



Earning a CAE: One Candidate's Experience

By

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John B. McHugh and Liz Novak, CAE, are frequent collaborators on association and publishing content.

JM: What prompted you to seek the CAE at mid-career?

LN: It seemed like the next logical step for me, as my job has evolved from managing editor to marketing director to more of a deputy. I decided to sit for the December 2017 exam because I knew I was close to the required number of CAE credits in order to qualify to take the exam and I also knew that 27.5 of those credits would expire in the next year or two. I also felt that the marketing team we have in place now is strong (a graphic designer and a marketing manager report to me) and that I could rely on them if I needed to be away or otherwise disengaged temporarily in order to study.

JM: Tell us about the application process. What tips do you have to assist the aspiring CAE in the application process?

LN: When I first downloaded the application from the ASAE website, I was completely intimidated. In addition to the information you'd expect to provide (name, address, employer, payment method, and so on), it asked for an accounting of every CAE credit I've earned. That accounting includes date, presenter, presenter's organization, sponsoring organization (i.e., if ASAE sponsored a webinar), a full description, and the number of CAE credits associated with it. I had completed some programs that had a substantial number of CAE credits associated with them, but I also had completed many webinars which only earn 1 or 1.5 credits. Fortunately, I saved all my registration information and all the post-webinar emails that included a certificate of completion, so I was able to find all of that information, but it was time-consuming. Also, just to be sure, I printed every certificate of completion and included it with my application. I don't know if that's what a typical CAE candidate does, but it made me feel better. In general, I treated the application process like I do most large projects: divided it into more bite-size pieces and work through it all as I was able to fit it into my schedule.

In retrospect, I wish I'd filled in the application as I earned the credits. I'm doing that now for my CAE renewal. [Side note: The CAE designation must be renewed every three years. A minimum of 40 CAE credits are required in order to renew, plus there's a fee.]

JM: From when your CAE application was accepted, how much time did you have to prepare for the exam?

LN: I didn't wait to find out whether my application was accepted before I began preparing. The application was due around mid-September. I'd purchased the books the previous May and began reading over the summer. My study group started meeting on September 20 and the first thing we learned was that 1) there's a LOT of reading involved and 2) it's never too early to

start. My advice to anyone who is considering taking the exam is to get the books, get the study guide, and start reading.

JM: What role did your on-the-job experience in association management play in your CAE preparation and sitting for the exam?

LN: Having the kind of exposure I've had to so many different facets of association management made all the difference in the world to me during the CAE process. Those who are either already CSEs (Chief Staff Executive) or have a deputy-like role are at an advantage compared to those who are more focused on one particular aspect of association management.

JM: You participated in a CAE study group. How did you find the study group that was right for you? Explain how your study group worked?

LN: I looked into the online study group presented by the Michigan Society of Association Executives. It's a great program but it's expensive. The Kansas City Society of Association Executives presents a great program and is local, so I joined that. They have something like a 92 percent pass rate, so I felt like I was in good hands. Also, it helped me get to know some of the other local association executives, whether they were leading the discussions or participating in it.

Our study group met for eight consecutive weeks, two hours per meeting. We had our reading assignments ahead of time. The study guide has example test questions at the end of each domain, so we all took those tests on our own and used our time together to go through the study guide to review and discuss the questions. One of the most helpful things to me was to go through each of the answers and hear the group discussing why the wrong answers were wrong.

JM: What was the value of a CAE study group in the preparation process?

LN: When I was thinking about joining the study group, I wasn't convinced it would help, but I turned into a believer. I liked hearing the different perspectives from the other people in the group. It also helped to know that I wasn't alone on this journey. My study group was very supportive at every step of the way.

JM: What strategy did you use during the exam?

LN: The exam is composed of 200 multiple choice questions and you must complete it in four hours. I knew from my practice tests that I had enough time to finish it, so I went through the questions methodically and finished in 2-1/2 hours. That first time through it, I was looking for the "right" answer. I used the rest of my time to go through it again and figure out why the other possible answers weren't correct. I think I ended up changing four responses that second time through. I did use the entire four-hour time period, but I knew this approach was best for me.

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Liz Novak began her publishing career in the early 1990s at *PC Magazine*. After enjoying 17 years as a magazine editor for various technical magazines, and seeing the impact of the internet on the publishing industry, she returned to school and earned her MBA. After graduation, her freshly minted MBA landed her a job as magazine editor for the flagship publication of the International Association of Plastics Distribution (IAPD). Six months into the job, she added Marketing Director to her title and has relished the opportunities that combining the association's publishing and marketing departments have afforded her. Contact: www.linkedin.com/in/lnovak.

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