

How Does a Member's Perception of Value Influence Their Decision to Join a Professional Organization?

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An entrepreneurial for-profit networking business group operates as a professional organization with selective membership and membership fees. These types of businesses expand their current business model by increasing their paying membership. The purpose of this study is to systematically gather and review evidence on prospective members' perceived benefits of their membership in professional organizations and make recommendations to increase membership. An analysis was carried out using a systematic review to investigate how perceptions of rewards and benefits influenced the decision to join a professional organization.

The review was carried out through the lens of the social exchange theory, whereby the cost of membership in a professional organization is weighed against its benefit. When the ben-

efit outweighs the cost, individuals will choose to engage in the social exchange, which in this case means choosing to join a professional or-

A professional organization can increase their paying membership by providing items and activities of value to their members that include knowledge sharing, opportunities for collaboration, expanding professional networks, and the availability of collaboration spaces.

ganization. Three types of membership benefits emerged from the analysis: knowledge-based benefits, intangible benefits that are not knowledge-based, and tangible benefits. The benefits most desired were knowledge sharing, opportunities for collaboration, expanding professional networks, and the avail-

ability of collaboration spaces. The study also noted that there were factors that reduced the value of joining membership; including time spent participating in activities, lack of value to career, and perception of lack of relevance to their objectives. This study supports the notion that the strongest benefit that members get from their respective professional organizations is the opportunity to network with their peers.

Keywords: Professional association, professional organization, business association, membership, social exchange theory, systematic review, rapid evidence assessment, incentive, value, reward, motivation

Introduction

An entrepreneurial networking organization is looking to profitably expand its current business model to further increase the value it delivers to its members. The organization hopes to achieve this expansion by increasing its paying members and through related extensions to the business model. The researchers are addressing the organizational problem faced by a

professional networking organization of increasing the company's revenue by paying membership using an exploratory evidence-based research approach. The targeted organization is a business incubator networking group for entrepreneurs in interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and multi-generational focal areas. The company provides value to entrepreneurs by creating an environment where those with entrepreneurial concepts can find technical or financial

Methodology

The organizational study enlisted a systematic review of recent empirical literature on reasons for deciding to join a professional organization. Gough, Oliver, and Thomas (2017) define systematic review as "a review of existing research using explicit, accountable, rigorous research methods" (p. 2). Such a review seeks to systematically search for, appraise, and synthesize research evidence, the essence of which is "[g]athering research, getting rid of rubbish and summarizing the best of what remains" (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 92). The systematic review commenced with the development of a search string based on key terms from the research question, including synonyms for the terms: value, benefit, reward, membership, and professional organization. The UMUC OneSearch search engine was used and includes 45 library databases. The Boolean search yielded 154 peer-reviewed scholarly articles published in the last 15 years and was further reduced to 51 articles for which the subject matter addressed membership and professional associations.

Study selection for the systematic review was rooted in the CIMO-logic guideline adaptation by Denyer, Tranfield, and Van Aken (2008). "C" stands for the context, setting, or wider system being studied (professional organization). "I" stands for the intervention, i.e., the effects of what event, action or activity being studied (perception of value / reward / benefit from the organization). "M" stands for the mechanisms that explain the relationship between the intervention and outcome of interest, i.e., accessing the circumstances under which the mechanisms are either activated or not activated (how the decision to join is made). "O" stands for the outcomes of the intervention (the decision to join the professional organization). In accordance with the CIMO-logic, this systematic review selected studies relating to professional organizations that set out to assess a members' definition of reward, value, or benefit attached to their membership in the respective organization. After further review, an additional 42 articles were excluded because they did not directly address the context, intervention, mechanisms, and outcomes that addressed a members' definition of reward, value, or benefit attached to their membership in a professional organization. Ten additional articles were identified through the process of snowballing from eligible base articles' references, although only seven of these remained after the CIMO exclusion was once again applied. Snowballing refers to searching for additional relevant articles using the references of articles and other documents. A total of 18 articles were left for inclusion in the study analysis.

