
The Virtual Association

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ABSTRACT

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A VIRTUAL ASSOCIATION is a demanding and expensive proposition, requiring more than a mere digitization of paper and the establishment of e-mail and a Web server. A virtual association is more communicative, more responsive, and more attuned to the needs of its members and its profession than a traditional paper-based association. This change means a radical alteration in organizational bureaucracies and perceptions, a process that some may find threatening. The benefits of a virtual association, however, far outweigh the transitory demands made by technology by enhancing communication and connectivity between members, staff, and a truly global audience.

INTRODUCTION

Can an association truly become virtual? Or will it always be locked into an endless cycle of conferences, workshops, reports, political tugs of war, and membership drives? Does an Internet site make an association virtual? Or is it really just a state of mind, a new philosophy to truly transform an association into a truly responsive organization for its members?

These questions face many officers and administrators of associations of all sizes and shapes around the world. The Internet provides for many associations an unprecedented opportunity to reach both members and the world at large in ways unthinkable just a few years ago. Yet some associations fear the Internet, and especially the World Wide Web, as a

threat to their unique stature as an information resource and professional collective for their members. A simple analysis of most association sites proves the difficulty of transforming an association from an elaborate tree house club into an electronic wonder. Associations can be more than politics, egos, and finances. Associations can truly appeal to the best in human nature rather than be a setting for the most foolish expositions of pettiness and emotion.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ASSOCIATIONS ON THE INTERNET

Hundreds of associations have established an Internet presence with World Wide Web and Gopher servers, from the technologically adept Software Publishers Association (<http://www.spa.org/>) to the most cerebral, such as the American Mathematical Society (<http://e-math.ams.org/>), to the most fossilized, such as the Palaeontological Association (<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/paleonet/PalAss/PalAss.html>). Most associations tend to treat the Internet as a static medium with the result that the kinds of information on the Internet do not differ radically from an association's printed offerings.

It is relatively easy to find the commonalities among association sites on the Internet (for a summary, see Noack, 1997). Most association sites will offer a history of the organization to instill pride in a given profession and a sense of heritage for members. There will be a long list of the benefits of membership, along with easy ways to sign up either online or by printing out appropriate forms. Most sites will include lists of publications—journals, books, reports—available for a fee from the association. There may also be ways online to learn more about other products, from pins to tee-shirts to bookmarks. In addition, most sites provide information online about recent past conferences and meetings and details on upcoming events. Every effort will be made to make these sessions as interesting as possible but without any allusion to a comparable virtual conference or workshop. Summaries of adopted standards or regulations may also be available online with descriptions of new industry standards in the works. Most associations work hard in Washington and in state capitols to defend their members against legislative troubles, so most Internet sites will explain these lobbying efforts and provide ways—by phone, letter, or electronic message—for members to show their support. Finally, most sites will provide electronic mail addresses for headquarters staff, although it is a rare large association that will name every staff member and give every individual's electronic mail address or phone number.

In some associations, there are more changes in headquarters staff than in the elected officers. Of course, all officers and all staff should be included in the electronic directory. Members really need to know the

size of the staff and whom to contact electronically when necessary. Some associations purposefully do not put all the names and all of the e-mail addresses of the staff in the online directories in fear that members will complain that the staff is too bloated. This is another example of administrative paranoia about the membership, a wrong-headed approach too often followed by association executive directors and their assistants.

In the past, much of this online information was provided in the form of printed membership directories and annual reports, and therefore much of the material now mounted on an Internet site is static, changing only a few times a year. That is the problem with most associations and their approach to the Internet and especially the World Wide Web—it is treated as a historical extension of an association's print culture. The situation parallels the early history of printing itself. For the first few decades of those new things called books, they looked a lot like hand-printed manuscripts. It was not until an astute businessman and printer by the name of Aldus Manutius realized that books did not need to be folio size to sell, that books could be printed in pocket sizes on topics about which people really wanted to read (such as anything nonreligious) that books became commodities and substantially transformed society. The profession is going through a similar phase when indeed every association Web server looks like the print brochures of an association. But why does that have to be tolerated? Are not associations—and especially the headquarters of associations—supposed to be filled with the best and the brightest people in a profession, erupting with creativity and ready to take advantage of these new opportunities? This optimism, it is acknowledged, certainly does not agree with the reality of the state of association personnel.

