

► **DirectTalk** MUSINGS FROM THE 10TH FLOOR



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NEHA 2.0

Values. Loyalties. Losses. These factors comprise the lens from which leaders should ideally view change through their stakeholders' eyes. What do employees, customers, and business partners value? Who or what are they loyal to? And if a proposed change is implemented, what will be the real or perceived losses? These issues are not trivial and change agents would be well served to identify those before embarking on the journey into an alternate future.

Our association, in its current state, is constructed for the baby boomer generation. In full disclosure, I'm one of those. We are joiners. We are homeowners. We peruse the Sunday *New York Times* cover-to-cover. We tend to remain with one employer and endure the ups and downs over time. Work-life balance? We work and bank our leave time. Of course, I'm exaggerating. But when you glance around, the undeniable truth is that the world is moving on from this generation.

The average human attention span in 2000 was 12 seconds. By 2013 it plummeted to 8 seconds. Today, American adults spend over 11 hours per day listening to, watching, reading, or interacting with media. I recently spent half a day at the beach prior to the Jamaican Association of Public Health Inspectors conference. Beautiful people. Gorgeous beach. Warm ocean water. But something was awry. Few people were talking or interacting. Couples, families, coworkers—silence. Virtually everyone was hunched over a mobile device. I felt as though I had landed on an alien planet, a planet that is orbiting

*In the future,
content is king.*

dangerously close to the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA).

In a recent national survey, 77% of association chief strategy officers reported younger members are uninterested in traditional membership models and a similar percentage of young professionals report being disinterested in current association governance. If these data are accurate, and if NEHA hopes to remain relevant for the next 50 years, we'll need to adapt to the new reality. Please allow me to share some thoughts on what that might look like.

In the future, content is king. The tourists lounging on that beach in Jamaica ignored each other because they were sharing, absorbing, or creating digital content. That content could have been a photo, idea, dream, or one of many other things. Whatever it was, it was likely a current affair. That is, something immediate or new that was worthy of seizing an 8-second attention span. This trend is relevant to the new workforce.

The emerging environmental health professional is likely female and more likely than not, of Hispanic or Asian origin. We will increasingly need to create and deliver capacity building that appeals and is useful to them. What do they like in their professional content? How should it be packaged? If video,

what's the optimal length? One minute? Three minutes? In a podcast format? Embedded in our *Journal of Environmental Health*? In a stand-alone blog? In a vlog (video log)? On what schedule? Just-in-time delivery? Daily? Hourly? Weekly? Monthly? On demand? In Spanish? Mandarin? Cantonese? The questions are almost endless and uncertainty is in abundance. One thing for certain, however, is that we are not equipped to accurately describe and meet these needs today.

The content of the future will need to be consistently, reliably, and immediately valuable. For example, in practice we'll need to emphasize creation of intellectual content such as policy or position statements, research articles, and amicus briefs. This content will need to be crafted, board approved, and disseminated in a nimble fashion, which translates to a NEHA employee workforce that emphasizes surveillance and situational awareness. We'll need to know what you need to know much more rapidly than the current intelligence gathering system. What do environmental health professionals need to know at this precise moment to protect and promote the health of their communities?

In the future, connectivity will be essential. Our traditional model of membership might become increasingly meaningless. Association business models based on creating and maintaining barriers between people and organizations are becoming outdated. Having a relationship with, and the trust of, people who need our content is where the action and value will be.

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credential holders and credential staff, to create an experience that is positive, transparent, straightforward, and powerful. I want our credential holders to be proud of their credentials and feel they have a team of caring experts to support them. Thankfully, I inherited a fantastic team with an enthusiastic attitude toward process

improvement and customer service. We are working on initiatives intended to create environmentally-friendly (i.e., paperless) processes in all credentialing aspects and growing our average 6,000 active credential holders by strengthening retention and creating new interest in all the credentials NEHA offers. 🐼

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What does that look like in practice? First consider yourself. If you need information on environmental health practice or emerging health issues, you may first go to the NEHA website. If you don't immediately find what you need, you ruthlessly move on to other websites from the National Association of County and City Health Officials, Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, American Public Health Association, Trust for America's Health, Association of Public Health Laboratories, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to name just a few. One of those organizations will certainly provide what you are looking for. Information is like water, it is continuous, asymmetrical, dynamic, and immediate. We need to wrap our minds around that in a very practical manner. Ask yourself, is that the NEHA you know today?

I foresee that the role of our state, uniformed, and private sector affiliates will become increasingly more important. In fact, our state affiliates, if they reach their potential, will find themselves as an essential hub of data and information critical to the health of their residents and the populations of adjacent states and territories. The hyper-local nature of environmental health issues means that those close to the action, someone like you, are as important or more important than a regional or territorial health official. Affiliates can play an essential role in brokering information, crafting reciprocity agreements, and maintaining an inventory of those willing to be deployed in strike teams. Information systems matter. That means local and



A glimpse of the past: Row homes, Porto, Portugal. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

regional relationships involving data and information will take on greater importance. State affiliates could increasingly benefit from NEHA's national capacity building of affiliate governance, peer-to-peer communication vehicles, and financial systems management, while affiliates focus on science, health, and regulatory issues in their spheres of influence. NEHA can also provide a force multiplier effect by communicating and advocating in the nation's capital what you have learned locally. I visualize a new role for NEHA in an assurance function that prioritizes affiliate performance and impact.

One thing for certain is that the lather-rinse-repeat cycle of recent association history will likely lead to a dead end. A new NEHA, one that meets the needs of the emerging workforce, a workforce dominated



A glimpse of the future: Hologram of the Burj Khalifa, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

by women in a highly digital society, will require nothing less than a radical departure from our current approaches and sensibilities. If we elect to embark on a new road, many will undoubtedly object as their favorite legacy programs become irrelevant. We should honor those humble stewards who gave birth and nurtured this noble organization as we pivot into a future characterized by supercharged Darwinian forces. Above all else, let us commit to remain true to our values, question the motivations of our loyalties, and minimize our real or perceived losses as we journey into the future together. 🐼

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