

*Vault*

# *Association Trends*



*Modernizing Data Offerings  
for Fast-Paced Decision Making*

**Association Trends: Modernizing Data Offerings for Fast-Paced Decision Making**

Copyright © 2023 | Published by Vault Consulting

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Design by Hinge. Visit our website at [www.hingemarketing.com](http://www.hingemarketing.com)



# Table of Contents

<b>04</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>
<b>05</b>	<b>CHAPTER 1:</b> <i>Faster Decisions Require a Modern Data Program</i>
<b>08</b>	<b>CHAPTER 2:</b> <i>The Value of Pulse Surveys for Informed Decision-Making</i>
<b>11</b>	<b>CHAPTER 3:</b> <i>Salary Surveys Can Help Organizations Navigate Labor Challenges</i>
<b>14</b>	<b>CHAPTER 4:</b> <i>Using Data to Create the Virtual Content Members Want</i>
<b>17</b>	<b>CHAPTER 5:</b> <i>Presenting Insight More Effectively for Stronger Decision-Making</i>
<b>20</b>	<b>CONCLUSION</b>
<b>21</b>	<b>ABOUT VAULT</b>



# Introduction

*Amid rapid technology advances and growing reliance on data, associations are realizing the tools and methods they use to share data with their members must change. Associations are facing demand for more personalized information, more actionable data, and more options for connecting with members. Without updating their operations and offerings to reflect these new expectations, associations risk losing the value they offer members in today's fast-paced world.*

This guide aims to help association executives harness modern data programs and effective presentation strategies to provide the critical insights their members increasingly rely on. This guide will also highlight three key association trends in data collection:

- » **Pulse surveys** that provide regular insight into specific issues.
- » **Salary surveys** that help members navigate today's labor shifts.
- » **Member feedback** that helps associations navigate the emerging value of virtual offerings.

By modernizing their data offerings, associations can better position themselves as thought leaders in an evolving world, while expanding their reach and potential revenue opportunities.

## Chapter 1



# *Faster Decisions Require a Modern Data Program*

*To remain relevant in the face of today's demand for rapid, customizable, and personalized information, many associations are finding they have to adapt. Past association trends have outlived their usefulness in today's digital environment. While associations may no longer collect survey responses by fax or distribute survey results by mailing out floppy disks, many still use manual or Excel-based data collection strategies to drive their research.*

Helping your members make timely, more informed decisions begins with your association's ability to provide better, faster data. For many associations, this may require modernizing the existing data program.

## **Elements of a Modern Data Program**

A modern data program isn't just about moving surveys and other solutions online. This association trend is all about utilizing today's technology solutions to drive results that better serve your members and staff. As a result, it's important to develop your data approach with a focus on the end results.



*A modern data program is all about utilizing today's technology solutions to drive results that better serve your members and staff.*

A modern data program should target the following goals:

»» **1. SPEED:**

The end goal of every research project is to provide members with timely data to help guide decision making. Reducing the burden on participants to provide information is likely to improve response times and increase participation.

To this end, associations should be selective regarding how many data points they request. They should also look for ways to add automation that makes the process faster and easier. Options include use of an application programming interface (API) solution that fully automates everything, tools to pre-populate survey forms with results from past periods, and an increased focus on short pulse-style surveys that take only minutes for participants to complete.

»» **2. ACCURACY:**

Accuracy is essential for ensuring trust in your research, and this is another key area where automation can help. Automating data collection and reporting steps can reduce the risk of human error and ensure higher rates of accuracy in your results.

»» **3. SECURITY:**

Proving your commitment to security is critical for securing sensitive data from members. Associations will need to have a clear policy around security practices and attempted breach protocols in place. A cybersecurity firm can support associations with insight into best practices or security audits that ensure your data is protected. Members will also want to see that your association is meeting their requirements for documentation security, such as compliance with the American Institute of CPAs' Service Organization Control (SOC) reporting standard, for example.

»» **4. EASE OF INTERNAL USE:**

A modern data program should provide benefits for your staff as well. Any updates should ensure that data is more easily accessible to all board members and staff, with the ability to hide certain data elements behind passwords as needed.



## »» 5. SUPPORT FOR ONLINE OFFERINGS:

Any solution that supports fast, secure, accurate data collection can provide a strong foundation for all of your online offerings. It's essential to ensure that your platform can integrate seamlessly with any other solutions that you may use to deliver interactive reporting, virtual events, member communities, and other online programs – while offering the same level of security and ease of use for staff and members.

