

Novak and McHugh on Writing and Careers

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As someone who has spent a career in association and commercial publishing, one of my passions is managing my LinkedIn Group®, *Association and Nonprofit Publishing*, for those working in association and commercial publishing. Over the years, this group has grown slowly, steadily, and organically. I'm careful to screen who joins, as my vision for this group is to have a place where association professionals can ask targeted questions of their peers, without being subject to sales pitches. Through this LinkedIn Group I've been able to expand my network, mentor those new to the association publishing field and, quite often, have been inspired to write articles based on conversations that start in the group and may continue over the phone.

It was through this group that I first met Liz Novak, with whom I've collaborated on a number of articles, mentored, and who has become a friend. Liz was part of the team that reviewed my redesigned website prior to its launch, and during that process she asked me just how many free articles were posted there. I counted and discovered 61 articles: 47 on publishing management and 14 on career management and networking.

Being the curious type – as publishing professionals often are – Liz asked a few more questions about my writing over the years. This conversation sparked the idea for this interview, which we hope will inspire you — or at least give you an idea of some of the free articles waiting for you on my website.

Q-What tips do you have for increasing a person's knowledge of people, behavior, and organizations?

A-It is all about paying attention. Absorb what is going on around you. Observe other people's behavior. Ask yourself questions such as:

- What am I learning?
- How am I growing?
- What are my colleagues' hidden agendas?
- What bosses are worth emulating?
- What bosses are poor leaders?
- Why?

I make it a point to interview the "rank and file"; that is, the staff members doing the "real" work of the organization. Top-level management has the decision-making power in any organization, but it's the lower-level employees who usually know what's really going on. I also interview customer service representatives, because they know what the members' (or customers') needs are and what is on their minds. (Senior executives would do well to emulate this practice, as in many cases this is the only way to gather truly valuable information. The payoff can be substantial.)

The key is to approach people with curiosity, not judgment. Too often our brains are wired to make snap judgments about people and then move on. Train yourself to recognize when you are doing this and make a conscious effort to stop and find out more about the people around

you. Ask them open-ended questions and appropriate follow-up questions. You never know what you might learn and what might inspire you to write.

Q-You have had many jobs in publishing over the years. Which one did you like the most?

A- My favorite job was my experience as a book acquisitions editor. Book acquisitions gives you a front row seat to how books are made: from signing contracts to bound books (or ebooks), the marketing and promotion and, most importantly, working with the author.

This work takes strong people skills. For that reason, I learned a lot about serving people and, yes, sometimes working with demanding and unreasonable authors. Plus, as an acquisitions editor, I worked with—and learned much from -- marketing, sales, finance, production, and distribution.

Signing contracts with potential authors was a valuable experience. Getting an author to agree to a contract takes a combination of preparation, understanding each provision in the book contract, negotiating ability, and patience. Best of all, experience as a book acquisitions editor gives you an overview of the publishing process and how a book publisher functions.

To get an idea of how things have changed—or remained the same — in book acquisitions, read my interview with Claire Reinburg, *Book Acquisitions: An Interview with Claire Reinburg, Director NSTA Press*, 2010, 8 pages, <https://tinyurl.com/rutxtx87>. I also suggest reading my interview with successful college textbook author Gary Porter, <https://tinyurl.com/487z82xt>

Q- Where do you get the ideas for your articles?

A-I worked for a number of commercial publishers and associations before moving in to consulting. In each job, I noticed and absorbed what worked, what didn't work, the most effective leadership styles, and the most efficient processes. The second major source of ideas for new articles has been the questions readers and clients have asked me over the years.

Q-Do you enjoy writing?

A- Yes. I like the process of writing, how words become a sentence, sentences to paragraphs, and so forth. Writing for me is a great way to clarify my thinking. I find writing hard but rewarding work. I love seeing the final product.

Q-You're a prolific writer and many of us have different approaches to writing. Can you describe your writing process?

A-I am a slow writer and it takes a while for me to produce anything that is decent. I start with the idea, and then I write down key words and questions related to that idea. I then spend some time researching the topic to find the answers to my questions. Once I have a handle on the topic, I "speed write" a rough draft. I don't stop to edit during this draft, I just keep writing. I don't stop to judge my writing and think about how the reader will react to my words. I do that later.

I revise this draft three or four times. Once I'm happy with it, I send it to the subject matter experts in my network for their input. After I collect their comments, I revise it and send the polished draft to Bev, my editor. I proofread it twice after Bev makes her edits.

The most useful writing tip I can share with you is this: set aside your best draft for a short amount of time (at least a day or up to a week incubator), then review and revise. Having that

time and distance from it will give you a fresh perspective that is invaluable in revising your work.

Q-What motivated you to write about career management topics?

A- Several reasons sparked my interest in career-related topics. As I reflected on my own career—my wise decisions and my mistakes— I thought these “lessons learned” could be valuable to others. Second, much of what I have written is gleaned from my experience as an executive recruiter. Third, over the last few years, I have mentored several friends, making suggestions to guide them in their career path. I should add that you, Liz, as co-author of our career management articles, have brought your own rich career experience and writing talent as a magazine editor to our articles. http://www.johnbmchugh.com/career_management.htm

Q-You’ve also produced a series of articles about networking. What advice do you have on this topic?

