

RESTORING TRUST IN EXPERTISE

CONTENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS	3
ABOUT ASSOCIATION TRANSFORMATION	3
DISCLAIMER	3
INTRODUCTION: A CRISIS OF TRUST	4
THE HISTORICAL MANDATE OF MEMBERSHIP ORGS.	5
DRIVERS OF DISTRUST IN EXPERTISE	5
TECHNOLOGY AND DATA	5
EPISTEMIC POLLUTION	6
FAILURE FUELING THE FIRE	7
THE UNIQUE ROLE OF MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS	7
REBUILDING TRUST IN PRACTICE	9
AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION	9
ENGINEERS WITHOUT BORDERS	10
CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS	11
AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION	12
CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS	12
STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS	13
A RENEWED PUBLIC COMPACT	14
CALL TO ACTION	14
REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY	15

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ELISA PRATT, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, BREWER PRATT SOLUTIONS, LLC

An expert in association management solutions, Elisa is a leader in strategic planning, innovative member engagement solutions, leadership development, and operational effectiveness strategies. As the founder of Brewer Pratt Solutions LLC, Elisa brings more than 20 years of experience as an impactful senior staff member for trade and individual membership organizations, both domestic and international. Elisa is a Certified Association Executive, has earned her Certified Virtual Facilitator™ designation from the International Institute for Facilitation and holds a MA in Government from Johns Hopkins University. Elisa serves as a strategic advisor, sitting on the board of the Institute for Association Leadership, has developed curriculum for AssociationTrends.com and AssociationSuccess.com and delivered keynote and session presentations for the American Society of Association Executives, Nplace.org, the IAL's Forum Focus, and the Virtual Association Network.



ANDREW CHAMBERLAIN, MANAGING DIRECTOR, ELEVATED

A former association chief executive, for 15 years Andrew held c-suite positions in professional membership bodies across the UK. Since 2016 he has worked globally, providing dozens of membership organizations with expert support in leadership development, business strategy, and good corporate governance. With a proven pedigree in understanding and maximizing association business dynamics, he provides a distinctly diverse perspective on what drives success in membership. Andrew is a Fellow of the Society of Association Management and a Member of the Institute of Leadership. From 2020-22 he volunteered as the Executive Director of the UK's Institute of Association Leadership; is founder of the Cambridge Governance Symposium; author of the NETpositive Governance™ model; editor of the IAL Almanac; and co-author of "Compass: the systems map for association leadership".



ABOUT ASSOCIATION TRANSFORMATION

Launched in July 2020, the Association Transformation podcast was conceived as a direct response to the membership sector's need for information, dialogue, guidance, and support during an unprecedented period of disruption and uncertainty. Recognizing the inherently global nature of the membership sector, the podcast is a transatlantic conversation between co-hosts Elisa Pratt and Andrew Chamberlain and is intended to advance the impact and evolution of non-profit organizations. We always seek diversity of thought and new examples of innovation in action, and across five seasons, we have hosted 90+ association specialists from the global sector across 100+ recordings, taking a deep dive into the current issues, emerging trends, leadership challenges, and business opportunities facing the international association community. Irrespective of subject matter, we always aim to share practical ideas, knowledge, and support for the long-term benefit of association chief executives, c-suite nonprofit professionals, and volunteer leaders. Our conversations cover a diverse compilation of subjects relevant to association leaders across the globe, ranging from mental health and wellbeing, the climate crisis, and DEI to membership recruitment and retention, financial strategy, and governance practice.

DISCLAIMER

The opinions and information provided in the white paper are offered in good faith. Whilst we make every attempt to ensure the information contained in this white paper is correct, we are unable to guarantee the accuracy or completeness of any information contained herein. Brewer Pratt Solutions and Elevated, their employees and agents will not be responsible for any misinterpretation, misunderstanding or loss, however arising, from the use of, or reliance on this information.

INTRODUCTION: A CRISIS OF TRUST

Trust is society's invisible infrastructure. It girds our reliance on experts, shapes compliance with public policy, and sustains the social meaning of professions. Yet data shows that trust is continuing to erode, and at a remarkable pace. The 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer reveals institutional trust falling into the "distrust zone" across multiple sectors; and at the same time, fewer people believe societal leaders act truthfully^[1] and with the best interests of society at heart. Historical trust in professionals (grounded in authority, credentials, and peer respect) is no longer guaranteed.

This erosion is partly due to an extraordinary combination of pressures. The COVID-19 pandemic, the climate emergency, the political theater, and continued socioeconomic instability have exposed the limits of expertise and of once-trusted institutions. As professional advice has often become delayed, contradictory, and politicized, laypersons have grown suspicious not only of failure, but of fallibility itself.

Simultaneously, the digital information revolution has muddied the waters. Social media and influencer culture present non-expert voices as peer equals, diminishing the public's ability to distinguish between vetted expertise, commercially motivated promotion, and anecdotal opinion; and studies confirm that misinformation spreads faster and is more trusted when it resonates emotionally, not factually.

**"Trust is society's
invisible infrastructure."**

Professionals are thus facing a crisis of authority, not necessarily because of they have made errors, but because the opponents of their positions speak with supreme confidence, and the platforms they once held have become discredited and destabilized by unprofessional behaviors and the misuse of "facts" and positions of authority.

Membership organizations, often omitted from the narrative, possess the structural capabilities needed to help reclaim that trust. If the credibility of experts rests on more than qualifications, these institutions can rebuild trust, leading the recalibration and charting a credible path to renewed legitimacy through organizational reform, community validation, sincere engagement, and strategic evolution.

