

# PROSPECTS ARE ENDLESS

By Carla Kalogeridis

Whether they fell into it or chose it, MSAE's 2013 Rising Leaders are keen on the future of the association sector in Michigan.

**A**ssociation Impact caught up with the four very dynamic MSAE Rising Leader honorees and captured their perspectives on what it's like to be a young professional working in associations.

Here are the insightful and often enlightening comments from Josh Lord, MBA, director of membership and strategic initiatives for the Michigan Dental Association; Amanda Toy, CMP, CTA, association sales manager, Greater Lansing Convention & Visitors Bureau; Allison Beers, owner of Events North; and Aaron Wolowiec, MSA, CAE, CMP, CTA, founder and president of Event Garde, LLC.

## Q: WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO A CAREER IN THE ASSOCIATION SECTOR?

**LORD:** I was first attracted to a job — not necessarily a career — in the association sector. But, that all changed as my perspective evolved during my six years within the profession.

A job with the Michigan Manufacturers Association was open at the time I was searching for new opportunities; I applied for it primarily because I found value in the prospect to not only work for a respected organization in a role that was well suited to my skillset, but also to help advance the interests of an industry that is critical to Michigan's future.

Association professionals share a similar passion for serving others and a desire to propel causes that shape industries and professions in ways that are only accomplished through collective action. Moreover, I've been attracted to building a career within the association sector because there are ample opportunities for members of

Generation X and Y to become top-level leaders, given Baby Boomers' exodus into retirement.

**WOLOWIEC:** I fell into the association sector, too. It wasn't a well thought-out process. After graduation, I needed a job to pay for things, so I started as a receptionist at an association. The manager didn't want to hire me because I was over-qualified, but I worked my way up to education director. It was the only place I worked, and then I started my own business. It was a terrific way to launch a career.

## Q: DO YOU THINK THE ASSOCIATION SECTOR IN MICHIGAN HAS ENOUGH VIBRANCY, CHALLENGE, AND OPPORTUNITY TO KEEP YOU IN THIS FIELD LONG-TERM?

**LORD:** Without a doubt. MSAE does an incredible job ensuring there's a sense of vibrancy within Michigan's association community. In addition, the onset of the End of Membership as We Know It Era is causing associations throughout the country to re-examine their relevancy and ability to create value for members. An outcome of the current circumstances

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**TOY:** As a grad from MSU's School of Hospitality, I found myself prepared to be successful. My education set the foundation for life-long learning, and I am pleased to work alongside association staff. For the most part, they are employees who strive to excel and enjoy their work.

**BEERS:** I have worked with associations since I entered the meeting and event management industry. I love the diversity of the work we get to do and learning about each client, their unique industry, and their needs. It makes work more fun!

is that there are plenty of challenges that will foster opportunities for the next generation of leaders to reinvent associations.

There's definitely a shift occurring within the association sector that will require years of effort from leaders who are committed to keeping membership organizations relevant and solvent, and I'm looking forward to remaining within the profession for decades to come.

**TOY:** Associations need to be sure they are dynamic, applying the latest trends and taking care of their associates' personal and professional needs. Today's emerging



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professionals want to be educated by peers and mentors and also want to be sure they have plenty of personal time as well. We work to live, not live to work.

**BEERS:** I work with corporate, social, and nonprofit clients. My clients are diverse enough to sustain the association market and their needs. It has kept me working in this industry for the last 12 years so far, and I hope that will continue.

The support the associations receive from organizations like MSAE and their associations in their individual markets helps them continue to grow and provide a foundation for stability and support.

**WOLOWIEC:** I consult around the country, and my business started outside Michigan. But through MSAE volunteer work and helping with the CMP courses, I’ve seen that there is so much need in Michigan. So now, I am specifically looking for opportunities to help in Michigan, where I feel responsible to give back. Associations are doing great things, and I want to be a part of it.

**Q: HOW IMPORTANT IS VOLUNTEER WORK TO YOU AND TO OTHER LEADERS OF YOUR GENERATION? WHERE DO YOU VOLUNTEER AND WHY DO YOU GIVE YOUR TIME THERE?**

**WOLOWIEC:** It’s important to give back, and we have a responsibility to give back as much as possible. Lots of people in my generation feel the same way.

In addition, rising professionals are looking for opportunities to have new experiences that they can then apply to their work careers. As a volunteer, you can chair committees and projects, or manage million-dollar budgets — things that most people in my generation don’t

get a chance to do in their regular jobs.

**LORD:** The volunteer leadership opportunities I find to be valuable are mission-driven. They offer an opportunity to make an immediate impact, link directly to the organization’s strategic direction and mission, and are structured in a way that recognizes the value of technology and limitations on one’s time.

However, I’ve become frustrated by the status quo approach to volunteer participation and management. I believe most organizations have recognized the lack of volume in their leadership pipelines, but haven’t yet taken the steps to realign their volunteer structures and systems to embrace the changes that have arrived. In my opinion, organizations need to focus on transitioning from committees to workgroups and taskforces, and seeking out volunteers based on skill set and

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subject matter expertise.