A-I have two things to say about networking. First ... do it! Networking is vital to your career success. Most people will tell you some variation of “it’s not what you know, it’s WHO you know.” Thanks to the power of a robust presence on LinkedIn, if you’re looking for a job at a specific organization, it’s possible that someone in your network will know someone in the network of someone at the organization where you want to work. You can easily reach out to your connection, who will most likely be happy to introduce you to their connection, who is in a position to make an introduction for you.

My second piece of advice is to read the three networking articles written by Liz and me to brush up on your networking skills and/or hear our perspective on the topic.

<https://tinyurl.com/3yc5tzfn>

Q- You seem to have a strong affinity with intellectual property (IP) law. Why have you written so many articles on copyright and permissions?

A-First a confession: I am a geek who finds copyright interesting and, as a result, I have studied the subject for years. Copyright is the bedrock of any publishing business. A knowledge of copyright law and its corollary subjects — fair use and public domain — will enable you as the publisher, and your authors, to determine whether you need to request permission to reprint material you plan to use in your publication. Understanding the doctrine of fair use and determining whether material is in the public domain will provide guidance for using copyrighted material without risking infringement.

In addition, I have a top-notch legal advisor; David Koehser, J.D. Dave has been generous with his time and has co-authored many articles. <http://www.dklex.com/about-david-koehser.html>

Q-What are your favorite books on writing?

A-I have numerous favorites, maybe 25 to 30; in fact, there are so many good ones that I stopped buying them years ago. All have served me well. Here are four of my favorites:

Howard Zinsser, *On Writing Well*. Read Zinsser first; he is the master on this topic. In fact, anything Zinsser teaches about writing is worthwhile considering. If you want to improve your writing, study Zinsser, you can’t go wrong.

Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*. Not a book on writing per se but rather a “mind altering” book to get you in the mood for writing and to help you put your writing in perspective. Read Lamott when you are in a rut and need some inspiration — and a laugh, too.

Patricia E. O’Connor, *Words Fail Me* and *Woe Is I*. Both of O’Connor’s books cover the numerous ways we mess up the English language. Yet we are not as culpable as we think, because English has numerous pitfalls and traps even for the pros. You will enjoy O’Connor’s lighthearted approach as she will not make you feel like you have flunked freshman college composition.

Q-Do you have any other advice on writing?

A-First, “trim the fat,” as if you are eating a steak. Most writers can cut from 25 to 50 percent of what they write. Less is more! You want to make every word count. Second, ask yourself: “Who is my audience?” and “What do I want the reader to think, feel, and conclude after reading what I wrote?”

To be a better writer, you should read widely. Read fiction and nonfiction. Read essayists such as the late Christopher Hitchens. Also worth reading are *Washington Post* columnists Michael Gerson and Dan Balz. Read anything by Joan Didion. Also recommended is the essayist Heather Cox Richardson.

For satire and a laugh, read the late Molly Ivins and Nora Ephron. I am also a big fan of the great satirists Chris Buckley and Carl Hiaasen.

If you are interested in politics, read a journal of opinion such as the *The Nation*, *New Republic*, or *The National Review*. And, of course, you can’t go wrong reading general interest magazines such as *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker*. I also recommend biographies by talented biographers such as Ron Chernow, Walter Isaacson, Jon Krakow, and Jean Edward Smith.

Read fiction. Fiction feeds my imagination and creativity. Great fiction writers use words economically; examples are Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Ernest Hemingway. As you write, keep Hemingway’s advice in mind and “write the truest sentence you know.”

I also have been fortunate to work with several capable co-authors including David Beacom, Harvey Kane, David Koehser, Liz Novak, and Claire Reinburg. My long-time editor, Bev Kolz, has consistently improved the final versions of my articles. I appreciate everything I’ve learned from them and their involvement has always improved my work.

Also of Interest

“McHugh Interviews: McHugh on Consulting, I-1, 2017 <https://tinyurl.com/55u4k63z>

McHugh and Novak Career Management and Networking Articles
http://www.johnbmchugh.com/career_management.htm

Liz Novak, MBA, CAE

Liz Novak has held various roles with the International Association of Plastics Distribution (IAPD) since joining the organization in 2011. She is currently the Director of Advocacy and Publications/Deputy Executive Director. She is responsible for IAPD’s government relations initiatives and political action committee, the editorial content for IAPD’s publications and assists her CEO with responsibilities related to IAPD’s Board of Directors and Executive Committee.

During her tenure at IAPD, she served as Marketing Director for seven years before promoting her protégé to the role. Liz holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from Loyola University of Chicago and an MBA from the Pennsylvania State University Smeal College of Business. She earned her CAE in 2018. Contact: www.linkedin.com/in/lnovak.

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, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and permissions, new ventures, organizational design, and social media strategy and policy. McHugh is also the manager of the LinkedIn™ group, **Association and Nonprofit Publishing**.

McHugh and Liz Novak, of IAPD, have also co-authored 11 articles on career and networking available free at http://www.johnbmchugh.com/career_management.htm .

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