

The Professional Society Today

membership demands – key to a meaningful future

John F. Connors

In this topsy-turvy, unpredictable world of today it seems to me that everyone I have occasion to contact is concerned about his or her role. As I read the newspapers and *TIME* magazine, I find that politicians, businessmen, industrialists, teachers, government employees, clerics, – just everyone and anyone – are having great problems trying to use past experience, past training, past education and traditional standards as guides for identifying present and future roles for themselves in their jobs, their communities and, yes, even in their homes.

Parents today can certainly understand this point. Have you tried recently to explain to your teenaged son or daughter in terms

of logic, morals or tradition, why certain actions or attitudes are “wrong”? It’s your role to carry out this explanation, but from whence do you draw support for your role in light of the exposure your kids have regularly to a world you may never have known and wouldn’t understand now if you did get to know it?

Today’s priest, minister or rabbi has a similar role problem in trying to bring God to congregations whose members are beginning to feel that time-worn religion might be a palliative that’s being “foisted” upon them in order to make life difficult. After all, how can this religious, moralistic stuff be apropos anymore when someone such as Hugh Hefner has proved through the

effective use of visual effects that the study of materialism and hedonism can offer much more support to us than religion can – especially as we pursue what comes naturally?

If you have taught in a high school recently and you’re over 35, how do you find support for a role that you believe should be fully oriented to instructing, to career counselling, to readying youths for productive living? In the light of what appears to be a nationwide breakdown at high levels in morals, ethics and compassion, how does your role accommodate for rationalizing to your students the fact that immorality, unethical action and complete disregard for our fellow-man or woman is perfectly proper so

long as one's objectives are achieved?

Societal Identification

And have you watched the businessperson and industrialist lately trying to move from his or her recognized and traditionally dominant role as a producer to other roles, albeit reluctantly, as social overseer, keeper of the keys to ecology, protector of human interests and benevolent provider?

Is it any wonder then, in view of the fact that people, leaders in almost every walk of life, are struggling with new, unaccustomed roles; that the institutions they spawn are groping for societal identification? Political entities, businesses, industrial firms, educational institutions, segments of government and churches are all struggling in the "throes of unpredictability." So it should be no great surprise to anyone that the monuments we have built to provide us professional identification — *the professional societies* — are having role problems.

Not too long ago, George Berkwitt said in *Dun's Review*: "Professional societies are on the decline. They are losing members, income and even the support of the industry. Once considered the spokesmen for thousands of engineers, scientists, sales personnel and other management specialists, the societies today are in danger of going the way of the dinosaur."

But Berkwitt says that there is a reason for this and it isn't that there is no role for the professional society in today's climate. Like that prehistoric creature, the dinosaur, he says, professional societies "seem unable to adapt to a changing environment. While the needs of their members are changing, the societies themselves are not."

In times when a society's members must come to grips with

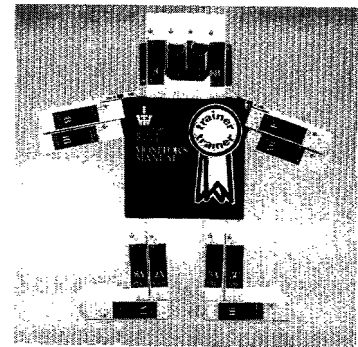
matters such as poor job markets, uncertain job benefits, or the need to strengthen their individual capabilities, how can those members be excited by such "benefits" offered by the society as monthly meetings (often with poor programs), journals that often miss the mark by a country mile, or seminars that nobody asked for in the first place.

I spoke to the leaders of an engineering professional society in New York several months ago. I had been asked to discuss with them what could be done to put some life into their seminar program which members were ignoring and which was, consequently, a "financial drag." The essence of my suggestion to them was to bury the program which was already dead and to get on with two or three other less structured and more difficult matters which the membership had been requesting for some time.

This particular society had been losing about five per cent of its membership each year for the past five years; yet, it was continuing to do business the same old way, completely oblivious of needs changes that had been developing within the membership ranks.

