



Nicholas
Collison

How the Pandemic has Changed the Values of Professional Communities

The value of a professional community ... has the pandemic helped us find our humanity? When I was first asked to write about the value of information to the companies we serve, I immediately started thinking about the various professional associations to which I've belonged over the past two decades.

What immediately struck me was how much our professional communities have changed over the previous five years, and how the last 14 months have really accelerated that trend.

Was I just thinking about how associations are run, the actual value we see in them, or how they help us develop professionally and personally? Are they really more than just an excellent rolodex we have in place?

So, let's take a look at the true definition of a Professional Community.

Three components of “Professional Community” defined:

1. The aggregation of practitioners across different parts of the information profession provides opportunities for community members to share their knowledge body, to learn about cultures across different groups undertaking similar work, to explore issues around perceptions, to collaborate on problem resolution techniques, to discuss our common professional values, to learn about legal aspects of our profession, and so forth.
2. Refers to specialized working teams whose members have all had higher education and are identified as much by their educational status than their specific occupational skills.
3. This type of learner-realized real-world community engagement falls within three realms of influence: current work colleagues, prior work collegial support system, and professional organization colleagues.

Now Let's Take a Look at Where We Are Today.

Since the pandemic was declared back in early 2020, our lives have been turned upside down, and new ways of working, and even delivering service have required us all to change and adapt to new ways of thinking and, more importantly, behaving. In those first few months when the virus really hit us I saw a massive change in how associations were adapting to member needs, with more online learning and a huge range of virtual get-togethers, in response to both social and professional needs.

It also became clear that those associations who had taken steps to address member connectivity pre-pandemic were in many ways ahead of the game, from the outset. For example, SLA (the Special Libraries Association), had recently adjusted their structure around "Communities" as units to which members belong, and were already working hard to create a broad and effective online learning program. The Association quickly developed social programs, held an interactive online conference, and encouraged all its communities to develop fun and exciting events. Two of those which I personally attended were pretty memorable for entirely different reasons: a comedy evening with a professional comedian and a "How To" session in the early days of Zoom. Both events had more than 50 people in attendance, and there were many more where they came from.

Like other associations, SLA has a terrific member platform, SLA Connect, where members can interact with other information professionals, debate hot topics, pose questions, seek advice, keep up with current trends or simply share information. Since this was already familiar to our members, it was a great tool for keeping in touch, making sure our colleagues were okay, and simply staying connected, and I observed a lot more traffic taking place there.

I also noticed a complete change in people's behaviors and how we work together. I saw empathy and kindness, a true collaboration. I myself am client-facing and work with multiple vendors; it was genuinely unique to see how those relationships worked and changed.

I manage substantial budgets in contract management for licenses, databases, SAAS products and engage, for the most part, in intense and time-consuming negotiations. But this new way of working helped me to focus more on people and less on process... more on the individuals I was working with, and more empathy was being shown all around. We know that a deeper understanding of empathy in both professional and personal life is key to relationships, and suddenly we were doing this without hesitation and without being asked.

Pretty early on in the pandemic, I began to see a difference in how people would interact and work together. Virtual video meetings became the new "negotiation space" to

connect; it was difficult for some, especially those who were a bit camera shy. But that all changed very quickly when the new norm was that the only way to do business was through a virtual meeting. And here again, I saw the true nature of people through their humanity and kindness.

I'm no therapist, but I can tell you this: People wanted to talk; I needed to talk! And very quickly, what I was hearing and experiencing was a new way of doing business. The person on my screen became more than just a client or vendor. People were more interested to learn about the person sitting in front of them via Zoom. The first question was, "How are you? And the family?".

I can honestly say, on almost every client or publisher meeting I attended, during the first twenty minutes or so we discussed everything from "keeping one's sanity" to "what's good on Netflix, Prime or Hulu," and then, of course, it was down to business.

I think, for the most part losing actual 'human interaction' has been tough on us all; as human beings, we need that social contact, the handshake, the direct look in the eyes, and the variety of people we come across each and every day.

What does this all have to do with the value of a professional community? To me, everything! Because as a community, we have had to change our behavior and adapt to a new way of thinking, managing, and above all, being human and kinder to each other.

I have seen such significant change within our professional communities. It humbles me to know so many people whose true nature is one of kindness.

I'll leave you with this quote from Nelson Mandela:

"Our human compassion binds us the one to the other – not in pity or patronizingly but as human beings who have learned how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future."

Nick Collison is Couranto's Director of Business Strategy, Market Development, Library & E-Content. He has decades of experience in managing information access, budgeting, strategic planning, and knowledge services. Collision is a Fellow of SLA, the Special Libraries Association.

Information inspires innovation™