

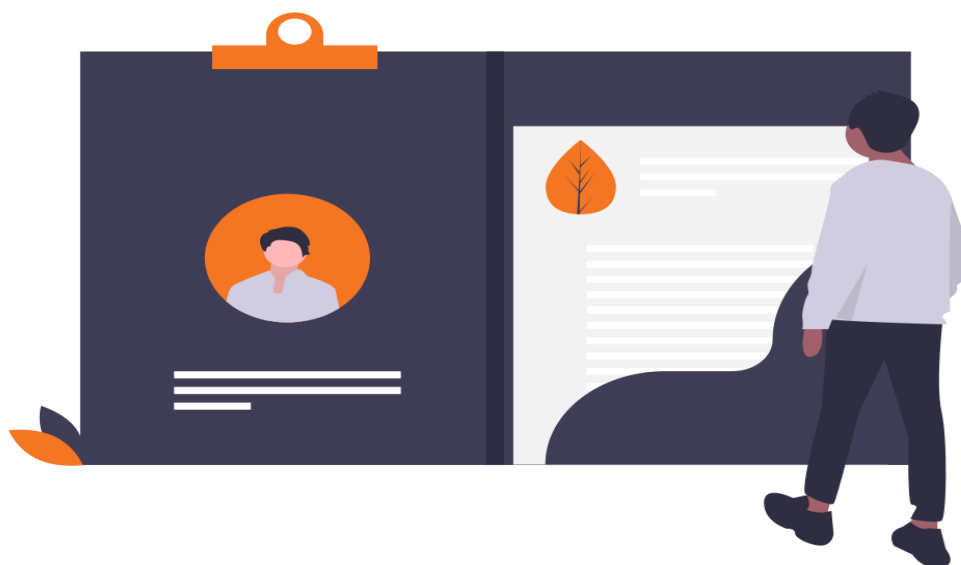
TPG Pulse For Associations

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Job Search in a Pandemic

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"Why would an association conduct a search in the midst of a pandemic? It is because employers recognize that a present, strong leader is essential now and they need to move ahead with their hiring project rather than leave the organization without a skilled navigator in turbulent times."

With news of record layoffs rivaling the Great Depression, an economy in deep recession, and the universal unknown of what the future holds, it may surprise people to learn that some associations (and other sectors such as technology and online commerce) have been hiring. For those now starting a job search, here are some insights for both employers on what they will face in terms of securing candidates and, especially for job seekers, the competencies being sought.

While millions of Canadians have claimed for government financial support, and the number of employment opportunities shrinking as each week passes, The Portage Group has managed four CEO searches in the past two months. We know of other

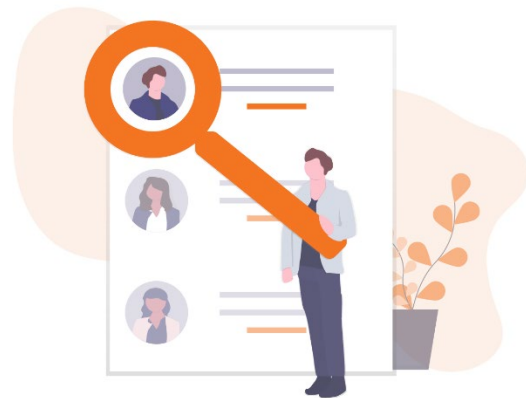
consulting firms currently conducting their own searches for associations. There are the 'DIY' employers who hire direct - without professional support - posting available opportunities on LinkedIn, Charity Village, associationjobs.ca or elsewhere.

Why would an association conduct a search in the midst of a pandemic? It is because employers recognize that a present, strong leader is essential now and they need to move ahead with their hiring project rather than leave the organization without a skilled navigator in turbulent times. There are some positions an organization can be without but when a CEO vacancy occurs, or some other key position is vacated by an event such as retirement, prudent employers are filling those roles.

Employers Face A Mixed Candidate Market

The good news for employers is that there is now an enormous market of available, talented candidates. There are others who are in the market for reasons other than being out of work, including the currently employed who worry about a future in an unstable sector or organization. The Portage Group has seen applications from consultants, for example, wanting a more secure position where they don't face the anxiety of an 'eat-what-you-kill' existence in a historically lean market. We are also seeing veteran executives, who previously chose full or semi-retirement, now feeling the need to extend their career to restore their financial position. On a recent project I was visually struck that a majority of candidates applying via LinkedIn, based on their visible profiles, appeared to be in their 60s.