Unfortunately, strategies that might have worked for paper do not work online. In no way does this sort of approach make an association “virtual” by merely migrating data from print to photons and electrons on networked computers. A truly “virtual” association requires a radical transformation, recognizing the possibilities of interconnections—via computers—to its members to take advantage of the ways in which the Internet allows one to cheat time and shorten distance as a primary catalyst for communication. The Internet simply makes it possible to communicate with members in ways never imagined. It also makes it possible to reach new audiences and different communities, to take to them a message about a profession or an organization that has not previously been heard.

WHAT ASSOCIATIONS ARE NOT ON THE INTERNET

Associations traditionally are built on income generated from membership fees; annual conferences; and related workshops, publications,

grants, donations, and investments. Some associations see the Internet as a vehicle that could potentially reduce receipts from conferences and from publications, two of the largest sources of income for most associations. This paranoia is based on the faulty logic that if members can easily communicate with each other over the Internet, they will not need a conference to get together to work out policies and issues. Most Internet connections cost less over six to twelve months than the registration fees, lodging expenses, and travel expenditures for just one week of comradeship under the banner of an association in most major American cities. Nevertheless, the Internet, however robust, cannot duplicate the serendipity of a roomful of experts on a given topic spontaneously inventing new policies, tools, or protocols. Some association administrators barely tolerate the time and space for an average face-to-face association meeting during an annual conference but are ready to defend these same meetings in the face of a new and "unknown" technological solution. They fear that the Internet is a threat to the old habitual ways of doing a conference, a routine ingrained in association tradition by decades of practice. These same administrators fail to see the ways in which the Internet can energize and stimulate events of all flavors during a conference. The Internet enriches rather than hinders by providing ample opportunity for all to speak, which is rarely possible in even the most organized sessions during a conference.

An even more important concern for association managers is the posting of publications on the Internet, from journals to books to technical reports (see, for example, Carl Malamud [1992] on his efforts with the International Telecommunications Union and the International Organization for Standardization). Many association staff believe that, if members and others can find documents and other publications with an association's imprimatur online, why would members bother to pay for the same information on paper? This sort of logic fails to recognize that most Internet users do not tolerate reading long documents online. In the online context, "long" is defined as anything amounting to more than two screens worth of detail. Research has clearly indicated that paper-based information is more popular than ever, with American consumption topping some 700 pounds of paper per year per person (Roberts, 1993). Why? Simply because it is difficult to read anything of any great length on a computer screen. Readers lose up to 40 percent of the information presented on a computer screen thanks to the irritating flicker of monitors (Valauskas, 1994).

Some associations are slowly realizing what many trade publishers have already discovered—i.e., that the Internet can be a stimulus for the sales of traditional books and journals. By placing on the Internet tables of contents, abstracts, and selected articles, some publishers are seeing

journal subscriptions increase as readers discover the value of a given periodical. By taking selected chapters of a book and putting them online, some publishers are detecting sales increases in the printed versions as readers make an educated decision about a given report. The Internet indeed can be a real marketing tool for a technologically savvy association by opening up sales to many nonmembers interested in specific topics promoted by members in journals and monographs. Rather than reducing revenue from publications, the judicious use of the Internet—where tables of content, selected chapters from books, and selected columns and articles from journals are displayed—allows members and others to make informed decisions about an association's given family of publications and to purchase just the right document, periodical, or monograph to fit their needs.

DIFFICULTIES IN BUILDING A NEW ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL

Building a virtual association is more than just making a Web site interactive, constantly refreshed with news and reports, and certainly more than consistently linking members and interested parties with listservs. Fundamentally, an association must look at the Internet as an opportunity to create a more responsive and interactive organization by bringing staff and elected officers into closer contact with members and with the world at large. This new responsiveness manifests itself in shorter time lags in developing programs for workshops and conferences (from cycles measured in years to mere weeks or months), in creating new professional literature, and in responding to legislative actions that require an organized response.

