Utilizing AI to Foster a Culture of
EXPERIMENTATION

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Remember twenty years ago, when many in associations were certain that social media was a fad? Those people ended up losing the argument, and today, it's standard practice for associations to engage their members and prospects on social media. Association reactions to generative AI are reminiscent of those early days of social media.

Pushing Cultural Boundaries

Early adopters of social media often struggled because their workplace cultures were incompatible with how social media worked. Traditional management bristled against social media's demands for things like decentralization, transparency, authenticity, and innovation. Organizations ultimately had to adapt their culture to leverage the power of social media. PROPEL's data on association culture confirms this - very few organizations continue to embrace a traditional approach in those areas.

Today, many associations are experiencing a similar tension about AI. Like social media, AI is not going away. Associations that invest in building AI capabilities can experience significant returns. But here's the catch: cultures will need to change to get those returns.

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Experimentation: A Building Block of Innovation

Innovation is widely recognized as a critical culture marker for associations. After all, associations that describe their cultures as extremely innovative are far more likely to report short-term and long-term membership gains. (MGI, 2023) At PROPEL, we assess an association's culture of innovation by measuring eight building blocks – an essential one of those is Experimentation. AI presents a remarkable opportunity for associations to foster Experimentation among staff members.

Many organizations initially prohibited using AI tools for writing content, citing the errors and "hallucinations" the tools would generate as problematic. However, early adopters of AI learned that errors and hallucinations were not the problem. Instead, the issue was their prompts. Only by user experimentation–trying prompts, getting poor results, and learning to craft better prompts— is the actual utility of AI revealed. But herein lies the culture challenge: most cultures don't value Experimentation. This finding is also evident in PROPEL's research data. Of the 64 culture items we measure, "Experimentation" ranks 45th in terms of its presence in culture. While Experimentation does happen in most organizations, it's often limited or pushed to the edges.

Sharpening the Saw:
Practicing Experimentation

AI efforts will be hindered if staff members are afraid to experiment because they might produce a result that others deem a failure. This scenario is an excellent opportunity to change organizational culture while serving members. Changing culture is easier than you think - simply change the process to generate the desired behavior.

For example, to foster a culture of Experimentation, create a process for measuring it.

STEP 1

At the senior team meeting once a month, require each department head (or staff member) to report on how many experiments their department ran last month and what percentage of them failed. Further details aren't necessary; stick to those two metrics.

STEP 2

If a team member reports zeroes monthly, talk to them about it. If they object, reinforce the expectation. If they are concerned about experimenting in areas that will impact the member experience, encourage them to identify back-office processes that could be improved by Experimentation. Suggest a team brainstorming session if they're at a loss for ideas.

STEP 3

Keep at it until Experimentation is a regular part of work at your association.

That is culture change. Change one simple process and monitor it until it becomes routine. Before you know it, team members are experimenting more and excited about the changes they're making. The more experiments that start happening, the more ready your culture will be to leverage AI.

Mastering AI and Experimentation

Associations will only be able to reap the full benefits of AI if they embrace Experimentation. The velocity of AI is too fast for associations to spend nine months perfecting a solution and planning a much-fanfared launch. It will be far more productive to test multiple applications of AI with members to get feedback and adjust accordingly. As AI capabilities expand and new applications emerge, additional experiments and feedback will help to ensure maximum value. As efforts evolve, association leaders should look at other culture markers such as agility, innovation, and transparency.
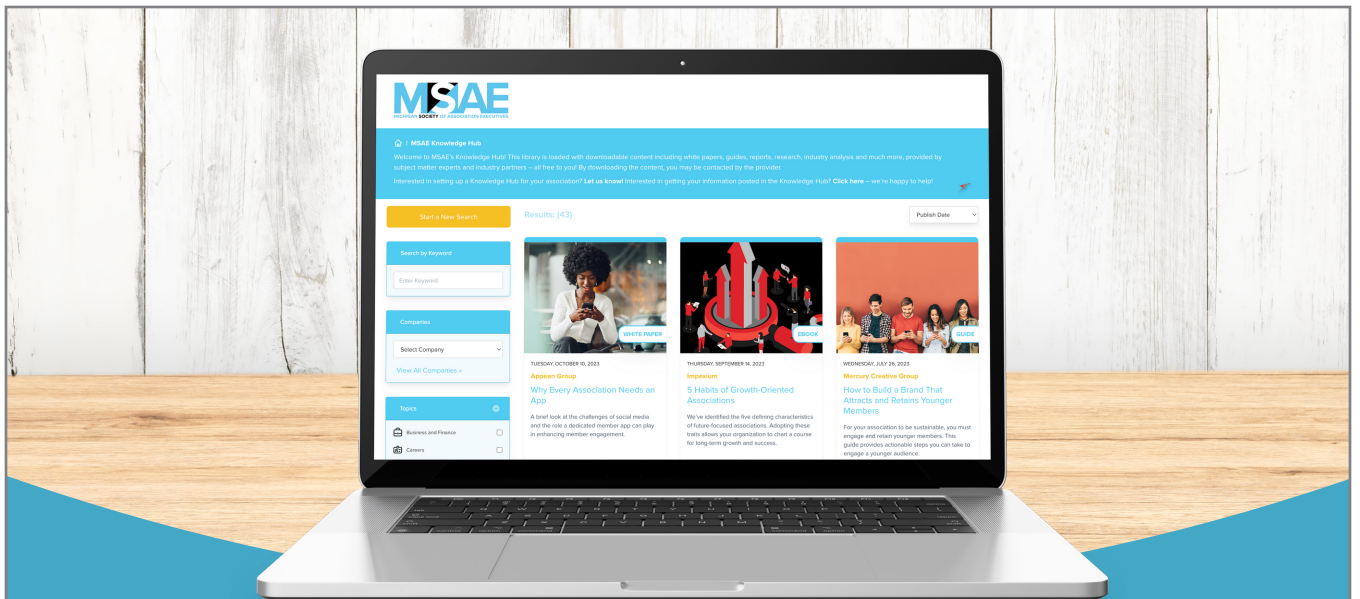
AI is not going to wait for you to change your culture, so associations that prioritize fostering cultures of Innovation (and Experimentation) will have a competitive edge over those that do not.

For more information about culture change or learn about Jamie Notter and Maddie Grant's new book, *Culture Change Made Easy: See Your Hidden Workplace Patterns and Get Unstuck*, email info@propelnow.co.

Meet Jamie

Jamie is an author, consultant, and culture strategist at PROPEL, where he helps leaders create amazing workplace cultures that drive greater performance and impact. Author of four popular business books, including the forthcoming *Culture Change Made Easy*, Jamie has a Master's in conflict resolution from George Mason and a certificate in organization development from Georgetown, where he serves as adjunct faculty.