

Counting the benefits of association involvement.

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Most individuals join professional associations with the intention of taking full advantage of all that these groups have to offer. Over time, however, it's easy to forget this goal as daily work demands begin to take precedence. Yet association involvement can have many lasting benefits. In fact, 86% of senior executives polled recently by Robert Half International said participation in professional organizations is valuable to an employee's career. Active involvement is even better and can help you in many ways.

Meet People

One of the major benefits of joining professional organizations is the opportunity to build your base of contacts. Associations facilitate networking by hosting periodic social activities and arranging for time before and after meetings for members to interact. To maximize your results, aim to be more than just a passive observer. Volunteering for committees, writing articles for association publications, and delivering presentations are a few ways to take your involvement to the next level. This can help raise your visibility while allowing you to build communication, leadership, and interpersonal skills.

Also make an active effort to assist others in the group. Be responsive when members--or their friends--ask for your guidance with business issues or job searches. If someone is referred to you, make time to speak with the person. If you find you can't help, suggest alternatives, such as recommending that the individual contact another expert in your network. You will build a positive reputation within the organization, and people will be more likely to reciprocate when you need their assistance.

Stay Up to Date

Educational programs offered by professional associations are another valuable benefit of membership. You may be able to interact with speakers and instructors, giving you the opportunity to receive one-on-one guidance on specific business challenges and goals.

Many organizations offer professional certifications. Although passing the exams and maintaining accreditations requires an ongoing commitment to learning, your time investment will more than pay for itself as continuing education helps you keep your skills sharp, think more strategically, and develop innovative solutions to financial challenges. These designations can also help you pursue your career track. In a survey developed by our company, 85% of CFOs polled said that having an industry certification is valuable for career advancement.

Broaden Your Horizons

Depending on your career and business goals, you may want to consider joining additional groups, such as:

- * Industry-specific organizations. As the name suggests, these associations bring together people who work in the same sector, such as healthcare or manufacturing. These groups can help you learn more about issues specific to your company's field.
- * Interest-specific associations. Members of these organizations are focused on a particular issue or cause, such as cancer prevention, promoting literacy, or the saving of a community landmark. Interest-specific organizations include charities and local nonprofit organizations. The main benefit of joining these groups is that they often include prominent business leaders, which means you may gain access to individuals you might otherwise not meet.
- * Local business groups. Organizations such as local chambers of commerce include members from a variety of industries and occupations. They can be a great way to broaden your network and raise your profile in the community.

Learn about an association's mission, values, and activities before joining. Assess the time commitment involved: How often does the organization meet? What time of day? How long do functions generally last? If you select groups that suit your interests and availability, you're more likely to become an active participant.

Save Money

Don't overlook the cost-saving opportunities available through the professional organizations to which you belong. Most associations offer an array of discounts that can be used personally or for your company, such as group insurance programs, car rental, and banking services. Review the groups' websites and publications frequently to make sure you are taking advantage of the latest deals.

Active involvement with associations can boost your visibility in the community and with your employer by showing how serious you are about your work and professional development. Take the time to select groups that align with your interests and priorities and look for ways to maximize your membership. An enhanced role with professional organizations may be just what you need to accelerate your career and move closer to achieving your goals.

Max Messmer is chairman and CEO of Robert Half International Inc. (RHI), parent company of Robert Half® Finance & Accounting, Accountemps®, and Robert Half® Management Resources. RHI is the world's first and largest specialized staffing firm placing accounting and finance professionals on a full-time, temporary, and project basis. Messmer's most recent books are *Motivating Employees For Dummies®* and *Managing Your Career For Dummies®* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).