



"Practical Problem-Solving Advice for Publishers"

Is There a Job for You in Association Publishing?

By

John B. McHugh and David Beacom

© 2020 by John B. McHugh and David Beacom

Association Publishing Is More Vital than Ever

In 2020, a worldwide pandemic laid waste to two leading revenue sources for associations: conferences and other forms of in-person learning. For many groups, these declines also imperiled membership dollars. Only publishing remained an effective tool for associations looking to keep making an impact and bringing in revenue.

Thousands of associations and other nonprofit organizations—including professional societies, museums, and foundations—are in the business of publishing print books, monographs, magazines, journals, and a wide array of digital content offerings. For those of you already working in association publishing, this comes as no surprise. For you, this paper will serve mainly as a refresher and an industry overview designed to be helpful if you are in the market for a new job.

But much of what follows may well be *terra incognita* for those who have worked only in commercial publishing. Hence, the goal of this article is to highlight the primary differences between the commercial and association publishing sectors, in support of, our argument that those with a commercial background should seriously consider careers in associations as well.

A Few Words about Association "Volunteers"

"Volunteer" is a very familiar term for those of us in the association publishing world. However, other readers may not be aware that, in this context, the term "volunteer" refers to anyone who is not a staff member and who is (usually) not paid for their services to the association. A volunteer is typically an association member who contributes time, expertise, and vision to programs that fulfill the organization's mission or strategic goals. All elected officers are volunteers, for example, from the national president down to the treasurer of a local chapter.

Association bylaws often allow volunteers to serve in influential roles for the organization's various programs, including certification, conferences, education, membership, and publications.

Specific to publications, volunteers frequently serve as authors, editors, or reviewers. And, in some of these roles, they may set aside their traditional unpaid status in favor of honoraria and even royalties.

The volunteer component is a critical difference between association publishing and its commercial counterpart. And that difference, which confers both advantages and hazards, needs to be grasped early in one's career in an association.

Advantages? Easy access to the best and brightest subject-matter experts in a given field, who are also likely to be eager and effective evangelists for association publications.

Hazards? Volunteers usually lack business knowledge or experience, and they frequently exhibit certain looseness when it comes to schedules and deadlines.

All that said, a well-utilized volunteer workforce is nearly always a far greater boon than bane. But reaching that happy state requires both skill and practice.

Is Association Publishing for You?

Publishing skills acquired in the commercial sector are directly transferable to association publishing. It matters not whether you are a magazine editor, book acquisitions editor, marketing manager, digital specialist, or any other kind of publishing professional, you will find much of the association publishing environment an easy fit. However, there are significant differences between publishing's commercial and association sectors. And you need to keep these differences in mind if contemplating a switch.

Given that associations are generally member-driven, political sensitivity and skill are crucial to striking the balance between producing financially viable publications and accommodating the needs and ideas of your members and other volunteers. Again, such volunteers are often powerful within the organization and influential in the field. One of our colleagues put it this way: "You manage the business aspects of publishing, and the volunteers drive policy." That is true, so far as it goes. But, in actual practice, the successful association publishing program is more of a balancing act, an organic partnership between members and staff. If you are empathetic and have good judgment and listening skills, you will soon master the political nuances of associations and their volunteers.

Over the years, we have found that association publishing culture differs from that of its commercial counterparts in the following broad ways:

- Associations often tend to be risk-averse.
- They generally take longer to make decisions, not least because of volunteer involvement.
- Too often, associations fail to maximize revenue because they lack a clear mission for their publishing business. In fact, even thinking about a publishing program *as a business* (needing investment of human and capital resources) initially represents a real stretch for many associations.

- Micromanagement by volunteers (who “just want to help”) is not uncommon. Most important, it must be vigorously controlled and thoughtfully redirected.
- When it comes to your own finances, associations typically lack the financial incentives that are widely found in commercial publishing: for example, bonuses and other performance-based reward structures.

