

# **The Dynamic Nature of Professional Associations: Factors Shaping Membership Decisions**

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*While career networks share similar characteristics with other professional networks, these networks have distinct attributes with members selecting a network to support career advancement. Previous studies of professional networks have explored network range, network diversity, and network functions; and this study was designed to assess factors which influence selection decisions of members. This study of professional associations examines organizational and personal factors that may influence a decision to join a professional association. Membership decisions related to instrumental and expressive attributes desired by members were evaluated along with potential constraints that may impede membership in a professional association.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Dyadic networks, or mentor relationships, were once believed to provide the optimal means for career development. These dyadic relationships typically included a senior member of an organization involved in mentoring an entry level or mid management colleague within the same organization. While some organizations sponsored formal mentoring programs for employees, most mentoring relationships evolved via the formal structure with new members becoming acquainted with senior members via projects or external organizational events. Identification of a mentor, therefore, was usually incumbent upon the new member to locate a potential mentor through both formal and informal organizational channels. (Kram, 1983; Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Ragins, 1997)

As a result, many mentors were selected based upon their hierarchical role and influence within the organization. While the developmental functions of mentors would vary based upon the dyadic relationship, most mentors offered both career and emotional support to their protégés. Mentor functions ranged from protection to sponsorship with many mentors actively coaching protégés and delegating assignments to increase visibility within the organization. Mentors also provided social support often counseling new members about organizational norms and expectations as well as role modeling professional behavior (Hill, 1995; Mullen and Noe, 1999).

While the dyadic model had benefits for those involved in a mentoring relationship, industry disruptions along with organizational restructuring challenged the relevance of the mentoring model. Although formal relationships had defined the career path for many executives in the past, advancement was no longer contingent upon developing hierarchical relationships within a specific organization but

instead contingent upon an ability to forge an array of multi-tier relationships which included peers and subordinates (Broscio & Scherer, 2003). Likewise, the digital economy also transformed interaction and communication patterns within most organizations virtually connecting individuals to an array of potential internal and external peers to support career development (Cascio, 2000; de Janasz, Sullivan & Whiting; 2003. Eby, 1997).

In response, the benefits of collegial and extended network relationships emerged as alternatives to the traditional mentoring relationship. Kram and Isabella (1985) found that peers did, in fact, provide many of the same developmental functions as mentors over various phases of the career continuum. In the early stage of a career, peers often provided validation for decisions while peers assumed a more consultative role in the latter phase of career development. Relationships were often forged with multiple peers with some dyads sharing only organizational information and other peer relationships offering more guidance and support (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004; de Janasz & Forret, 2008; Higgins, 2000; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Podolny & Baron, 1997).

Even though peers provided a vibrant lateral network, Hill (1995) contends that both lateral (peer) and hierarchal (superior) relationships must be also included in a developmental network. Superiors by virtue of their position within the organization can often circumvent barriers which may impede project implementation and impact organizational reputation. Likewise, junior associates may have access to resources or grapevine information which may be instrumental in accomplishing tasks. While internal networks can be influential in achieving company objectives, Ibarra and Hunter (2007) believe that development networks should transcend conventional organizational boundaries and include members outside the organization. Often these external networks are designed to complement an internal network and provide a constellation of potential contacts to support career advancement. Higgins and Kram (2001) also echo the benefits of concurrently developing network constellations with a particular emphasis upon network range. Rather than focus on a single organization, multi-tier contacts with individuals in multiple organizations should be forged to access information and resources. Connections with peers in diverse organizations provide divergent perspectives on professional issues and may diminish redundant information (Cotton, Shen & Tarandach, 2011). Recent studies on e-mentoring also suggest that the internet may exponentially increase both the range and scope of network relationships that can be forged across international borders (Hamilton & Scandura, 2003; Murphy, 2011; Whiting & deJanasz, 2004).

