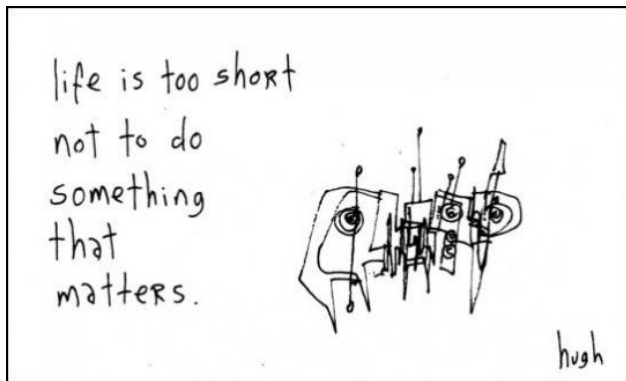


Going Forward

By Alane Wilson.

It may be no surprise that, as an Executive Director of an association, I muse a lot about trends in membership in associations and volunteering and what these may mean for library associations.



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Life is indeed too short and full to do anything that does not matter to you. But the form "something that matters" takes has changed over the decades, and perhaps mostly quickly in the last decade. This is not disconnected from the retirement of the Boomer generation from the work force, and is supported by profound changes in "connecting" technologies and services.

Much of what is said and written about the future of associations posits a decline in membership that will put many associations' existence at risk. Some associations have seen large drops in membership and this is often attributed to demographic shifts. The statement goes something like this: The pool of traditional (Boomer) members is diminishing and the Gen Xers/Millennials are not joiners.

I do not believe that is true. What is true is that the definition of joining has changed, as has the practice of participation. Millions of people join Facebook where they participate actively. Young people volunteer at higher rates than Boomers. So, what has changed is a perception of value—the value proposition, in marketing speak. Traditional associations have seen or will see a decline in their value propositions for current or potential members.

In our own community, CLA has seen a significant decline in membership and, as a result, is in full-blown self-analysis mode. Fortunately, so far, BCLA's membership has stayed stable but this does not mean we can be complacent. While membership is stable, it is a struggle to find people to volunteer for Board positions, and for committee work, and can lead to assumptions about inevitable decline and disappearance.

BCLA's Value Proposition

It is clear to me that people, regardless of the demographic box they belong in, still join; still participate in something that matters. So, the challenge for BCLA is to be an association that matters, one that people want to belong to and give of their time to for the benefit of all. This means making sure that the structure of the association is right for its purpose, and that attention and effort is focused on activities that contribute to that purpose.

This means examining the current structured organizational model where sections, committees and special interest groups, task forces and so on attach like box cars to the locomotive. Instead, we probably must make room for self-formation of connection because people will increasingly expect it. This means looking at all of the following: ways to allow physical and virtual involvement, new ways of looking at the concepts of participation, shedding boring and duplicative work, reducing time demands, examining the number of elected and appointed Directors and Chairs, and moving to a more holistic structure where staff and volunteers function as a participative parts of the whole. It means paying more attention to membership recruitment and retention, and to raising funds to provide programs and awards. It means taking nothing for granted.

It means change.

"I am prepared to go anywhere, provided it be forward." Attributed to explorer David Livingstone, 1813-1874.

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