Faced with a vast volume of applicants, the employer will want to be certain their evaluative criteria is well defined and they have the resources (especially time) to consider what each candidate offers. This may be particularly challenging for volunteer-based organizations where members serving on hiring committees have the added demands of home care for children, seemingly endless Zoom meetings, and the psychological weight of health and/or financial worries.



To all who in the past have been on the receiving end of an outreach from an executive recruiter ['head hunter'], they know that good executive recruiters proactively research the market to identify and approach candidates who have the skills their client/employer needs. But what headhunters are finding in a COVID-19 world is a target audience that increasingly practices a career version of 'staying at home'.

A significant obstacle for employers in attracting accomplished *employed* candidates is resistance to changing jobs. Association employers are seeing resistance which requires deft skills to overcome the target prospect's concerns. This applies no matter how compelling the opportunity, e.g., a higher salary

or a grander stage. There are two main concerns employers or their search consultants are encountering.

First, people tell us that the opportunities they would have eagerly embraced six months ago are now suspect because of their fear moving into the unknown and the uncertain future for an association and/or the sector they don't know well. It is the 'better the devil you know' objection. Initially, in March and April, there were responses to potentially reassure those prospective candidates, such as the organization having very healthy reserves and/or 2020 membership renewals in-hand. But now the economic ramifications of COVID-19 seem more dire and long-term, with uncertainty extending well into 2021.

Second, some employed executives have expressed a strong sense of responsibility (to their credit) to not leave their organization in the midst of COVID-19. This is the 'captain of the ship' rationale to not abandon a vessel in crisis. There is no appropriate response to these prospects other than to admire their loyalty and to stay in touch about future opportunities.

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For Job Seekers – The Competencies in Demand

With the millions of Canadians now sidelined and eager to be working and earning, it will be imperative as an applicant to stand out among a larger pool of candidates. What may have been a 1 in 50 shot to land a coveted position a year ago could well be 1 in 500 odds in the coming months.

As opportunities arise, job candidates will want to focus their presentation on the skills that employers are consistently seeking now and for the future. The following competencies are based on current and recent projects The Portage Group has managed. Some of those competencies may seem to be perpetual although our observation is that they are more pronounced in a COVID-19 world. If you are in the market for a new opportunity, prepare your application by addressing the experiences you have that demonstrate proficiency with these competency areas. It is our view they are universally important to prospective employers.

Let's first acknowledge that associations have always had core services such as advocacy. Advocacy has become even more important in the past few months, along with communications to keep members and stakeholders (such as government or the public) informed. The best candidates will show mastery in the core business of associations, for example, how effectively they've influenced and persuaded others. Consider also that many people feel overwhelmed right now with a tidal wave of information. So, a measure of success is not only what and how the organization (and its management) has communicated, but *how effectively* they've been able to engage audiences deluged with messaging from media and other organizations.

Here are five more noteworthy and valued competencies that multiple employers are now emphasizing and where job seekers will want to demonstrate their abilities. For those expecting that an employer will ask about how you'll help navigate COVID-19 and its fallout, the answer is not only in the tactics but one's mastery in the value associations deliver and your extraordinary competency in the following areas.

Change Management: It may not be possible to say what the future holds other than with certainty it will change from the environment of six months ago. Employers want to know how in the past you have readily **adapted** in the face of change and **embraced** change as a **positive opportunity**. The answers may focus on both proactive measures, such as research and data to segment members and target audiences effectively, and reactive ones such as retiring programs and services that cease to be in demand and how you then presented new opportunities more relevant to customers. The employer will want evidence that you are more resilient and creative than most in your field. Be prepared to address what the employer (or any association) needs to do to demonstrate value and evolve in the next year and beyond.

Growth: Growth will be defined in many ways – growing engagement, programs, profile, revenue, etc. Imagine your organization will have *half* the current members and revenue at the bottom of the pandemic's impact. If those former members have found they can live without those services for a year or so, it's unlikely the status quo will bring people back. This is also a **marketing competency** that you must ably demonstrate through prior successes and in articulating future vision – by understanding needs, by targeting, by differentiating, and hopefully by being innovative. Be prepared to explain how you drove engagement, won over next generation members, and/or created new markets and

categories of members, and the top results that were the consequences of that action whether in more revenue, membership, etc.