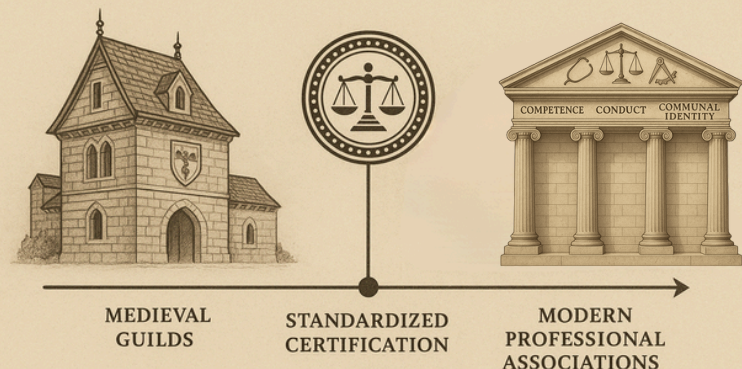
^[1] Edelman, 2024



THE HISTORICAL MANDATE OF MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS

Professional bodies emerged in the 19th Century in response to the increasing complexity and societal importance of specialized skills. Inspired by medieval guilds (of craftsmen or merchants), they codified qualifications, oversight, and ethics. The shift from informal apprenticeship to standardized certification marked a turning point, embedding a public service dimension into professions^[2] whereby the three pillars of competence, conduct, communal identity underpinned a social contract: experts would be appointed based on merit, uphold rigorous standards, and serve societal needs. In return, they received trust, legal authority, and social prestige. This model underpinned the rise of modern medicine, engineering, accounting, and law, transforming technical mastery into public benefit; and within this context memberships have always had a dual mandate: to serve and regulate their members, but also to protect the public. From licensing doctors to certifying civil engineers, their institutional frameworks offer assurances that practitioners meet baseline expectations and underpin the principle that wrong-doing can be corrected or sanctioned.

Importantly, throughout the 20th Century these organizations functioned as cultural stewards. Their national conventions, professional journals, and ethical codes shaped collective identity and, by extension, public narratives of what it meant to be a



trusted practitioner. That narrative power fostered a relational understanding: professions were not an abstract collection of technicians, but stewards of trust bound to society. While criticism around elitism and exclusion has arisen, this core architecture has endured because public trust demands institutional legitimacy, beyond individual charisma or expertise.

DRIVERS OF DISTRUST IN EXPERTISE

The erosion of trust in professionals and experts has become one of the defining features of the 21st century. This is not a single phenomenon with a single cause; rather, it is the cumulative result of technological disruption, institutional failures, public scandal, cultural shifts, and widening socioeconomic divides. To understand the challenge fully, we must first understand the context in which trust has been strained, even shattered.

TECHNOLOGY AND DATA

One of the most powerful forces reshaping how society views expertise is the rapid rise of technology and data. The internet, once hailed as a tool for liberation and learning, has fundamentally transformed access to information. In doing so, it has also upended traditional hierarchies of knowledge. In the past, authority rested with those who held credentials, association affiliations, or years of specialized study. These markers signaled legitimacy and were trusted by the public as indicators of competence. Today, that authority is increasingly challenged. Social media platforms, blogs, and podcasts have given anyone with a voice and confidence the ability to amass a following. With a well-produced video or a viral post, individuals can offer commentary on complex topics regardless of whether they have any relevant expertise, including disciplines as diverse as public health, climate science, and economics. Lived experience and anecdote, however valuable in context, are now often presented on equal footing with peer-reviewed research.

The result is what some scholars describe as a “flattening” of expertise.^{[3][4]}

^[2] Larson, 1977

^[3] Pew, 2023

^[4] Institute for the Future of Work, 2023



In this new landscape, authority is no longer conferred by depth of knowledge but by visibility, charisma, and narrative appeal. Misinformation can spread as easily (and sometimes more persuasively) than evidence-based insight. This not only complicates public understanding, but it also erodes trust in professionals who operate within rigorous, accountable systems. The democratization of information, while empowering in many ways, has also made it harder to distinguish between informed analysis and confident speculation. As the boundaries between experts and influencers blur, the role of credible institutions and professional bodies becomes more vital than ever, namely to uphold standards, foster trust, and help the public navigate an increasingly noisy world.

EPISTEMIC POLLUTION

The problem is compounded by the deliberate spread of false information. Misinformation (unintentionally misleading content) and disinformation (intentionally fabricated material) proliferate at an unprecedented scale. Social media algorithms reward engagement over accuracy. Content that elicits fear or outrage spreads faster than peer-reviewed evidence or cautious expertise.

Epistemic pollution is the widespread contamination of the information environment with misinformation, disinformation, and low-quality or biased knowledge.

“Epistemic pollution” refers to the widespread contamination of the information environment with misinformation, disinformation, and low-quality or biased knowledge. For membership organizations, whose credibility depends on trusted expertise, professional standards, and informed decision-making, this presents a growing challenge. As digital platforms amplify noise over nuance, both members and the public are increasingly exposed to polarized narratives, conspiracy theories, and pseudo-expertise. This erosion of trust in traditional knowledge sources undermines the authority of membership organizations as well, even when they uphold rigorous standards and evidence-based practices.