Industrial Disinterest

Additional danger signals for the future of professional societies that have been identified by Berkwitt and others sound familiar to anyone who has been close to the administration of these societies. It is pointed out that there is growing evidence that industry may be losing interest in professional societies. Berkwitt's study indicates that not too many years ago about 85 per cent of professional society membership was sponsored by employers. Now society records are beginning to show that many companies are



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cutting back on money earmarked for society membership.

Certainly the various industry recessions of the past several years have given impetus to this trend. But the disturbing fact is that the trend shows no evidence of halting or slowing down. An executive of a large technical organization said recently: "We're cutting back on expenses in areas where you can't pinpoint value. And society memberships are the first to go." And that attitude is shared by, unfortunately, an increasing number of companies that professional societies had considered, almost traditionally, active supporters.

The dwindling membership syndrome in most societies is symptomatic of the growing disenchantment of corporations and individuals with the value of professional societies. Membership attrition has become a major problem of technical societies, says an executive of the 26,000-member Society of Automotive Engineers. Some of these large societies are currently losing members at the rate of better than 2,000 per year.

And, of course, as night follows day, so does less income to a society follow declining membership and a corollary illness, smaller turnouts at paid meetings. Surveys of members of various national professional societies indicate, also, that journal advertising is falling off too rapidly and too significantly for comfort. Another danger signal for societies is the diminishing attendance at national conferences.

Services vs. Demands

Berkwitt took a look at the matter of attendance at chapter meetings in professional societies that were organized on a chapter basis. "One reason," he explains, "that members aren't attracted to meetings is that these local ses-

sions are generally dull, lackluster affairs. For this," he states further, "national headquarters of the various societies are blamed to a great extent. Most societies depend upon their various local chapters to serve most of their members' needs. But many chapters complain," Berkwitt continues, "that they get too little help from national headquarters in putting together lively, interesting programs."

A past president of a marketing society said recently: "Chapters generally don't have the kind of showmanship and talent needed to bring a lot of members out to meetings. And headquarters certainly aren't offering the necessary help."

Most national professional societies do hold national annual conferences or meetings, Berkwitt reports, and they "are masters of promotion and showmanship." And, he says, unlike the typical chapter meeting held in restaurant back rooms, in church assembly rooms or in local clubhouses, the national headquarters aims for the best at its annual affair -- the best hotels in attractive tourist areas. "While some business is conducted at annual meetings," continues Berkwitt, "the main emphasis is on entertainment and ceremonies featuring speakers and awards. Yet only a small percentage of the total membership attends. Few members can afford the time or the money. As a result, expensive and showy annual rites are another black mark that many members score against their societies."

Society journals have come in for a share of condemnation by members. Certainly I think we can all agree that there are many professional society magazines that have built up impressive subscription lists through a careful combination of society news,

technical features and interesting departments. But there is a membership attitude extant that most society journals "are considered boring, . . . largely made up of contributions by professional types who are self-serving and don't know what good journalism is or what the reader needs or wants."

Across the nation members are saying and the men who run professional societies admit that unless some genuine attempts are made to meet new demands of the memberships, there is precious little future for these societies. A.O. Dietrich, managing editor of the Sales Promotion Executives Association is rather blunt about the situation. He says, "Professional societies must change to reflect changes taking place in the business lives of their members. Those that do will broaden -- some will merge. The others will just slowly fade away from the scene."

Some of these projections may seem strange, coming from someone who has just recently been president of one of these professional societies. Let me say that I don't bring the dour predictions of Berkwitt and others to you as matters that I necessarily agree with 100 per cent. But, as an ASTD past-president, I feel that I'd be quite remiss in my responsibilities if I were to allow you to believe that ASTD can look toward a bright future if it turns its back on *any* demands for change that are being made by members.

We are a professional society traditionally organized around the local chapter concept. As I have travelled the length and breadth of this country over the past two years I have seen nothing to lead me to believe that the chapter will ever lose its importance to the Society. It has been the backbone of the Society in the past. But as

time goes on – if, indeed, ASTD is to serve the training professional fully and completely – something more than blind devotion to the chapter organization concept must be considered. And what I see in the years ahead for this Society is a type of organization that could not only emphasize the important role of the chapter, but could also provide a local chapter or groups of chapters considerably more autonomy than they now have within the Society.

