

Overview: Why Care About This Study?

“Develop a passion for learning. If you do, you will never cease to grow.” Wise words from Anthony D’Angelo, founder of Collegiate Empowerment, wouldn’t you agree?

Professional development, continuing education, credentialing, online learning, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), seminars, webinars, conferences, forums, training, or whatever else we call it, all have a similar underlying theme – the sharing and gaining of knowledge.

By some estimates, dollars spent on continuing education top \$160 billion a year. Regardless of who you are, that’s a lot of money. And, on average, our survey shows that 42 percent of an association’s revenue comes from professional education and training.

There’s a growing amount of free and low-cost continuing education options, validating why associations – now more than ever – need a strategic education plan, technology to support the strategy, and content that’s engaging and relevant to members and nonmembers, alike. Otherwise, organizations could quite possibly see a significant decrease in a crucial revenue channel.

In this study, we dig deeper into insight uncovered in our 2016 Member Engagement Study, which found that for Millennials and Generation Xers, continuing education is one of the top three reasons they join an association. Millennials, in particular, are chomping at the bit for programs that will help them increase their knowledge and skillset to get a job, as well as advance in their careers.

We look at education programs through the eyes of both members of associations and professionals working at associations. By doing so, we can determine what members want and value from their associations’ education programs, and what association professionals think their members want.



This approach helps us clearly see where alignment exists between members and associations, and where gaps exist regarding their attitudes, values, and behaviors around professional education programs.

Our research set out to answer four essential questions:

- Does each generation value professional development and continuing education differently?
- What are the most important aspects of an education program from a member’s perspective?
- Do members turn to multiple sources and organizations to fulfill their training and education needs?
- How do members prefer to pay for professional development and continuing education?

We explored education-related topics with more than 1,000 members in the United States across three age segments – Millennials, Generation Xers, and Boomers. We also posed a number of questions to more than 100 association professionals who work at professional membership organizations. The association professionals surveyed are involved in decisions around professional development and continuing education. The online surveys took place between January 18 and February 13, 2017.

Key Findings

Attracting younger members can be challenging

The number one challenge identified by professional organizations is attracting younger members to education and training programs. Interestingly, Boomers turn to their associations as their number one source for professional development, while both Millennials and Generation Xers also turn to their employer for professional education.

It's been stated many times before, but it's worth repeating – Content is King

Across all age groups, the plethora of new, readily accessible, lower-cost education options is a threat. But your expertise in content is a differentiator. The number one reason members across all generations engage in continuing education or professional development is because of the content. Specifically, practical, skill-based information that can be used immediately is highly valued by members.

Association members are turning to a variety of sources for professional development

While associations and employers remain the top “go-to” sources for professional development and training, members rely on multiple resources for their development – and value all of them for growth and development opportunities.

Technology is a challenge for associations

Finding the right technology tools and learning management platforms remains a challenge for many associations. Only a third or fewer of professionals surveyed are “very satisfied” with their ability to target outreach, run reports, or provide interactive features for their members participating in courses.

There is a gap between the way associations charge for professional development and what members want

Most members want education and training to be all-inclusive in the membership dues, while only about one-third of associations take this approach. Many associations are committed to a pay-as-you-go model, but this has very little appeal to members – particularly Millennials.

Overall, members value their association's education, training, and professional development offerings

On a positive note, members value the education and training they receive from the associations to which they belong.

