

## ▶ BUILDING CAPACITY



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## Building Capacity Through Communities of Practice

**Editor's Note:** A need exists within environmental health agencies to increase their capacity to perform in an environment of diminishing resources. With limited resources and increasing demands, we need to seek new approaches to the practice of environmental health. Acutely aware of these challenges, the *Journal* publishes the Building Capacity column to educate, reinforce, and build upon successes within the profession using technology to improve efficiency and extend the impact of environmental health agencies.

This column is authored by technical advisors of the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) data and technology section, as well as guest authors. The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NEHA.

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Some of my favorite times are when I can get together with friends and colleagues who I have worked and collaborated with over the years. On the other hand, there is also the joy of making new connections—prompted by mutual needs, interests, and history—that provide a fresh infusion of perspectives and ideas.

The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) and its regional affiliates are superb examples of effective communities of practice. In addition to NEHA, there are also associations for hazardous materials, wastewater, drinking water, vector control, and many more.

Communities of practice establish social learning systems for circulating skills, methodologies, and innovations. Even just

swapping stories is extremely constructive and supportive.

### Communities of Practice for Software Users

Your software provider ideally facilitates communities around its software and users. The village can embrace environmental health experts (e.g., program managers, inspectors), as well as power users who manage renewals, billing, collections, report writing, and other functions. Cross-connecting with these experts is ideal.

Healthy communities are larger and more vested in common interests, enough to be self-sustaining. When the thoughts, ideas, and educational materials are member-generated, they become self-sustaining. Said better, it is superior when the membership “owns”

the organization, providing direction on a multitude of programs that make the organization the place to go for valuable resources.

### It Is Time to Emphasize the Face-to-Face

Yes, these communities can function digitally (e.g., through message boards, Discord, Slack, etc.), but they really become something special when done face-to-face, or at least via video conference.

Coming together face-to-face for an organized conference, user group meeting, or regional training might feel like just another calendar appointment to be scheduled around. It is not.

Being in person feels more difficult now perhaps because we are out of practice. Here are some ideas on how to get back into the swing of face-to-face meetings.

### Make Travel and Time Requests Relevant

With the agenda in hand, relate requests for time and travel to the needs of your agency. In my experience, liberally using the words “training” or “educational” helps a lot. If you cannot attend or are not approved to attend, recommend a colleague to represent your agency in your stead.

Good leaders should recognize the prospect for all sorts of intangible benefits from these events. For example, these events provide opportunities for recruitment and retention, professional development, leadership, presentation skills, and benchmarking.

### Be on the Program

One of the best ways to be preapproved to attend an event is to be on the agenda. Most

events might waive some or all fees when you sit on a panel or lead a breakout session. Even though proposal deadlines can be months (sometimes 6 months or more) before the actual event, do not get too concerned about sourcing every bit of the presentation. At the planning phases, event planners are looking for themes and broad strokes. Details of the presentation can come together closer to the day of the presentation.

### Track and Use Your Contacts

Reach out before the event to touch base and plan for times to meet to have coffee or a chat. Most events feature an app with attendee search capabilities, messaging, and even appointment requests.

Collect new contacts with enthusiasm, organized as business cards, LinkedIn connections, or shared emails and texts. To each contact add a brief note—a little play-by-play—regarding something special about each person you met.

### Give Yourself an Extra Day (or Afternoon)

Traveling and being away from family and responsibilities can inject stress. On the other hand, travel is a gift. There is a balance, for sure. Overall, the stress of travel can pass quickly.

When it makes sense and you can swing it, arrange your travel for an extra day or afternoon and commit to experiencing something new. Better yet, invite your significant other or a friend to come along for the adventure.

At NEHA 2022 Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition in Spokane, Wash-

ington, many attendees strolled or jogged along the excellent trail system of the Spokane River. NEHA Immediate Past-President Roy Kroeger held a “Walk With Leaders” event in the morning to bring together attendees for an early morning stroll. Great idea!

### Be Visible During and After

These people are your connections and you should share what you know. Attend all the events, even if you are tired. Sit in the front and hang around to chat with the presenters. Sign up for committees and stay up late. Disappearing into your hotel room would be such a shame.

### Hit the Exhibit Hall

The people in the exhibit hall also made sacrifices to be at the event. For some events, the commercial providers represent a sizeable portion of the event budget. While you are collecting pens, water bottles, and drink koozies, grab the latest product summary sheets, sign up for the newsletter, and ask tough questions.

### Share What You Learned

I keep running notes in OneNote during and after presentations. Those notes and snapshots become the basis for a postevent briefing with my staff members. Your staff who did not get to travel this year want to know everything about the event. In the best cases, you can repackage an educational session for your own office. Sharing what you learned at the event serves to reinforce that knowledge.

### See You Soon

A fresh batch of spring conferences is just around the corner for you to employ these suggestions and make the most out of your face-to-face event experiences. And the NEHA 2023 AEC will be in New Orleans, Louisiana, on July 31–August 3. The AEC is an ideal place to practice what you have learned here and over the coming months as you venture back into face-to-face events. ✨

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### CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The *Journal* seeks guest authors for the Building Capacity column. Our goal is to provide a platform to share capacity building successes occurring across the country and within different sectors of the environmental health profession, including academia, private industry, and state, local, tribal, and territorial health agencies. Submissions will be reviewed by the NEHA technical advisors for data and technology and *Journal* staff for appropriate content, relevance, and adherence to submission guidelines. To learn more about the submission process and guidelines, please visit [www.neha.org/jeh/building-capacity-column](http://www.neha.org/jeh/building-capacity-column).

## Did You Know?

We are busy at work putting together the educational program for the NEHA 2023 Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition to take place July 31–August 3 in New Orleans, Louisiana. The 2023 AEC will provide education on a variety of environmental health topics including climate and health, data and technology, emergency preparedness and response, food safety, general environmental health, healthy communities, infectious and vectorborne disease, environmental health topics in Louisiana, special populations, water quality, workforce and leadership, and the NEHA-FDA Retail Flexible Funding Model Grant Program. We are also lining up an engaging preconference educational program to enhance your AEC experience. Attendee registration opens on December 1. Learn more at [www.neha.org/aec](http://www.neha.org/aec).