Diminishing Membership

Most of the ills and danger signals that Berkwitt and others have identified in professional societies in general have, indeed, surfaced at one time or another in ASTD. Let's take the matter of diminishing membership. While ASTD's membership hasn't declined significantly, neither has there been any growth to speak of. About three years ago, a plan was submitted to the Board of Directors by, as I recall, the Chapter and Member Relations Committee. The plan called for doubling the membership of the Society over a period of 10 years. Now, three years later, and after a series of membership drives, ASTD has shown almost no growth. And as we consider the rather appalling annual turnover rate within the Society, all we can say is thank goodness for those membership drives! Without them we'd stand to be in very poor shape in terms of numbers.

It has been suggested that we need to develop more chapters. Some of the leaders of ASTD over the past years have indicated that this is the real key to increased membership. Well, we have had in the past year or so some five or six new chapters added. But, unfortunately, most chapters being formed now are in areas where it's difficult to attract many more

than the minimal requirement of 20 National members.

Let's suppose we formed 20 new chapters over the next six months. That would only amount to about 400 members, if we can use past statistics as predictors. And it's conceivable, as has happened in the past, that in the formation of these 20 chapters we'd simply do a considerable amount of transferring of individuals from an existing chapter to a new one. Now, I'm not indicating that new chapters shouldn't be formed – they certainly should and must be. But the answer to our dilemma of Society growth is not apt to be in just the formation of new chapters, or, indeed, in membership drives in existing chapters.

There are, as you know, between two and three thousand ASTD members currently on our rolls who do not choose to belong to chapters – don't want to belong to chapters. Vince Miller, president of ASTD for 1974, and I have discovered through some careful investigation that there are literally thousands of training people in the country looking for professional affiliation with a society that will provide some emphasis for their functional interests. Some years ago when ASTD began to bring divisions into being (Sales Training Division, Community Development Division, Organization Development Division) I, as a member of ASTD, was dead set against this trend. My reason, however, was

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not that such a trend would dilute the role of the chapter. Rather, I was concerned that we simply didn't know what to do with a division once it had been chartered. And, sure enough, for several years we kept these divisions on the periphery of ASTD activity, allowing them no opportunity whatsoever to get into the mainstream. Fortunately, during 1973, the existing three divisions were given "a place in the sun," but not until the threat of withdrawal from the Society became an issue.

ASTD can blame itself and its attitudes against change for many of its existing problems. Clear across the country the needs of trainers have been changing. And, while new needs have been identified, we have been trying to operate as we have been for the past 25 years. It won't work, if we are to grow professionally as a society and to grow in numbers. Right now we are a Society of nearly 10,000 members. We've been around that figure more or less, for almost five years. It should concern us that there are at least another 10,000-plus trainers of one sort or another in the United States that our ASTD never touches - or if some of them have been touched, they've backed away quickly because we have nothing to offer them.

There are government or civil service trainers by the thousands, police trainers, nursing trainers, supervisory personnel in business and industry who have direct responsibility for training, engineers who are involved in the continuing education of engineering personnel in industry, and many more groups for whom ASTD should be offering something in the way of professional help.

Looking to the Future

I can see the ASTD of the

future as a Society of at least 20,000 members. This could be a very low estimate. This would be a Society of training people who join the National organization possibly for a fee of something less than is being charged today. Sales trainers, OD trainers, technical and engineering trainers, management development personnel supervisory personnel, aircraft trainers, hospital trainers, etc. will join ASTD as national members because that Society will be geared to provide professional assistance to functionally-oriented members through its Professionalism program, its Training Resources Information Service (TRIS), its carefully selected and needs-oriented seminars, its position information service, and other services directly related to membership needs.