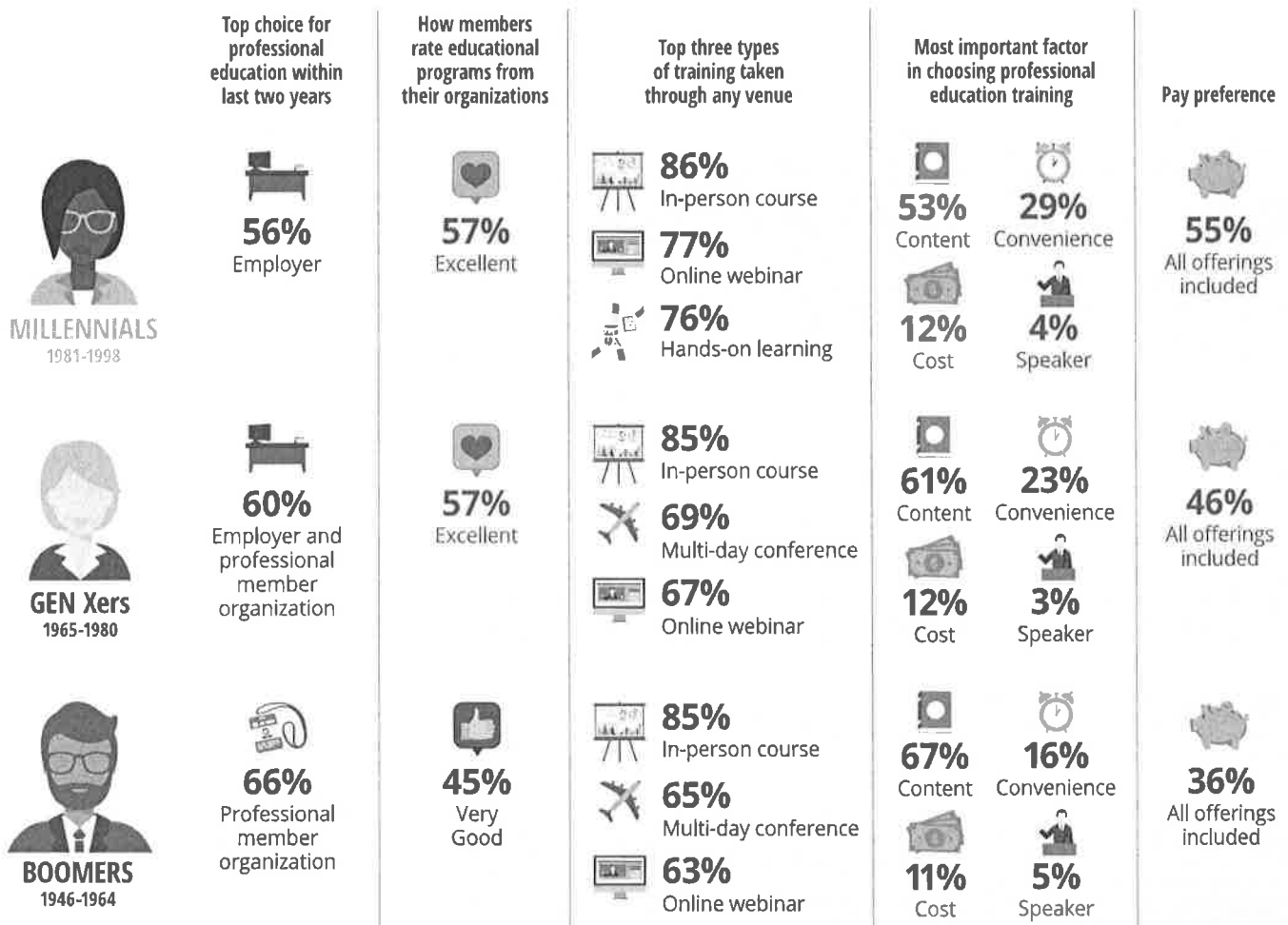
Generational Overview

While there are many commonalities between the different generations when it comes to education and professional development, there are also some glaring differences. To effectively segment programs and target specific audiences, associations need an association management system (AMS).

With Millennials now the largest generation in the workforce, associations would do well to create programs that align with what's important and valuable to this quickly emerging cohort. Their increasing influence will shape the broader business landscape and drive new behaviors, which in turn will affect how associations attract, engage, retain, and provide professional development to this generation.

The chart below provides a high-level snapshot across three generations of members: Millennials, Generation Xers, and Boomers.

GENERATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Top Challenges Organizations Face

In the table below, we take a broad look at the challenges associations face when it comes to providing quality education, professional development, and training programs to their members. These challenges set the stage for the remainder of the study, and provide a jumping-off point to dive deeper into the data.



Section 1: Tailoring to Your Audience

The good news is, across all generations members choose their affiliate association as the “go-to” source for professional development, training, and education, 60 percent of the time.

However, that’s not the only choice for members. Both Millennials (56 percent) and Generation Xers (60 percent) also turn to their employer as the key resource for professional development. Other sources, including college or university, training institute, and even a networking group rank high as resources amongst Millennials and Generations Xers. Figure 1 looks at all the ways members seek professional development across the three generations – Millennials, Generation Xers, and Boomers.

Where received professional education and training within last two years	Total	Millennials	Generation Xers	Boomers
Professional membership organization(s) you belong to	60%	53%	60%	66%
Your employer	56%	56%	60%	54%
A college or university	29%	36%	25%	24%
A training institute	26%	30%	26%	24%
Professional membership organization(s) you do not belong to	24%	23%	27%	23%
A corporation that is not your employer	21%	20%	22%	19%
Networking group	19%	26%	17%	15%

Figure 1: Where members received professional development and training within the last two years

A majority (67 percent) of members surveyed seek professional development and training to stay current with best practices and the latest innovations. However, Millennials independently rank learning a new skill (67 percent) as the number one priority. Figure 2 looks at the main reasons members seek professional development or education.

Member Professional Development Study 2017

DECISION DRIVERS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT In Aggregate Across the Three Generations



Figure 2: Decision drivers for taking professional development trainings and courses

For the most part, members are pleased with the education content and training they're receiving from the associations to which they belong. As a matter of fact, associations are harder on themselves than their members are when evaluating the value of what they offer. As Figure 3 illustrates, 84 percent of members rate the professional development and training they receive from their associations as either "excellent" or "very good," while just 73 percent of professional associations say the same about their own educational programs.

MEMBERS RATE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FROM THEIR ORGANIZATIONS



PROFESSIONALS RATE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS THEY OFFER



Figure 3: How associations and members rate the education programs offered

Member Professional Development Study 2017

Of all the generations surveyed (Millennials, Generation Xers, and Boomers), Millennials are the only group that ranks hands-on learning in the top three types of training desired. Millennials are hungry for very practical, just-in-time development that provides real-world-situational experience. For example, a person in the field of chemistry getting training in a laboratory setting, working directly with the tools of the trade.

This is consistent with what we've seen from Millennials in other studies we've conducted – they want information, content, and training that will help them be effective right now. Execution and pragmatism can outweigh strategy and theory.

Figure 4 provides a snapshot of when different generations tend to join the organization, how many associations/organizations they belong to, and what types of training they tend to take.

