

Five Ideas

Association Decision-Makers Must Discard in 2023

With the start of 2023 now just weeks away, association decision-makers would be wise to pause and reflect on which ideas will advance the ongoing effort to move their organisations forward, not only over the next 12 months but for the rest of this decade and beyond. To facilitate their inquiry process, this article examines why five popular ideas are, in truth, quite detrimental to the future of all associations and must be discarded immediately.

Future-proof. Given the complex and difficult challenges association decision-makers have faced in the last 2+ years, it is easy to understand why this idea has gained traction in our community. But as [I wrote](#) more than two years ago, “[w]hile clearly appealing from a marketing perspective, the implication of this catchphrase is that associations can be made somehow impervious to the impact of future forces.” This is an unattainable outcome. Instead, association decision-makers must work to anticipate a full range of plausible futures through a consistent and robust practice of foresight and use their intentional learning to shape different and better futures for their organisations, stakeholders, and successors.

Generational labels. We know that [generational labels](#) are meaningless. Nevertheless, even as we put pressure on young people to step up and save the world from their predecessors’ mistakes, our community also demeans them by implication through the continued use of harmful shorthand descriptors. As [I argued](#) in 2019, “...associations should not participate in any way in the ongoing denigration of the very stakeholders they want to attract to their organisations,” a warning that still goes mostly unheeded. To thrive in the years ahead, associations must stop applying unsupportable generalisations to categorise young people and start building an empathic understanding of who they are as actual human beings.

Relevance. In recent years, the notion that ensuring relevance is the strategic endgame for associations may have finally overtaken membership as the community’s most sacrosanct orthodox belief. Relevance is a fallacy, however, one on which I have been [pushing back](#) for many years. As [I wrote](#) in the fall of 2020, “continuing to perpetuate the relevance fallacy is a serious mistake because it creates a clear pathway back to complacency,” which is precisely what has happened over the last two years. For associations to thrive in the years ahead, they must strive to make an ethical and purposeful impact on our world rather than wasting organisational attention and energy on a futile run toward relevance.



Soft skills. The shift to more remote work, the intensifying power struggle between employers and workers about returning to the office, and the accelerating adoption of artificial intelligence/automation technologies combine to raise serious questions about the long-term future of human contribution to work. For association stakeholders and successors, navigating this disrupted context in the years ahead will require them to develop more robust capabilities for coordination, cooperation, and collaboration, and become better at communications, creativity, and imagination. While each of these skills is profoundly human, none are “soft,” and association decision-makers are long overdue to stop describing them in this way.

Strategic planning. My [contrarian view](#) on the association community’s enduring commitment to strategic planning is straightforward: strategic planning is not a good use of association resources. This was true before the pandemic, and strategy as an exercise in planning will not help association decision-makers navigate [the discontinuous next](#) they will need to contend with for the foreseeable future. What associations need is strategy as a process of learning, which concentrates on the purpose-driven and empathic co-creation of distinctive value with stakeholders as a complement to the practice of foresight that must be the primary focus of association boards.

The beginning of a new year is always an important moment for association decision-makers to think differently about what it will take to build their organisations to thrive. As the fourth year of The Turbulent Twenties begins, the urgency for new thinking and action continues to grow. Choosing to let go of these five outmoded and damaging ideas is a necessary first step in the right direction.

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