



John B. McHugh, Publishing Consultant
PO Box 170665 • Milwaukee, WI 53217-8056
414-351-3056 • jack@johnbmchugh.com • www.johnbmchugh.com

Job Searching in Association vs. Commercial Publishing: Key Differences and Interviewing Tips

By **John B. McHugh** *Publishing Management Consultant*

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IS THERE A JOB FOR YOU IN ASSOCIATION PUBLISHING?

Thousands of nonprofit organizations, which include associations, societies and foundations, are in the business of publishing books, monographs, magazines, journals, and now a wide array of digital products repackaged from their core products.

For those of you already in association publishing, this paper will serve as a refresher if you are in the market for a new job. Those who have worked in commercial publishing and are interested in exploring opportunities in association publishing will learn about the primary differences between the two publishing sectors.

FIRST...SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT ASSOCIATION "VOLUNTEERS"

Volunteer is a term familiar to 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 not paid for their service to the association.

A volunteer is usually 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, whether they are the president, or the treasurer of a local chapter. Often association bylaws allow for volunteers to serve in leadership roles for the organization's various programs, including certification, conferences, education, membership, and publications.

IS ASSOCIATION PUBLISHING FOR YOU?

Publishing skills acquired in the commercial sector are directly transferable to association publishing. So, whether you are a magazine editor, book acquisitions editor, marketing manager, or digital specialist, you will

easily fit into the association publishing environment since "publishing is publishing." However, a significant difference does exist between the commercial and association sectors, and you need to think about it when considering a switch.

In association publishing there is a critical balance between producing financially viable publications and accommodating the needs and ideas of your members and volunteers, who are often politically powerful. Given that associations are generally member-driven, political sensitivity is crucial to striking this balance successfully.

One of my bosses put it this way, "You are in charge of the business aspects of publishing, and the volunteers are in charge of policy." In actual practice, the successful association publishing program is a partnership between members and staff members. If you are empathetic and have reasonable political and listening skills, you will master the political intricacies of associations.

Over the years, I have found that association publishing differs from commercial publishing in that associations:

- Are risk-averse.
- Take longer to make decisions because of volunteer involvement.
- Fail to maximize sales from lack of a clear mission for their publishing business—or lack of even thinking about their publishing program as a business needing investment of human and capital resources.
- Can be hindered by unprofessional micromanagement by volunteers.
- Lack some of the employment financial incentives of commercial publishing; for example, bonuses and pay for performance.

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While some of these differences may be considered disadvantages, if you are savvy enough you can work around them. Pay tends to be slightly lower in associations, but the benefits are usually better than in commercial publishing. For example, many associations still sponsor defined pension plans in addition to 401k plans. Generally, association publishers are more solid financially and not subject to the unremitting bottom-line pressure prevalent in commercial publishers. Best of all, the probability of losing your job in a sale of your division to another company is very low.

What should you look for in the best association publishing programs? I have asked myself, "What characteristics separate successful association publishers from the rest of the pack?" The answers to that question prompted me to write *Twenty Best Practices in Nonprofit Publishing*. You can find this FREE **McHugh Publication** at:

http://www.johnbmchugh.com/pdfs_2008/association_publishing/A8%2020%20Best%20Practices%208.07%20BKL.pdf

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 is important but here I will focus on the phone interview, although everything I say also applies to the personal interview in the association's office.

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 technically qualified for the job. The phone interview is what I call the "interpersonal" test, which answers the questions, "Does it feel right for both parties? Is there a connection and empathy? Would I

want to work with this person?"

It is essential that you succeed with your phone interview as this is the gateway to the in-person interview. My own criteria for evaluating candidates at the phone interview stage are as follows:

- **Familiarity with the Association/Society:** It is inexcusable not to know something about a prospective employer given the wealth of information on the Web. Be prepared to ask questions that demonstrate your interest in the employer's organization. Here I suggest that you bone up on the association's mission, membership base, and products and services offered, including conferences, education, certifications, symposia, etc. Learn the details about the association's publishing portfolio (books, magazines, journal, digital offerings, etc.)
- **Listening Ability:** The ability to listen is a must for success in any organization and more so in an association, where there is continuing interface with members, volunteers, and numerous chapters and committees. A weakness here is a notable deficiency that might disqualify you as a serious candidate for the position.
- **Organized Thought Pattern:** Logical, orderly thinking is the key to much success on the job even though thinking styles vary greatly. If I can't understand the logic of your reasoning or position on an issue, I am not sure I want you to work for me.
- **Ability to Think Analytically:** This is a close cousin to logical thinking. In an interview, many questions do not have a right or wrong answer, but rather require evidence that you follow an analytical process to determine your answer.
- **Succinct Answers:** Long-winded answers that are short on substance will get you negative marks in my book. Direct answers are always the best.

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- **Candor:** Be candid without being apologetic. If you failed at something, explain why. Don't bad mouth anyone. If you have long, unexplained gaps in your employment history be prepared to explain why. Evasiveness will get you low marks in my book.

BE ABLE TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS

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

1. Why are you on the market for a new position?
2. What salary range are you expecting?
3. Are you willing to relocate?

FOR MY REVIEWERS

I wish to thank these three association publishing professionals for their review of this manuscript:

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

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John B. McHugh is an experienced executive recruiter with a specialty in commercial and nonprofit publishing, including college, business, technical, professional, religious, and association publications. He has written extensively about the field of effective publishing management, drawing on his expertise as a successful executive of both book and journal programs.

Tap into McHugh's extensive knowledge of the information industry to find top executives to profitably manage your publications program. Save on recruiting costs since McHugh charges a fixed fee instead of the costly retainer percentage used by most executive search firms.

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- Get an expert evaluation of prospects and final candidates.
- Save money by paying a flat fee vs. typical 33 1/3% of first year salary charged by executive search firms.

Contact John B. McHugh

Email: jack@johnbmchugh.com

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

LinkedIn™ Profile: <http://goo.gl/cR51Dq>

Association and Nonprofit Publishing LinkedIn: <http://goo.gl/xepxo2>

Self-Employment Forum LinkedIn: <http://goo.gl/zJTj4Q>