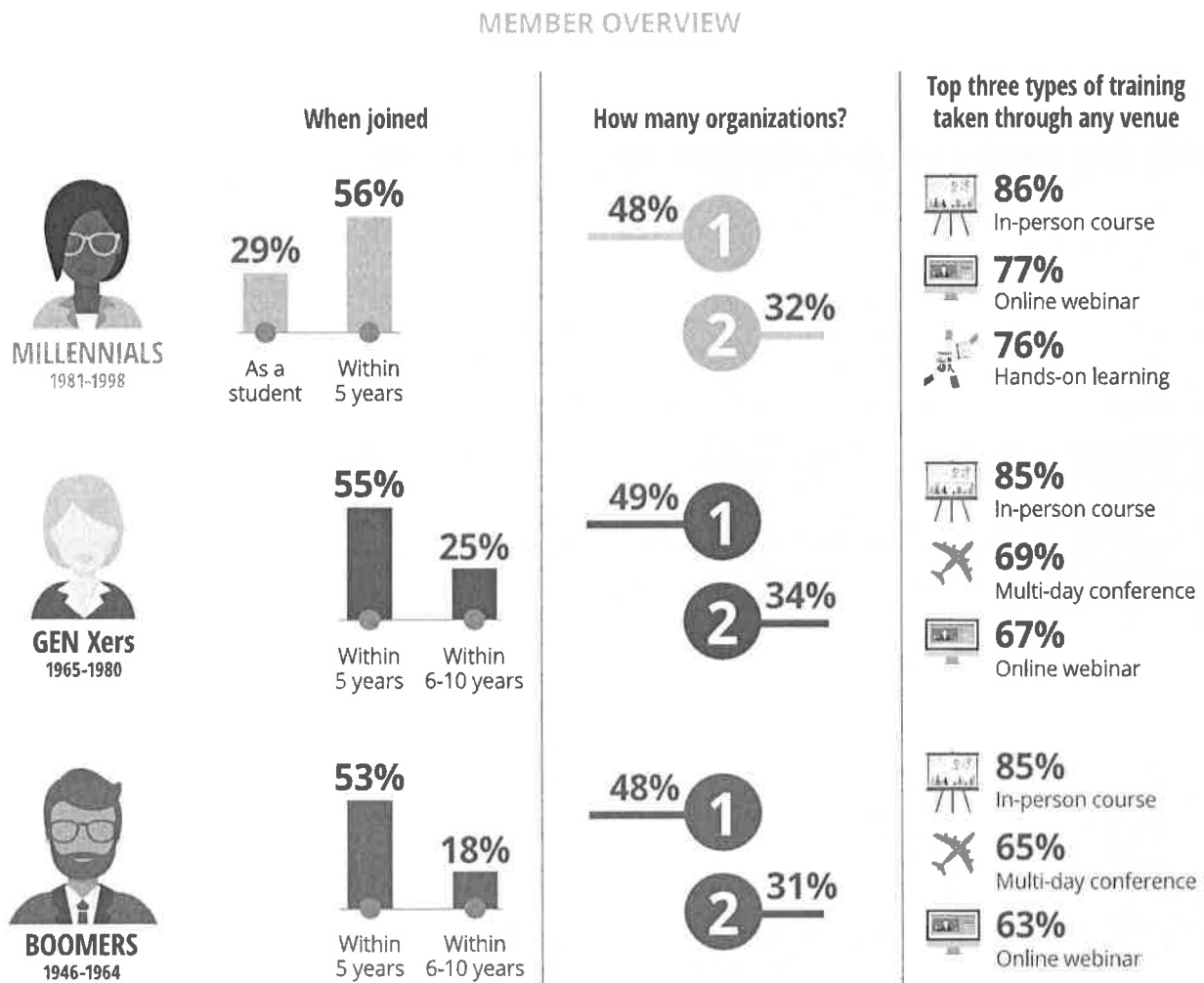


Figure 4: Membership and education patterns

Section 2: Content is King. Long Live the King.

To (again) restate the obvious, content is king. The single most important driver members consider when choosing professional development or training is content (60 percent). *What is the topic? Does it provide just-in-time learning? Is it relevant to me? Will it help me progress in my career?* There are other drivers members consider as well, including convenience (22 percent), cost (11 percent), and speaker or instructor (5 percent). Figure 5 shows the importance of each driver, broken down by generation.

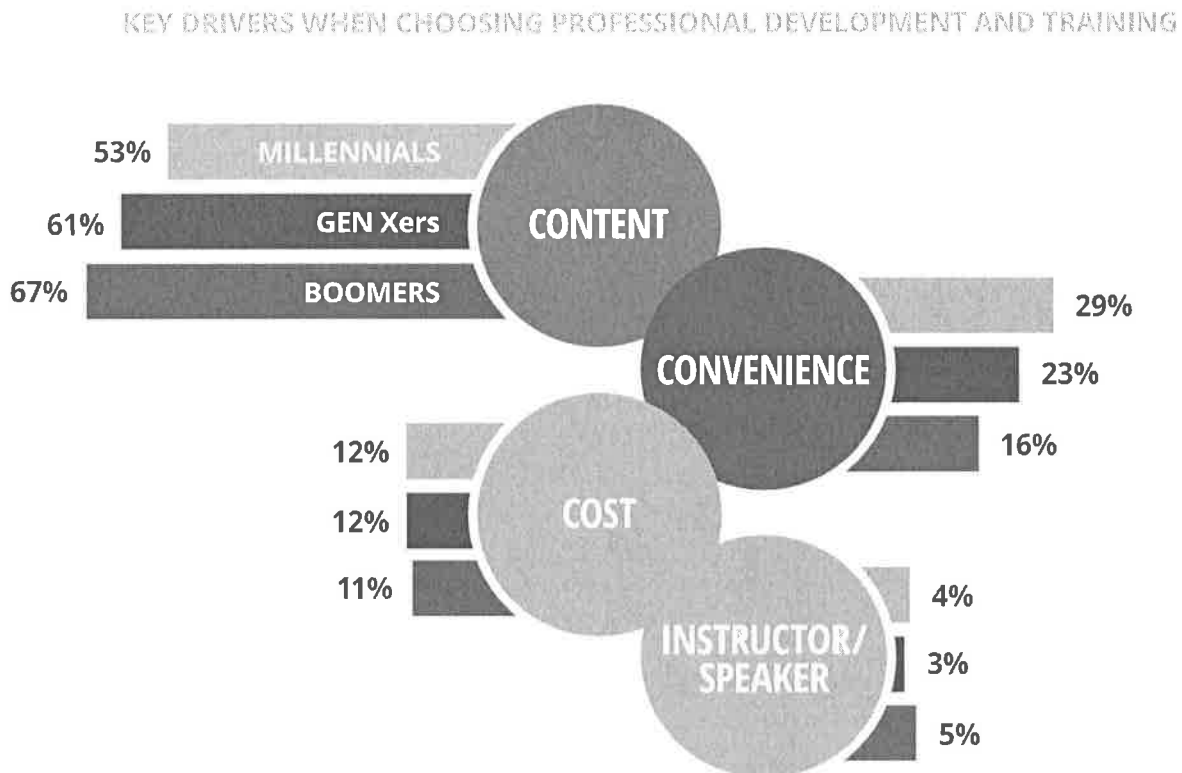


Figure 5: Key drivers when choosing professional development and training

Okay, so we know content is the main factor for members when choosing whether to take a professional development course, but what type of content matters most? And what are the main factors within each of the other drivers – convenience, cost, and speaker – when it comes to making a choice?

Practicality rules the top three types of content members prefer. Practical skills (48 percent) ranks at the top, followed by case studies (36 percent), then hands-on learning (34 percent). A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself a few questions before launching an education session:

- Can members use this information immediately?
- Which members are we targeting and how will it benefit them?
- Can members use this information to grow professionally?

