

A professional photograph of a man with short, dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark suit jacket, a light blue shirt, and a patterned tie. He is smiling and has his hands clasped in front of him. The background consists of horizontal window blinds with light filtering through, creating a striped pattern. The overall lighting is warm and focused on the subject.

# VIRTUAL STAFF ACTUAL SU

Greg Dummer, CAE,  
Executive Director,  
Association for  
Laboratory Automation



# ING, ACCESS

*The Association for Laboratory Automation not only created a virtual management model, but also found the right leadership and partnerships to make it seamless.*

By **Linda C. Chandler**

PHOTOGRAPH BY TODD WINTERS

What if—over five years—you could transform your association from an event-centric organization to a member-centric organization, adding signature member services, such as education, career programs, awards, blogs, and podcasts, each year? What if, at the same time, you could double your association's number of paid members, grow associate and corporate memberships, double the amount in your reserve fund, produce a respected and award-winning scientific journal—and accomplish just about anything else the board considers a strategic initiative? What if you could do it with just two paid staff and minimal brick-and-mortar investment?

Sounds next to impossible, but this is exactly what the Association for Laboratory Automation has done.

### That Was Then

ALA is a child of the 1990s technology boom. Chemists, biologists, engineers, and researchers in fields as varied as food, pharmaceuticals, forensics, biotechnology, and agriculture shared an interest in new automated processes and high-tech laboratory equipment. In 1996, the founders created a “coat-pocket” association, with the main functions directed by volunteers and the main identity driven by an annual conference. By the turn of the millennium, the overworked handful of charter members was outsourcing the annual meeting and a few other duties. The three-person board expanded to five and began to look at how the association should change moving forward.

Having warmed to the idea of an executive director but not ready to make a huge investment in facilities for headquarters, the board approached the search firm Tuft and Associates for help. During the discussions with Tuft's Carole Badger, CAE, it became clear that the board members—although experts in their fields—were not well schooled in the discipline of association management.

“ALA volunteer leaders wanted to see their group evolve into a professional association,” says Badger. “They needed a crash course in Association 101, including governance structure and the concept of a rotating board, but they were open to their own demise. They had already begun to rewrite their bylaws.”

### This Is Now

It's January 2008 at the ALA annual conference in Palm Springs, California. Everything is running smoothly. Any outsider—and for that matter, most ALA members—would never guess that the ALA management team of 15 people wearing matching polo shirts actually represents a dozen independent companies that come together not only to staff the conference but also to run the various divisions of the association year-round. Only two—Executive Director Greg Dummer, CAE, and Member Service Manager Amy Wilkinson—are salaried. The rest work for ALA on annual contracts, but they are more than ordinary outsourced employees.

Erik Rubin, ALA 2008 vice president, admits that before becoming a board member, he was unaware of ALA's unique staffing arrangement, but as chair of the Scientific Committee for this year's conference, he saw the seamless operation of the team. He compares it to building a house. "But in that sense, the plumber is interested only in the plumbing, not the entire house. In ALA, all the

## TWO OTHER HYBRID MANAGEMENT SCENARIOS

The Society of Women Engineers, headquartered in Chicago, has outsourced many of its functions for 15 years, says Betty Shanahan, executive director. In addition to five full-time employees, SWE uses six service providers to handle important functional areas. Shanahan's team players are less concentrated geographically than ALA's. They stay updated through a 90-minute senior management conference call every two weeks. In addition, the management team takes an annual retreat, primarily to work on strategic plans.

"A hybrid management model is more flexible in many ways. You get parts of lots of people. When you're busy, you can ramp up with the staff of the partner firm and don't have to worry about hiring others or forcing in-house staff to wear more hats," Shanahan says. "The price you pay is that your remote staff has to support other clients some of the time. No one model is perfect."

Brian Casey is president of High Point Market, a publicly funded 501(c)(6) in North Carolina. Including himself, there are seven full-time employees. Were it not for partnerships with key independent companies, he might need to double his staff, he says. "We see advantages in minimizing costs of additional real estate and office staff."

Casey says working with nonstaff partners heightens the importance of communications, but it's no more time consuming than working with in-house staff. "There are advantages when everybody isn't living in the same house. There's freshness in the perspectives. [Our partners] are constantly thinking and they bring new ideas to the table, not for more dollars in their pockets but because they are stakeholders in the process. Levels of quality and productivity are usually greater," he says. "To manage the culture of your business, be sure to expose potential partners to other team members for their feedback and get an idea of personalities, just as if you were hiring in house."

'subcontractors' see the big picture. They are genuinely motivated by the success of the entire organization."

One would think that pulling together independent companies to staff a "professional team," as Dummer refers to his management group, would lead to silos of information, but that is not the case. Rather than a protective or competitive attitude, team members share easily and respect one another's expertise. There's no office politics. And just like the scientists the association serves, the team is empowered to experiment, test new ideas, and learn from the results, good or bad.

### Assembling the Team

At the heart of the success of such a model is choosing the right team members. Steve Hamilton, an ALA charter member and past board member, credits Dummer's experience and well-crafted RFPs—and subsequent review processes—with helping the board find good partnerships early in the model's development. "This style of operating can either work well or fall on its face, depending on the people involved. As a small organization, we couldn't staff for all the expertise we needed, and, in fact, we didn't know where to look for the best resources. Greg did," says Hamilton.

Filling a position involves plenty of input. For example, when Corcoran Expositions responded to an RFP to market and manage ALA exhibits, Tom Corcoran met with ALA's marketing and event professionals as well as Dummer. Board members or special committees also are involved in the review process. Dummer then makes a recommendation to the board for approval before the contract is signed.

