

# Professional Practice Corner

## Professional Associations Build and Enhance Careers

By Larry J. Smith, PE, CCM

When asked to speak to about the benefits of professional associations or tips on how to build one's career I think of advice received over 20 years ago.

***“Everyone must realize that good career management comes out of your own pocket.”***

There will be times when you'll need to invest in your own training and development and to make the time necessary to build and sustain a promising career.

Today, too many young and old professionals are missing a great opportunity to build and enhance their careers through networking with professional associations.

As a public sector professional interfacing with public and private sector professionals and as a leader in professional groups I hear common questions and excuses for not accepting the simple advice given to me that could improve your own career:

### **“What's In It For Me?”**

When first suggested that Civil Engineering students join ASCE I also wondered, “What's in it for me?” One of my college mentors Professor Grant Borg<sup>1</sup> was well known for his hundreds of plaques and certificates documenting his successful career. His advice was this: “Students need to belong to organizations that represent and set standards for their profession.”

That advice seemed sound, so I joined the ASCE Student Chapter, thus beginning my first experience with a professional association. Students were afforded access to a small office where informal study groups were formed. Over time, networks and friendships were developed that have lasted for over 35 years.

Networking helped develop the knowledge and skills needed to be a better engineer, project manager, and leader in the community. It encouraged preparation for the EIT examination and as graduation approached it provided job opportunities and multiple job interviews.

My first job taught me that I had much to learn. Colleagues convinced me to continue working full time and to pursue a graduate degree. Graduate school was full of many full professionals and part-time students. Their “real world” experience and networking in the classroom gave our classroom experience new meaning.

An investment in higher education was just the beginning of my networking. “Networking is the infrastructure of your career”<sup>2</sup> John Doehring<sup>3</sup> says networking “is engineering.” Doehring stresses that “networking has the ability to contribute to personal and professional success.”

Networking builds relationships. Professional associations give you access to other professionals who may have work experience themselves.

The career path of most successful engineers follows three segments:<sup>4</sup> Entry level, developing technical capabilities; Middle Management developing human relationship skills; and, Executive, providing leadership and vision for others. Professional associations teach young professionals to develop soft skills that enhance professional experience. Networking helps develop and gather information about professional practice. And finally, networking keeps us current with trends and how to prepare for change.

Professional affiliations continually motivate and recognize personal achievements outside of the workplace. Professional organizations provide experience and opportunities in leadership. Individuals volunteer or sometimes get appointed to lead. Any small measure of success is noticed and rewarded by peers. Your next opportunity may come when asked to run for office or being appointed to serve in a vacant seat. Each opportunity brings a new reward from serving and representing your profession.

As careers progress and we pass onto the next segment, our interests take us in many different directions. We are often rewarded by moving up to a higher level of responsibility. Many professionals choose to join more than one affiliation as friends or connections encourage participation. Each affiliation brings a new network and new opportunities for growth and professional development.

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### ***“Networking is the infrastructure of your career”***

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As your career advances, continually ask yourself what was your intention for joining a professional affiliation, what were your expectations, and is membership in this organization helping you with your goals in the future. Professional associations do not exist to simply serve you. They are vehicles for you to work through to achieve personal or common professional goals.

Organizations need innovative thinkers to stimulate action up and down the chain. Innovation is created by reaching outside our day-to-day contacts and breaking traditions that continually produce unwanted results. Professional associations expose new ideas and concepts often creating innovation and learning.

Our profession is in transition. New faces in engineering and construction should be recognized. They should be given opportunities for increasing roles and responsibilities.

If you join, you'll get out what you put in. Don't join out of the sense of loyalty or obligation to the association but rather what's in it for you. "What's in it for me" is a rewarding career; a promising future and helping others understand and develop their future careers.

### "Membership Fees and Time Commitment"

Eva Kaplan-Leiserson<sup>5</sup> states "In a struggling economy, spending time on tasks that don't directly contribute to your company's bottom line may seem unwise. However, some argue that's exactly what you should do, at least in regard to one activity: networking.