More broadly: Overall pay tends to be slightly lower in associations than in commercial publishing, but the “fringe” benefits are usually far more generous. For example, health-care support and workplace flexibility tend to be outstanding. Some associations still sponsor defined-benefit plans (pensions). More commonly, association “matching” contributions to 401(k) or 403(b) retirement accounts tend to dwarf what’s offered in commercial firms.

As an executive, you are, of course, expected to earn a “profit” (surplus) if you are in charge of an association publishing program. However, you’re not likely to be subject to the unremitting bottom-line pressure prevalent in commercial publishers.

This is because, for the most part, association executives tend to view people more as an asset than as a cost. As a result, associations less frequently undergo the massive reductions in workforce so often experienced inside commercial publishers. Perhaps best of all, the likelihood of losing your leadership role in a sale of your group to another company is tiny to the point of vanishing.

Interviewing Tips for Jobs in Association Publishing

Most job interview skills are the same for both commercial and association publishing. However, there are a few key differences. In association publishing, as in commercial publishing, there is usually an interview hierarchy, with a preliminary phone discussion before a possible invitation for an in-person interview.

Each interview is important. If someone takes the time to interview you on the phone, and ultimately in person, you have made the first cut in the selection process. Namely, your resume shows that you are, at a minimum, technically qualified for the job. But then the real learning begins—and on both sides of the conversation.

Every interview is ultimately an interpersonal test, which sets out to answer the following questions:

- Does the candidate truly possess the knowledge and experience the position demands?
- Do the association executives serving as interviewers appear to understand how the position fits into and interacts with the wider organization? Do they seem committed to the growth and success of the organization overall and to the specific activity under discussion?
- Do all parties to the conversation appear to demonstrate a strong work ethic, reliable judgment, a clear sense of fairness and equity, good humor, generosity, and tolerance?
- Overall, do the candidate’s personality and approach seem like a good “fit” for the organizational culture?

- Most fundamentally, as the conversation unfolds: does the exchange begin to “feel right” for all parties?
- Would all concerned plausibly look forward to working together?

Screening Candidates for Association Publishing Jobs

When we interview candidates, we suggest that they be prepared to do *at least* the following to ensure a successful experience:

- *Demonstrate a Basic Familiarity with the Association/Society* Be prepared to ask questions that show your interest in the employer’s organization. These days, it is inexcusable not to know a good deal about a prospective employer—given the wealth of information available online, including annual reports, mission statements, member magazines and newsletters, and book catalogs. Also an association’s tax returns (IRS 990) can be deeply informative about the organization’s financial health and salary levels.. Be sure to learn what non-publishing products and services are offered, including conferences, certifications, symposia, etc.
- *Cultivate Your Listening Abilities* The ability to listen is a must for success in any organization, and it’s even more important in an association—where there is nonstop exchange with members, volunteers, and chapters and committees.
- ** Demonstrate Logical Thinking and the Ability to Clearly Describe Your Reasoning* Logical, orderly thinking is the key to success on the job. Even more vital is the ability to explain the logic of your reasoning or position on an issue.
- *Show the Ability to Think Analytically* This is a close cousin to logical thinking. In an interview, many questions may not actually have a right or wrong answer. They are often posed simply to allow you to display evidence that you followed an analytical process to arrive at an insightful answer.
- *Practice Succinctness* Long-winded answers that are short on substance will inevitably get you negative marks. Direct answers are always the best. If you don’t know the answer to a question, just say so.
- *Exhibit Candor* Be candid without being apologetic. If you failed at something, explain why. If you don’t understand a question, frankly say as much.
- *Refrain from Bad-mouthing Anyone* Never speak negatively about others, particularly former bosses and colleagues, even if your work history includes association with a difficult colleague or boss. If pressed, fall back on the generic and innocuous, “We just came at some situations differently.”
- *Avoid Evasiveness* If you have long, seemingly unexplained gaps in your employment history, be prepared to fill them in honestly. For example: “We had two school-age children, and schools closed for the better part of a year during the pandemic” is an explanation that any reasonable employer should be inclined to accept these days.

