

I WANT TO WORK IN AN ASSOCIATION

Now What???

A GUIDE TO GETTING A JOB IN A PROFESSIONAL
ASSOCIATION, MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATION, OR SOCIETY



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“I Want to Work in an Association— Now What???” Book Excerpt

A Guide to Getting a Job in a
Professional Association,
Membership Organization, or
Society

**By Charlotte Weeks,
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Foreword by Sheri Jacobs, CAE

Do you remember what you wanted to be when you grew up? If you were asked to think back to when you were in grade school, you might have responded by saying, "I want to be a vet, a teacher, or a professional baseball player." Most likely, you did not say, "I want to be an association professional."

When we were young we dreamt of pursuing our passions and helping others. We dreamed of traveling to far-off places and exploring new worlds. Our vision of what this may entail was based on our beliefs that anything and everything was possible—if you worked hard. Yet, our vision was also limited by what we saw on TV or our interactions with adults in our lives.

The one common trait among the answers given by children in response to the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up" is the feeling of pursuing something that is enjoyable and meaningful.

Although the association profession meets or exceeds all of these objectives, it is an accidental profession. In a random (and unscientific) survey of my colleagues, 100 percent stated they found their way to this profession by chance after working in corporate America or in another field altogether. Why is this the case? Because they lacked awareness of the opportunities and a roadmap for navigating the community.

Charlotte Weeks provides the association community, and the next generation of young professionals, an invaluable tool for finding a position that will be more than just a job. From "How-to" tips and suggestions to case studies and sample resumes, Weeks gives the reader an insider's look into how to find a fulfilling career in association management.

As you turn the pages, you will read first-hand accounts of how some association professionals have turned a chance encounter into a lifelong career. When you finish the book, I hope you will be inspired like I was to recommend this book to others who wish to find not just a job but also a meaningful career.

Sheri Jacobs, CAE

President + Chief Strategist

Avenue M Group

Author, *199 Ideas: Powerful Marketing Tactics That Sell* (ASAE 2010)
and *Membership Essentials: Recruitment, Retention, Roles, Responsibilities, and Resources* (ASAE 2007)

Introduction

If career coaching and resume writing weren't my true passions, I would have been content to spend the rest of my career working in an association. Like many people, I fell into working for one (in human resources), and was immediately struck by how good a fit it was for me. Helping people was a high priority, but my previous experience in a nonprofit was not a good one. It was so small and low-budget that I did not have Internet access, and my desk wasn't even a desk, but a table! My pay was barely enough to live on, and there wasn't much room for growth. I figured I'd need to just get a corporate job and volunteer after hours if I wanted to help people.

Unexpectedly, I found out about associations. While they are still nonprofits, they fall into a class of their own. Associations are typically comprised of members (and employees) focused on furthering a specific profession. However, it goes much further than that. For example, healthcare organizations support professionals working in the industry, but they also educate the public on medical issues. They can also contribute to society by offering their unique skills during a time of crisis (for example, sending physicians, nurses, or paramedics to an earthquake-ravaged area).

Associations are often run like corporations, with the competitive pay and benefits that come with a corporation, but they are usually much more focused on the mission than on the bottom line. As in any organization, finances are important,

but the needs of the members are a higher priority. In fact, when interviewing people for this book, I found that the most common answer to the question, "What do you think is most important to be aware of when applying for association positions?" was an awareness of being member-focused.

While I grew to feel passionate about the mission of the association I worked for (I initially didn't know much about the area), there are so many to choose from. Nearly every profession has at least one that represents the people in that field, and there are those that serve every facet of daily life. According to the Association FAQ page on the website of The American Society of Association Executives', The Center for Association Leadership (ASAE), in 2009 there were 90,908 trade and professional associations, and 1,238,201 philanthropic and charitable organizations.

Ironically, most of the people I interviewed for this book did not choose to work in an association, but instead "fell into" it. The answers to "how" varied widely. A few temped in college, some volunteered first (even as early as high school), and others just applied to an association along with many other types of organizations. Regardless of how they got there, all ended up enjoying associations immensely.

Whether you want to break into the association industry or are a seasoned professional, this book will help you find your next opportunity!

About This Book

The information in *I Want to Work in an Association—Now What???* comes from a variety of sources. I drew on my experiences of working in the human resources department of an association and leading The National Resume Writers' Association, along with the knowledge I've gained in my career as a career coach and resume writer.

My research also included reviewing content found in numerous association periodicals, websites, and newsletters, and attending industry seminars and workshops. Of course, the single greatest source of information came from the more than 50 association professionals that

shared their experiences with me. Ranging from entry-level employees to CEOs, from career changers to "lifers," and running the gamut across job function and association industry, each shared valuable insights with me and many are quoted here.