Moreover, organizations must focus on facilitating work to be done digitally and in project teams — and letting go of the paradigm that volunteer work is accomplished by meeting around a table for a few hours, three to four times

per year, with a group that is likely not comprised of the best talent and most engaged individuals.

Nonetheless, volunteering is critically important to the health, stability, and longevity of the association sector. At the same time, I hope Generation X and Y leaders are patient enough to allow for associations to catch up to today’s realities.

**BEERS:** I have been volunteering since I was a child. My mom took me along to everything she volunteered for, and I learned by watching her get involved in our community and church.

I do find that our generation makes time for volunteering as a part of life. I coordinate the Young Professionals Program for the Traverse City Area Chamber of Commerce, and a huge part of our programming centers around donating time back to our community.

I am on the board of our Rotary Club in Traverse City and also Rotary Charities. I love the diversity of the areas of service that Rotary offers, and as a young mom, the ability that it provides for me to involve my children.

I serve on the board of the Downtown Traverse City Association. My office is downtown, and the vibrancy of downtown Traverse City is something I’m very passionate about. I am the president of the Cherry Festival Foundation. It’s wonderful to help an institution like the National

Cherry Festival give back to the Traverse City community and build long-term sustainability. And, as a former board member of Big Brothers Big Sisters, I still volunteer at their events.

I feel like I have been blessed to be involved with these amazing

organizations. My advice is to get involved with something that you're passionate about and treat each volunteer opportunity as if it's a job. Do what you say you're going to do and give 100 percent.

**TOY:** Young people today feel connected to their surroundings and their community. Giving back is a way to keep our communities alive and vibrant. I focus my volunteer efforts on church activities, assisting with retreat and conference planning. Outside of that, I work on governmental and MSAE committees to increase exposure to the world of associations to students and young professionals.

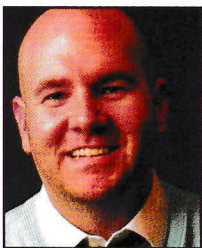
There is an association for everything. Young people want to invest in what they love, which is why I foresee tremendously passionate leaders for tomorrow's associations.

**Q: WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME KEY LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR FROM YOUR WORK IN THE ASSOCIATION COMMUNITY?**

**BEERS:** As an outside meeting planner, I have the helpful advantage of seeing many different associations and see how their events and meetings function. From this vantage point, I can see what things worked well and apply them to other clients' meetings and events. I love serving as a connector of ideas to the association industry from one client to the next.

**LORD:** The biggest lesson I've learned thus far is the importance of being connected to peers outside of one's office. The best advice and ideas tend to come from those who aren't directly affiliated with one's employer, and there's an incredible amount of knowledge and expertise one can tap into by looking to MSAE's community for support.

Also, one always needs to pay attention to societal trends because they shape members' expectations for service, participation, and support; there's considerable risk in not responding to marketplace developments. In addition,



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**— AARON WOLOWIEC, CAE, CMP**

the best opportunities to innovate surface when one scans the environment and identifies links between unarticulated needs, an organization's core competencies, existing orthodoxies, and discontinuities.

**TOY:** No matter how hard people work, they can always use fresh insight. People get stuck in their day-to-day routines far too often. Stepping back, asking tough questions, and listening to what really needs to be accomplished is the key to success. Asking questions is far more valuable than running your mouth.

**WOLOWIEC:** For me, it's the opportunity to see and learn from so many different organizations. Often, an association professional only sees their own business, their own problems and challenges. I've benefitted from seeing many different people's problems and processes. I get to see what works and what doesn't and then modify that for some of my clients.

We can all benefit from learning about each other's outcomes. Sometimes we get into the firefighter syndrome, focused on putting out the next fire and forgetting to think strategically. If we focused less on putting out fires and more on strategy, we would be doing a much greater service to our members.

**Q: IF YOU HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO MENTOR A NEW GRADUATE LOOKING FOR A CAREER, WOULD YOU ADVISE THEM TO LOOK INTO ASSOCIATIONS?**

**TOY:** Before I advised them, I'd ask about their passion. If they like to communicate with others, work as a team, and provide quality customer service, they would be a great fit for an association. Associations aren't right for everyone, but they are perfect for some. It means knowing if you have

what it takes to help an organization reach its goals and help create a roadmap for its future success.

**WOLOWIEC:** I have already mentored people to look for jobs in associations because you can be what you want to be in associations. You can wear many different hats — membership, fundraising, education — you get to own your career. Explore! See what you like doing; see what you're good at.

**BEERS:** I love recommending that our interns seek employment with associations because there is such an opportunity to learn about a new industry, use their skillset, and also to jump in and help out in other areas in the office where they might not get an opportunity. It's such a wonderful, tight-knit network of professionals. I love to see that kind of support system for a young person entering the industry.

**LORD:** I would advise a new graduate to pursue a career within the association sector because of the once-in-a-generation opportunity to help shape how a sector is going to operate and remain viable for the coming decades. New association professionals and those who are already working in the field from Generation X and Y will have the ability to redefine associations in ways that have never been explored and at a level that is unprecedented.

When taken in combination with the amount of turnover that's poised to occur because of the Baby Boomer transition, the prospects for young professionals within the association sector are endless, and the magnitude of change that will be created is simply unimaginable. ♦

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