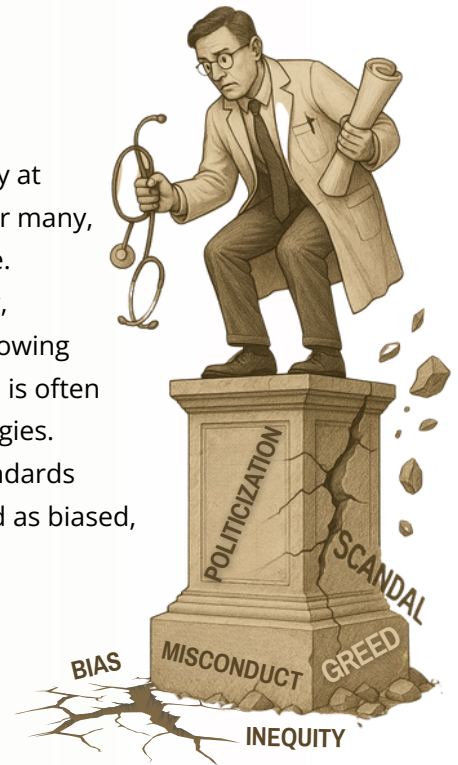
The result is a crisis of legitimacy: professionals and experts may be dismissed as “out of touch,” while lay influencers or populist voices gain traction. This threatens the foundational role of membership bodies as custodians of professional competence, ethical conduct, and public interest.

Furthermore, epistemic pollution complicates internal decision-making. Members themselves may arrive at divergent views informed by unreliable sources, making consensus and collective action more difficult. It also increases reputational risk, as organizations may be expected to respond swiftly to false claims or ethical breaches amplified online. In such an environment, trust in institutions and the professionals who speak for them has been replaced by tribal loyalty, emotional resonance, or simply convenience, often exemplified by a culture of the “loudest voice wins”.

To address the issue, membership organizations must actively champion epistemic integrity by promoting transparent standards of knowledge production, investing in media literacy for members, serving as visible counterweights to misinformation, and above all modelling patience and empathy. Rebuilding public and professional trust requires not just expertise but also courage, clarity, and proactive leadership in an increasingly polluted information landscape.

FAILURE FUELING THE FIRE

At the same time, there have been undeniable failures within professional domains that have undermined their own standing. Financial misconduct, clinical negligence, regulatory inaction: each high-profile scandal chips away at the perceived legitimacy of the systems meant to protect the public; and for many, trust has not been lost due to ignorance, but because of painful experience. Institutions once seen as guardians are now often perceived as self-serving, opaque, or slow to respond to wrongdoing. Adding fuel to this fire is the growing politicization of expertise. In an era of polarization, professional knowledge is often judged not on its merits but on its perceived alignment with political ideologies. Climate science, epidemiology, education policy, and even engineering standards have all been drawn into cultural and partisan conflict. Experts are branded as biased, elitist, or out of touch, sometimes fairly, but often as a tactic to undermine inconvenient truths. This politicization makes it harder for professionals to speak with authority and neutrality, even when their work is grounded in rigorous evidence.



Beneath all of these dynamics lies a deeper structural issue: inequality. In many parts of the world, professionals are seen as part of an urban, educated elite that benefits from systems others cannot access. When large segments of society feel unheard, disenfranchised, or left behind, they become more likely to distrust not just specific individuals but the very idea of expertise itself. In such contexts, distrust becomes a form of resistance, a signal that traditional institutions have failed to listen or deliver.

Taken together, these forces create a perfect storm. The authority of professionals has been destabilized from below (via grassroots misinformation), from within (via institutional failures), and from above (via political instrumentalization). In this landscape, trust can no longer be assumed, but instead must be rebuilt from the ground up, and membership organizations are among the few institutions positioned to lead that work.

THE UNIQUE ROLE OF MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS

Amid growing skepticism toward traditional institutions, membership organizations retain a distinctive ability to bridge the gap between professionals and the public. They are neither purely regulatory authorities nor simply advocacy bodies but rather exist at the intersection of trust, expertise, and ethical governance. To understand their power in rebuilding credibility, we must first understand their structural uniqueness.

At their core, membership organizations represent the institutional embodiment of a profession's social contract. They do more than accredit or assemble practitioners; they articulate what it means to belong to a community of practice rooted in shared values, standards, and responsibilities; and this is more than a symbolic gesture. When functioning at their best, these bodies serve as both gatekeepers of competence and custodians of public interest.[5]

[Membership organizations] serve as both gatekeepers of competence and custodians of public interest.

First and foremost, membership organizations uphold professional standards through structured entry requirements, qualifications, and continuing professional development. These mechanisms are critical because they provide assurance, not just to employers or peers, but to the wider public that members are competent, current, and committed to lifelong learning. The act of certification thus becomes a declaration of

[5] Freidson, 2001



readiness to serve, not merely a technical credential. However, competence alone is not enough. Public trust hinges on integrity, and here, the ethical dimension of membership bodies becomes vital. Through codes of conduct, disciplinary procedures, and whistleblowing protections, these organizations enforce professional norms that are often more stringent than legal baselines. When members breach those standards, the consequences are clear and enforceable, which is an essential feature in a world where self-regulation is often viewed with suspicion. Just as importantly, these ethical standards evolve and the best membership bodies regularly review their codes to reflect emerging societal expectations, whether related to digital privacy, environmental responsibility, or social inclusion.