As far as the other categories are concerned, time of day (44 percent) is the most important factor when considering convenience, followed by location (which ranks at 40 percent). Good value for the money (47 percent) is the most important cost factor, and an interactive instructor (34 percent) is the most important factor when considering a speaker.

Figure 6 highlights the main drivers and the associated factors for each.

IMPORTANCE IN CHOOSING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION/TRAINING

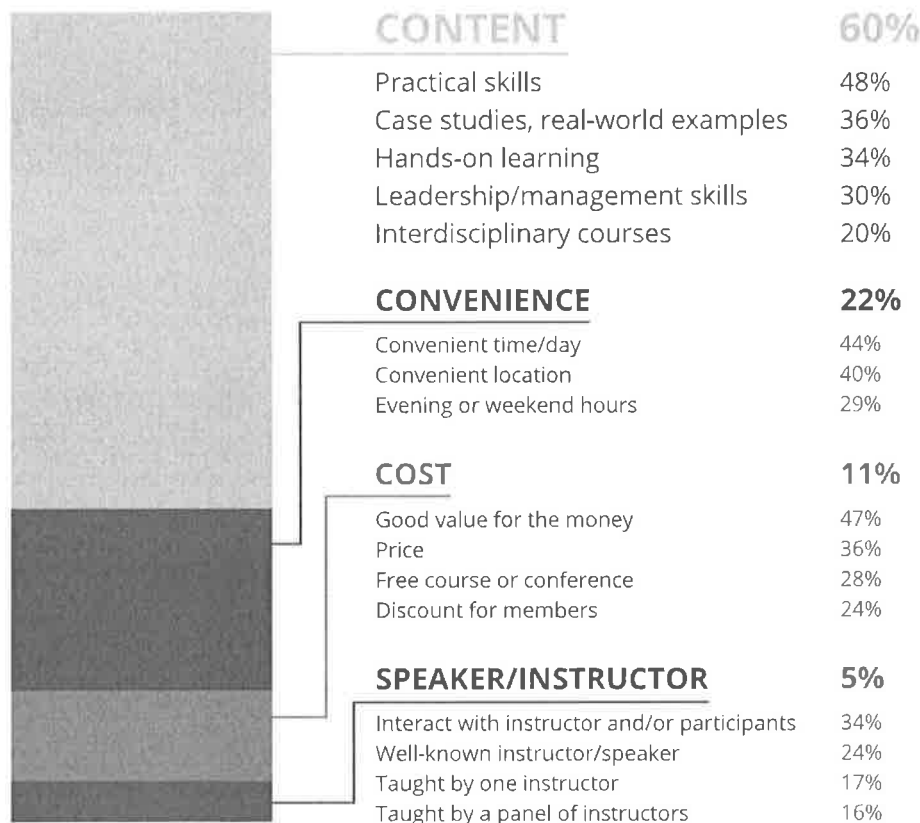


Figure 6: Key factors for each driver referenced in figure 5

Member Professional Development Study 2017

While content is king and the main driver for training and professional development, different needs drive choice of learning format (in-person, hands-on, online, etc.). For example, taking a course through a mobile device is far more driven by convenience than content. Figure 7 highlights different types of sessions and whether content or convenience, or both, are the driving motivators.

