

FEATURE  
STORY

# Learning for a Lifetime

## The Role of Associations to Shape the Future Workforce

2019 Think Tank



Think Tank  
Facilitator

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Professional and trade associations have served as pillars in the architecture of adult learning for over a century. Those working in similar fields began to document best practices, challenges and progress. They began to convene at meetings and summits, traveling across great distances to share knowledge and information, long before today's comforts of rapid transit and technology.

The FSAE Foundation created a Think Tank model to ideate around topics critical to the future of associations. In October 2019, a group of executive leaders convened in Daytona Beach to explore professional learning – where we've been, where we are and where we need to advance.

Key takeaways and actions that every association should implement include:

Identify who the learners are

Assess learning needs

Analyze job tasks and skill gaps

Map career trajectories for advancement

Create the need to learn

Utilize persuasion to fulfill learning needs

Vary learning approaches – auditory, visual, gamification

Make learning available 24/7/365

Engage members and at large community/industry in content development

Relate content to the learner

Incentivize learner progress

Build value in learning as an investment

Add referral programs to learning products

Transparent evaluations and feedback of sessions, courses, presenters (i.e. yelp ratings)

Conduct a competitive analysis

Orchestrate a learning strategy prior to purchasing tools and technologies

Recruit qualified staff to implement the learning strategies

Notice that none of the items listed specify conferences, online learning or learning technologies. However, most time, energy and resources are spent on implementing traditional learning products and services and most associations generate non-dues revenue through a portfolio of learning products and services.

It is true that traditional conference models create the continued sense of community for those able to attend. Face-to-face events often become a membership value driver and often are the main identity of the organization in addition to being a major source of revenue. However, some associations lose focus by not calculating the time, resources, energy and investment by the actual percentage of the profession that utilize this format for learning.

Examples:

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Staff spend 90% of their time building learning products used by 20% (or less) of total membership.

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Marketing messages are focused on early-bird rate instead of career capacity building.

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Planning committees utilize the same presenters with fair reviews and dated content because those are who submit session ideas.

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New, shiny technologies are implemented at high cost and low return on investment

*Divide the actual total costs of purchase and implementation of a conference mobile app by the total number of actual users*

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Online learning is relatively new to associations starting from utilization in higher education in the late 1990s. The ability to reach learners at their time and point of need has never been more critical due to changing demographics, competition for content attention and the dynamics of the workforce. However, implementing a successful online learning program for adult professional learning can fail due to: poor technology specifications and selections; lack of qualified staff to implement, maintain and manage; lack of quality content to engage learners; poor business planning and pricing models; and, misunderstood marketing campaigns.

The future of both face-to-face and online learning has incredible potential for associations to remain a pillar in career development. Emerging competition is growing through higher education colleges and universities that seek non-traditional learners and have capacity to entice alumni, business and industry to their programs. Employers seek qualified candidates and will build their own training programs to match needs. Partnerships between associations,

**“Is your association ready to take a fresh look at lifelong learning for your members and the industries that you serve?”**

K12, colleges and employers already exist in many industries and could expand drastically driven by data and analytics that match competencies and skills to fill job vacancies in exact regions/states/cities.

Is your association ready to take a fresh look at lifelong learning for your members and the industries that you serve? Are you ready to realign the resources needed to explore, research and strategize a fresh portfolio of learning products? Will you serve your mission to enhance the profession's skills and abilities into the next century?

**Excited to learn more? Read the full FSAE Foundation Think Tank white paper.**  
[www.fsae.org/think-tank](http://www.fsae.org/think-tank)

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