Beyond regulation, membership organizations play an essential narrative role. They have the capacity to shape public perceptions of their profession, not through public relations spin but through sustained engagement, community outreach, and transparent communication. By demystifying what their members do and why it matters, they can transform professions from distant expert cultures into familiar, service-oriented communities. This is particularly important in professions like law, science, engineering, and health, where public understanding is often limited, but the consequences of misunderstanding are high.



Critically, these organizations serve as conveners, not just of their members but of dialogue between professionals and the public. Many have embraced open consultations, citizen panels, and participatory governance as tools to strengthen legitimacy, and in doing so, they have moved from being introspective clubs to outward-facing institutions. This participatory ethos signals that expertise is not imposed from above but shaped in partnership with the society it serves.



In moments of crisis, whether during pandemics, financial upheavals, or institutional failures, membership organizations can act as trusted intermediaries. They translate complex issues, contextualize expert advice, and provide a stabilizing voice. But this role can only be effective if they are seen as independent, credible, and aligned with public interest over private convenience. Ultimately, the unique strength of membership organizations lies in their hybrid character. They are simultaneously enforcers of standards, stewards of professional identity, and architects of ethical culture. Unlike corporations that are driven by profit or regulatory agencies limited by legal mandate, these bodies have the freedom (and the responsibility) to shape professions in the public image. **In an age of mistrust, this makes them not only relevant but indispensable. They are not the only answer to the crisis of confidence, but they are among the few institutions with the reach, resilience, and moral mandate to lead the way forward.**



Membership organizations occupy a nexus between individual competence, collective identity, and societal oversight. Their distinct roles include:



- **Standards & certification:** Defining entry and progression standards through rigorous training, licensing, and continuing professional development (CPD). Certification signals more than expertise; it signals accountability.
- **Ethical governance:** Their codes of ethics guide professional conduct. Transparent disciplinary processes prioritize public protection over professional solidarity. Publishing outcomes builds legitimacy.
- **Public advocacy:** By contributing an informed voice to policy debates, these organizations can contextualize evidence-based solutions in relatable terms, bridging gaps between technical communities and the public.
- **Public engagement:** From public consultations and panel inclusion to myth-busting campaigns, membership bodies can demystify professional practice and show how standards protect society.
- **Professional identity and values:** By articulating values of service, humility, and responsibility, they rebuild the moral ethos around professions. Membership is more than belonging; it is a pledge to shared societal norms.



In short, membership organizations are not peripheral. They are central to the project of sustaining the social legitimacy of expertise.

REBUILDING TRUST IN PRACTICE

While principles and frameworks are important, the impact of membership organizations is best understood through real-world examples. Across various professions, forward-thinking membership bodies have begun reimagining their roles, shifting from internal service organizations to public-facing institutions committed to ethical leadership, transparency, and trust-building.

AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

The American Medical Association (AMA), established in 1847, is one of the oldest and most influential membership organizations in the United States. As the voice of America's physicians, the AMA has long played a foundational role in setting medical ethics, shaping healthcare policy, and advancing public health. With over 270,000 members and a broad policy influence, the AMA is publisher of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* and its network of specialty journals, an essential component of its public-facing credibility and trust-building strategy. In an era marked by rampant misinformation, ideological polarization, and growing skepticism toward medical authorities and public mistrust in the healthcare system the role of peer-reviewed scientific journals has become more vital than ever. The AMA has recognized that one of its greatest assets in defending public trust lies in the integrity of its publishing. *JAMA*, as one of the world's most respected medical journals, stands as a beacon of evidence-based practice, rigorous peer review, and scientific independence.

Through *JAMA* and its affiliated journals, the AMA provides a structured platform for transparent, reproducible, and scrutinized research to reach clinicians, policymakers, and the broader public. During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the rapid but rigorous publication of clinical data, public health updates, and epidemiological modelling contributed significantly to public understanding and practitioner preparedness. Importantly, these journals also published critical debates around vaccine safety, emerging treatments, and health system equity, demonstrating that trusted science is not silent, but engaged, self-correcting, and open to scrutiny.

The AMA's editorial governance also helps to reinforce credibility. Its publishing division operates with editorial independence from policy and advocacy arms, ensuring that published research is free from political or institutional bias. This separation between scientific integrity and organizational positioning is a crucial safeguard in maintaining trust among both professionals and the public. Moreover, the AMA has made deliberate efforts to broaden access to medical knowledge. Many of its articles are now open access, and it actively promotes public-facing summaries, infographics, and multimedia explainers to enhance scientific literacy beyond the medical profession. This effort to democratize knowledge not only strengthens transparency but also counters the oversimplification and distortion common in social media discourse.

The AMA's journals have also led the way in addressing structural health inequities through research. Special issues on racism in medicine, social determinants of health, and underrepresentation in clinical trials exemplify how peer-reviewed platforms can tackle difficult, systemic issues in ways that resonate with both professionals and the public. These publications demonstrate that scientific rigor and moral clarity can (and must) go hand in hand.



The case of the AMA illustrates a vital lesson for all scientific and professional bodies: in a time of epistemic instability, peer-reviewed publication remains one of the most powerful tools for trust-building. Journals are not just repositories of knowledge; they are instruments of public engagement, accountability, and professional integrity. When governed transparently and used proactively, they can help anchor society in a shared understanding of truth, even in uncertain times.