The 18 articles employed quantitative survey (13), semi-structured interviews (1), and literature review (4) methodologies. At least 10 different types of professional organizations were represented in the 18 articles. Professional organizations represented in the articles included: the Society for the Advancement of Sexual Health (SASH), the American College of Cardiology (ACC), the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), the American Psychological Association (APA), Canadian Health Libraries Association, "a large international accounting association," the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA), "national library associations," nurses, and school counselors where the annual cost of membership ranged from \$225 to \$600 (Pariser et al., 2010).

To ensure the quality of the articles used in the analysis, a quality appraisal was performed using Gough's Weight of Evidence (Gough, 2007), and articles were scored based on the rigor and relevance of the article to meet the stated objectives of the study. The Weight of Evidence structure helps the researcher to judge the preponderance of the evidence to identify how the information contributes to answering the research question by providing a fit for purpose approach to evaluate the quality of the evidence. For the Weight of Evidence assessment, articles were scored along the six dimensions of transparency, accuracy, purpose, utility, property, and accessibility, and then totaled and used to determine the overall strength of the evidence to contribute to the findings. These six dimensions are often abbreviated as TAPUPAS. The 18 articles were then coded to develop themes that allowed the researchers to identify patterns and make connections in the data. The findings from the review articles were synthesized into four themes: three types of benefits and costs. The summary of the included literature is presented by theme in Table 1.

Table 1. Members Perceptions of Benefits and Costs of Joining Professional Organizations

Theme	Findings from the Literature	References
<p><u>Knowledge-based benefits:</u> achieved when organizations advance and disseminate specialized knowledge applicable to their field of expertise via journals, newsletters, and information on new research.</p>	<p>Professional organizations reportedly serve to advance and disseminate specialized knowledge and information applicable in their field of expertise through the dissemination of journals, newsletters, and other knowledge-based materials, especially new research.</p> <p>Access to newsletters, virtual libraries, exclusive website access, and access to trade / professional journals were the most common knowledge-based benefits reported.</p>	<p>Ali, 2013; Bauman, 2008; DeLeskey, 2003; Delmonico et al., 2014; Henczel, 2014; Khaliq & Walston, 2012; Ki & Wang, 2016; Markova et al., 2013; Peterson et al., 2006; Thackeray et al., 2005; Walton, 2017</p>
	<p>For organizations such as APA, APTA, SASH, and those serving nurses and counselors, knowledge acquisition by way of conference attendance was reported as a major benefit and participation in special meetings at the conference were especially welcomed.</p>	<p>Delmonico et al., 2014; Dingwall et al., 2014; Henczel, 2014; Ki & Wang, 2016; Pariser et al., 2010; Peterson et al., 2006;</p>
<p><u>Intangible benefits that are not knowledge-based:</u> non-physical benefits achieved through social functions such as networking, advocacy, and member collaboration with those who are like-minded and similarly employed.</p>	<p>Professional associations serve a valuable social function for professionals through networking and collaborating opportunities, where they are socializing with those who are like-minded and similarly employed. Members felt a sense of belonging and social inclusion through these connections.</p>	<p>Henczel, 2014; Markova et al., 2013</p>
	<p>These opportunities are made easier as the association serves as the catalyst by hosting events where networking and collaboration is actively encouraged.</p>	<p>Ali, 2013</p>
	<p>The ability to network fosters a member's professional identity, enhances reputation and encourages engagement in professional involvement activities.</p>	<p>Bauman, 2008; Henczel, 2014; Khaliq & Walston, 2012; Ki & Wang, 2016; Markova, 2013; Peterson et al., 2006; Sullivan & Stevenson, 2009</p>
	<p>Advocacy opportunity and the setting of standards and guidelines were viewed as important to enhancing the profession.</p>	<p>Dingwall et al., 2014; Henczel, 2014; Pariser et al., 2010; Peterson et al., 2006; Schroeder, 2013</p>
	<p>Virtually all the articles explicitly named networking and collaboration opportunity as a major benefit that members are afforded, making it the most prominent benefit that members stand to gain.</p>	