"I completely fell into association work. I started working as a temp during college at the American Subcontractors Association. The association had two summer meetings, so they always needed help in the summer. It got to the point that ASA called me at school to find out when I'd be home in the summer to work. Once I finished school, I was working part-time for ASA and substitute teaching. A full-time position opened up in the government relations department and I decided that I needed the benefits and could always go back to teaching. Almost 25 years later, I'm still in the industry."

Karin Soyster Fitzgerald, CMP, CAE, Vice President, Membership Services, American Bakers Association

DISCLAIMER: *Please note that opinions expressed by individuals do not necessarily reflect those of their employers.*

2 What Type of Association and Job Do You Want?

If "any type" is your answer, think again. Job searches are *much* more effective when there is a clear goal. As the saying goes, "if you don't know where you're going, how will you get there?" You don't need to have such a narrow focus that you limit yourself to just one or two organizations (in fact, you shouldn't—the job search is often a numbers game, and the more places you look, the higher your odds). However, you should definitely know the area, function, and level you're seeking (e.g. marketing division, director-level), and it can be helpful to target associations that specialize in an area you're passionate about.

So how do you figure out what to do "when you grow up?" While some people figure this out gradually over the course of their career, a self-reflective process analyzing what you want (and don't want) can help you get to this point more quickly. Keep in mind, this is more than just interests. Things such as your skills, financial requirements, desired geographic location, and the state of the market all need to be taken into account. While no job is perfect, once you identify what's a deal-breaker and what would be "gravy," you'll be able to narrow down the options even further. Only you can know what's best for

you, but the guidelines and questions below will help get you thinking. The case study at the end of each category illustrates how a person's answers can bring them closer to identifying what they want in a job.

Skills: What have you been "known for" on and off the job? Which tasks come easily to you? In which areas have you had the most success? Don't limit yourself to skills you've used on the job. Consider hobbies, volunteer work, or even things that you were good at while you were in school. At this point, don't worry about how your expertise will fit into a job.

Case Study: Grace is the "go-to person" for all client presentations. In college, she performed in plays, frequently in a leading role. One of her hobbies is singing. Clearly, Grace could be considered for roles that involve public speaking (one possibility: in-house trainer).

Interests: What do you do in your free time? What are the topics of most of the books you read? What type of volunteer work do you like to do? When you were a kid what did you want to be "when you grew up?" What have been your favorite duties throughout your career? Answers to all of these questions can give you insights on both what job functions and which industries you'd enjoy.

Case Study: After work, William takes classes to learn French. Growing up, he wanted to be a pilot. He's never shied away from business travel, and enjoys meeting people and learning about other cultures. A job with heavy travel may be the ticket for William. With his love of people and new places, a potential job could be a liaison between U.S. and international branches.

Finances: If you find your dream job, but it doesn't pay you enough to keep a roof over your head, it really isn't the right position for you. Still, though salary is likely an important factor in any job, it is only part of the equation. The benefits package, which typically includes health insurance, retirement plans, and vacation days, also needs to be considered. Before beginning your job search, determine exactly how much you need to make and which benefits are must-haves.

Case Study: Harry would like to be paid well, but more important than that are the benefits an organization can provide. His wife makes a very good income at her job, but the health benefits leave a lot to be desired. Fortunately, she gets an entire month of vacation each year,

and both she and Harry love to travel. Therefore, he will focus on acquiring a generous vacation allowance and quality health insurance, even if it means sacrificing pay.

Environment: Do you prefer to be in an office building five days a week? If so, is an office a must-have or is a cubicle fine? Would you rather be "out in the field" calling on clients? Do you want to have a structured 9 to 5 schedule, or would you prefer to have more flexibility (even if it means evenings and weekends)? Since 25 percent of your life is spent on the job, it's important that you are happy with your environment.

Case Study: Phillip doesn't really mind going into an office each day, as long as he doesn't need to keep rigid times. Eight or even ten hours a day is fine, as long as he can occasionally schedule doctor's appointments during the day or come in early and leave early when his kids have a soccer game. With these preferences, Phillip will ideally work in a company that provides flex-time, or at the very least, a laid-back culture.

Market: How is the job market for the type of work you're seeking? Does your dream association support a profession that's thriving? Have there been layoffs recently? Look five to ten years into the future. Where do the trends point?

Case Study: Caroline had been working for an association focused on the construction industry. She was hired at the height of a building boom, and despite a recession has been promoted several times. Whenever she hears about the organization losing members or another construction layoff, she wonders if she should look for a new job. The problem is, she really likes the industry and has built up a strong reputation. After conducting research on trends and projections, she decides to stay put. Though things are not great now, she feels confident that construction will rebound as the economy improves.

