

Designing Your Future: Key Trends, Challenges, and Choices Facing Association Leaders ***What value does global trends research have for Association Management, Ltd.'s (AML) association clients?***

There are many future focused tools out there. Why did AML choose to embrace and incorporate this ASAE and The Center research for the benefit of their client trade associations/professional societies? This article offers a better understanding of how incorporating the trends (socio-demographic, technological, economic, environmental and political) information enhanced AML's association clients' strategic planning processes.

Highlights of the Research Project:

- Proposed practical insights and tools to help associations assess emerging risks, define their options, identify opportunities for future sustainability and growth, and implement responsive strategies.
- Incorporated a heavy involvement of a broad cross-section of the association community in the content development.
- Focused the trend tool intentionally on the "middle market" (typically associations with a budget of over \$1 million employing at least 5 staff team members).
- Complements a non-profits' existing strategic planning process. (The trends information does not replace a strategic planning process.)
- Allows volunteer leaders to understand how trends impacting their own day-jobs also have an impact on their trade association/professional society.
- Creates a *Call to Action*, addressing the message to the association leaders and their boards, allowing volunteer leaders to understand how trends impacting their own day-jobs also have an impact on their trade association/professional society.

Important Components:

The **50 Key Trends (socio-demographic, technological, economic, environmental, and political)** already have, or could have, a global impact over the next five years, or more specifically, in the United States.

The **profile of each trend** includes a description, timeframe, potential Impact, implications and opportunities for associations, functional implications and opportunities, example industry implications, and sources and references.

Although the trends are important individually, they also converge to form a number of distinct higher-level **"patterns of change" that will affect the: individual, society, business, nation, and world.** Each of the 10 Patterns of Change is linked to relevant "Key Trends by Number," identifies key implications and opportunities for Associations, and also walks the reader through the **"key strategic challenges" for associations** that result from each change pattern.

10 Patterns of Change:

1. Economic Power Shifts
2. Politics Gets Complex
3. Expanding Business Agenda
4. Science and Technology Go Mainstream
5. Demographic Destinies
6. Generational Crossroads
7. Rethinking Talent, Education, and Training
8. Global Internet Expansion
9. A Society in Transition – An Era of Responsibility and Accountability
10. Natural Resource Challenges

Each of the Patterns of Change contributed to multiple challenges facing organizations.

10 Key Strategic Challenges:

1. What's your leadership paradigm? – (Envisioning tomorrow's association.)
2. What's plan "B"? – (Adapting to a new economic landscape.)
3. Who's driving the talent agenda? – (recruiting and preparing tomorrow's labor force.)
4. Who's the customer? – (Serving an aging, multi-generational, and ethnically diverse population.)
5. How do you connect your community? – (Tapping the potential of social networks.)
6. Where's the money? – (Responding to shifting patterns of income and wealth.)
7. How can you exploit new business models? – (Staying responsive and solvent.)
8. What's your consumption footprint? – (Facing up to energy and environmental pressures.)
9. How sustainable are you? – (Managing ethics, transparency, accountability, and responsibility.)
10. What's next on the radar? – (Embedding environmental scanning, scenario planning, and what-if thinking.)

Critical Strategic Questions for Leaders – Four Stage Framework:

1. *Why are we here?* (Purpose, strategic direction, and vision.)
2. *What will we do?* (Core products and service offerings.)
3. *How will we do it?* (Service delivery model.)
4. *How should we organize ourselves?* (Organization model.)

Develop a Change-Ready Organization:

- Acknowledge that the only guarantee is that fundamental shifts are happening and will continue to happen.
- Help leadership learn to live with handling uncertainty by making it a core part of the association's strategic thinking.
- Continue to ask the "what-if" questions about core assumptions.

AML's volunteer leaders routinely embrace strategic planning. Initially they asked, "How does this fit into MY process?" AML staff team members explained that the *Designing Your Future* publication recognizes that associations may have existing processes for strategic and operational planning. The information is meant to serve to complement an association's current approach. It is impractical to think that a trade association/professional society can continue with a strategic planning methodology that is void of future trends. It is the job of the AML staff team members and their association client Boards of Directors to develop the best method of incorporating a review and discussion of the significant trends that can, and will, have an impact on to the future of their organization.

What is the Next Step?

- Some trends will be more relevant to an organization than others. (Be selective and analytical.)
- Identify resulting implications for the association.
- Proceed with your strategic planning in light of the trends impact.
- It is essential to continually monitor changes and revisit trends during strategic conversations.

The choice is simple. Do you want to be a recipient of the future or an active participant in designing it?

How AML Used This Tool with their Association Clients?

It took some time to understand and incorporate these important trends research findings internally with staff and externally with AML's association clients. As one would guess, some clients embraced this information more than others, and others immediately incorporated trends into their existing strategic planning processes.

- AML's brought in an outside strategic consultant (and contributor to ASAE and The Center's research) for the company's strategic planning day to learn about *Designing Your Future – Call to Action*, to discuss trends, and develop an action plan to deliver this important research to their association clients.

- AML staff participated in a survey asking for top five trends, out of 50 key trends (socio-demographic, technological, economic, environmental, and political), impacting the management company.
- AML staff participated in a survey asking for the top five trends, out of 50 key trends (socio-demographic, technological, economic, environmental, and political), impacting their association clients. Results were shared with AML's association clients' leadership.
- AML assisted their client association leaders' to participate in a survey asking for top five trends, out of 50 key trends (socio-demographic, technological, economic, environmental, and political), impacting their associations.
- Information was incorporated as an overlay into their strategic planning process.
- Some association clients chose to survey their members as well asking for top five trends, out of 50 key trends (socio-demographic, technological, economic, environmental, and political), impacting their association. Results were compared to the leadership's trends survey results.
- Some association clients prepared newsletter articles or blogged about on how they incorporated trends and future forward thinking into their organization's planning process.
- Some association clients' Boards revisit key trends at board meetings to align with member services and educational programming.

For more information about AML's action plan with their association clients, contact President/Owner Molly Lopez, CAE, at associationmanagement@aml.org. For more information about the *Designing Your Future: Key Trends, Challenges, and Choices Facing Association and Nonprofit Leaders* publication, visit: <http://asaecenter.org/Marketplace/BookstoreDetail.cfm?ItemNumber=35492>.

Acknowledgments: Content in this article was originally authored by Sue Pine, CAE, Strategic Consultant to Association Management, Ltd. (AML), and ASAE and The Center Research Committee (Environmental Scan Task Force) member, and Mark Engle, CAE, ASAE and The Center Research Committee (Environmental Scan Task Force) member. With their permission, AML has incorporated their company's experience into the authors' original article. (September 2010.)