

## **Education at the entry-level -Why not-for-profit organizations need to provide more learning opportunities for their junior staff**

By Roma Ihnatowycz

Furthering the education of senior level management has become a firmly entrenched tradition in the not-for-profit sector. There are various programs, designations and certificates available for top executives looking to hone their skills at running a charity or not-for-profit group.

But what about entry-level staff? Here, a very different picture emerges.

To date, there has been a dearth of continuing education programs targeting junior staff members. There are few, if any, courses available to supply them with basic industry knowledge. Also few in number are senior association executives who understand the value of providing education to entry-level employees. This was not, after all, how they themselves started off and learned the ropes.

“Earlier, there was a lot of learning on the job, or people would be mentored by their direct superiors,” says Ed Barisa, President and CEO of the Ontario Real Estate Association (OREA). “So we would essentially push (new employees) off the end of the dock and hope that they could swim.” And swim they did. Baby-boomers usually entered the field by happenstance and thought nothing of learning along the way.

Today, however, things have changed. The expectation that younger staff will simply have to learn their skills on the job falls short of the mark. Younger Gen-X and Gen-Y employees are expecting – and sometimes demanding – more in the way of education as well as the overall investment an organization is willing to make in them.

As a result, association executives and volunteers are warming up to the idea that measures need to be taken to provide entry-level education to junior employees – and also to professionals switching over from the for-profit world.

### **Education shortfall**

The Canadian education system is weak on delivering courses dedicated to the not-for-profit sector, so professionals entering the field rarely arrive with enough background knowledge. “What we’ve got are very basic areas of training that exist [at the university and college level],” says Catherine Chow, interim executive director at the Canadian Solar Manufacturers Association, “You have subjects such as event planning, but it’s not the entire piece. So you may know about event planning, which is a very narrow niche, but you don’t, for example, have the membership component.”

As anyone working in the not-for-profit world knows, multiple skill-sets are often required. Organizations tend to be small, with staff wearing many hats. Someone may be well educated in

one particular stream, but often needs to acquire additional skills and knowledge in other areas. This calls for supplemental education and learning, says Chow.

Senior association professionals may argue that they have long enrolled their staff in various courses and designation programs. This is nothing new. Those courses, however, have targeted more advanced employees, leaving junior staff by the wayside. In other words, those who were already knowledgeable had a chance to improve through courses, while those who had little knowledge to start did not.

The irony of this situation is not lost on Chow. In the early part of her career, she expressed interest in taking CSAE's Certified Association Executive (CAE) course. Her direct supervisor told her she needed to be in the association world "for at least two years for it to make any sense."

At the moment when Chow needed – and wanted – to learn more about the sector, the only education available was a program targeting those who already had some basic knowledge under their belt. Like other entry-level professionals, Chow found herself in a Catch-22 situation, and the message was clear: for basic knowledge, you were on your own.

### **Addressing the issue**

CSAE is now working to address this disconnect. The association is launching a certificate program in 2012 that will target entry-level professionals. The aim is to provide them with a broader, more holistic education that will serve as a starting point for building a career in the not-for-profit sector.

The program will be distinctly different from the association's high-level CAE designation, says OREA's Barisa, who sat on the CSAE taskforce developing the curriculum. It will target an altogether different demographic. "You need to dial it back for entry-level people so that they can at least understand the association structure and are not working in a vacuum," says Barisa. "I found, working with Gen-X and Gen-Y, that they like to understand the bigger picture. They're demanding from their supervisors to know how they fit into the bigger scene."

So while at the CAE® level it is all about learning how to develop useful bylaws for your organization, says Barisa, the newer program will provide a basic understanding of association bylaws, what they are and what purpose they serve. Similarly, the courses will outline standard information, such as the roles and responsibilities of volunteers and staff, the functions of the Board, the different election protocols, how to work with committees, etc. In short, it will be a 'not-for-profit 101' type of education for individuals new to the field.

Associations and charities also need to do their bit, particularly when it comes to educating employees on the profession or trade their members represent. In the case of OREA, the group holds seminars for new employees that deliver basic knowledge on the real estate industry. One seminar might outline what exactly real estate agents do and explain the difference between

brokers and agents. It sounds simple, but Barisa says he has often encountered newly hired staff members who “have no idea what these professionals do on a day-to-day basis.” This is not an isolated incident, but rather a pattern that repeats itself at many groups.

## **A new approach**

All of this may sound like a lot of work, time and money to dedicate to something that not-for-profit groups have done without for decades. But the old adage, ‘We’ve never done this so we don’t need to’ no longer applies. Times have changed and they are a far cry from what they used to be.

We are starting to face a major talent shortage, spurred on by the departure of high numbers of baby boomers as they retire. Associations need to start thinking about succession planning and developing the management potential of their younger employees if they want to secure a healthy future. Providing education to those in the lower ranks is one way to do this.

“With the demographic shift that Canada is facing, we have to start building succession planning,” says Erin Spink, president of PAVR-O, the Provincial Association for Volunteer Engagement Professionals. “We are really behind the eight ball at this point but I think that by focusing on entry-level association professionals, we are going to build a stronger, smarter workforce that is more sustainable.”

It is in an association’s best interest to target and train younger staff members who have the potential to lead the organization in the future, stresses Spink. Not only do they need to do this to fill these employees’ knowledge vacuum, they need to also inspire them to consider the not-for-profit sector as a viable, long-term career path.

“We need to offer courses at an earlier stage, when people are exploring a career in association management,” agrees OREA’s Barisa. “Hopefully by offering them better opportunities for professional development, they will feel more secure, will start looking at career opportunities in the association sector, and therefore will stay with us longer and replace those who will be retiring.”

Spink notes that associations can make use of education as a tool to change the prevalent mindset among young professionals that the not-for-profit sector is just a temporary place of employment. “A lot of young people come into roles with associations as a stepping stone,” notes Spink. Associations need to do what they can to change that thinking. They need to be more involved in targeting those within their organization who hold potential, training them with the skills they need, and inspiring them to view their employment as a fulfilling career choice rather than a stop-gap measure.

There is a tough, competitive market down the road, and demands on charitable and not-for-profit organizations are more numerous than ever. Those that started up as “band-aid” solutions

in the 1980s and '90s have become institutionalized, notes Spink, and legislation impacting professions and trades is increasing in complexity year after year.

All of this, in turn, is increasing the demands being placed on not-for-profit professionals. Associations need to be prepared, and so do their younger, newer employees.