Which associations are the most secure? According to Jack McInerney, Chief Digital Officer of InTime TV, a video channel for associations, any organization that certifies its members is more likely be a stable employer. Jack also says that healthcare and engineering associations are less likely to have layoffs.

Create a List of Potential Job Functions and Associations

Using the information you've gathered above, write down all the possible jobs and organizations that come to mind. If you're unsure about what job functions are available, visit <http://www.onetonline.org>. Created for the U.S. Department of Labor, this helpful site has tools to help you identify occupations. It also provides you with detailed information on what you can expect from each role (including duties, salary, and outlook).

If it's associations you need more assistance with, visit <http://www.weddles.com>. Its association directory has links to thousands of organizations, all grouped by industry (e.g. fashion, telecommunications, travel, etc.). Use this resource to brainstorm industries and learn about specific associations at the same time.

Test the Options

Once you've narrowed down your functions/industries to a manageable number, it's time to conduct primary research. While this can take significant time, it's better to find out what you *don't* want now, rather than after you've started a new job. There are countless ways to explore an industry or organization, but the methods below are some of the most effective.

Volunteer

Not only can volunteering double as networking (see Chapter 5 to learn more about how to network and why it's important), but it can also help you find out whether or not an association is the right fit. If there's a cause you're passionate about, volunteering for organizations with the same focus could give you more of an "inside" view than you'd get from an interview. Whichever way you participate, you'll naturally meet members and employees.

Carly Caminiti, Manager, Mission Services, Tobacco Control and Community Outreach at the American Lung Association in Illinois, actually started her association career as a volunteer for the ALA—in high school! At an early age, she was able to confirm what she wanted to do for a living.

Not only can volunteering help you determine what type of industry you want to work in, it can also help you try out new tasks. If you've always worked in finance and are wondering about transitioning to marketing, offer to serve on an organization's marketing committee. You'll find out if you really do want to make the move, and you'll pick up new skills in the meantime.

Internship

Many people have had college internships where they learned exactly what areas they did *not* want to work in. Others have ended up with offers, and are still happily employed today. Either way, internships are a great way to try out careers, and they aren't just for college students!

People of all ages try for internships if they're interested in changing careers. Cindy Simpson, CAE, Director of Programs and External Relations, Association for Women in Science, recommends them as a way to both get your foot in the door and to learn more about a particular organization. To find opportunities, she says, "Internships may be found at many associations, and information would be available on the association's website. Set up times to meet with various people who are already in the association industry to talk with them about career opportunities."

Temping

Being a temporary employee for an association has multiple benefits. Not only are you getting paid, but you're also networking internally, and are probably getting access to posted jobs before anyone else. Even better, you get to "test drive" an organization, something that not

everyone gets to do. Since employment agencies benefit from their temps staying on long term, they're usually very open to any feedback you have. If you truly dislike working somewhere, the agency can often assign you somewhere else. Hopefully, that situation is the exception to the rule, but regardless, you can see how you feel about an organization (and position, if you're temping in the one you hope to be hired into) before throwing your hat into the ring.

J. Mori Johnson, Director, International Medical Graduates Services and minority affairs, American Medical Association, found that temping for six months was a huge boost to her career. Coming from a different industry, she was able to learn how the association world worked. This "trial period" also gave her the opportunity to prove herself, and her employer ultimately ended up creating a new position for her.

Informational Interview

Informational interviews are one of the best ways to find out the "real deal" about a career before pursuing it. All the online research in the world can't compare to meeting face-to-face with someone in the trenches.

Like a regular job interview, it helps to have a warm lead. Identify people you know who work in your target area (this can often be accomplished through LinkedIn) and simply ask for help. Sonia Pagonakis, a job seeker who has worked as a program planner in associations, asked a friend to make an introduction to her "target," which ultimately led to an in-person informational interview.

If you just can't find anyone, a cold call is an option. Find out who you'd like to meet with by doing a search on LinkedIn or Twitter and contact them directly. It's less effective than an introduction, but when you approach it from an educational standpoint as opposed to a job search, you're more likely to get results.

When making initial contact, be clear about your expectations. State exactly how long you'd like to meet with the interviewee (remember, you're the one initiating the interview) and what it is you'd like to discuss. Then, stick to it! If you both agreed to fifteen minutes, and the

conversation doesn't seem to be winding down, say something like, "I want to be respectful of your time, and I know our fifteen minutes is up. Would you like to end now or continue our discussion?" To stay on topic, come prepared with a list of questions. The person you're interviewing may offer more than you could have expected, but they'll appreciate the fact that you're focused, and also aren't expecting a job offer. Whatever you do, don't offer your resume (which immediately implies that all along your agenda has been a job, not an informational interview). Only provide if asked.