<p><u>Tangible benefits:</u> physical benefits that members derive from being a part of the professional organization. The two examples that surfaced in this assessment include grant or scholarship awards, the use of space for collaboration, and CE courses.</p>	<p>The awarding of grants and scholarships was a notable tangible benefit. These were, however, ranked at the lower end of the scale.</p>	<p>Dingwall et al., 2014; and Pariser et al., 2010</p>
	<p>Members found the availability of a collaboration space where members could connect face to face somewhat beneficial.</p>	<p>Delmonico et al., 2014</p>
	<p>A closely related benefit, access to job notices, was mentioned or alluded to. Networking with peers or seasoned professionals can easily lead to job opportunities and opportunities for collaboration and can also alert members as to what is happening in the field for later career opportunities.</p>	<p>Ali, 2013; Bauman, 2008; Dingwall et al., 2014; Henczel, 2014; Peterson et al., 2016</p>
	<p>A unique benefit reported in the articles is the provision of continuing education courses which was reported in a majority (14 out of 18) of the reviewed articles.</p>	
<p><u>Costs:</u> the physical and non-physical cost that potential members view as surpassing a potential benefit thereby determining to not select membership in a professional organization.</p>	<p>Members found the cost of membership, time to participate in meetings and conferences, the perception of the lack of value to personal career, and the perception of relevance to the associated field or personal objectives as deterrents to membership.</p>	<p>Henczel, 2014; Khaliq & Walston, 2012; Peterson et al., 2006</p>

partners or share ideas and concepts in thought-provoking meetings. Additionally, speakers provide valuable insight and advice on various aspects of developing, funding, and marketing business ideas. This study takes an organizational problem and relies on converging data from theory and existing research to answer a research question. The associated research question is as follows: How does a member's perception of value (or reward or benefit) influence their decision to join a professional organization?

Professional organizations or associations refer to companies that operate to expand a professional topic or trade and benefit their members. The term professional organization broadly covers religious organizations, health and human rights organizations, civic and political organizations, labor organizations, and business associations. According to a Hoover's report, there were 106,911 professional organizations in 2012, generating annual revenues of over \$200 billion (D&B Hoovers, 2018). Professional or trade organizations are often tied to individual professions and typically expand nationally or globally. Previous research has reported a declining trend in professional organization membership due in part to a decline in the economy, the trend for more online networking, and the lack of engagement of younger individuals. Large organizations can pro-

vide many services through economy of scale, while smaller organizations may focus on specialized niche business areas where there is a defined need. Professional business organizations typically make a profit through dues-paying members who assume the cost of the activity, although other sources of revenue include conferences, publications, training, and other services. The term professional organization will be used throughout most of the study as it broadly covers professional and business organizations and associations. To answer the research question, the literature on professional organizations and the benefits of membership will be analyzed through a theoretical lens to inform the research problem.

Literature Summary

The academic literature was analyzed and the member's perceptions of factors that influenced their decision to join a professional organization were coded for further synthesis. Respondents to the surveys and interviews included members of professional organizations (hereafter referred to as members). Four overarching themes were identified by the researchers during the second level coding of the data and included knowledge-based, intangible that are not knowledge-based, and tangible benefits, and costs of membership.

Fourteen of the 18 articles were surveys of members and provided empirical data to answer the research question. The remaining four articles were literature reviews and provided further support for the empirical evidence (Ali, 2013; Greggs-McQuilkin, 2005; Schroeder, 2013; & Sullivan & Stevenson, 2009).

Theoretical Lens

The researchers considered a range of possible management theories to guide the research efforts including stakeholder theory, social network theory, expectancy theory, organizational justice theory, and the social exchange theory. Each theory was evaluated for its ability to explain the relationships in the research question.