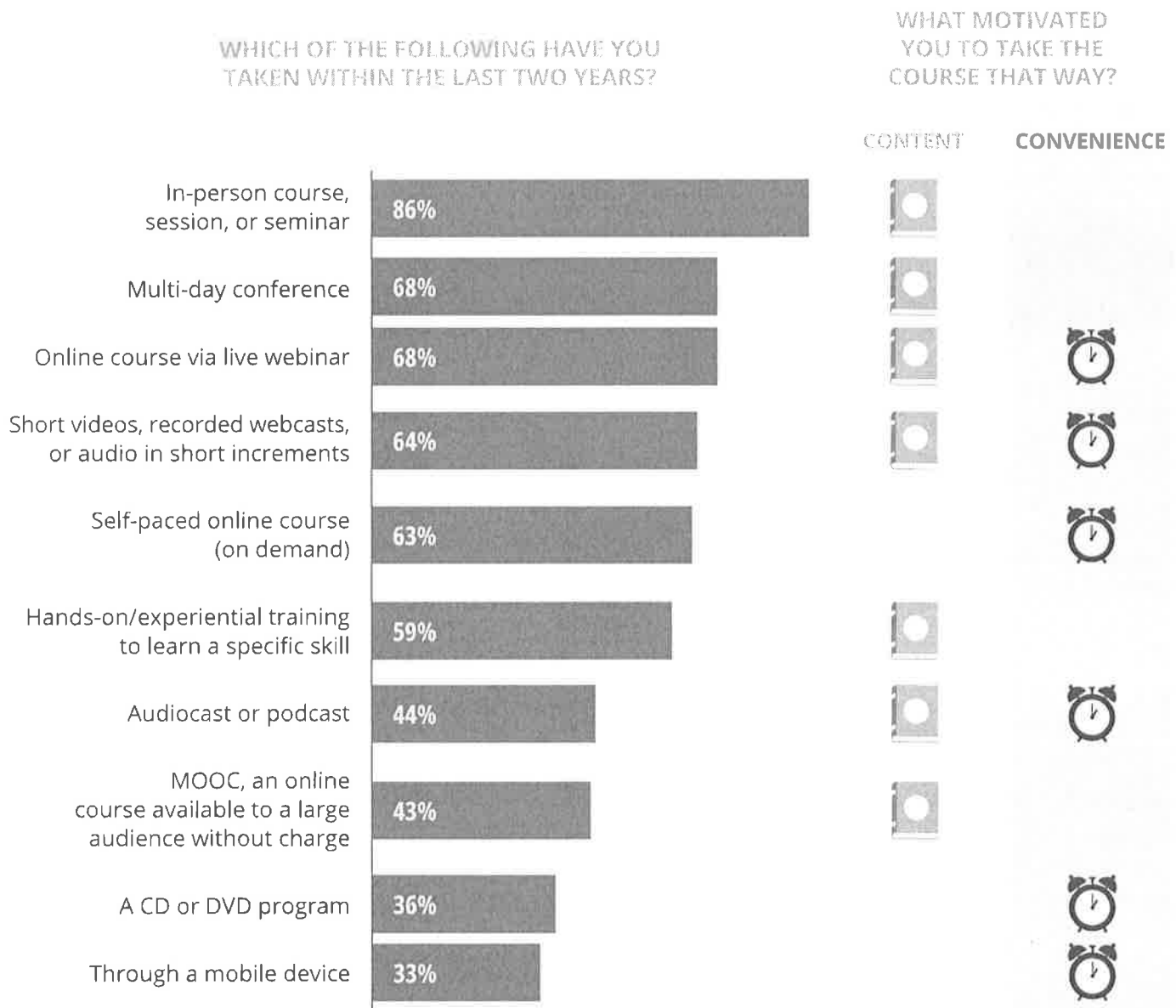


Figure 7: Different learning formats and the motivators for each

Section 3: Competing Against Other Organizations

Members want education. Period. And, while most (60 percent) turn to the organizations to which they belong for education, they seek other sources and venues for professional development and education. The good news is, most members truly value the education experience and content they're receiving through their member organizations (84 percent), but they tend to highly rate all education experiences.

Colleges and universities rank highest (89 percent) when it comes to the learner experience, while the lowest rated is their employer (77 percent), even though both Millennials and Generation Xers often turn to their employer when seeking professional development and training.

Figure 8 looks at where members have taken professional development and training within the last two years, and how they rate each of these sources of education.



Figure 8: Source of education and associated ranking

Interestingly, those members who turn to their associations for professional development and training are much more likely to seek out multiple sources for additional education. The majority of those who don't use the member organization to which they belong for professional development and training, settle on only one source. Figure 9 showcases this difference.

What's not clear is whether those using the association to which they belong as a source for professional development feel the need to look elsewhere because they aren't satisfied or are just more likely to be lifelong learners.

WHERE DIFFERENT MEMBERS RECEIVED PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

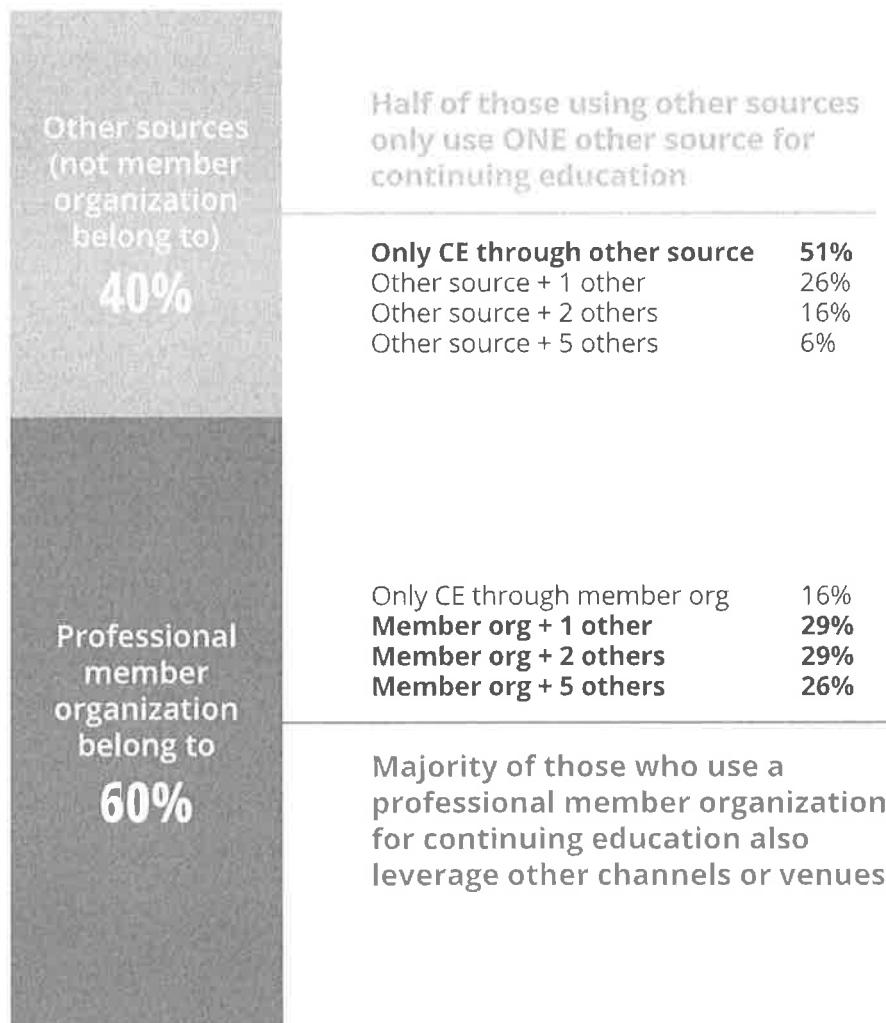


Figure 9: Where members get their professional development and training

Section 4: Length and Format

Members will turn to multiple sources for their professional development, continuing education, and training. But what is the preferred format (in-person, online, etc.)? And how long should these sessions be?

While both associations and their members say they prefer multi-day conferences, this might be aspirational, at best. The data show that members pay the most attention during one-hour seminars and courses – and that these types of courses (one-hour) best meet the everyday needs of members.

Figure 10 shows the sweet spot in terms of length for a seminar or course, while Figure 11 shows the preferred format for courses and seminars.