Construction of a Gopher or a Web server in an association is just part of the process in reviving the way of handling information internally and for an external audience. Information once locked away in paper or on computer hard disks must be evaluated in any preparation for an association Internet presence. Will this information be useful to members? What will be the effect of making this information available online? How will the association respond to access to this document? How will the document be refreshed online? These fundamental questions about the kinds of information on a server reflect the broader kinds of questions that an association must ask about itself as a virtual organization. How will the association connect to its members? Who will be responsible for interacting with members online? How will the interactive work of the members be integrated into the association as a whole? The answers to these sorts of questions truly transform an organization from just another content provider on the Internet to a virtual association (Valauskas, 1995).

Much organizational inertia and bureaucracy retards most associations in their efforts to become virtual. Staff in an association may feel

threatened by any move to a more digitized state, as some of the more mundane chores of delivering documents and information to interested parties may disappear. In a virtual association, managers and administrators may find themselves spending more time in contact with members, thanks to electronic links, which may in turn generate more work preparing documents and files on demand. Indeed, there may be a subtle (or not so subtle) shift of organizational power within an association to those administrators and managers who are more comfortable in communicating electronically away from those who are more technophobic. For senior managers and administrators this shift may be most unwelcome.

Members indeed may be able to assist an association in the throes of a virtual re-organization in several ways. First, members should be supportive of the costs associated in developing an electronic presence and in using it on a daily basis. These costs are more than the sheer expenditure for equipment, software, and connections. Training is the most ignored cost in any organization undergoing this sort of transformation and yet it is the most fundamental. Without adequate training for all staff—but especially upper management—it is a waste to spend hard-earned association funds on servers, software, and Internet links. Second, once an association has developed a precursory Internet presence and has started to explore virtual possibilities, members should assist association staff in taking advantage of some of the fundamental ways in communicating via this medium. For some staff in an association, there may be some real problems in co-processing hundreds of electronic mail messages a day in addition to performing basic day-to-day tasks in the office to keep the association moving forward. Members can help in this regard by helping staff set new priorities in this virtual state and identifying work—digital or otherwise—that must be addressed immediately. Finally, members will have to understand that there will be some bumps along the way, that no association yet has unquestionably become completely virtual. In some cases, these “bumps” may manifest themselves as old documents never refreshed on a server; in other cases, there may be mail that simply disappears into the Internet ether without a response. Patience will be needed to make an association reach its objectives as a genuinely wired organization.

WHAT A TRUE VIRTUAL ASSOCIATION COULD BE

A virtual association would combine the best features of the Internet with the traditional hallmarks of a responsive and dynamic organization. By becoming virtual, an association does not lose sight of its fundamental purposes, its real reasons for existence. The real objectives of any association—virtual or real—are to enhance communication between its members and between the organization itself and the world; to develop a given

profession with standards, accreditation, and policies; to encourage professional work with journals, books, reports, and other documents; and to reward professional activities with recognition in the form of awards and elected participation in the association itself. Basically, a virtual association takes advantage of its connectivity to make these objectives more easily attainable in less time and at less expense.

Enhanced communication is a fundamental benefit of any association moving toward a virtual presence. Some associations may sponsor a rich variety of listservs that address any number of topics to increase the ways in which members reach each other and reach staff. These listservs may be primarily public, allowing members and nonmembers a way to communicate in an electronic forum. Other listservs may be private, increasing the ways in which board members and headquarters staff can reach others on a daily basis. Some associations are already beginning to experiment beyond these sorts of discussion lists to encourage discussion in truly different ways. Real-time threaded chat rooms, for example, provide for a more dynamic and comfortable environment for discussion (Peck & Scherf, 1997). As the software evolves for these sorts of online facilities and bandwidth improves, associations should be able to develop conferences and programs that truly reach larger and larger portions of the membership, where members participate in person or electronically from the comfort of their offices and homes.

With greater interactivity, an association will find itself putting more of its "proprietary" documentation, such as journals, books, and reports, online. These documents will take advantage of the medium by becoming works in progress, evolving over time online with input from editors, staff, and members. As these documents evolve online, they will become less like their paper equivalents and more dynamic. Hyperlinks will take the searcher from one file to another on an association server, providing the reader with less verbiage and more valuable content. The actual number of equivalent paper pages may indeed drop.

