



## Do You Know What Your Members Know?

Before you can run an effective professional development program, you must first understand what your members need to know, now and in the future. This may sound obvious, but for busy association executives, the importance of identifying your field's body of knowledge is all too easy to ignore.

Without identifying a body of knowledge, how do you determine what to teach members in your educational programs? What do you use as your basis for selecting content for your publications? What is the foundation of your certification program examination?

But with a body of knowledge, your association can achieve many key goals.

- Gain recognition or distinction for your field.
- Improve the state of professional knowledge and practice.
- Distinguish areas of specialized practice within your field.
- Guide entry-level education requirements or continuing education programming.
- Develop a certification or recertification program.
- Implement a knowledge management system.
- Develop self-assessment instruments or competency profiles.
- Develop universal standards for practice across sectors of your field or across geographical boundaries.

To identify your field's body of knowledge--formally known as a peer-developed compendium of what an individual must know to accomplish work in a specific field--experts generally recommend three steps.

### **Step 1: Collect data to create a draft body of knowledge.**

Your association should collect as much data as possible about what members need to know and be able to do. This process of identifying a field's job tasks and the associated knowledge, skills, and abilities is often called a job analysis. You can use various methodologies to collect job analysis data, but I recommend a combination of the following approaches to produce the most reliable results.

*Literature review.* Unless your field is new, there are publications from which you can draw the knowledge, skills, and abilities that individuals in your field need. These materials include job descriptions for the target audience, tables of contents or subject indices from industry publications, certification test outlines, standards documents, and conference curricula.

*Interviews.* It's best to have a trained interviewer collect data from individuals who either hold or supervise the job being analyzed.

*Focus groups.* A facilitator addresses questions to a group of individuals who are (or were) in the job or supervisors of the job being analyzed.

*Observation.* A trained individual gathers information about job duties by directly viewing individuals at work.

*Log diaries.* Individuals record logs of their daily tasks.

*Questionnaires.* Information is obtained through an individual's responses to a list of questions regarding the job.

*An expert panel.* A group of experienced individuals--job incumbents, supervisors, university faculty, trainers in the field--reviews collected data and refines it to develop the domains, tasks, and competencies required to perform the job.

*Delphi technique.* Conducted by mail via a series of questionnaires, participants systematically brainstorm predetermined issues or questions and rank their responses.

*Nominal Group technique.* Similar to Delphi but conducted in person, Nominal Group is designed to help achieve consensus of expert opinion without sacrificing individual ideas to group think.

Once you've gathered the necessary data, your draft body of knowledge might look like the following:

Functional category (domain)  
    Job task  
        Knowledge  
        Skills  
        Abilities

### **Step 2: Verify the body of knowledge.**

You will now need to affirm, through more formal research techniques, that the draft body of knowledge is grounded in actual practice. Exactly how formal this research needs to be depends on how you intend to use the body of knowledge.

For example, if you're developing a certification program, then the methods you employ should validate or ensure that the body of knowledge is indeed what is needed in practice. Associations generally do this with a job analysis validation survey conducted by an experienced individual.

If you're using the body of knowledge for other purposes, such as guiding members' professional development, you can use less sophisticated approaches to simply verify it.

### **Step 3: Monitor and update the body of knowledge.**

To make sure your body of knowledge remains a current reflection of the field, you must update it. The frequency depends upon the pace at which new developments and technologies affect your field. If you expect changes to be relatively minor and the major dimensions of the job to remain stable, you can use informal methods. But if you're expecting fundamental changes, you'll need to use more formal procedures. Most associations formally update their bodies of knowledge every three to five years. Although you may use a variety of methods to monitor and update your body of knowledge, many organizations use their initial methodology or a simplified version of it.

### **Getting started**

Begin proactively by developing a purposeful plan for identifying, using, and advancing your field's body of knowledge. Form a steering group to develop a comprehensive body-of-knowledge plan. Because this group will work toward integrating all association knowledge efforts, the members should represent the field and your staff. At minimum, you should include staff working in certification, education, publications, research, special-interest groups, information technology, and communications. Your steering group should consider the current and potential goals of your body of knowledge, then set priorities among these goals. It should then choose the proper methods of identification and develop a plan to carry out the body-of-knowledge identification.

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