



RECOGNIZING AND REWARDING TALENT AND SKILLS ARE VITAL TO ASSOCIATION SUCCESS

TEXT BY LUC MAENE

In recent decades, the nature of trade association work has evolved significantly. These associations were once largely statistical bureaus or trusted technical advisors to policymakers. Over time, their privileged access to policy circles has been challenged by NGOs, their monopoly on certain information undermined by the internet and their role enlarged to include advocacy. Today association executives must know how to navigate complex decision-making institutions, manage stakeholder relations and master the technical aspects of the sectors that they represent. Furthermore, a trade association in a multinational context - in my case, with members in more than 80 countries and in all regions of the world - must have staff members who know how to interact with very diverse cultures. Language skills are, of course, useful, even if the organization has an official language. This is a lot to ask of staff members.

For many years, I have vocally advocated that running an association is a true profession, requiring specific skills. There are now training opportunities and certification programmes for association executives, which is a very positive development. Nonetheless, governing boards do not always appreciate the specific nature of an association executive's duties and required skills, so it is difficult to obtain their approval

for the incentives that can attract highly qualified candidates. I have always been puzzled that member companies hesitate to adequately remunerate qualified managers to collectively represent the industry when there would be no questions asked if the executive worked on the issue from inside the company itself. This is particularly bemusing since pooling resources to manage some issues through a trade association saves members the expense of each hiring someone to manage the same issue.

In general, the more nationalities represented in an association's governing board, the greater the difficulty in agreeing proper remuneration levels, because the cost of living and salaries may vary widely from one member country to another. Furthermore, the role of trade associations is not as well understood in countries where such organizations are a fairly new development.

In order to attract the right candidates, an association must offer adequate remuneration. This is all the more important since career development is limited in many association secretariats due to their small size and relatively flat structures. Each association needs to determine an objective method for defining a fair remuneration package for its staff members, which can be further complicated by the need to recruit in other countries with differing norms. In the case of my association, we have a policy of benchmarking our staff salaries against the industry we represent in our host country. Although some of my board members find employment both expensive and extremely complex in

France, they have come to understand the need to compete for quality managers.

Sufficient rewards for highly qualified association executives also contribute to their motivation, especially since their chances for advancement are limited unless they leave the organization. Because so much of the work carried out by trade associations today depends on personal relationships, whether with members, policymakers or stakeholders, the departure of a staff member can seriously set back or slow down work in their area of expertise.

One strategy that I learned during my previous assignment leading a team of experts with different national and cultural backgrounds at a United Nations (UN) agency has greatly assisted me to increase motivation even at times when there was little I could do to improve remuneration levels. It consists of understanding colleagues well enough to fully exploit their strengths and avoid forcing them into assignments for which they were not suited. Granted, this is not always easy. We may inherit some staff members. Plus there are simply some necessary tasks that no one enjoys very much. But at the UN, despite having no control over the composition of my team, I was fortunate that they had very complementary personalities, and a strong esprit de corps emerged with excellent operational results. In my present assignment, I have been able to work proactively to build a solid team. I am convinced that my insistence on proper compensation was key in securing the right people for the job.