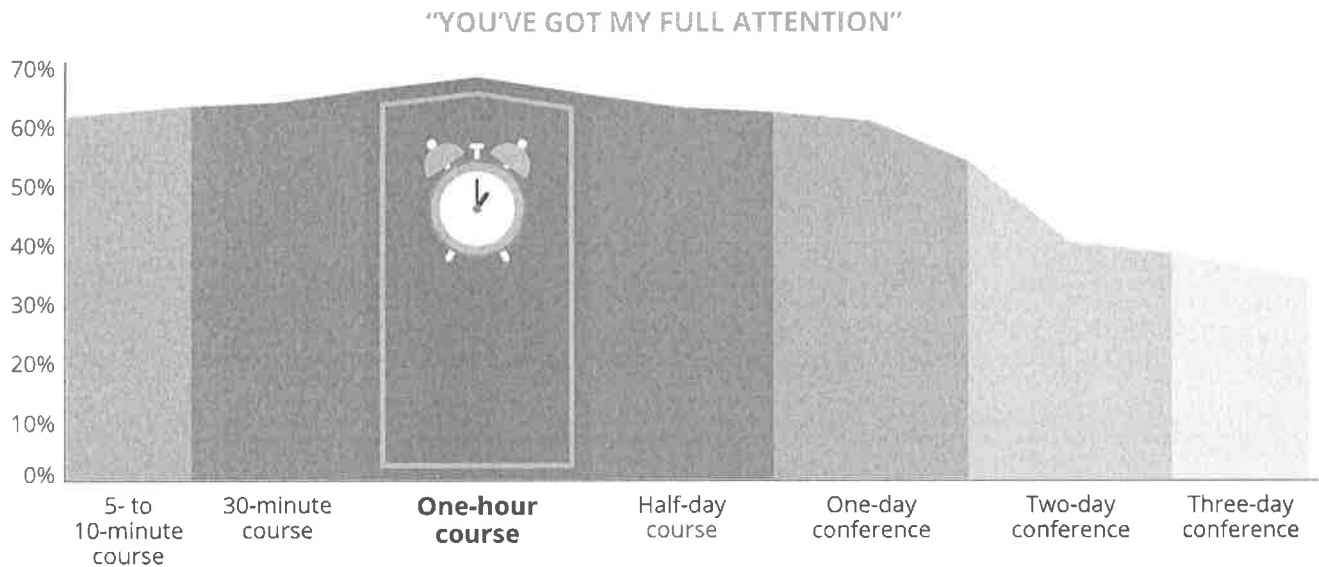


Figure 10: Duration of course and quality of attendee attention span

MOST POPULAR TYPES OF SESSIONS FROM PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATION

An in-person course or seminar (not multi-day conference) was the most popular offering taken from a professional organization



Figure 11: Top three most popular types of education and training taken through professional membership organization

Section 5: Technology

While many associations use a variety of technologies (webcast and webinar tools, email marketing tools, learning management systems, etc.) to deliver and evaluate professional development, continuing education, and training programs to their members, there's not a high level of satisfaction with the technology.

Figure 12 looks at the types of tools associations are using, while Figure 13 illustrates the satisfaction level with the different capabilities of technologies being used.

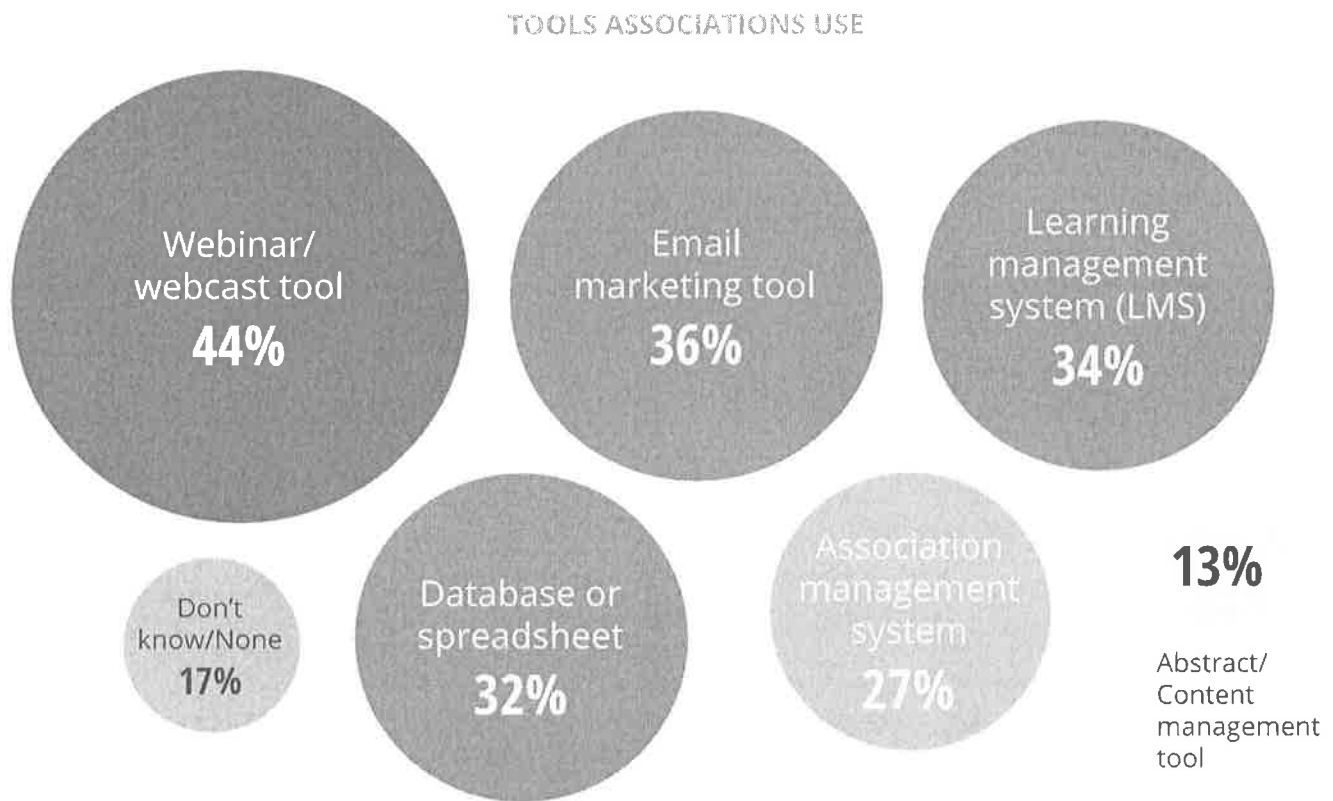


Figure 12: Tools associations use for professional development, continuing education, and training