Although many development networks do transcend organizational boundaries, Parker (2002) also acknowledges the unique role that “career communities” play in supporting career development. Often these career networks emerge to share expertise or practices that are unique to an industry or a profession with members ascribing to a unified vision (Parker, Arthur, Kerr, 2004). While career communities share similar characteristics with other development networks, Molloy (2006) argues that career networks have distinct attributes which differentiate them from other developmental networks. In particular, members tend to share similar professional interests with members frequently using this network for career advancement (Whiting & deJanasz, 2004)

## **FUNCTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS**

Although the scope and structure of professional associations will vary, selection decisions are often based on the perceived instrumental and expressive attributes of benefits offered to members of a professional association. Instrumental benefits have been defined as those factors which provide tangible benefits such as information exchange, access to association resources, and network contacts (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Kram & Isabella, 1985). In particular, network contacts can help to legitimize the professional reputation of an individual and offer a formal endorsement of professional skills as well as tacit support for personal accomplishments. De Janasz and Forret (2008) believe that these network contacts are essential to enhance social capital and promote career advancement.

Often professional associations can provide tangible resources or synergies with other members. In a study of business school faculty, Gersick, Bartunke and Dutton (2000) found that 51% of the respondents believed that their professional associations were pivotal in locating resources to support their research

projects as well as identifying members who had similar research interests. These findings are not entirely surprising given the disciplinary nature of many academic projects and the limited number of colleagues with a similar research agenda within a particular university. As a consequence, professional associations within the academic community may provide the optimal forum to identify colleagues for collaborative projects and resource exchange.

In a related study of professionals in the health care industry, Heathcote (1990) found that members cited seminars and conferences as key factors which influenced their decision to join a professional organization. While some of these decisions may be due to regulatory requirements related to certification, respondents also rated multidisciplinary collaboration and expansion of network contacts as secondary factors influencing their membership decisions. While seminars do provide tangible information about emerging trends in a profession, it also appears that members value the social interaction which accompany many of these events.

Morrison (2002) also contends that social interaction is an important dimension of the assimilation process of new members and may influence member retention in an organization. Other studies have confirmed the importance of expressive factors in providing a sense of belonging and fostering an enduring commitment to an organization (Hayton, Carnabuci, & Einsenberger, 2012; Carroll & Teo, 1996). These expressive benefits typically include factors which provide intangible benefits such as personal support, involvement, or inclusion in a professional association.

Within the organizational context, integration within a social network may positively influence career satisfaction. Burke, Rothstein, and Bristor (1995) found that employees who were more integrated in their internal networks reported higher levels of career satisfaction and expressed a stronger sense of organizational commitment. Inclusion within the social network also offers a mechanism for members to establish trusting relationships with other members and develop their social identity within the network (Bevelander & Page, 2011).

While previous studies of developmental networks have explored network type (Ibarra, 1993), network range and diversity (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Kelan & Jones, 2010; Pini, Brown, & Ryan, 2004) and network functions (de Janasz, Sullivan & Whiting, 2003; Hill, 1995; Ibarra & Hunter, 2007) few studies have specifically focused on the role professional associations as a mechanism to expand professional networks and support career development. As importantly, most studies of professional networks have not examined factors that may influence a decision to join a professional association, and this study was specifically designed to examine both instrumental and expressive benefits which may influence membership decisions. Despite an interest a professional association, organizational barriers or personal constraints may limit participation in an association and it was important to also understand those factors which could potentially impede participation in a professional network.

## **METHODS**

### **Sample**

Often a decision to join a professional association is made during the early or mid-phase of a career and 80 surveys from students enrolled in their final MBA course at private, non-profit university were included in the study. All of the students were enrolled in a part-time graduate program, and 97% of the participants were employed on a full time basis. Data for the survey was collected from several courses over three semesters with instructions provided that participation in the survey was completely voluntary, and would be used to support research to understand factors influencing decisions to join a professional association. Surveys were completed by 40 students with four surveys excluded due to incomplete information or failure to complete the entire survey for a response rate of 45%.

### **Measures**

While association benefits may entice individuals to consider membership in an organization, organizational as well as personal factors may also limit participation. Respondents were initially asked to identify organizational factors which could potentially influence their decision to join a professional

association. Questions related to employer reimbursement, membership cost, as well as supplementary costs for association events were designed to assess organizational factors that may impact a membership decision. Likewise, personal factors related to time constraints as well as familiarity with other association members were designed to measure social factors which may influence participation and expedite integration into the professional association.

