Two groundbreaking research studies provide insight on people’s decision to join professional organizations and their decision to volunteer for those organizations. Both studies were conducted by ASAE, The Center for Association Leadership, the leading national professional association for membership-based organizations. In 2011, ASAE re-examined the issues further validating the overall findings. This paper summarizes the key points from these studies.

The Decision to Join, James Dalton & Monica Dignam, ASAE, 2007

“A person’s decision to join an individual membership organizations is a not a cost-benefit analysis ... [it] is not a classic procurement consideration.” from The Decision To Join.

Study Highlights:

• **It’s all about the Good of the Order** – Being part of something larger was consistently chosen over personal benefit as the reason for joining an association. This doesn’t mean that personal benefit isn’t important, but that it is the unity of personal benefits and benefits to the field that make up the Yin and Yang of the decision.

• **Engagement increases retention** – A key metric for renewal is found in level of involvement and in fact the perception of value rises with involvement. This engagement was described by survey participants largely as ad-hoc or more formal volunteer roles. Interestingly, those not involved are much more similar to former members in their assessment of the value of membership. One additional point, the probability of being a promoter of the association also increases with involvement.

• **It’s not simply a generation thing** – Research demonstrates that the primary driver to joining is stage of career not generational attributes. A separate study supports The Decision To Join in its finding that “young workers show every indication of joining associations at even higher rates than the Baby Boomers.” One caveat: younger professionals are more dissatisfied with how associations are meeting their needs at the beginning of their careers and in the availability of leadership opportunities.

• **Resignation is out of the association’s control about 50% of the time** – In the study, about one-half of the respondents who had dropped their membership indicated it was due to career and other life changes. Of course that means we are responsible for drops about 50% and falls into two broad areas: did not receive expected value, and dissatisfaction with association performance.

• **It’s all about WOM (Word Of Mouth)** – The top method of recruiting members is word of mouth making colleagues, friends, connections our secret weapons.
“Volunteering that is related to a profession is viewed increasingly by employers and colleagues as a virtue rather than detrimental to their professional responsibilities.” from The Decision To Volunteer.

Study Highlights:

- **It’s all about the Good of the Order (Again!)** – Values drive volunteering. People contribute their time for both altruistic and instrumental (self-serving) reasons telling us that volunteerism is best considered a pro-social activity. It offers the ability to benefit others without restricting the volunteer’s own possible benefits.

- **One Size Does NOT Fit All** – One of the key findings relates to patterns of volunteering and underscores the trend that volunteers have diverse needs and desires. The study identified distinct patterns in volunteers that offer a continuum for involvement from the ad hoc (short-term) volunteer to the shaper or super volunteer. It is important to note that more than one-half of association volunteers fall into the ad hoc category. And across all levels of affiliation, there is a distinct trend in volunteering that mirrors the more individualistic and self-directed perspectives on work and leisure activities. This will require us to rethink volunteer opportunities and build more flexibility into our programs. This gives us a new picture of engagement.

- **Members see professional benefits of volunteerism** – Interestingly, two-thirds of the survey respondents said they look for opportunities to connect volunteering to their professional work. Many also said volunteering is a benefit of membership.

- **Meaning keeps volunteers engaged** – Above all other elements, people volunteering for associations expect to be involved effectively. The value being in the company of like-minder people and have the opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way to the cause/profession they believe in. Endless meetings, unclear roles, and projects with no discernable outcome turn members away.

- **Organizational strategies can support or discourage volunteering** – The top reason for not volunteering is lack of information about opportunities and among the top barriers that discourage ongoing volunteering are poor follow-through with volunteers, forgetting to thank them, poor communication and lack of support and training. It is the organization that hinders volunteering more than individual circumstances, however is should be noted that family, work and geography are limitations on volunteer participation as well.

- **It’s all about WOM (Word-of-Mouth)** – The number one recruitment strategy is the direct ask by another member of staff. In fact 51% indicated they first volunteer through a direct request compared to only 13% indicating they responded to a call for volunteer or ad.