SATISFACTION WITH PLATFORM/SOLUTION CAPABILITIES

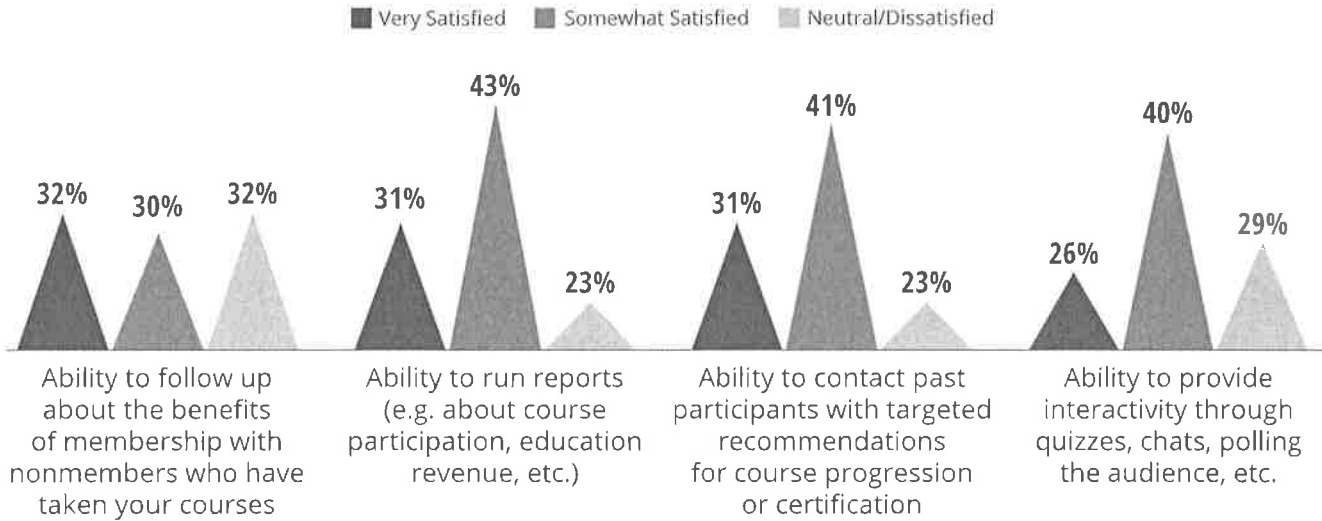


Figure 13: Association satisfaction levels with current technology

For online offerings, specifically, Millennials have the highest interest. Additionally, most members want access to documents they can read and review. While we live in a digital world with digital natives, real documents that can be easily referenced later greatly appeal across all generations.

Figure 14 provides the various degrees of interest across different types of online offerings, split out by generation.

INTEREST IN ONLINE OFFERINGS

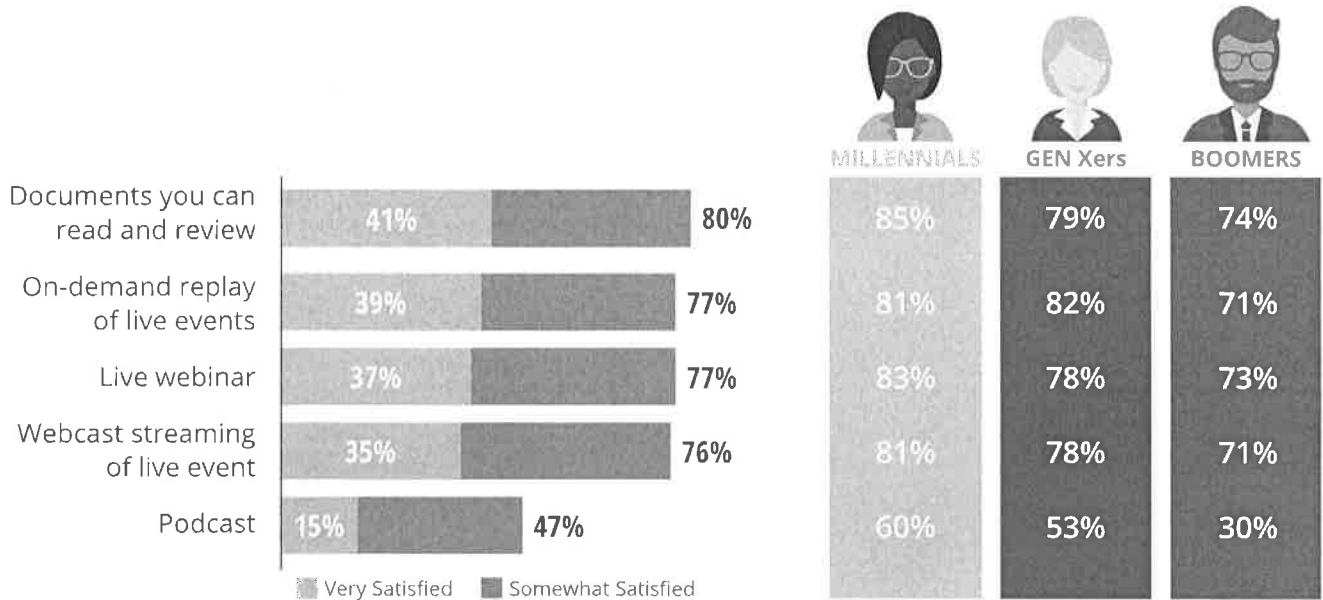


Figure 14: Online interest by generation

Section 6: Pricing

Ah. Pricing. Everything costs something, including education and professional development. But how do members want to pay for professional development, continuing education, and training? Nearly half (45 percent) of all members surveyed (and 55 percent of Millennials) prefer an all-inclusive membership fee that comprises professional development, continuing education, training courses, and seminars.

However, only about one-third of organizations currently offer this option. There's a definite disconnect between members and associations when it comes to an all-in-one offering. The two least popular options for members are those that offer some discounts for certain items (11 percent) and pay-per-use models (20 percent). While Millennials do not like the pay-per-use model (12 percent), Boomers are nearly as interested in pay-per-use as they are in all-in-one offerings.

The data in Figure 15 showcases the changing attitudes and behaviors toward professional development and training pricing structures. Associations must adjust to this shift to attract and retain Millennial members.



Figure 15: How members prefer to pay for education

Not surprisingly, most associations don't offer discounts to nonmembers. In fact, 13 percent of associations don't even make material, courses, and seminars available to nonmembers. See Figure 16.