ENGINEERS WITHOUT BORDERS

Engineers Without Borders (EWB) exemplifies how a membership-based organization can redefine a profession's public image by embedding social justice, equity, and sustainability at its core. Founded in response to a perceived disconnect between technical expertise and global humanitarian need, EWB has grown into a global movement that challenges conventional narratives of engineering as purely corporate, industrial, or technocratic. Operating through national chapters in countries such as Canada, UK, USA, and Australia, EWB mobilizes engineers and engineering students to apply their technical skills to community-driven development projects, often in resource-poor or structurally marginalized areas. Their work includes clean water systems, renewable energy installations, and sustainable infrastructure, solutions co-created with local communities. By prioritizing partnership over paternalism, EWB has helped shift the role of the engineer from "problem solver" to "collaborative change agent."



Crucially, EWB is not simply a volunteer outlet or project broker; it is a professional development ecosystem. Its membership model integrates mentorship, ethical training, design-thinking workshops, and leadership pathways. Through this, EWB positions itself as both a capacity builder and an ethical conscience for the engineering profession. Members gain more than technical skills; they are immersed in critical reflections on power, privilege, and the societal impacts of design and infrastructure. This transformative approach is underpinned by a rigorous commitment to values-led practice. For instance, EWB Canada has published a Global Engineering Framework[1] that challenges traditional engineering curricula and calls for systemic reform in how engineers are trained, evaluated, and recognized. The framework emphasizes empathy, humility, and cross-cultural competence, qualities often overlooked in mainstream credentialing processes.

Furthermore, EWB has been proactive in policy and advocacy, influencing educational institutions, accreditation bodies, and employers to integrate social and environmental responsibility into the core of engineering education and practice. EWB UK, for example, launched the Engineering for People Design Challenge, engaging thousands of students annually in real-world briefs focused on community-led solutions and sustainability goals. The initiative has been widely adopted across UK universities, seeding a new generation of socially conscious engineers.

Importantly, EWB also models transparency and reflexivity. Its annual impact reports do not shy away from complexity, often highlighting not just achievements but the challenges and ethical dilemmas encountered in community-based engineering. This openness reinforces EWB's authenticity and strengthens public trust in the engineering profession as a whole.

The broader significance of EWB lies in its redefinition of professional identity. By making values as important as skills, and collaboration as important as competence, EWB challenges the technocratic insulation that can erode public trust. In doing so, it offers a roadmap for other membership organizations seeking to bridge the gap between expertise and ethical accountability. In an age where trust must be earned through visible alignment with public interest, EWB shows how professional bodies can rebuild legitimacy not through slogans or reputational management, but through a deep, structural commitment to justice, humility, and inclusive progress.



CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

The UK's Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) offers a valuable case study in how a membership organization can enhance professional credibility in a field often viewed with cynicism. Public relations (PR) has long been dogged by negative perceptions, often associated with spin, manipulation, and opaque motives. Against this backdrop, the CIPR has taken significant steps to reposition PR as a principled, socially accountable discipline.

Founded in 1948 and granted chartered status in 2005, the CIPR serves over 10,000 members across corporate, public sector, nonprofit, and independent practice settings. Its central mission

is to raise professional standards, foster ethical communication, and promote the public value of responsible PR. In doing so, it confronts one of the profession's most critical challenges: the erosion of trust in those who shape public narratives. At the heart of the CIPR's work is a robust ethical framework. All members commit to a code of conduct that emphasizes honesty, integrity, and transparency.[6] The Institute provides a formal disciplinary process for breaches, including the public naming of members found in violation, a rare but important step in demonstrating accountability. By upholding and enforcing these standards, CIPR challenges the notion that PR lacks internal discipline or moral direction.

The organization also plays a key role in professional development.

Through qualifications, continuous professional development schemes, and a chartered status pathway, the CIPR reinforces the idea that communications is a craft grounded in knowledge, judgement, and public responsibility and not just persuasion. Its training emphasizes evidence-based practice, diversity and inclusion, and the ethical implications of digital communication and AI. In the realm of misinformation, CIPR has emerged as an advocate for truth and transparency. It has issued guidance on responsible crisis communication, developed resources to help members counter disinformation, and publicly opposed unethical practices such as astroturfing[7] and deceptive influencer marketing. By doing so, the CIPR not only strengthens the professional identity of PR practitioners but also contributes to the resilience of democratic discourse.

Credibility in communications must be earned through consistency, openness, and a commitment to the long-term interests of both practitioners and the society they serve.

Public engagement is another cornerstone of CIPR's strategy. It regularly publishes thought leadership on trust, reputation management, and stakeholder engagement, and contributes to policy consultations on media regulation and digital ethics. Its thought leadership helps frame PR as an essential function in maintaining trust between institutions and the public. Perhaps most importantly, the CIPR has modelled transparency within its own governance. Its annual reports, board minutes, and financial statements are publicly accessible, and it encourages member feedback on strategic priorities. This openness strengthens trust in the Institute itself and sets an example for the wider profession. By promoting a culture of ethical reflection and proactive accountability, the CIPR exemplifies how a membership organization can rehabilitate the image of a misunderstood profession. It has shown that credibility in communications must be earned through consistency, openness, and a commitment to the long-term interests of both practitioners and the society they serve.



[6] CIPR, *Ethical Frameworks and Publications*

[7] In PR, astroturfing is the deceptive practice of creating the appearance of a genuine grassroots movement or public opinion by concealing the true sponsor or origin of a message or organization. It involves fabricating support for a cause or product, making it seem like a spontaneous, widespread public sentiment when it is orchestrated by a specific entity.

AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION

The American Bar Association (ABA), founded in 1878, is a preeminent membership organization that has played a defining role in shaping the legal profession in the United States. With over 400,000 members, it sets standards for law school accreditation, ethical codes, and professional conduct. Yet in recent decades (particularly amid growing political polarization and perceptions of systemic inequity in the justice system) the legal profession has faced significant challenges to its legitimacy and public trust. In response, the ABA has undertaken deliberate efforts to reassert its public-facing role and restore confidence in the profession. Central to this work has been its commitment to judicial independence and the rule of law. At times when courts and legal norms have come under political pressure, the ABA has acted as a non-partisan guardian, issuing public statements, filing amicus briefs, and educating the public about constitutional principles.

Through its public legal education, the ABA has helped close the gap between expert knowledge and civic understanding. Its Law Day and civic literacy initiatives equip the public with foundational knowledge of legal rights, processes, and responsibilities. These programs are particularly important in a country where access to justice remains uneven and where misunderstanding of legal systems fuels mistrust; and while the ABA navigates tensions between its member service functions and its broader public mission, it has demonstrated that a membership organization can remain relevant and trusted by aligning its professional stewardship with civic education, ethical clarity, and policy advocacy grounded in democratic principles.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite their potential, membership organizations are not immune to critique. They face both internal and external challenges that can undermine their credibility and effectiveness, and recognizing these limitations is essential to understanding how organizations evolve.

1. Perception of Insularity

Membership organizations are sometimes perceived as serving the interests of their members above those of the public. This perception is reinforced when disciplinary actions are opaque, when codes of conduct seem weak or unenforced, or when leaders fail to speak out on contentious ethical issues. Such insularity breeds suspicion and alienates stakeholders.

2. Structural Inertia

Legacy governance models, risk-averse cultures, and hierarchical decision-making structures often inhibit innovation and adaptability. In a fast-moving world, agility is critical, yet many membership bodies struggle to pivot quickly in response to societal expectations, crises, or technological disruption.

3. Diversity and Representation

Professional bodies have historically mirrored social inequities. Gender, racial, and socioeconomic disparities persist in membership demographics, leadership composition, and institutional culture. A lack of inclusivity weakens legitimacy and creates a credibility gap with the wider public.

4. Financial Constraints and Commercial Tensions

Balancing member services with public interest obligations can be financially and strategically complex. Dependence on member fees may disincentivize bold action, such as enforcing standards that result in suspensions or public censure. Furthermore, the growing trend toward offering non-member commercial services (e.g. training, conferences, CPD) can skew organizational focus towards revenue rather than purpose.

5. Communication Gaps

Many organizations still struggle to communicate in ways that are accessible, engaging, and transparent. Jargon, overly technical documents, and passive websites alienate rather than inform. In the absence of effective public-facing communication, even well-intentioned activities can go unnoticed or misunderstood. Confronting these challenges requires courage and reform. Acknowledging shortcomings is not a sign of weakness but of maturity, and it is the first step in reimagining the role of membership organizations in a trust-deficient world.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

To realize their potential as trust-builders, membership organizations must move beyond incremental reforms and embrace a bold, values-led transformation. Rebuilding public confidence in professionals is not simply a matter of technical regulation or reputational management. It demands a cultural reset that places public interest at the heart of everything these bodies do.

The first step is to **reassert and clarify their public purpose**. Too often, membership organizations are seen as primarily serving their members, defending privileges, offering benefits, and protecting status. While these functions are of course important, they must be recognized within a wider societal mission. Organizations should embed the public interest into their governance structures, strategic plans, and performance indicators. This means more than aspirational language but rather structural change. Public representation on boards, the creation of independent ethics committees, and transparent decision-making processes are all signals that an organization takes its accountability to society seriously.

Transparency must become a defining feature of modern professional bodies. In an era marked by skepticism and cynicism, opacity breeds suspicion. Membership organizations should adopt a philosophy of radical openness, publishing disciplinary outcomes, performance and financial reports, audit results, and policy decisions in accessible formats. They should not only be prepared to explain how decisions are made but actively invite scrutiny. This willingness to be seen, questioned, and challenged is central to earning and sustaining public trust.

At the same time, membership organizations must **invest in building meaningful relationships with the public**. Public engagement cannot be an afterthought or confined to media statements in times of crisis. It should be integrated into the day-to-day work of the organization. This may include establishing citizen panels, facilitating open consultations, and creating forums where public voices influence ethical debates and strategic priorities. Such mechanisms move organizations away from a defensive posture and toward genuine co-creation with the communities they serve.

Combating misinformation is another critical frontier. Membership organizations are well-placed to act as



authoritative sources of accurate, evidence-based information, particularly in sectors like health, science, law, and education where public confusion can have tangible consequences.[8] This responsibility should be embraced proactively. Whether through myth-busting campaigns, online explainer tools, or partnerships with schools and media outlets, professional bodies must reclaim their role as trusted guides in a crowded and chaotic information environment.

Crucially, this work must be underpinned by a **genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion**. Trust cannot flourish where representation is lacking. Membership organizations must reflect the communities they serve, across race, gender, class, geography, and lived experience. This entails not just inclusive recruitment strategies, but a wholesale re-examination of cultural norms, leadership pipelines, and institutional narratives. Addressing inequity and fostering belonging should be seen not as political risks but as moral and strategic imperatives.