For the association and its members, reports and other materials will take on a new life with these hyperlinks, as the historical and professional context of documents appears. In turn, the printed version of these documents will undergo a remarkable revival with parallel increases in sales, further encouraging the creation of new online materials. Increased communication among members, staff, and others and abundant online information certainly will characterize virtual associations in their early stages of reinvention.

A fully mature virtual association also will be highly transparent and democratic. Headquarters staff will work in ways as yet unimagined with members and with interested parties outside the association communicating substantially and quickly both on demand and in anticipation of

needs. Members will collaborate on projects to enhance the association and the profession with broader constituencies, providing more dynamic resources to the professional community. Finally, the world itself will know more about a given profession and its constituents thanks to an association's virtual self. This ability to reach a larger audience will displace ancient misconceptions and will provide a larger basis for financial and intellectual support over the long term.

With improved and more dynamic links to members, headquarters staff will be able to work inventively with constituents both within and outside the association to form new and even exciting coalitions. The American Library Association, for example, in last year's legal tussle with the Justice Department over the portion of the new telecommunications law known as the Communications Decency Act, was able to act quickly, thanks to electronic connections, with its members and others. The association developed highly visible and successful coalitions to arouse public opinion. These sorts of dynamic and—some might even call them—unusual coalitions will flourish as associations become more digital and come in touch with varied kindred professions and individuals on volatile topics.

AN EXAMPLE OF A VIRTUAL WORK-IN-PROGRESS

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) is the most prominent international library association in the world. Established in 1927, IFLA has been migrating from a Euro-centric organization to a truly diverse international association accelerated in part by IFLA's growing Internet presence.

Experiments with the Internet by IFLA started in 1993 with proposals to develop a more interactive way for members to reach IFLA's headquarters staff in the Hague and in regional offices and core programs around the world. Modestly, the first efforts involved the development of a listserv called IFLA-L, sponsored by one of IFLA's patrons, SilverPlatter, Inc.

In 1995, IFLA's presence on the Internet grew remarkably with the creation of a World Wide Web server for IFLA, maintained by IFLA's own International Office for Universal Dataflow and Telecommunications (UDT) at the National Library of Canada. Over the course of the past twenty-four months, IFLA's Internet activities have increased, thanks to an abundance of hypertext, popular listservs, and a supportive membership and staff (see Figure 1).

Statistically, the IFLA server handles an enormous amount of traffic—in 1996, some 2,000 requests were managed each day leading to the transfer of some 37,000 kilobytes on average per day. A few crude calculations translate this traffic into some 18,000 pages of IFLA documents circulated around the world daily (see Table 1).

