PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Limbo: Straddling the Present and Future

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We are about to witness a tectonic shift in our profession. Within the next couple of years, the baby boomers employed in the environmental health field will be outnumbered by Generation X and Generation Y (also known as “millennials”). This realization should prompt us to examine the evolution of our profession, our mission, and how our professional association is meeting the needs of the millennials who are about to dominate the environmental health workforce.

This shift causes me to reflect upon how our personal and professional lives have been impacted by technological advances of the past and present and how our paradigms will be affected by the changes the future will surely bring. To remain current in our profession, we find ourselves having to adapt rapidly to the changes around us—something most of us are already accustomed to doing. For instance, depending on your generation, you may remember a time before
- debit cards;
- laptop and tablet computers;
- thermocouples;
- e-mail, conference calls, and video conferences;
- cellular phones, text messaging, and smart phones; and
- social media.

The changes happening in our workforce and professional associations were recently well articulated by this year’s Florida Environmental Health Association (FEHA) President Robert Maglievaz in his presidential address at FEHA’s annual conference. Like NEHA and many other organizations, FEHA finds its organization in a period of transition. Many of their members are retiring and the incoming generations are not replacing the outgoing members. Attracting younger professionals to join our environmental health associations and become part of our cause is our responsibility. If we do not take action to preserve our professional associations that support our field of practice and our continuing education, we are at risk of being witness to the fading of more programs and lack of support for our environmental health workforce. How will this impact our association world and our environmental health functions within our communities? The generational transition is very real and is impacting our affiliate organizations. The FEHA president’s efforts to outline their current struggles and rally the membership are to be commended. I hope you will also appreciate and relate to Mr. Maglievaz’s presentation excerpted below.

Connecting the Future One Dot at a Time

Autumn is a time for reflection upon the change happening around us and there has been no shortage of it within our organization. A combination of economics, demographics, societal shifts, and technological change has forced our organization to alter the way we have always done things … and change is never easy. So we reflect upon the organization we once were and doors that have closed behind us. We lament over the things we left behind in the process and worry about what the future might bring. Alexander Graham Bell once said, “We often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us.” I ask our members to consider the possibility that Alexander Graham Bell may have been right … that we need to stop focusing on the closed ones and instead notice the doors opening up around us, the doors leading us to new opportunities that could make our association better, stronger, and take us to a more relevant place than we find ourselves today.
Connecting Dots

Getting to that place is not always obvious. It sometimes requires a “connecting of the dots” before the true picture of the future emerges. The problem is, as Steve Jobs once said, “You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in the future.” I think that was the secret to his success … when a door opened to a new opportunity, he somehow knew how to read all those dots and piece them together to form the “big picture.” I think this analogy applies to the future of our association. These newly opened doors have revealed a lot of dots to us … dots that we must somehow start to connect in order to form the picture of our future. I’d like to share my perspectives and discuss the dots and how I see them connecting for our future.

A Dot in Time—January 1, 2011

One of the first dots that I see is January 1, 2011. Why is this date important? On this day, the largest turnover of human capital in American history commenced when members of the baby boom generation reached 65. Each day afterward, another 10,000 baby boomers reached retirement age. I believe it is no coincidence that our membership began dropping around this date.

Young People Just Don’t Care?

Consider the statement, “Millennials only want to work eight hours while they look for a better opportunity.” If this is true, then why are thousands of young people appearing at events such as Occupy Wall Street and how did somebody convince all these millennials to care? Clearly there must be a disconnect here, because the research says young people do care … and the ones going into the environmental health profession really do care about environmental health issues and they really do want to be involved. The research tells us the disconnect is how we expect them to plug in. We expect them to be just like baby boomers and they are not.

So the next dot connection we must figure out is how to build the plug and where to put the outlets in order for our new generation of environmental health professionals to plug into our organization and get them involved. Limited leave, tight economic times, and increased workloads also make it difficult for them to attend an annual educational conference on their own time and dollar.

According to the research, millennials really want to become part of a community that supports causes they can identify with, a community that offers connections to others within the profession, and a virtual infrastructure through which they can rapidly plug into to make these connections from the comfort of their home or office. So building an infrastructure that can support that virtual environmental health community are the next dots we must connect.

We Need a Cause

What better cause could we adopt than fighting for the respect and salaries of these new people coming into our profession and supporting them as they move through their careers? Building that respect, supporting our own, and promoting environmental health in our communities are all causes that will attract millennials to our ranks.

A Better Future

One hundred and fifty years ago, for every person who died of old age, eight more died from environmental-associated diseases. It was through the commitment and diligence of those who came before us that we now all enjoy the possibility of living to old age.

This is no time to rest on the laurels of our past. This is no time to wallow in the trial and tribulations of our current circumstances or to allow pessimism and pragmatism to keep us on the plateau of the present. I have come to you to remind you of the urgency of NOW and why an organization like FEHA is important to us all. This is the time for a new beginning, a beginning that could eventually unite the professionals in our environmental health programs and make them stronger and more effective. I challenge you to rediscover the spirit of urgency and purpose that was present when the environmental health profession was created. Now is the time for us to make the commitment to be involved and take the journey together.

Moving Toward the Future

The challenge is identifying and connecting with younger professionals using different approaches and technologies. NEHA is addressing this challenge by expanding our student mentorship program. We have the opportunity to hear directly from graduating environmental health students now entering the profession. NEHA has also been working diligently to incorporate practices that are more appealing and conducive to learning for our incoming workforce. Some examples of recent changes within NEHA include 1) e-Learning opportunities online, 2) learning laboratory formats for our conferences, 3) virtual conferences where participants can tune in remotely either live or at a later time, 4) E-News publications one to two times per month, 5) release of an E-Journal last month, 6) e-mail blasts for quick dissemination of information, 7) development of an electronic communication tool for information exchange between affiliate presidents, 8) e-commerce, 9) creation of environmental health blogs, and 10) community outreach efforts at annual conferences.

At our upcoming 2014 Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition in Las Vegas, Nevada, our meeting with affiliate presidents will focus on the technological and generational transition. We will strive to do more, are open to your ideas, and will engage in further exchange with our affiliates. Please feel free to contact me by e-mail or contact your NEHA regional vice president (see listing on page 186) if you have any thoughts on taking proactive measures during this time of rapid transition.