Since one of the primary objectives of the study was to understand those factors which influence decisions to join a professional organization, a scale adapted from Dreher and Ash (1990) was used to classify both instrumental and expressive attributes which potentially influence membership decisions. Attributes such as advancement, challenge, ethical framework, information, network contacts, recognition, reputation, resources, vision and visibility were classified as instrumental factors that provide tangible resources to members via network involvement. Expressive attributes such as assistance, cooperation, excellence, gratitude, importance, inclusion, involvement, personal support, self-concept, and understanding were used to assess the scope of social support provided through other members of the professional association. Respondents were initially asked to rate the importance of each of the 20 factors upon their membership decision using a five point Likert scale ranging from very unimportant to very important for each attribute. Since the importance of a particular association attribute may vary due to member age, gender, or management level, a regression analysis was used to determine how these variables influenced membership decision (Brass, 1985; Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011; Ibarra, 1993, Kelan & Jones, 2010; Pini, Brown, & Ryan, 2004; Ragins, 1997).

## **RESULTS**

Surveys were complete by 36 respondents with 18 males and 18 females participating in the study. As shown in Table 1, respondents were primarily in the early phase of career development with 50% between 26-30 years of age and another 8% under 25 years of age. Another 28% of the respondents were in the mid-phase of their careers with 14% between 31-35 years of age and another 14% between 36-40 years of age. While 22% of the respondents had been employed over four years in their organization, 53% of the respondents were employed less than three years in their organization. Although less than 6% of the respondents held executive positions, almost 39% of the respondents had acquired Director level positions in the early phase of their career development. Another 19% of the respondents were employed in sales positions or as consultants in various industries with over 28% employed in the health care industry and another 19% employed in financial services. Since 58% of the respondents were under age 30, many of the respondents were employed in entry level positions with 36% holding other entry level positions in their organizations.

Since many of the respondents were in the early phase of their careers, both career development (39%) and networking opportunities (34%) were cited as the benefits that were influential in their decision to join a professional association. Individuals in this phase of their career appear to be actively seeking associations which can enhance their professional skills and expand the range of potential contacts in their industry (Table 2).

Despite these apparent benefits, financial constraints may pose obstacles to joining a professional association or may limit participation in association events. Results revealed that membership dues did not appear to be excessive for respondents in this study with 53% of dues less than \$100.00 per year, 22% below \$200.00 per year, and 14% below \$300.00 per year. It is also important to note that some of these costs may have been absorbed by employers since 50% of the respondents received employer reimbursement for their professional dues. In contrast, ancillary expenses for seminars or career related services can also contribute to membership costs and 34% of the respondents paid for continuing education and 25% paid for additional career services or mentoring programs offered through their association. These findings suggest that some members may be willing to pay for supplementary benefits; however, it was not clear if employer reimbursement was used to defray some of these costs.

**TABLE 1**

<b>DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS</b>		
<b>Gender</b>	<b>n</b>	
Male	18	50%
Female	18	50%
<b>Management Level</b>	<b>n</b>	
COO	1	3%
Senior Manager	1	3%
Director	14	39%
Sales Rep	7	19%
Other	13	36%
<b>Age</b>	<b>n</b>	
Under 25	3	8%
26-30	18	50%
31-35	5	14%
36-40	5	14%
Over 40	5	14%
<b>Industry</b>	<b>n</b>	
Health Care	10	28%
Hotel and Leisure	0	.00%
Financial Services	7	19%
Professional Services	1	3%
Retail Industry	2	6%
Other	16	44%
<b>Time in organization</b>	<b>n</b>	
Less than 1 year	5	14%
1-3 years	19	53%
4-6 years	8	22%
More than 6 years	3	8%
n/a	1	3%

While over 97% of the professional associations sponsored annual or semi-annual meetings, personal time constraints may limit participation in a professional association and 34% of the respondents cited this factor as a consideration in a decision to join their professional association. Time constraints may also limit involvement in association meetings, and 39% of the respondents reported that they did not attend annual or semi-annual meetings sponsored by their professional association. While almost one-third of the respondents did attend their annual meeting, only 11% of respondents attended semi-annual meetings sponsored by their association. These findings are not entirely surprising and suggest that time constraints

do limit participation in association meetings. Likewise, financial considerations may also play a role in these decisions since travel costs combined with convention costs can also potentially limit participation (Table 2).