A business can be understood as an organization that includes a set of relationships among groups that have a stake in the success or profitability of said business. Stakeholder theory states that it is the executive's job to manage and shape these relationships to create as much value as possible for stakeholders and to manage the distribution of that value in the activities that make up the business (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & de Colle, 2010, p. 5). Stakeholder theory provides a partial explanation of the problem but does not fully respond to the organizational issue as the theory is more focused on organizational management and business ethics that address morals and values in managing an organization rather than the value of membership.

Social network theory is the study of how actors: people, organizations or groups of individuals interact with each other within their (social) network where the relationships between actors are the central focus of the theory (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010, p. 18). This theory does not address the organizational problem because it only considers internal forces, i.e., interactions between "actors," and does not accommodate outside forces (e.g., attracting new members) that are necessary for the growth of the business.

Bauman (2008, p. 166) researched membership through expectancy theory postulating that moti-

vation to take a particular action increases with the expectation that a highly valued outcome will result from that action. In the case of professional membership, an individual is more likely to join a professional organization when he or she believes that joining will result in a valued outcome. Organizational justice theory refers to the perception by potential members of the fairness of an organization's policies and operations that members use when considering to join or remain in a professional organization (Skarlicki, Lucas, Prociuk, & Latham, 2000).

Since the objective of this study was to explore the different ways that the benefits of organizational membership outweigh the cost incurred by the prospective member, the authors opted to look at the research question through the lens of the social exchange theory (SET) (Burns, 1973). This theory was best suited to address membership expansion as the SET framework can reflect the flow of resources in an exchange relationship. It also provides the context for understanding that prospective members make relationship decisions based on a cost and reward analysis, i.e., the members must forfeit

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something (cost) to attain a benefit they value (reward). The graphical representation of the SET in Figure 1 surmises that the "social exchange" occurs when "benefit" outweighs the "cost," i.e., the cost is less than the benefit. Conversely, the social exchange may not take place if the cost outweighs the benefit. The central mes-

sage is that people weigh the pros and cons before making a decision.

The conceptual model in Figure 2 illustrates that a prospective member will evaluate the professional relationship by analyzing the value, reward, or benefit that they perceive as a result of their membership or professional relationship with the organization. In the absence of sufficient apparent rewards, individuals engaged in a social exchange may be primarily motivated to avoid costs in those exchanges. Individuals seek profits in their exchanges such that rewards are greater than the costs, leading to the exchange being made, in this case, the decision to become a member.

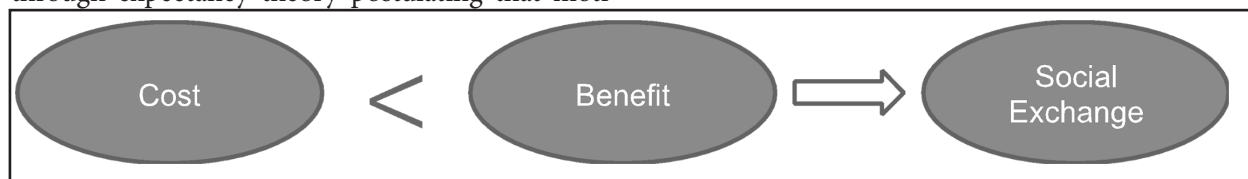


Figure 1. Graphic representation of the social exchange theory (SET).