Each professional team member's contract includes a schedule of responsibilities and is approved annually. When new projects are identified, it's quickly determined who will take the lead in implementation, and compensation is adjusted during the budget cycle. Team members submit monthly invoices based on their retainers and any reimbursable expenses. A notice clause gives

each party time to prepare in the case of nonrenewal.

That doesn't sound much different from a typical outsourcer's arrangement. So what makes the difference in this team? Brenda Dreier, ALA's director of event management, points to the reporting structure. "The primary difference for me—as well as for most of the others on the team—is that at ALA I am the director of events; I report to the executive director and have significant interaction with the board, volunteers, and other team members," she says. "With other clients, I'm an outsourcer reporting to a director or manager of events, and I'm not involved with other aspects of the organization."

Couldn't the same results be achieved through an association management company? Peter Gaido, ALA's legal counsel, doubts it. "ALA's model represents a significant advantage over the traditional association management firm, which from a cost-benefit standpoint naturally pushes tasks down the employee pipeline to less-experienced staff members," he says. He also notes advantages over traditional office staff: "By contracting directly with individual professionals and select independent service providers, ALA receives focused time and attention from more experienced and high-level talent than does a typical association employing a full-time staff."

From Dummer's perspective, ALA's hybrid has the best of all worlds. "We are a standalone association in that we have our own headquarters office, infrastructure, technology platform, and core professional team. Our carefully selected team functions above the curve of AMC specialists," he says. "And statistically, the ALA virtual-hybrid business model outpaces both the standalone and AMC scenarios, exceeding industry standards in operating ratios" in ASAE & The Center's *Operating Ratio Report*.

The ALA Board of Directors embraces excellence, leadership, and awareness as core values and professionalism, stewardship, and collaboration as behavioral values. All professional team members believe in and practice these values,

## “THIS IS A TEAM. WE ARE ALA.”

—TOM CORCORAN

Dummer says. “The bond we share transcends a traditional transactional relationship. ALA and its service providers grasp the basic organizational tenets and share in the responsibility for management and success on all initiatives and projects. These values are ingrained in the fabric of the team and fuel how we work with each other and with board members and volunteers.”

### Nuts and Bolts and a Well-Oiled Machine

Most of ALA’s professional team members are located near enough to the Chicago area to attend quarterly, face-to-face planning meetings. These usually consist of half days of highly organized agendas with strategic focus. Lunch or dinner follows the meetings, giving the team opportunities to interact informally.

Technology plays a role in keeping everyone on the same page. Routine updates and planning are facilitated by email. Shared files are created according to a naming protocol. Weekly conference calls are scheduled before the annual conference. “And we all know we can pick up the phone anytime to discuss issues with Greg or the other team members,” says Dreier. “Relationships are unique in this group. Everyone feels a part of it.”

Nan Hallock, managing editor of ALA’s journal, agrees. Although based in Wisconsin, she interacts closely with those in charge of marketing, events, technology, and membership. “I don’t feel isolated. I like the focus of the approach, the ability to contribute at all levels, and the input from people whose opinions I regard,” she says. As the team member with the longest tenure, she’s seen the virtual-hybrid management concept develop. “We have a consistent team that keeps getting better and

better. Everybody’s committed to making it work.”

While many associations are striving to break silos and overcome poor corporate cultures, Dummer has built a staff of independent business owners who not only work well together but enjoy their interactions. “One of the unexpected but welcomed bonuses of this unique working relationship has been the really strong bond that has resulted among the ALA virtual staff,” says Cocoran. “This is a team. We are ALA.”

### The Captain of the Team

Dummer is convinced the quality of talent ALA’s management model brings to the table is the biggest benefit to the association. That may be true, but board members and team members alike insist Dummer is the key to the success of the virtual staff.

Hamilton notes that the original board “wanted somewhat of a virtual model, not a bunch of full-time employees. Greg understood the concept and knew he could make it happen for us. He filled in the details.”

Dummer’s enthusiasm for the model was evident when he was interviewed for the executive director’s position, says Badger. “The idea captured his imagination and fit his background. Greg has an entrepreneurial and business-development mindset,” she says. “He really did his homework about ALA, including reading journal archives, bringing ideas for an organizational audit, and even preparing a potential organization chart.”

Five years later, the ALA board finds itself in a strategic role, rather than tied to the operations of the association. “You have to understand,” says Hamilton, “we’re scientists. We tend to look at everything under the microscope. Our only previous goal was to have more

money at the end of the year than we spent. With Greg’s help, we’ve evolved from being an event—which some people didn’t even know had an association behind it—to an association that does any number of things, and the conference is just one of them.”

ALA 2008 President James Sterling says, “The thing that makes it work is Greg’s focus on the people and the meetings that, just like our board meetings, are well planned with clear action items and assigned responsibilities. When there are no opportunities to bump into other staff in the hall and talk about issues, the meetings and communications are especially important to focus everyone’s attention. Greg’s outsourcing business practices are so effective, I look to incorporate them into my own academic environment, and I’m sure they translate into for-profit organizations, too.”

The professional team members talk about productivity, camaraderie, engagement, and trust and attribute the ease of working together to volunteer leadership as well as Dummer. “The organization is goal oriented and team members are invested as part of the team,” says Paul Finkel of Potomac Digitek, ALA’s web specialist. “The behavior starts at the top and permeates downward, but we’ve all bought into it and, therefore, good things happen.” **an**

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