentoring opportunities for emerging leaders with lauded industry leaders in attendance

**2015 - 2017 – ELG launches webinars, expands to NIGA and G2E Asia**

- Recurring awards reception at G2E
- Networking events at NIGA San Diego & G2E Asia
- Featured emerging leaders in ELG newsletter
- Emerging leaders writing for ELG newsletter
- Launch of video webinars featuring expert panelists on gaming trends

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