

Go-Getters Use Groups to Get Ahead

Squeeze in Time For Professional Organizations

By LILY WHITEMAN
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You are probably already overworked, overscheduled and overcommitted. So why try to cram time into your jampacked calendar for joining professional groups?

Because by participating in professional organizations — including alumni organizations, organizations that target professionals from your field and your demographic, advocacy groups and training organizations — you may gain credentials and contacts that are just as important to your career as those yielded by your paid experience, many professionals say.

For instance:

■ **Lead high-level projects.** Professional organizations are usually short-staffed and smaller and less bureaucratic than corporate and government employers, said Steve Ressler, an information technology analyst and co-founder of Young Government Leaders. He said, "It's generally easier for go-getters to get experience in strategic planning, supervising others, communications and project management in professional organizations than in other types of organizations."

Ressler is one such go-getter. Through his YGL position, the 20-something has appeared on national radio shows, served as an editor of a journal, earned Federal Computer Week's Federal 100 Award and delivered presentations at large conferences.

■ **Meet and impress hiring managers.** Many employers value contributions to professional organizations as much as paid experience, said Lisa-Joy Zgorski, a former president of the Kennedy School of Government's D.C. Alumni Council. That's because, Zgorski said, your participation in professional orga-



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nizations demonstrates your initiative, engagement in your field and commitment to staying current.

Zgorski added, "Employers project what you do on a volunteer basis to what you would do for payment." Therefore, if your fellow members like what they see, they may hire you. Zgorski knows this because her contribu-

tions as council president impressed several fellow members so much that they hired her communications firm.

Then last spring, after Zgorski applied for a senior-level position at a federal agency, she happened to be interviewed for the position by a fellow alumnus. Although the two had never met, her interviewer had been a reg-

ular reader of Zgorski's newsletter. The upshot? She got the job.

■ **Collect advice on launching a new career.** If you're a recent grad or have an itch to switch career tracks, professional organizations can help you decide whether and how to plunge into a new field. A case in point: Several years ago, Amber Jones joined various organizations, including the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the National Association of Science Writers, to scope out opportunities in science writing.

The job listings, events and guidance convinced her to earn a master's in science writing, helped her identify target employers and introduced her to mentors. Jones describes such resources as "absolutely essential" to her ability to beat out keen competition for a job in a science-based federal agency.

■ **Get training.** Many organizations provide career-boosting training not available on the job. Among the beneficiaries of such training is Jackie Conciatore, a writer-editor at the Jane Goodall Institute, who belongs to Toastmasters International, a group that helps professionals improve their communication skills.

"I want to be my best advocate for my ideas at work," she said. "But before joining Toastmasters, I often felt hesitant about speaking up in meetings or sounded under-confident when I did speak up."

At Toastmasters, Conciatore receives supportive, confidence-building coaching on her presentation skills. Soon after joining, she was asked to give a presentation to her employer's board members. But instead of "going into panic mode, I developed a plan," Conciatore said. The result? The talk was well received and helped her realize that she actually enjoys public speaking.

Even if you cannot attend events, Conciatore recommends connecting with colleagues in your field via the online resources of these organizations. Such connections can "give you a sense of community, energize you and help you strategize future career moves."

Filling the Rolodex

How to cultivate connections:

- Find appealing organizations by asking around for recommendations, surfing the Internet and researching organizations mentioned in the media.
- After joining, socialize. Showcase your skills and build camaraderie with others by helping to organize events, contributing to publications and giving presentations. Pitch in when others need help, and identify organizational needs and help fill them.
- Stay in touch with your contacts. As you advance and move among employers, so will they. Therefore, some contacts who can't help you now will probably eventually be able to do so in unanticipated ways.