

TRANSFORMING INNOVATION INTO SKILLS: THE CHANGING ROLE OF ASSOCIATIONS IN THE AGE OF ONLINE LEARNING

More than 100 years ago, two Belgian visionaries established the Union of International Associations (UIA) to serve as a central repository for the world's information, to radiate knowledge to the world and to construct peace as well as universal cooperation. The mission to become a hub of knowledge and to hold meetings in order to spread innovation can be generalized to most international associations. But today there is more that associations can do: develop and equip their members with the necessary expert skills to excel in the modernization of their field of specialization.



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The idea of entering the training business is not new to larger associations. At a roundtable hosted by the UIA in 2011, a participant proposed that opening an online academy would create a prosperous third income stream after membership and conference fees. At that time, however, an online academy seemed to be a big project that could only be realized by those associations, which had the necessary budget to invest. This situation has changed significantly: it is now possible for most international association to design and realize their own educational programs, from the development of curricula to certifying learning achievements.

Since most associations today do not have any particular expertise in the field of training, their role starts primarily by identifying and facilitating the experts in their network who can serve as instructors. Together with these experts, they can develop a strategy for an educational program with the definition of goals by answering the following questions: What knowledge, skills and competences do we want to train? Is online education an adequate means? What credibility would a certification have in the market? Should the academy be open only for members or for a wider audience? Would a modular concept such as hosting courses on other sites be a better start? It is recommended that a working group should be launched together with the members since some of them might already have the necessary experience.

Once the learning strategy is in place the biggest challenge is to create learning resources; in this case associations with a lack of financial means have to be creative. In September 2016, the Headquarters magazine featured the streaming of conferences under the title "Virtual and Hybrid Events in the post Brexit Age." In a nutshell, the magazine featured new ways of collaborating online, broadcasting of conferences and remote participation in "hybrid events." These types of events provide a great opportunity to create

meaningful learning resources by selecting and instructing conference speakers accordingly.

The reason why even today many associations shy away from exploiting the potential of eLearning is the common belief that an online academy would have to offer shiny and expensive courseware to appear professional and credible – a belief that has been proven wrong by the hype around Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in recent years. Top-ranked universities like Harvard, Stanford and recently also Oxford have opened their lectures to a global audience on sites like edX, Coursera and many more. Even when the first hype is over, MOOCs are still offered today because of the potentially low production costs (often recording a teacher who presents his slides and moderating an online community of students) and the changing business models in Higher Education. Freely available MOOCs based on Open Educational Resources that enable the further sharing and remixing of teaching material have contributed to the reputation of universities and played a role in attracting students. And apart from being inspired by universities on how to open the classroom towards a virtual dimension, associations can also learn something else from the Higher Education sector: how to generate revenue streams from certification.

Let's face it: after our experience in school and university, learning might not have the best connotation for many of us. It is often considered as something in which one has to invest valuable time and which should eventually pay off. This perception has led to a certain meaning of officially recognized certifications, which are necessary for specific tasks such as the PMP certificate for project managers, being certified as Microsoft Professional, etc. Non-profit associations can play a vital role in the credibility of associations and complement the certification landscape significantly. However, the reliability of a certification is based on the way the assessment is conducted. This is also why the importance of outsourcing test centres or proctoring exams online will be the final important step for an association to run an online academy successfully.

As a non-profit and independent organization, the UIA has served serving international associations for more than 100 years. The reason why the UIA is still of importance today – maybe more than ever before – is because of its significance to associations as a lighthouse for innovation by remaining humble and providing a forum for exchange, which has been the basis for the success of the UIA Association Roundtables.

ROLF REINHARDT has been serving the eLearning community for more than 10 years with a genuine interest in technology-enhanced learning. He considers associations to be the training centres of the future by being pole-positioned to continuously upskill the world's professionals in specialized expertise. Rolf Reinhardt was elected as a Member of the Executive Council of the Union of International Associations in 2015.