This National orientation to the individual member will be augmented by programs provided locally throughout the country by chapters or clusters of chapters organized into ASTD regions that are not simply broadly geographically established, but established by virtue of common needs and interests. The National organization, instead of worrying about such matters as whether a chapter is charging an initiation fee or whether all chapter bylaws coincide with National's, or whether chapter dues are \$2 or \$15, will be concentrating on providing chapters with specific information about individuals who are potential chapter members, etc.

In short, in the ASTD of the future, I'd hope that the basic concerns of the National organization, the chapters and divisions will be for the needs of the individual members. National will exercise this concern by giving direct service to members, to chapters, and to a new expanded divisional segment. Under this

concept, a chapter or a cluster of chapters, will not just be a segment of ASTD in a region but they will *be* ASTD.

ORTF

The Organization Review Task Force (ORTF), which I commissioned at the start of 1973 to determine whether ASTD was organized to meet the requirements of a changing society, reported to the ASTD Board of Directors for the first time at our November 1873 meeting in Madison. The Task Force's final report is anticipated by July 1974. I anticipate that some of what I've discussed here may be emphasized by that group. It may be that ORTF may propose some ideas that are even more startling than anything I've said. But I asked them to open up their minds, to forget what ASTD has been traditionally, and to give us the benefit of their best thinking. I'm satisfied that the excellent people who comprise ORTF will do just that.

Now, once the ORTF does make its final report and once ideas for a renewal of ASTD are up for consideration, I beg all leaders and members of ASTD to give them serious consideration. Despite some fiscal problems recently, ASTD has been one of the stronger, more sound professional societies in the country. But growth-wise, it's on dead center and has been for some years. We can't afford to bury our heads in the sand and assume that the problems that are besetting professional societies generally will pass us by because we have been strong in the past. No organization can stand still and grow.

Fortunately, ASTD is not waiting for disaster to strike before beginning to think about the future. The machinery is in motion which can, within a few

years, make this the most outstanding organization of its kind in America. But to achieve that distinction we must not hesitate to look forward. We need to build on the strengths of our past, but we must never allow ourselves to believe that our future can be a carbon copy of the past.

The changing world in which we live, the changing needs of the people we serve, the changing attitudes of the industrial supporters of professional societies combine to make it apparent that we can't convince the world around us by simply talking to ourselves. I have completed my year as president of ASTD with a

strong conviction that the membership and professional objectives that we'd like to achieve *are* within reach. A short 30 years ago we started from nothing. Surely what we have today can be the foundation for a rather glorious future.

USE ASTD

John F. Connors is director of manpower development, Martin Marietta Corp., New York, N.Y. Prior to World War II he taught in a vocational high school in Corry, Pa., worked in the engineering department of a manufacturing concern there and taught in the northwest Pennsylvania adult education

program of Penn State University. He worked as a training officer with the Veterans Administration, Pittsburgh, and as guidance director for the Ford City, Pa. School system. He has held various positions in the Martin Marietta Corp. training and development program. He holds a master's degree from the University of Pittsburgh. Recently, he completed a year as chairman of the Continuing Engineering Education Studies Division of the American Society of Engineering Education. He is a member of the adjunct faculty of the University of Maryland where he teaches an industrial training course. He has been a member of the Maryland ASTD chapter and the national Society since 1957 and is a past president of the Maryland Chapter.

OD Division Seeks Items For Bibliography

One of the projects of the ASTD Organization Development Division this year is production of an updated bibliography of practical OD concepts and techniques. Division Editor Peter Vaill is calling for materials, and anyone who knows of resources (books, articles, programs, other materials) should forward the pertinent information as soon as possible.

At *Journal* press time, several hundred items were in the Division's collection, but more inputs

are welcome. According to the January OD Newsletter (January *Journal*, pp. 26-27), the bibliography will include references on management-by-objectives, job enrichment or open systems approaches. Resources from the entire spectrum of organization development, world-wide are sought.

Complete information on the sources of materials should be forwarded to:

Peter Vaill

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According to the January OD Newsletter, distribution of the bibliography will be made to all Society OD Division members in late spring, 1974.