

**asae**

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**Choosing A Professional  
Association Executive**

**A LEADERSHIP CHOICE THAT IS GOOD BUSINESS**

## Preface/Introduction

Recruiting and hiring a chief staff executive is one of the most important functions performed by the governing board of an association. Serious as it is, more often than not, search committees and governing boards frequently move ahead with insufficient discussion and understanding of the unique aspects of association management. This process in associations is clearly different than in most other businesses.

Associations, by their very nature, present distinct challenges to management and governance. Successful associations operate with an over-arching value on participating elected leaders. In associations, members provide volunteer service at all levels throughout the organization, working in partnership with executive and other staff. Shared authority, responsibility, and participatory governance are the heart of associations. Unlike for-profit businesses, which are generally driven primarily by issues of efficiency in operations, associations must balance efficiency with the importance of participation and democratic governance. Associations must strive to conduct business in a manner that serves members, constituents, and the fields represented in an effective, efficient, and responsible manner, but not at the expense of leaders and members feeling disenfranchised.

The unique qualities of associations directly affect the types of executive employed to manage and lead the association, regardless of how “member” or “staff” directed the association. Above all, the staff executive must have the capacity to work with diverse groups of people, while managing diverse interests and needs. Great care must be taken by the search committee and governing board to assure that

the management values of the staff executive are understood and compatible with the culture of the association. Because associations are fundamentally in the “people” business, this compatibility is far more important in associations than in most other businesses. More often than not, this issue is at the heart of unhappy and unhealthy board/staff executive relationships.

Finally, the board must recognize that it is employing an individual whose tenure will likely far exceed the tenure of any current member of the board. The association must employ a staff executive who can work effectively not only with the current board but with future boards, groups which may have a very different complexion.

Hiring a staff executive is indeed serious business. It requires setting aside individual bias in an effort to develop a shared view of the management and leadership qualities necessary for the association. It is a time to set aside personal agendas and to thoughtfully carry out the process. Hiring a staff executive is an important responsibility entrusted to the board by the membership, the true “owners” of the association.

In making this meaningful decision, the board or selection committee often debates the advantages and disadvantages of the experienced career association executive versus the industry executive. The thoughts which follow illustrate the many reasons why hiring a career association executive may make good sense for the future of your association.

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## Why Choosing a Professional Association Executive Makes Sense

When the board of directors or search committee of a not-for-profit organization is faced with the challenge of recruiting a chief staff executive, the question always arises: "Should we hire someone who knows our industry [or profession], or should we instead select the person who has extensive association management knowledge and experience?"

Examining this issue may be the most important endeavor in which a board engages. Despite the obvious long-term implications of the recruiting effort and hiring decision, many boards of directors have little experience on this front because recruiting a professional executive doesn't typically come up with frequency.

### Where can you turn for help?

A number of resources are at the volunteer leadership's disposal to assist in making this all-important hiring decision:

- 1 Obtain a copy of *Hiring an Association Executive: A Blueprint for Quality in the Search Process*, available from the American Society of Association Executives. This helpful booklet contains practical advice on analyzing needs, organizing the search committee, and executing a full-scale, comprehensive executive search.
- 2 Learn more about the services provided by professional association recruiters and compare their services to those offered by other firms. Many association recruiters who specialize solely in the not-for-profit sector have served as association executives themselves. Accordingly, they can provide unique insights to guide the board in selecting a professional association executive.

- 3 Request the guidance and advice of the chief staff executive who is being succeeded, if appropriate. Some boards forbid the former executive director from any association with the selection process, thus overlooking a valuable potential source of information and input.
- 4 Consider the insights of nonprofit boards that choose to retain professional association executives.

## Some Reasons for Choosing a Professional Association Executive

### 1 To Reduce Professional Conflicts of Interest

Choosing a professional association executive reduces potential for conflicts. An individual who has maintained a career in the industry or profession of the association's constituency has loyalties that could lead to real or perceived conflicts of interest. For example, this person most likely has made good friends as well as detractors while working in the industry. These ties can interfere with the professional management of the association and affect relationships with the board, committees, membership-at-large, and staff. This is especially true when an industry person, serving as chief staff executive, must mediate disputes among members.