Finally, communications and service delivery must evolve to meet contemporary expectations. In a

[8] CIPR, *Ethical Frameworks and Publications*

digital-first world, clunky platforms and passive content does not suffice. Membership bodies should embrace design thinking, mobile accessibility, and human-centered communications. They must speak with clarity, humility, and relevance, making their standards, values, and work visible to those outside their professional walls.

The path to renewed trust is not a linear one, nor is it without risk; but it is clear that public legitimacy will not be restored through tradition alone. It must be earned, through bold choices, structural reforms, and an unwavering commitment to the society that grants professionals their authority in the first place.

A RENEWED PUBLIC COMPACT

The erosion of trust in professionals is one of the most pressing challenges of our time. It threatens not only the credibility of individuals but the functioning of institutions, economies, and democracies. Yet, this crisis also presents a unique opportunity: to rediscover and revitalize the role of membership organizations as agents of trust.

These organizations were founded on the powerful idea that professions should be defined not just by skill, but by service. That their authority is earned, not assumed; and that they exist not to protect insiders, but to serve the common good.

Rebuilding trust in expertise will not be easy. It will require transparency, humility, and bold reimagining, but membership organizations are well-equipped to lead this work. Their blend of ethical stewardship, professional identity, regulatory authority, and public voice positions them as vital bridges between expertise and society. In a world of unrelenting noise, they can speak with clarity; in a time of polarization, they can model responsibility; and in an era of doubt, they can earn (again) the

trust of the public they ultimately serve.



CALL TO ACTION

Membership organizations must lead the restoration of public trust in expertise. In an age where misinformation thrives, institutions are under scrutiny, and professional authority is no longer taken for granted, these bodies are uniquely positioned to act, not as relics of tradition, but as forward-looking agents

of ethical, public-oriented leadership. To fulfil this role, membership organizations must embrace a bold cultural and structural transformation rooted in five strategic imperatives:

- 1. Reassert Public Purpose:** Organizations must clarify that their mission extends beyond serving members to serving society. Public interest should be embedded in governance, strategy, and performance measures, not just through statements of intent, but via tangible reforms like public board representation and independent ethics oversight.
- 2. Champion Radical Transparency:** Trust thrives on visibility. Professional bodies must publish disciplinary outcomes, decision-making processes, performance and financial statements, and performance metrics in clear, accessible formats. Openness to scrutiny and explanation must become a norm, not an exception.
- 3. Deepen Public Engagement:** Engagement cannot be reactive or symbolic. It must be sustained, participatory, and inclusive, realized through citizen panels, public consultations, and community partnerships. Organizations must demonstrate that professional standards and ethics are co-shaped with the people they serve.

4. **Actively Counter Misinformation:** Membership organizations should position themselves as trusted sources of evidence-based knowledge. This includes creating myth-busting resources, contributing to public discourse, educating media, and promoting digital literacy among members and the public alike.

5. **Advance Equity and Inclusion:** To be legitimate, professional bodies must reflect the diversity of society. This includes addressing underrepresentation in leadership, tackling structural barriers to participation, and embedding inclusive values in culture, training, and decision-making.

These steps are not merely tactical. They represent a renewed social compact: professions exist not for privilege or prestige, but to serve the common good. Rebuilding trust means confronting uncomfortable truths, reforming outdated models, and redefining professional identity around service, humility, and accountability.

In short, membership organizations must move from insular service providers to ethical stewards of public value. This requires courage, clarity, and a willingness to lead by example, rebuilding not just their own credibility, but the societal belief that expertise, when accountable and aligned with the public interest, remains indispensable.

(CALL TO ACTION)

MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS MUST LEAD THE RESTORATION OF PUBLIC TRUST IN EXPERTISE



1. REASSERT
PUBLIC PURPOSE



2. CHAMPION
RADICAL
TRANSPARENCY



3. DEEPEN PUBLIC
ENGAGEMENT



4. ACTIVELY COUNTER
MISINFORMATION



5. ADVANCE EQUITY
AND INCLUSION

REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chartered Institute of Public Relations Ethical Frameworks and Publications. Available at https://cipr.co.uk/CIPR/CIPR/Our_work/Policy/Ethics.aspx.

Edelman Trust Barometer (2024). Available at <https://www.edelman.com/trust/trust-barometer>

Engineers Without Borders Impact Reports. Available at <https://www.ewb-international.org>

Freidson, E. (2001). 'Professionalism: The Third Logic', University of Chicago Press. Available at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/37689531> Professionalism the third logic on the practice of knowledge

Institute for the Future of Work (2023). 'Trust and Technology in the Professions'. Available at <https://www.ifow.org>

Larson, M.S. (1977). 'The Rise of Professionalism', University of California Press. Available at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319444775> The Rise of Professionalism

O'Neill, O. (2002). 'A Question of Trust', Cambridge University Press. Available at <https://www.cambridge.org/gb/universitypress/subjects/philosophy/political-philosophy/question-trust-bbc-reith-lectures-2002?format=PB&isbn=9780521529969>

Pew Research Center (2023). 'Health Information Online'. Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/topic/internet-technology/healthcare-online/>

WE ARE ELEVATED



GOVERNANCE | STRATEGY | LEADERSHIP

SCAN QR

Dedicated to supporting non-profit and association business growth, we work worldwide with staff, boards of directors, and volunteer leadership teams in defining, developing, and delivering high-impact strategies that lead to financial sustainability, create business strength, and add real value to professional communities.



We develop and implement strategic plans, business policies, and governance practices to realize financial strength and business resilience; and through training, coaching, mentoring, and business guidance we work with organization leaders, c-suite professionals, and governing bodies to define their authentic leadership style and enhance their professional success.



