

Associations Outsourcing Human Resources?

Annalisa Ponchia, Director of Innovation & Customer Experience, AIM Group International and former CEO of the European Society for Organ Transplant, explores the challenges and opportunities presented by outsourcing certain association services, including human resources



Last January at the Annual Meeting of the AC Forum, a membership organisation exclusively made for and by associations aiming for excellence in association and congress management, we debated about the constant need of the associations for human resources and the sustainable balance between employed staff and external resources. In an environment where volunteers make up the bulk of an organisation's strength compared to employed staff – who can only deliver to their capacity – the workforce plays an important role, especially in regard to the always increasing quest for technology and strategic communication.

Is there a limit of services that can be delivered in-house or shall we do everything ourselves? How many employees can we hire in relation to the size (and financial sustainability) of the organisation? Which skills make a resume appealing today? Should we hire multi-skilled individuals who are flexible and polyvalent or specialized experts who are, say, well-versed in communication and technology? Is it better to grow a young talent or search for different experience levels?

Those are some of the questions association executives should ask themselves, and I expect many readers to share the same dilemmas. We all want to deliver top quality services that support the organisation we work for but we have to make do with sustainability, flexibility and functions that serve the needs.

LIMITED KNOWLEDGE SHARING

In my previous position as CEO of the European Society for Organ Transplant (ESOT) I was managing a rather small-size team and had to make clear-cut choices on the amount of staff we could hire. It resulted in a limited variety of expertise to count on 'in-house'. Knowledge sharing in this context was limited and we found the participation to events and trainings offering exchanges and dialogue with colleagues of other organisations very valuable. This was also a

great opportunity to meet experts that could be hired as consultants.

Typically, what associations offer range from educational events and congress management to member services and association management. Frequently, they need temporary workers to shadow, support or substitute for staff members for a short period of time. The search of the perfect 'avatar' can be very arduous and the sector lacks agencies offering this kind of services.

During the discussions at the Annual Meeting of the AC Forum, my peers indicated which services they would normally outsource both on a long- and short-term basis: digital and strategic communication, CRM and data analytics, finance and tax advising, HR, change management. There were also some special services such as broadcasting, A/V and IT, stage management, and app development.

SIZE MATTERS

You would be tempted to think that the size of the organisation matters and the bigger the association – thus the amount of hired staff – the more seasoned experts you have in-house. Not surprisingly Isabel Bardinet, CEO of the European Society of Cardiology, thinks that *"for a business it is called the USP (unique selling point) but for a non-profit such as the European Society of Cardiology (ESC) the USP stands for 'unique scientific provide.'*

She says: *"What makes associations different and unique must lie in their 'core business', and anything helping towards this can be either outsourced or supported via consultancy. Some are obvious: they can range from finance and tax advisors to HR and labor laws. But others may be less visible, such as publishing & data collection."*

She adds: *"At the ESC, we outsource any very focused service which comes in support of our own activities such as CRM and data management or digital development and videoconferencing. When we were small and young, we needed lots of technical and logistics support which we have*

taken in-house now. Today we are bigger and more mature, and we need advice on strategy, governance and change management. To fulfill our mission, we must listen and deliver our strategic pillars (membership, education, research, advocacy and congresses) and anything that helps, supports and consolidates this needs to be considered and managed. Thanks to this we have developed a unique expertise in project coordination!"

Organisations are becoming more demanding and their needs more sophisticated. The *raison d'être* of experts and consultants might be to fulfill what associations cannot manage and deliver in-house while supporting the client's vision and adding extra value in a seamless fashion, whichever the service provided.

Consultants must of course be reliable, cost-effective and understand the business of associations and the not-for-profits. Outsourcing is not an easy task and you should never underestimate the amount of time and exertion you still need to invest to achieve good results. Should you choose to work with 'outsiders', don't be afraid to provide extensive briefings and information about the scope and the culture of your organisation, and be clear on expectations and budget available. Good suppliers and consultants are valuable partners to engage in long-standing collaborations, don't be lured by best price and discounts.

The odds are that a client becomes the supplier of tomorrow and vice versa in the vast and yet small association world.

Annalisa Ponchia has an extensive experience in the association management and the events industry, which includes running her own PCO company before setting up the managing structure of the European Society for Organ Transplant, where she served as CEO for twelve years. As a volunteer, she used to be a member of the AC Forum Board and is currently a member of the PCMA European Advisory Board.