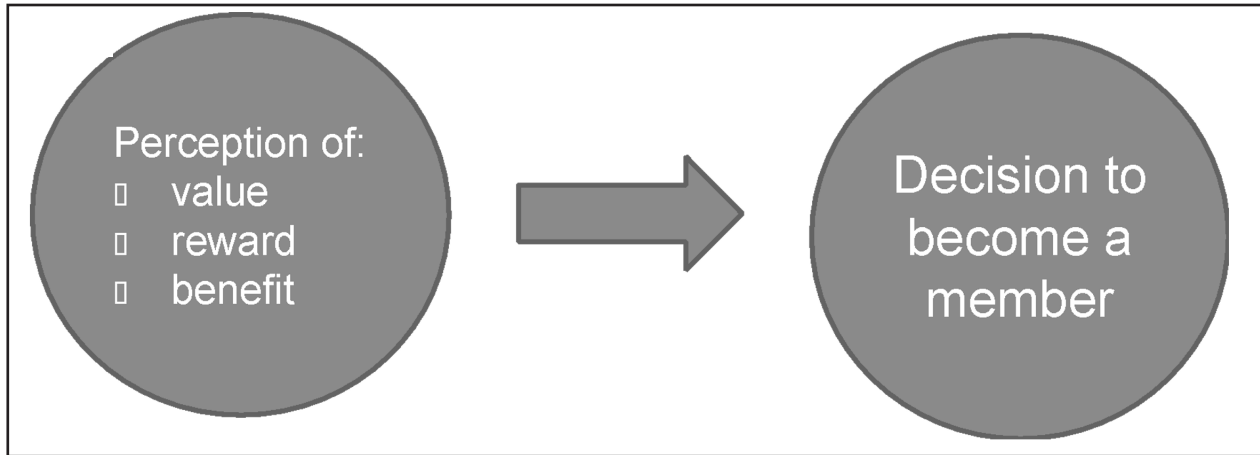


Figure 2. Conceptual model. This model is a graphical representation of the organizational problem through the lens of the social exchange theory (SET).

Discussion

The research question of how a member’s perception of value (reward / benefit) influences their decision to join a professional organization was addressed through the lens of the social exchange theory (SET). SET continues to be one of the most frequently referenced theories vis-à-vis professional association membership (Walton, 2017; Yeager, 1981), and it theorizes that people provide each other with resources and fulfill obligations to establish or continue the relationship (Byrd, 2006). Elements of SET include reward, value, and resources. Per the theory, people evaluate their relationships by analyzing the benefit (reward) they think they would receive through them. They then make decisions about the relationships in their lives by comparing alternatives (value). Resources refer to any material or symbolic commodity transmitted through interaction, including information, goods, services, money, love, and status. SET explains the exchange of tangible or intangible activity (between at least two persons) that is rewarding or costly. The objective of this study was to explore via a systematic review of the literature the different ways that the benefits of organizational membership outweigh its perceived cost.

SET presents the perspective that members are externally motivated. In other words, if an individual’s perception of benefits they stand to gain from joining the organization outweighs its costs, then their decision to join is solidified. Bauman (2008) stated that an individual would join an organization when the perceived benefits of joining are greater than the cost (p.166). Khaliq and Watson’s study (2012)

utilized the SET lens and noted that membership in professional associations is motivated by expectations of benefits and rewards (p. 359). Skarlicki, Lucas, Procuik, and Latham (2000, p. 69) used social cognitive theory to emphasize the importance of outcome expectancies in influencing choice. When expectancies of benefits are positive, there is an increase in the probability that people will join and remain active in the organization; to the degree that expectancies of benefit are low or negative, people will not join

The empirical studies from the literature review concurred that members join professional organizations based on the benefits they perceive.

or will not remain in the organization.

Skarlicki et al. (2000) suggested that people derive self-worth from group membership. Hence, members stand to benefit from having their self-worth or self-esteem increased when they join a professional association (p. 69). Delmonico et al. (2014, p. 58) found that one’s need for positive self-esteem motivates a person to affiliate with social groups that contribute to this positive self-esteem and that people derive self-worth from group membership. People join and maintain membership in organizations as a way to enhance their self-esteem and identity. Markova, Ford, Dickson, and Bohn (2013) stated that people identify with a group to the extent that they vest their self-concept in the valued persona represented by their group (p. 494). This research reinforces the fact that members benefit from being a part of the association by deriving their self-worth from the group membership. The “social exchange” occurs when the “benefit” of belonging outweighs the “cost,” i.e., the cost is less than the benefit.