**TABLE 2**  
**ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING SELECTION DECISIONS**

<b>Factors Influencing Decision to Join</b>	<b>n</b>	
Career Development	17	39%
Educational Seminars	5	11%
Networking Opportunities	15	34%
Other	6	14%
n/a	1	2%
<b>Membership Costs</b>		
Less than 100	19	53%
\$101-200	8	22%
\$201-300	5	14%
\$301-400	1	3%
Don't know	2	5%
n/a	1	3%
<b>Ancillary Membership Costs</b>		
Career Services	6	15%
Mentoring programs	4	10%
Seminar/Continuing Education	14	34%
Other	1	2%
n/a	16	39%
<b>PA Offer Annual or Semi Annual Meeting</b>		
Yes	30	83%
No	5	14%
n/a	1	3%
<b>Frequency of Attending Meetings</b>		
Annual Meeting	11	31%
Semi-annual meeting	4	11%
Monthly	7	18%
Weekly	0	0%
Other ( Do not attend)	14	39%
<b>Employer Reimbursement</b>		
Yes	18	50%
No	18	50%

**Learn About Association**

Colleague or professional contact	12	29%
Employer	17	41%
Internet / Social Media	7	17%
Other	5	12%

**Potential Organizational Constraints**

Time Constraints	16	34%
Expensive Dues/fees	8	17%
Scheduling of Meeting	6	13%
Lack of info on other association members	1	2%
other	4	8%
n/a	12	25%

**Do any of your PA's require a sponsor letter?**

Yes	7	19%
No	27	75%
n/a	2	6%

Organizational endorsement may also motivate individuals in the early phase of their careers to join a professional association, and 41% of the respondents had learned about their professional association through their employers. It appears that many of the organizations in the study not only provided financial support for membership dues, but they also actively encouraged their employees join a professional association. This implicit endorsement may be particularly important to those in the early phase of their careers as they evaluate various professional associations and expand their network relationships. .

Familiarity with other members in a professional network may also influence a decision to join a professional association. Colleagues and professional contacts were instrumental in offering association information to 29% of the respondents, and these social links may expedite the assimilation process for new members. As prospective members evaluate various professional networks, these informal networks can be pivotal in influencing perceptions about various benefits provided by a professional association (Table 2)

Potential members also tend to evaluate both instrumental and expressive benefits offered by a professional organization and member age, gender, and management level appear to influence membership decisions. Only 6% of the respondents in the study were in senior management or executive positions so opportunities for advancement (0.49,  $p < 0.05$ ) and reputation of the professional association (0.011,  $p < 0.05$ ) was an important consideration for those in mid-level and entry level management positions. Professional associations which are well regarded in particular industry and which offer members opportunities for advancement in the industry may be well positioned to attract new members. Likewise, organizations with a strong vision for the future also appear to be attractive based on member age (0.034,  $p < 0.05$ ). Over 58% of the respondents in the study were under age 30 and preferred organizations with an ability to communicate a strong message about the future of the organization. Gender also tends to play a role in influencing decisions to join a professional organization with access to network contacts (0.021,  $p < 0.05$ ) rated more highly by females than males in the study.

These findings echo previous studies which suggest that hierarchical position may limit the range of professional contacts for women within the organizational context, and professional associations may offer another channel to expand their career network (Table 3).