Networking builds relationships, promotes business and provides new opportunities. Picture yourself as a laid off professional who worked at the same company or just a few firms. You figure it's always easy to reconnect to your old network of professional colleagues and business associates. One problem, you didn't have the time or the money to join or maintain those networks. You now find you've reached a dead end.

Think you can't afford the dues? Most employers will cover the cost of membership in a professional association or the cost of professional development offered by a professional association. You could join and let your voice be heard and counted.

Think your life is too busy, your job too demanding and your family obligations are consuming all your free time? Find a committee that interests you. Attend some meetings to stay in touch with your colleagues. Get out and let off some steam. Meetings are a great place to exchange ideas, find out what others are doing and to learn something new. Most of your colleagues face the same challenges you face. It's important to network with others outside of your place of employment to gain a broader perspective.

### "To Join or Not to Join?"

"Good career management comes from your own pocket." Professional associations exist for the benefit of the individuals within that organization. Like most things, just joining a professional organization will not give you opportunity to enjoy its greatest potential. Becoming active, on the other hand, can open many doors for you during your career. What one gets out of an organization can often be traced to what one puts into and organization.

As I assess my career I can summarize that networking is for those with peers that are running on the track as fast as you. One thing you'll gain from a network group is "energy." Whether you're looking for professional development or leadership development you'll find some excellent reasons for joining a professional affiliation. Become involved in professional associations – remain excited about your career.

Today, I remain active in ASCE, CMAA and SAME. I've found a common relationship between these organizations and my role as a professional engineer and a professional Construction Manager. **CM**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Civil Engineering, University of Utah

<sup>2</sup>Terry Foster, P.E., F.NSPE, professor in the Department of Construction Systems at University of Nebraska—Lincoln

<sup>3</sup>Senior vice president at A/E Consulting an A/E and research firm

<sup>4</sup>William Marcuson III, PhD, P.E., ASCE president 2006-7

<sup>5</sup>"Building Your Career Infrastructure" – NSPE, November 2008

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We welcome submissions for the Professional Practice Corner. Please send your ideas to [John McKeon at \[jmckeon@cmaanet.org\]\(mailto:jmckeon@cmaanet.org\)](mailto:John.McKeon@cmaanet.org).

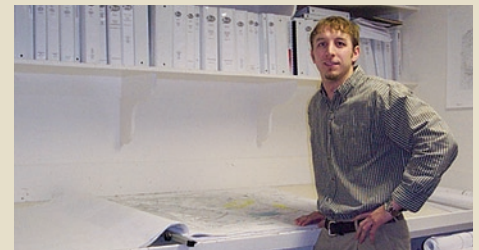
## Scholarship Spotlight—Where are they now?

CMAA's 2003 academic scholarship winner Brandon Lebo now works as a project manager for Lobar, Inc. in Dillsburg, Pennsylvania. Lobar does approximately \$380 million dollars worth of work a year in Pennsylvania, New York, and Maryland.

Lebo earned the job after two summers as an intern while in college. The position allowed him to start managing work immediately. To date, he has managed projects with contracts up to \$13 million, including new construction and renovation of educational buildings, as well as two new prison facilities. As project

manager, he is responsible for project scheduling, billings, subcontractor management, cost monitoring, change order preparation, RFI submission, and other tasks.

"The involvement and generosity of organizations such as the CMAA has played a major role in my personal and professional development," said Lebo. "Organizations that take an active role in education and business development through scholarships, seminars, and conventions are truly dedicated to bettering the construction industry.



"Receiving the first CMAA National Scholarship and attending the National Conference in San Diego was easily the most memorable experience of my college career and I am truly thankful to the CMAA for that experience."

Learn more about CMAA Foundation at <http://cmaanet.org/cmaa-foundation>. **CM**