### 2 To Preserve Objectivity

A professional association executive has the advantage of being able to offer a fresh perspective, as well as critical objectivity, when making key decisions. Since associations must represent broad-based memberships, they require objective management untainted by an individual's personal opinions or background as a

specialist in a vertical market. The views and opinions of someone who has worked in a particular profession or industry are bound to have been affected by previous experiences in the field. An industry person may have been so “close to the trees” that he or she may now have difficulty seeing the “forest” — the larger views of the entire association.

Likewise, because of a bias based on working in the field, an industry person may focus on the issue areas he or she knows best, possibly, even unwittingly, expending less effort on the multitude of other responsibilities that a chief staff executive must address. A chief staff executive’s objectivity is especially critical because, while managing the association, the chief staff executive is privy to sensitive and confidential information.

### **3 To Eliminate “Identity Crises”**

To be fully effective, the chief staff executive of an association must be perceived as independent and representative of all members of the association. A prior industry affiliation might impair an executive’s relationship with the news media, the public, or within the industry.

In turn, if members see the chief staff executive position as an “industry job,” the likelihood that some members will instigate disruptive “power plays” in attempts to obtain the position increases significantly. Politicizing the chief staff executive role always harms the association.

### **4 To Ensure Proper Motivation**

The motives of a highly skilled association executive with no specific ties to the field are more likely to be viewed as objective rather than personal. Because of previous loyalties, an industry executive might be seen as biased with respect to decisions about pricing, programs, services, and other association activities.

### **5 To Conscientiously Fulfill Board Responsibilities**

Under state and federal laws, the elected board of a not-for-profit corporation has ultimate legal and fiduciary responsibility for the conduct and performance of an association. Retaining a seasoned association professional shows strong commitment to these serious responsibilities.

### **6 To Maintain Appropriate Board and Member Relationships**

When the chief staff executive is a career association manager, he or she has learned to share the power, authority, and responsibility with elected officers. Association executives know how to work with a board of ever-changing volunteers, manage a full-time staff, and respond to the needs of multiple constituencies. As a one-time professional peer, an industry-professional-turned-association-executive may have difficulty relating to board members on new terms. This can interfere with the search for objectivity, as can the industry person’s background as a former competitor or colleague of those represented by the association. Membership recruitment can also suffer when the industry person must appeal to former competitors.

## What Skills and Experience Do Association Executives Have?

Probably the biggest reason to choose a professional association executive is because of the wealth of knowledge and experience he or she brings to the table. Successful association management requires a background and a broad range of experience in most or all of these critical areas:

- not-for-profit tax issues;
- financial management;
- generation of non-dues income;
- foundations and subsidiary corporations;
- legal issues;
- lobbying and government affairs;
- regulatory processes;
- long-range and strategic planning;
- association organization and operations;
- publishing;
- adult continuing education programming;
- meetings, conventions, and exposition management;
- marketing;
- human resources management;
- communications and public relations;
- public speaking;
- program development;
- member recruitment, retention, and satisfaction;
- chapter relations;
- information systems;
- technology;
- governing board structure; and
- volunteer relations.

An association's strength can be measured in part by the counterbalance of the practical knowledge of its board and committees and the association management skill of its chief staff executive. A board that retains an industry person as chief staff executive duplicates the elected leadership's expertise and deprives the association of the skills and knowledge brought to the group by an experienced association executive.

Since the advent of the information age, personnel decisions are increasingly influenced by credentials and the benefits of specialization. If you need an electrician you don't hire a plumber. If you need a pediatrician, you don't visit a podiatrist. Similarly, when an association needs an executive, hiring someone who already has association expertise seems an obvious choice.

To a volunteer board, a career association executive represents a known quantity. This is a comforting fact, considering that the hiring of a chief staff executive is one of the most, if not the most, important decision an association board will ever make.