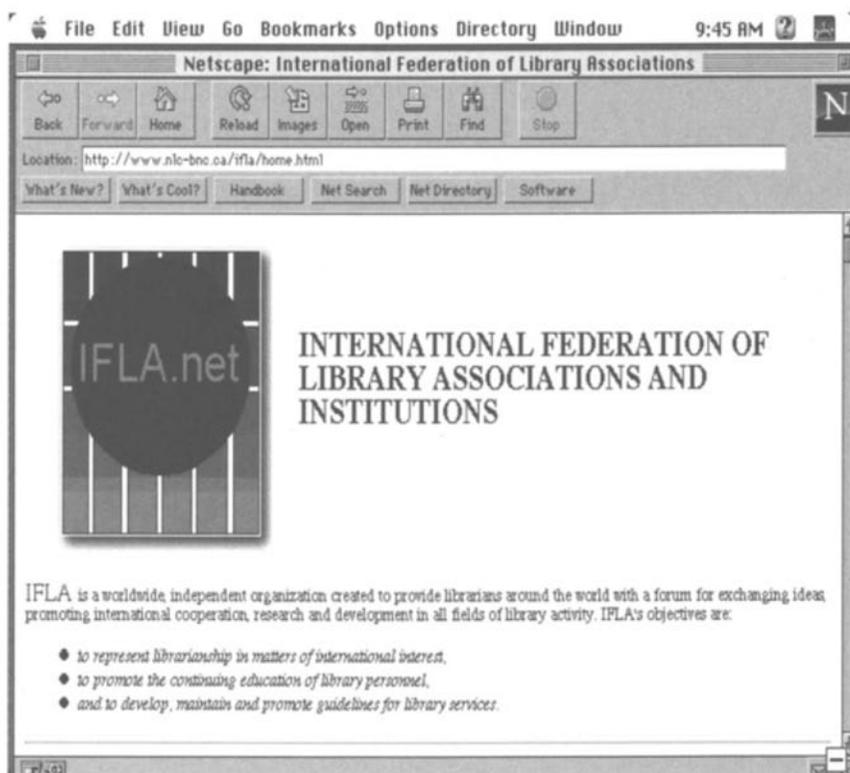


Figure 1. IFLANET, the Web server for the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), provides 37,000 kilobytes of information on average per day (or some 18,000 pages of IFLA documents) to thousands of members and interested parties from around the world.

TABLE 1.
USE OF IFLA WEB SERVER ([HTTP://WWW.NLC-BNC.CA/IFLA/](http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/ifla/)) IN 1996

Total data sent	13,366 MB
Data sent, average/day	37,397 KB
Total requests	691,408
Requests, average/day	1,889
Total distinct hosts	140,389

Source: International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 1997

What kinds of information are in demand? Documents related to IFLA's conferences in Beijing and Istanbul, files on training and copyright, and archives for IFLA's listservs are frequently and repeatedly requested. Requests in 1996 came from some 106 different countries. These demands encourage further use of this medium as a way to communicate with both members and nonmembers alike (see Table 2).

TABLE 2.
GROWTH IN THE USE OF THE IFLA WEB SERVER, 1995-1996

	<i>July 1995</i>	<i>July 1996</i>	<i>Percentage Increase</i>
Hosts served	5,318	12,637	138%
Files transferred	19,926	51,845	160%

Source: International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 1997

Three IFLA listservs sent over 5 million messages in 1996, reaching thousands of subscribers around the world (see Table 3). Each listserv reaches a different audience. For example, IFLA-L allows librarians around the world to share their interests in international librarianship. LIBJOBS helps librarians find new employment opportunities in institutions in Asia, North America, Europe, and elsewhere. DIGLIB examines the technical work in the ongoing process of creating digital libraries. In addition, there are private listservs for officers and board members.

TABLE 3.
USAGE OF IFLA LISTSERVS, JANUARY 1997

	<i>Total Subscribers</i>	<i>Number of Countries</i>
IFLA-L	835	60
DIGLIB	1,761	53
LIBJOBS	3,598	52

Source: International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 1997

For IFLA, its Internet activities provide a high profile means for many to learn about librarians and their activities in various institutions around the globe. It is both a communications device for the members and a promotional tool for the profession as a whole (Valauskas, 1997). In turn, the evolution of IFLA's Internet services has made the association even more responsive to the needs of its members in dealing with issues related to copyright, freedom of access to information, preservation and conservation, and professional standards. The success of the IFLA server has already led to the birth of a mirror server in France (<http://ifla.inist.fr/>) at the Institut de l'Information Scientifique et Technique (INIST). This development will lead to reduced access times for many of IFLA's European members and the further translation of documents into

some of the other official IFLA languages. Overall, the growth of IFLANET and IFLA's electronic resources have stimulated the growth of the association with record participation in its annual conferences (the most recent annual conference in Copenhagen in 1997 set new records) and record numbers of organizations and individuals joining and participating in the association. The success of IFLA's Internet efforts prove the catalytic value of enhancing communications and document delivery by this medium, ultimately in the organization's bottom line and in its profession mission.

CONCLUSION

With persistence, patience, creativity, and hard work, virtual associations will become the norm over the course of the next five years. Software and hardware solutions, improved network bandwidth, and increased successful experiments of organizations such as IFLA will encourage the rapid growth of digital associations in the near future. The members of associations will benefit from greater ways to communicate more quickly and accurately with other members and staff. The association itself will grow both professionally and financially, attracting new audiences and finding new problems to address. Ultimately, the professions served by these new remodeled associations will better meet the demands of this networked information age. The work demanded in this transition will reap benefits long into the next century.

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