What questions should you ask? Whatever it is you want to know. If you're considering an association with a different focus than those you've been in, a few ideas to get you started include:

1. What do you feel are some of the biggest challenges faced when working for an association focused on the XYZ profession?
2. How has this type of association furthered the XYZ industry, profession, etc.?
3. Where do you see XYZ and/or the XYZ association headed in the next five to ten years?
4. What are the qualifications required for someone starting out in a XYZ position?
5. What do you like about being a XYZ? What do you find more of a challenge?

Many of the same rules apply when following up after a traditional interview. Send a thank you letter immediately, or even consider sending a small token of your appreciation. Also, stay in touch through occasional e-mails or connecting on LinkedIn. Though the primary purpose of an informational interview is to learn, you also may make some valuable networking contacts.

Online Research

This is the easy one! Start with the basics, and check out the sites of several associations in your target industry. The "About Us" page can be especially helpful. After that, dig a little deeper by doing a Google

search and go through a few pages. This is where you're more likely to find third-party opinions on an organization. Check out groups on LinkedIn or trending topics on Twitter to see what others are saying.

Once you've gotten a good grasp on your areas of interest, weigh the pros and cons (especially the deal breakers!). Cover as many topics as possible, using the categories early in this chapter as a guide. Think about the day to day routine, growth opportunities, salary, commute—anything that you feel is important to consider.

When it comes to researching a type of job, you can visit <http://www.onetonline.com> (described earlier in this chapter), or <http://www.bls.gov/oco>. The latter is the Occupational Outlook Handout, which profiles hundreds of jobs. Updated annually, it provides information on a profession's outlook, requirements, and salary.

Making a Decision

After all of this self-reflection and research, you still probably haven't found "the one" perfect job. That's because it doesn't exist. There are likely several jobs out there that would be a fit for you.

It's not easy, but to move forward you must make decisions so that you can conduct an effective job search. Look at your top few choices and consider the pros and cons of each. Consider which factors are deal breakers and must-haves, but also listen to your gut. While no job is perfect, don't ignore what your instincts are telling you!

About the Author



Charlotte Weeks is a career coach and resume writer specializing in helping association executives to find their passion and land at the top. Prior to launching Weeks Career Services, Inc. (<http://www.weekscareerservices.com>), she was employed in an association, and currently serves as president of The National Resume Writers' Association.

Active in both the careers and association industries, Charlotte is a member of several organizations, including ASAE and The Association Forum of Chicagoland. She has served as an industry expert for various media outlets including The Wall Street Journal, CareerBuilder, and NBC-Chicago.

Avid travellers, Charlotte and her husband Mike call Chicago their home base.

Getting “I Want to Work in an Association—Now What???”
(<http://www.happyabout.com/workinassociation.php>)

“I Want to Work in an Association—Now What???” can be purchased as an eBook for \$11.95 or tradebook for \$16.95 at <http://www.happyabout.com/workinassociation.php> or at other online and physical book stores.

Please contact us for quantity discounts sales@happyabout.info or to be informed about upcoming titles bookupdate@happyabout.info or phone (408-257-3000).

"What a fantastic resource! This book is a useful tool not only for those considering working for an association, but also for individuals, like myself, who have worked for associations for many years. I'll definitely keep this resource close at hand."

Deanna Menesses, CAE, Executive Director, Capital Area Medical Society

"I Want to Work in an Association—Now What??? is a great resource that I plan to give to each of my protégés. I found Chapter 5, 'Why Is Networking Important to My Association Career?' and Chapter 6, 'How Can Social Media Help My Job Search?' to be relevant, timely, and the perfect reference book that should be read by all rising executives!"

Stephen Peeler, Vice President of Membership, American Moving and Storage Association

"College students in search of a career that combines passion with practicality will jump at I Want to Work in an Association -- Now What??? - a step by step guide to jobs with professional associations, membership organizations, or societies. This is the first book out there that showcases the association marketplace: what the jobs are, where they are, how to successfully land a job, and how to climb the association career ladder. No college career library should be without it."

Marianne Green, Assistant Director, Career Services, University of Delaware



Charlotte Weeks has worked in human resources at the American Medical Association and served as President of The National Resume Writers' Association. Her services have been featured in several media outlets including The Wall Street Journal, NBC (Chicago), CEO Update, WGN-TV, Yahoo! HotJobs, and Women's World and Men's Health magazines.

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