Figure 16: How associations charge for professional development and education

Section 7: Where Do We Go From Here?

Education and the value of professional development aren't going away anytime soon. In fact, professional development and training will likely increase in value as the job market becomes more competitive and automated solutions threaten to displace sections of the workforce. Individuals are looking for every edge they can gain, every skill they can sharpen, every advantage they can take.

Associations are aware of this shift, and a majority (about 60 percent) have adjusted in the last couple of years to adapt to the changing tides. However, many (about 40 percent) have only made small adjustments or no changes at all to their professional development and education programs (see Figure 17). For associations to be successful, and to take advantage of the opportunities that exist for education and development, it's imperative to continue to evolve.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES TO CONTINUING EDUCATION IN LAST TWO YEARS

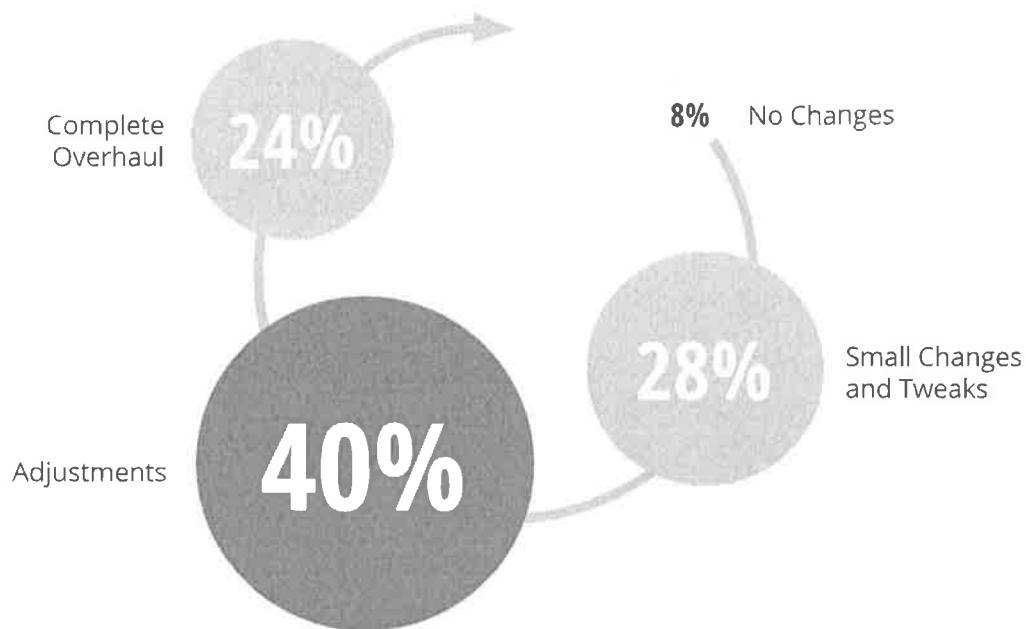


Figure 17: Some organizations have invested in upgrading CE programs; some haven't

Millennials will drive new and different behaviors in the workforce, while technology will drive some jobs out of existence and create entirely new roles that haven't even been identified yet. So, where do we go from here?

Here are some specific tips and suggestions associations can use to get the most out of the data in this study.

Evaluate your current education programs

Are your current programs meeting the needs of your members? Are your members taking advantage of your education offerings? About 60 percent of the members we surveyed turn to the associations to which they belong for education and training. If fewer than 60 percent of your members are using you for education, then your program likely needs an overhaul. Are the courses you're offering too long? Are they the wrong format? Is the content not useful?

Engage different generations in different ways

Tailored programs and targeted content by generation can have a truly beneficial effect on your education programs. Understanding the various needs of your members, depending upon where they are in their career journeys, can pay huge dividends. For example, Millennials value a "learning by doing" approach.

Offer practical, applicable content

Generally speaking, members want one thing from their education experience – practical, pragmatic information they can start using today. Focus on courses that offer very practical tips with detailed information on how to implement. Nano-learning and specific just-in-time content will likely resonate well with your members – especially Millennials. Although many members like the idea of multi-day conferences, the data suggests that one-hour, in-person courses are the best format for busy professionals.

Evaluate your technology

The right tool for the right job can make all the difference in the world. You wouldn't use a hammer to sweep your floor or a pair of pliers to nail a board. Doing so only leads to frustration, dissatisfaction, and typically, an incomplete job or low quality final product.

Look at the technology you're using to deliver your education program. Ensure you're using a comprehensive system that enables your staff to manage your offerings from start to finish. Everything from your webinars and webcasts, to your on-demand programs, to your continuing education courses, should all be run through the same learning platform to guarantee a seamless experience for your learners and staff.

And don't miss the opportunity to work with a system that integrates with your main database of record or association management system (AMS). Your data should be fluid, your systems should be talking to one another, and your members should have a smooth, positive, across-the-board experience.

Review your pricing model and structure

Sixty percent of members turn to their association for professional development and training; however, that means 40 percent do not. Plus, another chunk is turning to other sources, even if these members use their association initially for training and development.

Pricing structure might be a factor. While only a third of organizations surveyed offer an all-inclusive pricing option, nearly 50 percent of members surveyed prefer this option. A simple pricing model restructure could lead to greater stickiness with members around education programs. And, keep in mind, more segmented content combined with hands-on training can position your association ahead of members' and nonmembers' employers for continuing education programs.

Survey Methodology

Commissioned by Abila, Edge Research conducted online surveys with more than 1,000 members in the United States across three age segments – Millennials, Generation Xers, and Boomers. For these online surveys, Edge Research engaged with a reputable, large opt-in panel in which survey exposure is monitored and limited. For the Member survey, criteria included: adults 18+ who self report they are a member of a professional membership organization and have taken professional education and training in the last two years, or plan to in the next two years. We also posed questions to more than 100 association professionals who work at professional membership organizations. The association professionals surveyed are involved in decisions around professional development and continuing education. Note that sometimes totals may not appear to add up to 100 percent due to rounding and the option for survey participants to make more than one choice.

The online surveys took place between January 18 and February 13, 2017.

About Abila

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