Back to Basics: The First Three Questions to Answer

You should also be able to answer these three questions before you start any job search:

1. Why are you in the market for a new position?
2. What salary range are you expecting?
3. If need be, are you willing to relocate?

Thanks to Our Reviewers

We wish to thank these association publishing professionals for their contributions to a prior version of this paper:

Robert Burleson, former Membership Manager, The Gerontological Society of America (GSA)

Erin Landis, Vice President of Publications, Scholarly Publishing, American Gastroenterological Association (AGA)

Nancy Modrak, former Director of Publishing, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)

McHugh/Beacom Executive Recruiting Services

John B. “Jack” McHugh and David Beacom are experienced executive recruiters with a specialty in commercial and nonprofit publishing, including college, business, technical, professional, religious, and association publications. Jack McHugh and David Beacom have written extensively about the field of effective publishing management, drawing on their expertise as successful executives of both book and journal programs.

They can assist you in recruiting for a variety of association positions. Tap into their extensive knowledge of the publishing industry to find top talent. Save on recruiting costs since they charge a fixed fee instead of the costly retainer percentage used by most executive search firms.

The McHugh/Beacom full recruiting service for publishing executives offers these advantages:

- Save expensive staff time involved in screening resumes and preliminary interviewing of candidates.
- Use McHugh and Beacom as third-party independent interviewers to validate your own observations.
- Get an expert evaluation of prospects and final candidates.
- Receive a comprehensive interview report customized to your job needs. (This service is available on an a la carte per-interview basis.)
- Save money by paying a flat fee vs. the typical percentage of first-year salary charged by executive search firms.

Free Expert Interviews <http://www.johnbmchugh.com/interviews.htm>

- I-1, *McHugh Interviews McHugh on Consulting*, 2013, revised
- I-11, *McHugh Interviews McHugh on Executive Recruiting*, 2011

The Best Nonprofit Publishing Programs

What should you look for in the best association publishing programs? We asked, “What characteristics separate successful association publishers from the rest of the pack?” Our long discussions on this question led us to write “Twenty Best Practices in Nonprofit Publishing.” <https://tinyurl.com/yaj7m5v2>

John B. McHugh

John B. “Jack” McHugh is a 40-year veteran of the publishing business. Jack has worked as an executive for Houghton Mifflin, Wadsworth, and Saint Mary’s Press. Jack is also an experienced association publishing executive. For seven years, he was Publisher and Director of Programs at the American Society for Quality and, for a two-year period, he served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute. He is a member of the ASAE Advisory Board for Publishing, Communications, and Media Issues and Practices.

Jack’s specialties include association/nonprofit publishing, book publishing, career management, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and permissions, new ventures, organizational design, and social media strategy and policy. Mc Hugh is also the manager of the LinkedIn™ group, **Association** and **Nonprofit Publishing**. McHugh and Liz Novak, of IAPD, have written a series of papers on **Networking Techniques**.

Contact Jack McHugh, 414-351-3056

Email jack@johnbmchugh.com,

Website <http://www.johnbmchugh.com>.

LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/john-b-mchugh-21651811/>

David Beacom

David Beacom is a long-time publishing executive, primarily in the nonprofit sector. For more than 15 years, Beacom served the National Science Teachers Association ([NSTA](#)) as Chief Content Officer (formerly Publisher) and Associate Executive Director. Under his leadership, NSTA evolved from a distributor of other providers’ resources into a leading publisher of books and other content in its marketplace. (Revenue rose from \$1M to \$6M.) Previously, Beacom spent two decades with the National Geographic Society, where he was the lead creative and editorial voice in education—and where he effected a bottom-line turnaround of its school publishing group.

Beacom has contacts and resources across the industry. A few years ago, he served as (elected) President of the Association of Educational Publishers (AEP) and, in that role, was part of the leadership team that negotiated AEP’s merger with the then-AAP School Division. After the merger, he served on the AAP’s Learning Group Executive Council, including one year as co-chair. LinkedIn™ <https://bit.ly/2J5Umf6> David is now collaborating on consulting assignments with John B. McHugh.