



# Associations Evolve 2023 & BEYOND

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# Is there a Future for Association Chapters?

While we all felt the rumblings in chapters before 2020, the pandemic has us jumping over deepening cracks in the system. We saw too many chapters go dormant even as we saw others burst with activity and new faces. Disruption opened a door for us to explore new options for chapters and chapter programs.

Two major studies captured much of this experience in data. Findings from [ASAE Foresight Works: A World Reshaped by COVID](#) uncovered several common themes characterising the chapter response to COVID-19.

## **20<sup>th</sup> century form limited 21<sup>st</sup> century function.**

An antiquated organisational structure limits chapters' ability to adapt to a virtual environment. While some pivoted successfully, many lacked the flexible and innovative mindset, resources, and/or technology to shift quickly to the virtual format.

## **Time zones, rather than geography, redefined operational boundaries.**

The shift to a virtual environment produced several interesting side effects. Many chapter members who had never participated in traditional in-person events showed up for virtual programs — suggesting an opportunity for responsive chapters to expand their value proposition beyond those members willing to get in a car. Yet, paradoxically, this shift also placed chapters in direct competition with programs delivered by the central organisation (association headquarters/HQ) and other chapters.

**Good leadership still matters.** Chapters that adapted well to the pandemic benefited from good leadership — flexible, innovative, empathetic, business-savvy, problem-solving leaders. This fundamental attribute of effective organisations is especially important in an environment of uncertainty and radical change — and it applies regardless of technology.

[The Mariner Management/Billhighway 2022 Chapter Benchmarking Report](#) filled in with data from association CEOs, CRPs (Component Relations Professionals) and chapter leaders. The full report, available for download (free), highlights three critical deserts that if addressed can truly help associations answer, “are chapters worth the effort?” And if they are, how to apply the right services and support to create what appears to be an elusive value.

## **To understand the three deserts, we asked associations: are chapters worth the effort?**

This question continues to stump the association community. Only 30 per cent of CEOs offered an unqualified “absolutely” when asked if chapters are worth the effort and organisational resources devoted to them.

The answers of the remaining 70 per cent ranged from “probably” to “absolutely not” with an average score of 2.8 on a 5-point scale earning a C- at best. CRPs gave an only slightly better score of 2.9 for overall effectiveness.

Based on the CEO and CRP surveys, roundtables, and focus groups, the uncertainty derives from fuzzy metrics caused by the persistent lack of valid chapter performance data. Only 22 per cent of associations surveyed reported having direct access to a full range of chapter data while 39 per cent reported no access at all. Most associations rely on chapter-reported or anecdotal information which, on our close inspection, is usually incomplete and/or inaccurate in far too many cases.

In our qualitative research, CEOs and CRPs agreed their associations need a local presence for networking, education, and advocacy. Yet, without data, CEOs and CRPs struggle to confidently affirm the quality and value of chapter performance in these areas.

Given the extensive range of programs and services offered by associations to support their chapters, associations need a more effective chapter data management system, one that provides a reliable measure of member value and engagement in chapter programs.

We detected no obvious positive correlation between headquarters support and consequent chapter

effectiveness — sadly, more HQ support did not seem to produce better chapter performance. This persistent ambiguity should be a red flag to associations when considering allocation of scarce resources. If HQ provides the same support year after year, such as leadership training, but chapter performance doesn't improve, it's time to evaluate and revamp the type of support provided.

We're not arguing that chapters aren't worth the resources or effort, but associations must address the severe limitations of their current model of chapter performance assessment. Addressing this will permit associations to more effectively support chapters.

Conundrums aside, chapters do have a place in many associations. They've been an oasis for members in many associations — providing PPE, securing legislative/regulatory wins, delivering critical news, and offering comfort. However, the path to a successful future lies in navigating three deserts.

- **Data desert.** The “data desert” represents a consistent and disturbing theme throughout this research. We continue to rely on fragmented, disconnected software systems that offer a fractured view of how our chapter system delivers value to members and serves the mission. Though none are perfect, plenty of technology platforms are available that could provide a far more accurate picture of our chapters' performance and a much stronger basis on which to allocate our limited chapter resources.

**Action:** Seek new technological answers and bring chapter leaders into the conversation to assure buy-in. Talk to your AMS vendor and chapter technology partners about solutions, and challenge your IT/digital staff to meet this opportunity.

- **Volunteer desert.** One CEO observed, “The grass is always greener... where you water it!” Our volunteers represent a precious resource that we tend to waste by asking them to spend their extremely limited time dealing with administrative checklist functions rather than member service and the mission.

**Action:** We need to apply resources, especially technology, that reduce or eliminate the need for volunteers to fulfil those administrative roles. We must build a volunteer development program that supports and places our volunteers in roles where they are most likely to succeed.

- **Strategic desert.** CEOs, CRPs, and chapter leaders spend far too much of their collective time in the tactical weeds. We must step back and view our chapters as one part of a vibrant ecosystem working collaboratively to serve the member and move the mission. We allow ourselves to be hamstrung by territorial squabbles that reinforce an “us versus them” culture. Let's throw off our HQ shoes or chapter shoes and put on our member shoes so we can focus on why we're here in the first place.

**Action:** To get beyond the chapter volunteer and staff blinders, talk with members about their experiences. Tap behavioural data to uncover how members are interacting with their chapters. Develop chapter member personas and walk through their experiences in a journey mapping exercise.

**A final note:** At the core of chapters are volunteers. Coming in late Fall 2022 is the ASAE Foundation report on effective volunteer models which will offer a roadmap for shoring up this core.



Peggy Hoffman, FASAE, CAE, is president of Mariner Management, an association management company and consultancy focusing on member/volunteer engagement and member components. Mariner is the research team behind the [Mutually Beneficial Volunteerism](#) study and 2022 Chapter Benchmarking and is currently conducting industry research on effective volunteer models.

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