The empirical studies from the literature review concurred that members join professional organizations based on the benefits they perceive, and the findings

were consistent across various types of professional organizations. Although there are times when people are required to join professional organizations for work or school, for this study, it is assumed that joining a professional organization is voluntary; therefore, prospective members must feel that the value they would receive from the relationships within this network will deliver sufficient benefit and outweigh the costs. Prospective members need to believe that the benefits of membership are above those that are available to the nonmembers, and also need to believe that the benefits of joining this professional association are greater than those of joining another organization. Existing members must also be considered when making organizational changes as they will likely decide to sustain their membership provided they continue to receive benefits from the relationship with the organization and the organization continues to fulfill their expectations.

This study analyzed the applicable research from the past 15 years and defined three distinct types of benefits perceived by members; knowledge-based, intangible but not knowledge-based, and tangible (see Table 1 for details). The literature also revealed that there could be factors that diminish the marginal utility for the prospective member and therefore deter membership, such as the monetary cost, or the cost of time and energy to join and attend events. In as much as the benefits should be defined and enhanced, the costs of membership should be mitigated.

Implications for Managers

Managers should gain awareness of professional organization membership trends and ways to engage members. Organizations can begin by surveying their existing members to identify what they believe is of the most benefit to them. With an understanding of the benefits identified by current members and as identified in the literature, leaders and managers of professional associations can take specific actions toward increasing membership with the implementation of the following recommendations.

Provide Learning Opportunities. Professional organizations can create their own curriculum or mini-academy in continuing education which could make the organization a hub for continuous entrepreneurial learning and possibly include the issuance of certificates or continuing education credit units. Bennett (2011) noted members of professional organizations appreciated learning opportunities to help advance their professional identities. Many

professional organizations provide these continuing education courses via an online learning management system.

Expand Student Membership. Membership may be expanded to students, resulting in the generation of additional revenue as well as helping to cultivate a new breed of members who are likely to be savvy and up-to-date on innovative entrepreneurial practices. Student membership could start with a 3-month trial period during which students are first mentored by current members before becoming a full-fledged member. Students are often not aware of the benefits of professional association membership and may require additional information regarding the value of the membership. Younger members can often be reached best through social media, so managers should use various tools such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, and others to connect. Innovation and entrepreneurship are subjects that the younger generation finds interesting and the opportunity to network and collaborate with others who share that passion should be viewed as having value.

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Provide Collaboration Space. Organizations should look to identify space where their members can occasionally gather on collaborative projects or temporarily work. The collaboration space should be in a convenient location that has good transportation access for a large portion of the members. For a

national organization, physical space will likely not have the same value to members as it would for a more local association, and an online collaboration space may be considered as an alternative. An online collaboration space can be further enhanced with frequent webinars and other training events.

The organization might experience some resistance to new learning, especially from those seasoned members also known as the “old guard.” These are members who have been a part of the organization for some time and want things to remain the same. The company may also experience some difficulties attracting students who may not fully understand the benefits or rewards of belonging to a professional organization and often find it difficult to afford the cost of membership. Managers must ensure that the benefits they are offering to members are benefits that are exclusive to members and are not provided by an alternative for a lower cost. Prospective members will weigh the expected benefits from joining the professional organization based on the comparison of the benefits to an alternative. When the costs are

perceived as equal, prospective members will choose to join the one that contains the least ambiguity, has the greatest social approval, and has the more immediate outcomes (Nye, 1978). When the benefits are perceived as equal, prospective members will choose to join the organization that has fewer costs. As long as the prospective or current member perceives a profitable or satisfactory exchange, they will join or remain a member.