Strategic Planning

Creating clarity, direction, and achievable strategy for lasting organisational success



Governance Review

Strengthening governance through clear structures, roles, and effective oversight



Podcast Production

Planning, recording, and producing podcasts that inform and inspire audiences



Business analysis

Uncovering needs, clarifying problems, and identifying effective business solutions



Mentoring/Coaching

Helping professionals unlock potential, build confidence, and lead effectively



Training/Facilitation

Designing and delivering engaging sessions that spark learning and change



Project Management

Bringing structure, focus, and momentum to important organisational initiatives



Performance Review

Independent reviews that identify strengths, gaps, and growth opportunities



governance - strategy - leadership
you-elevated.com



ELEVATED



BREWER PRATT
SOLUTIONS

Strategic evolution for mission-driven success



Elisa Pratt, CEO
Your Partner in 501c Innovation

Following unprecedented disruption, is your association ready to reassess, respond, and evolve? Brewer Pratt Solutions approaches nonprofit challenges with energy, candor, and customization.

- Let's architect a **vision** for your future.
- Let's define and **amplify** your impact.
- Let's engage and **empower** your next leaders.

Brewer Pratt Solutions can help your organization evolve through organizational assessment, strategic planning, leadership development, and stakeholder engagement. We aren't the average consulting firm. We don't want to be. We are staff-minded and mission-focused. **We are your partner!**



Based in Washington, DC
Serving clients around the world



(703) 433-0516



elisa@brewerprattsolutions.com



Strategic Planning

Helping clients recalibrate for the future and achieve realistic and transformative goals.



Leadership Development

Empowering leadership with the education, tools, and direction to make a difference.



Stakeholder Engagement

Turning prospects into members, members into volunteers and loyal champions of your mission.



Future Visioning

Engineering inspiring and actionable futures that address your unique challenges and advance your mission.



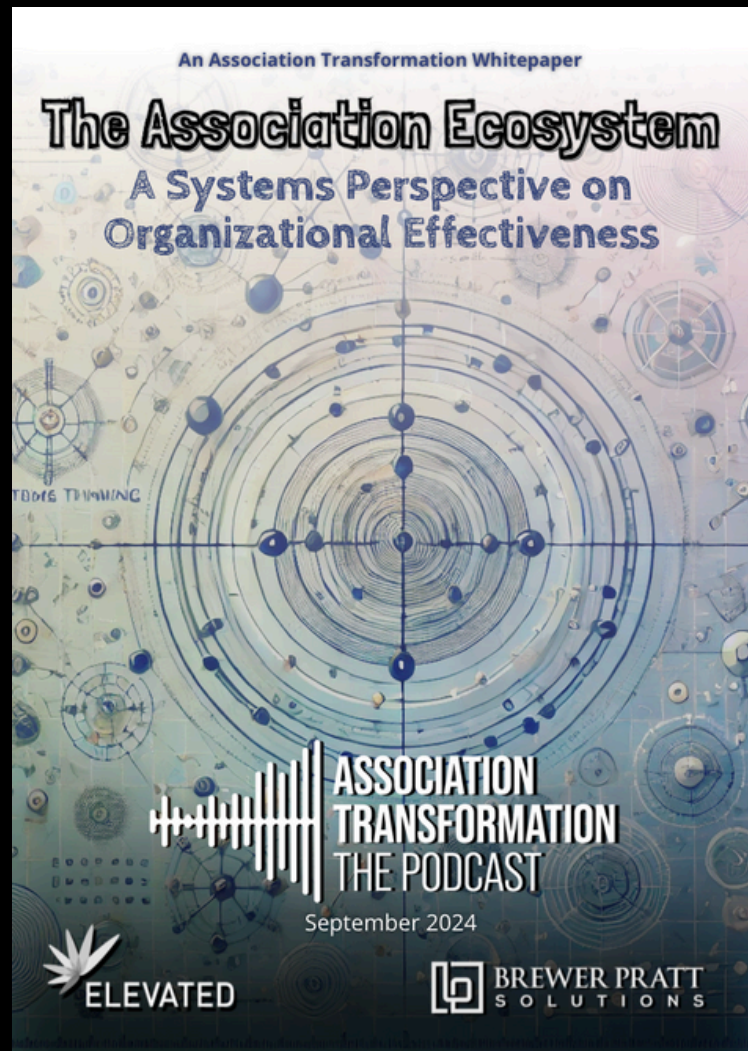
Organizational Evaluation

Asking the hard question to ensure the alignment of strategies, resources, and priorities across your organization.



Executive Search

Defining, attracting, and placing best-in-class nonprofit executives with a responsive approach that works (I'm not a head hunter).



DOWNLOAD OUR WHITEPAPERS AT
ASSOCIATIONTRANSFORMATION.ORG

LISTEN TO OUR WEEKLY PODCAST ON
 APPLE, SPOTIFY, AMAZON & YOUTUBE

150
episodes

10,350
listeners

ON AIR

Est. July 2020

Elisa Pratt, CAE

2
dedicated hosts

Andrew Chamberlain, FSAM

listeners from
89 countries

124 specialist guests

LISTEN NOW!

purpose

membership

leadership

strategy

governance

partnership

innovation

vision

Listen on
Pocket Casts

Listen on
Amazon Music

Listen on
Spotify

Listen on
Apple Podcasts

SUBSCRIBE

82 hours

4,944
minutes of content