**TABLE 3**  
**INSTRUMENTAL AND EXPRESSIVE FACTORS INFLUENCING SELECTION DECISIONS**

	<b>Management</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>
	<b>Level</b>		
<b>Advancement</b>	0.49*	0.285	0.349
<b>Recognition</b>	0.255	0.89	0.627
<b>Visibility</b>	0.266	0.143	0.716
<b>Reputation</b>	0.011*	0.758	0.137
<b>Importance</b>	0.481	0.754	0.328
<b>Network Contacts</b>	0.13	0.021*	0.146
<b>Inclusions</b>	0.868	0.176	0.519
<b>Personal Support</b>	0.889	0.56	0.398
<b>Understanding</b>	0.693	0.885	0.12
<b>Resources</b>	0.585	0.07	0.08
<b>Assistance</b>	0.28	0.158	0.818
<b>Cooperation</b>	0.883	0.217	0.252
<b>Information</b>	0.376	0.491	0.887
<b>Vision</b>	0.983	0.495	0.034*
<b>Excellence</b>	0.47	0.885	0.788
<b>Ethical Framework</b>	0.918	0.151	0.505
<b>Self -Concept</b>	0.839	0.199	0.051
<b>Challenge /Learn</b>	0.603	0.52	0.538
<b>Involvement</b>	0.683	0.501	0.487
<b>Gratitude</b>	0.473	0.55	0.92

$\alpha = 0.05^*$

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS**

While most professional associations promote instrumental and expressive benefits to potential members, these findings suggest that age, gender, and management level do play a role in selection decisions. During the early phase of career development, it is particularly important for associations to promote instrumental benefits related to potential career advancement in the profession. Developing mentoring and networking opportunities via conventional seminars as well as online discussion boards can provide a forum for members to exchange ideas, validate professional role expectations, and understand emerging trends and professional norms in the early phase of their careers.

Organizational reputation also seems to play a role in selection decisions as members evaluate various associations. Professional associations which are highly regarded within an industry or which have an established reputation within the network appear to be very attractive to members in the early and mid-career phase. While the scope of this study limits discussion on those factors such as board structure or network ties which enhance organizational reputation, it is important for leaders of professional associations to understand those factors which influence member perceptions about organizational legitimacy and reputation within the larger environmental context.

As importantly, it is essential to understand how member composition influences organizational reputation and the subsequent selection decisions of female members. Network contacts influenced females to join a professional association, however, is not clear if the range of potential contacts or the status of current members are more salient factors influencing this selection decision. In promoting attributes which appeal to diverse members, it is important to understand how connections with peers in multiple organizations as well as access to high status members influence these membership decisions.

Although expressive factors such as involvement or inclusion did not significantly influence membership decisions, it is interesting to note that 70% of the respondents learned about their professional association from either their employer or a colleague. Many of these established relationships may provide an immediate sense of inclusion for new members and expedite the assimilation process in an association. Since several studies suggest that an absence of social support or lack of familiarity with current members may pose a potential barrier in selection decisions, it is important to assess how existing relationship links influence member recruitment and integration. Likewise, it is also important to understand how these relational networks influence member satisfaction with association benefits and member retention.

Many of the employers in this study promoted professional associations and provided reimbursement for association dues. While some respondents did pay for continuing education and career services, it appears that some of these costs were also absorbed by employers or offered as ancillary member benefits. In contrast, time constraints can potentially limit participation in an association with 39% of respondents unable to attend annual meetings and other respondents noting time constraints and scheduling of meetings as factors influencing their membership decision. In evaluating a membership decision, it appears that most potential members give serious consideration to these factors and association leaders may need to expand meeting options. In conjunction with their annual meeting, associations can concurrently sponsor webinars which allow members to interact with other participants or download annual meeting events at some future time. Associations can also customize programs for regional affiliates to enhance networking opportunities as well as develop online materials to support professional competencies. Since time constraints can influence member involvement, designing alternate forums for member exchange are important considerations in developing association events.

While the findings of this study largely reflect attributes that appeal to members in the early or mid-phase of their careers, it is also important to understand those attributes which impact membership decisions in the latter phase of a career. In particular, it is important to assess those attributes that contribute to retention rates of members over the span of their career since current members appear to be pivotal in recruiting the next generation of members and sustaining the viability of the association.

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