Limitations

Systematic reviews offer the advantage of the introduction of minimal unconscious bias by the researchers. This study has the usual limitations. Above all, the study was limited to the literature that was found in two library search platforms, UMUC OneSearch, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. Although OneSearch is one of the most comprehensive collections of database search engines available and includes 45 different databases, it is by no means exhaustive. The study is therefore unable to account for other relevant studies not uncovered by the included databases. Additionally, the restriction of the search to full-text articles likely eliminated articles on the topic, but the researchers opted for this restriction for expediency, as there was not adequate time to track down full articles that could not be retrieved from the academic library. The risk of excluding relevant evidence was reduced by snowballing from the eligible articles to find articles located in other library databases that were not found from the original search. Secondly, the researchers focused the study on one theoretical framework, i.e., SET, rather than choosing to integrate multiple frameworks. Social exchange theory has received criticism for being not one theory but a frame of reference upon which other theories rest. Other theories were discussed to the extent that they contributed directly to the findings — for example, other authors, such as Bauman (2008), defined membership benefits through the lens of expectancy theory and organizational justice theory. Delmonico et al. (2014) and Skarlicki et al. (2000) defined membership benefits through the lens of social identity theory and social cognitive theory. The use of multiple frameworks can provide a variety of viewpoints in explaining the expected benefits prospective members look to gain from membership in an organization. A third constraint is that of construct definition. Although this review took pains in ensuring the proper definition of constructs, inherent differences in their defini-

tion will always exist. The authors' constructs of the themes and findings are not exclusive, for example, one may consider job notices as a tangible benefit for those who are looking for new employment, but for another, job notices would be considered an intangible benefit if they have no desire for a job change. Additionally, some of the research studies reviewed in this study categorized conference attendance as a knowledge-based benefit while others categorized it as an intangible benefit due to the focus on networking that takes place.

Future Research

The existing literature on professional organizations is primarily focused on non-profit organizations that are organized around professional interests, such as professional nursing associations, library associations, or teaching associations. For many of these organizations, membership may be mandatory or almost mandatory in that students and employees in these professions must stay engaged to be plugged into new job opportunities and training on the latest advances in the field. The research on for-profit entrepreneurial professional organizations is nascent. Additional research on for-profit professional organizations would provide further insight as to what costs members would pay and what additional benefits could be added for an additional cost to further expand the business model. It was not clear as to the standards that prospective members use to evaluate costs regarding alternative exchanges that may be available. Researchers have used a variety of survey instruments, and the field could benefit from a standard set of questions for members and prospective members and a validated survey instrument. Previous research has primarily surveyed current members on their perceived benefits of joining a professional organization, and more research needs to be focused on prospective members, as current members may have a bias toward membership.

Findings from this study indicate membership in organizations is based on three types of benefits: knowledge-based (continuing education, journals), intangible but not knowledge-based (networking, collaboration), and tangible (collaboration space, discounts, courses) benefits.

Conclusions

Many professional organizations want to expand their business model and increase their membership especially in a time of overall professional membership decline. The overall aim of this review was to analyze the empirical evidence on how a prospective member's perception of value, reward, or benefit influences their decision to join a professional

organization. A systematic review was conducted on how prospective members perceive the benefits and cost of membership in professional organizations. Through the lens of social exchange theory, when the benefit outweighs the cost an individual will choose to join a professional organization. Findings from this study indicate membership in organizations is based on three types of benefits: knowledge-based (continuing education, journals), intangible but not knowledge-based (networking, collaboration), and tangible (collaboration space, discounts, courses) benefits. Findings also reveal that the costs or deterrents to membership are the monetary costs, time, and perceived relevance. For an individual to join an organization, the organization must ensure that benefits to the target audience are of greater value than the potential costs and are greater than the alternatives available from other organizations. The systematic review found that offering additional benefits increases the value proposition of organizations to prospective members, thereby increasing the probability that individuals will decide to join the professional organization. Based on the benefits, the following were recommended for a professional organization as it seeks to increase its membership and expand its business model: 1) provide knowledge-based learning opportunities; 2) expand networking membership to include student entrepreneurs; and 3) provide a collaborative space to facilitate collaboration among members. These recommendations can likely be extended to professional organizations with the same organizational goal.

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Review

This article was accepted under the **strict peer review** option. For further details, see the descriptions at:

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