

Managing Editor's Desk

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Worrying about NEHA and the Case for Online Learning

I joked with our board at its meeting in Tucson: I offered that if they really wanted to pin me with a “real-world”-based job title, they should change my title from CEO to CWO (Chief Worrying Officer). On a more serious note, I continued that when all is said and done, what NEHA really pays me to do is to worry! And in fact, on many days, there I am, out there on the bow of the Good Ship NEHA, madly looking for and worrying about any sign of developments that could impact our organization.

Accordingly, when ominous events or trends do develop, I spring into worry mode and begin to think about how we might respond, adapt, and if possible, take advantage of whatever it is that stands in our way.

I don't have to tell anyone who has recently read a newspaper or glanced at his or her cell phone to look at the latest news from CNN that the waters we are all now navigating through are anything but smooth. In the little speech that I presented to our board, I pointed out that over my career at NEHA, I have never seen a business environment that is as scary as the one we are sailing into today. It seems that no matter which way we look, challenges loom.

For the NEHA member, the good news is that we actively look for these challenges and then determine ways to respond or adapt. Yours is not a reactionary organization that waits for hammers to fall before it starts to change its ways to then scramble into step with the times. (You can stop reading here if you wish because you now have the central point to my column this month.)

To illustrate our determination to identify challenges early and to respond to them be-

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fore they become overwhelming, I will devote the remainder of my column to a specific example of a scary challenge and how we are responding to it.

People all over the world are shuddering these days over the rapidly rising cost of energy, especially gasoline. Though some people are making tempting arguments that oil prices may soon be reversing, others insist (based largely on the growing energy appetites of China and India) that the price for a barrel of oil will continue to escalate and possibly even reach \$200 a barrel within a year.

If we can hold that thought for a moment, let me note that given everything that NEHA does, nothing compares in significance to our responsibility to provide education and training for this profession. (Associations are the

single largest source of continuing education in the nation.) Our focus on education is also the main justification for our 501c3 not-for-profit status.

To put this in more practical terms, our annual conference represents about 20% of our total revenue. When you add to that the education that we provide through our journal, several of the grant programs we operate, our publications program, and our credentialing programs (i.e., the training we offer for the exams), we're easily talking about the source for more than 50% of our total income. Therefore, you better believe that we are prepared to do what we need to do to protect these activities—even in the face of developing threats that could undermine our educational offerings.

Because education is so central to what NEHA is all about, it is imperative that we think about how the rising cost of travel could affect us. This is especially true of the Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition, which requires either an increasingly expensive airplane ticket or tanks full of gas to attend. If people can no longer afford to attend our annual conference, NEHA will be in a world of hurt, as will almost all associations. (One econometric model with which I am familiar projects that for every 10% rise in the cost of a gallon of gas, a .5% decrease in the demand for hotel rooms will occur. My guess is that this decrease would be even more significant if we were talking only about public sector employees, who comprise the majority of NEHA's membership.)

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- increase the understanding of the relations among exposure to hazardous agents, conditions in the home, and adverse health outcomes; and
- improve the ability of programs to address an array of housing deficiencies in an efficient, effective, and timely manner.

HUD and CDC have also jointly developed and funded other important activities related to healthy homes, including

- a healthy housing curriculum that addresses the training needs of environmental public health practitioners, public health nurses, housing specialists, and others interested in building local capacity to address housing-related health hazards (Healthy Homes Training Center and Network, <http://www.healthyhomestraining.org>); and

- the *Healthy Housing Reference Manual*, which gives public health and housing professionals the tools necessary to ensure that housing stock is safe, decent, and healthy for our citizens, particularly children and the elderly, who are often most vulnerable and spend more time in the home (<http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/publications/books/housing/housing.htm>).

Format of This Manual

HUD and CDC recommend that Section 1, the Healthy Housing Model Resident Questionnaire (a voluntary health assessment), be completed first. The questionnaire should be used to collect information that cannot be determined visually. Information from the questionnaire can provide important clues that point to housing deficiencies.

Section 2, the Visual Assessment Data Collection Form, should be used to collect information that can be determined without asking questions of a resident. This form includes detailed assessment of exterior housing, kitchen, bathroom, and living area, as well as a general building information.

This manual also contains three supporting appendices:

- a data dictionary that defines housing deficiencies listed in the Visual Assessment Data Collection Form,
- a cross-reference to code provisions in the 2003 *International Property Maintenance Code* (2003 IPMC), and
- additional resources (links to environmental sampling methods and to more information about substances or issues related to healthy housing). 🐼

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To get some sense for how the relationship between rising energy costs and education is playing out, I looked at what higher education is going through this summer in light of the rise in the cost of gas and how much more expensive it has become for college students to drive to school. The results are not surprising.

To summarize:

- most (79%) of the nation's 15 million students live off-campus, meaning that driving and the cost of gas is a very real part of their world;
- schools are seeing a significant increase in the percentages of their students who are now enrolling in online courses;
- though the increase in online enrollments is taking place at both four-year schools and community colleges, this development appears particularly pronounced at community colleges;
- online enrollment increases of 35%, 24.5%, 52%, and 114% have been reported at Bucks County Community College (Pennsylvania), Brevard Community College (Florida), Ozarks Technical Community College (Missouri), and Bristol Community College (Massachusetts), respectively; and
- even four-year institutions are seeing significant increases in online enrollment, as evidenced at Villanova (40%), Tennessee (29%), and South Texas College (35%).

In all cases, the reason cited for these enrollment numbers is connected to the rising price of gas.

On the one hand, many in the meetings business argue that because we humans are social creatures and have a need for face-to-face contact, meetings as we have known them will continue on. On the other hand, and using the experiences of these colleges as a guide, it would seem that the price of travel is now reaching levels that would have many people trading in their airplane ticket for a seat at the keyboard where they can access online learning for much cheaper. Is NEHA ready for such a trend?

We can honestly say that we began preparing for this day several years ago when we started worrying about the decreases that you were experiencing in your continuing education budgets. In response, we began building a brand new NEHA program (which we initially called CERT or Center for Environmental Research and Training but which we now refer to as our e-Learning program). Through our e-Learning activities, we are now able to provide a healthy measure of continuing education online.

As we were experimenting with different business models for the e-Learning program to determine what might work best for both you and NEHA, we rather quickly concluded that the fee-based model was not the best. As a result, we have abandoned this approach and are now giving away for free the many online learning courses that we feature through our Web site.

To cover our costs and make this financially viable for NEHA—especially if this new program is destined to make up for revenue we could lose from our AEC & Exhibition—we are now courting sponsors to support these online courses. This arrangement offers all parties a win-win-win opportunity.

Clearly, the member wins, for you are now able to honor your professional obligation to keep on top of your practice through continuing education, at no cost! NEHA wins, because we have found a way to deliver the education that people come to us for, but through an arrangement that enables us to cover our costs. And the sponsors win, because they are able to connect better with the membership by being visibly present in their educational experiences.

NEHA will continue to enhance and aggressively market its AEC & Exhibition. Please don't read into these comments any subtle message about pulling back on our AEC & Exhibition commitment. When I see decreased continuing education budgets and significant migration from in-class experiences to online training options, however, I worry. Out of that worry comes a sobering realization that if this trend sweeps through the NEHA community, we have to be there with the appropriate options. And we are. That's just the way that NEHA works! 🐼