Strategy & Vision: Faced with questions about strategic thinking and future vision, candidates might be tempted to explain their experiences going through a planning exercise and then organizing the work that ensues. While that's an essential skill, what employers want to know is how you have been forward-thinking, how you enable generative thinking about the future within the organization, how you helped stakeholders to challenge and push the organization to deepen the value proposition, how your analysis identified the scenarios your organization could face in uncertain times and the necessary decisions arising from them. Also remember that plans not successfully implemented are worthless. You do not want to appear to be too far ahead or too far out in your thinking; strategy must be embraced (yes, owned) by those it benefits and successfully carried out.



Relationship Management: Relationship management is at the heart of the executive's path to success and it includes individuals, organizations, and one's outlook to advancing the mission and delivering value. It involves effectively working and

collaborating with others toward a common goal. It means building cooperative relationships. It very much requires openness to ideas, to listening, to valuing others and what they offer, and the capacity to set aside ego. If you reflect on this for a moment, simply it means putting into practice the core benefit of why not-for-profits exist: power in numbers coalesced to advance a shared (hopefully grand) goal.

Recurring annual research on top-of-mind association trends by The Portage Group has identified partnership and collaboration as a top 10 trend. More associations are growing relationships with other organizations to reach new and related member and stakeholder audiences, to enhance value to members, reducing overlap and redundancy, and to save resources. So, yes, relationships have always been important to success but the new ability to foster other relationships (e.g., with competitors) will be critically important in the future.

Relationship management also touches how the executive leads a team and their approach to people. Inspiring leaders enable success; they motivate outstanding performance by their own example and encouragement; they actively help others to grow, and they deal with team members supportively, objectively, and fairly. As a job candidate and manager, honest self-awareness is key: Ask yourself how others who have worked with you (volunteers, staff, suppliers, etc.) will describe you to others. Rest assured a prospective employer will do that research and find out.

Continuous Learning: I was fortunate to meet Peter Drucker on a couple of occasions in my early career and well recall a phone conversation we had. He said “the only skill that will be important in the 21st century is the skill of learning new skills. Everything else will become obsolete over time.”

A manager must be open to and embrace continuous learning in their own life while also encouraging others by inculcating a learning culture in the organization which includes volunteers and staff.

One’s self-improvement should also be stretching. Mastering the new skills described by Drucker requires active commitment and a willingness to grow. As John F. Kennedy said in one of his best speeches (at a university) about America’s choice to explore the moon and do other things, we are energized to embrace challenges “not because they are easy, but because they are hard.”



Employers will want to know how you have applied continuous improvement organizationally and individually. In preparing your case for the job you want, consider: What systems have you improved? How is your organization better for the knowledge you acquired and skills you developed? How have you benefited from mentors?

A final observation about candidates and mistakes they inadvertently make. I have interviewed dozens of executives for jobs since COVID-19 was in full bloom. I offer three tips.

First, focus on novel solutions that brought about better outcomes; resist describing outdated methods that don’t apply to solving the complex problems of the 2020s.

Second, avoid theory. For example, employers likely don't care that you can explain governance, but they will value how you've enabled governors to model better practice.

Third, have self-confidence. If you are now not working or worry your job is at a dead end, have faith in what you've done. You have been successful throughout your career for good reason. What's ahead may be a challenging transition. However, know and trust that your own career trend line is consistently a positive and ascending one.

As you ready for the next opportunity in your career, create an inventory of how you led the effort, the actions taken, and results you realized. Describe exactly what you did that is innovative, the measurable benefit that ensued, and how that experience is relevant to the opportunities and challenges before your prospective employer. Be prepared to pivot past experiences to future needs. The next sign on your career journey says, 'Making a Positive Difference Ahead'!



Supporting Associations Retooling to Thrive

Through the coming weeks and months, TPG and CSAE will be collecting data, and providing information, insight and guidance where we can. We'll do this by publishing a series of free resources that track the impact of COVID-19 on the association sector and that delve into how associations are adapting, retooling, and refocusing not just to survive, but hopefully to thrive, in our new reality. You can find other recent resources and information on upcoming initiatives [here](#).

For more information please contact research@portagegroup.com or info@csae.com.

About The Portage Group Inc.

The Portage Group is a full-service consulting firm serving the association sector. TPG is the official research partner for the Canadian Society of Association Executives.

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About Canadian Society of Association Executives

CSAE is Canada's only member-based not-for-profit organization committed to delivering the knowledge, resources and environment to advance association excellence.

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