



## 5 Association Trends to Pay Attention to in 2023 and 2024



I recently attended the ASAE Annual Conference in Atlanta and it was awesome! After not being able to attend last year, it was such a treat to be with so many amazing people who share a passion for enabling associations to make great things happen in the world!

Seeing long-time colleagues and meeting new ones was definitely the highlight. But I also made it a point to attend as many educational sessions as possible – sometimes two in the same hour – to get a sense of the topics that are resonating and enhance my own knowledge.

Interpreted through my unique lens, here are my top 5 takeaways from the conversations and educational sessions I participated in at ASAE 2023. These are big ideas that have the potential to shape what's next for associations.

### *My Top 5 Takeaways from ASAE Conference 2023*

1. Using the Kubler-Ross Change Curve as a gauge many people in our industry are ***still in a state of Denial/Resistance*** when it comes to Artificial Intelligence. During the conference, and in many conversations since, it has become obvious to me that I can no longer just talk to others about how they should be exploring and adopting AI for their work and their organizations. While I didn't see it at first, that is its own form of denial. I need to take my own medicine and actually do the same. As a result, I am experimenting with and incorporating AI tools into my work – beyond just chat bots for email creation/editing. It's still a little uncomfortable, but learning often is.



2. Yes, there are levels, but ***the participatory governance continuum certainly goes beyond asking members to vote in elections.*** Participatory Democracy is a model of democracy in which citizens have the power to decide directly on policy issues and political matters rather than through representatives. With members often spread out geographically and less than deeply engaged, it can be easy to use voting or representatives as our default mechanisms for participation. To be fair, those are our industry's go-to methods, and they are practical and efficient. But there are so many other ways to involve stakeholders in the work of the association. At Essentiam, we are learning and applying tenants of community organizing and collective impact from local nonprofits and we're watching the growing movement of DAOs (decentralized autonomous organizations) and similar collaborative forms of governance in other sectors. Exploring how to re-interpret those and similar frameworks may be the next frontier for association governance and member engagement.
3. I'm not entirely sure, but I'm beginning to see how ***a large board of governors (or similar body) might actually be a good thing,*** contrary to popular governance wisdom. If you have a legacy body with more than a dozen organizational leaders engaged and attending meetings, maybe it is what you do with them that is important. Rather than disbanding them, maybe repurposing them to be change catalysts would help solve for member engagement challenges. This summer we worked with a client to turn part of their formal, presenter-focused board of governors meeting – with 50 folks from all over the world – into a futures workshop. Together they explored how industry and societal trends might impact their work. They loved being asked to actively think, share, and guide the organization. Hopefully they carried those ideas back to their geographies for further conversation. It's just a start, but a step in a new direction. At a time when many associations are struggling to get 50 people who care about their organization involved in leadership, maybe a large board of governors used wisely is a blessing, not a curse.
4. Formal education took a hit during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we have long known that adults continue to learn new skills – both hard and soft – well beyond their time in formal education. ***Micro-credentials have the potential to revolutionize the way we track and articulate our accumulation of knowledge and skills. And associations could be at the forefront of this revolution.*** A combination of new technologies (blockchain, generative AI), ways of working (shorter tenures, independent contracting, geographic mobility) and demands on traditional education (clearer ROI, virtual campuses, on-demand learning) are pushing us toward badging and micro-credentialing. Associations have expertise in this arena from offering CEs and certifications to recognize knowledge/skillset gains. With its influence over many industries, perhaps the association community could help to accelerate adoption of micro-credentials as the most legitimate form of skill demonstration for employers. And in the process secure its place at the forefront for the next generation of members, employers, and partners.
5. ***Welcoming the next generation of members into associations is a 'wicked problem'.*** Wicked problems are complex, with multiple contributors and symptoms. They are hard to fix because they defy traditional root cause analysis, there are often complex social factors at play, and there is usually not just one single solution. (my description, not a definition) During this workshop, when asked to



choose a wicked problem associations are trying to solve, at least three tables of association leaders chose to focus on next gen members. Interestingly, each identified a different aspect of the problem as their starting point: 1) seasoned members not wanting to cede their positions to new members (in the association, but also in the profession); 2) attracting more new folks to the field and to the association; and 3) new members joining but not feeling included due to structural issues and offerings. These and other issues combine to make attracting and keeping the next generation a wicked problem. For me, this was a reminder that the solution this particular challenge may not be the same for every association, that it will likely take a portfolio of solutions rather than just one, and that digging a little deeper to understand the dynamics at hand for each association will be critical to finding solutions that work.

Hopefully these five things give you a new idea or perspective to use in your work and for your organization. If so, please tell us about it in the chat.

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to take the next step toward accelerated success.