## Solutions that Can Help Achieve Your Goals

It is easy to be overwhelmed by the multitude of options available to help modernize data collection and reporting. The good news is that associations have no need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to updating their data programs. This is one area where association trends are making it easier to stand apart, as existing apps and plugins can generally support this data shift. What might have been a costly six-month build can now be done at a lower cost with much quicker turnaround by using modern infrastructure solutions already in place. By vetting potential vendors, associations can provide the tools their members want.

Another key area to consider is moving from on-premise servers to cloud-based solutions. This step can reduce the risk of data loss due to disaster or other destruction of files, and ensure continual access to files in the event of board member or staff turnover. Moving to a cloud-based server also means turning security over to a dedicated expert, rather than relying on association staff to maintain up-to-date security procedures and invest in security software solutions.

Making the move to a new system can bring tremendous efficiency, but it's important that associations continue to review their data collection policies and solutions regularly for additional opportunities to improve. Any new solutions implemented should provide associations with flexibility to adapt and change in the face of future needs.



*Making the move to a new system can bring tremendous efficiency, but it's important that associations continue to review their data collection policies and solutions regularly for additional opportunities to improve.*

## Chapter 2



# The Value of Pulse Surveys for Informed Decision-Making

*Fueled by rapid changes in workforce, industry, and consumer behavior, your members rely more than ever on access to the latest data for fast, sound decision-making. This is where pulse surveys are proving to be an invaluable association trend.*

These brief surveys capture the “pulse of an industry” within a few questions. Their strength is in their brevity, as they can be used to provide regular insight on critical business needs as factors evolve in real-time.

## What Is a Pulse Survey?

In general, a pulse survey asks only a few multiple-choice questions. They may be sent out weekly, biweekly, or monthly, and generally take less than five minutes to complete. Their strength is in their narrow focus.

Pulse surveys typically come in one of two forms:

### »» OPINION-BASED:

These surveys aim to capture association members' sentiments on key issues. An opinion-based pulse survey might ask for opinions on labor challenges or advocacy issues, for example.

### »» DATA-BASED:

These surveys capture member-submitted sales or other benchmarking data. A data-based pulse survey might ask how sales have been impacted by a specific event or for details about work backlog.

Despite their brevity, pulse surveys provide your members with valuable, up-to-date information on the issues that matter most to their industry, peers, or customers. They provide timely insight into how companies compare against the industry at large. These brief surveys also provide a sounding board in between more in-depth association reporting that often drives decision-making.

## Who to Survey to Get the Pulse of Your Industry

Because pulse surveys should take only a few minutes to complete, associations may find they get responses from a wider than typical range of their association members. This proves valuable in providing a strong data set to track over time. However, it also helps to build up engagement that can translate into greater member participation in future events and research opportunities and dictate future association trends.

Given their brevity, pulse surveys also open up the possibility of seeking input from a diverse group of individuals, capturing a broader perspective of industry issues. In fact, these surveys are an excellent opportunity to reach out to stakeholders who may be adjacent to your typical audience. This might include different people within the organizations you already work with, as you look beyond engagement with senior leadership to include sales reps, marketing, and mid-level positions. This may also involve distributors, supply chain partners, and even customers. A tracking study among consumers, with monthly or quarterly information, can identify purchasing and other trends that can inform association members' decisions.



*Pulse surveys are an excellent opportunity to reach out to stakeholders who may be adjacent to your typical audience.*

## The Value of the Pulse of the Industry

Although brief, pulse surveys pack a powerful punch. These short, quick-hitting surveys can also promote the issues essential to the success of your industry over time. In fact, pulse surveys' value tends to increase over time due to the ongoing accumulation of historic

data that identifies trends in data points. The historic data contained in these surveys can provide members with insight that can help them plan how best to weather industry challenges. This supplemental data can also help guide members' decisions in between your association's larger-scale surveys. For associations, pulse surveys offer a more regular opportunity to engage with members than annual research projects.

The narrow focus of pulse surveys also tends to prove attractive to members of the media. These surveys are shaped around telling a very specific story, and many associations find they can build a brief narrative around their surveys to provide context to historic association trends.

The Electronic Components Industry Association (ECIA), for example, has built a [robust story](#)<sup>1</sup> around its monthly survey on product delivery lead times. The ECIA narrative connects this single data point across several product lines to the challenges that impact elements of the supply chain. With this information, ECIA issues regular press releases that are carried out by several industry publications, while also tying the quick poll to a more complete members-only sales report. ECIA demonstrates how, with only a few targeted questions, associations can extend their reach and drive greater value for their industry.



1. <https://epsnews.com/2022/04/12/sales-trends-soften-for-electronic-components/>

## Chapter 3



# Salary Surveys Can Help Organizations Navigate Labor Challenges

*It's an employee's job market, but not all employers have gotten the memo. The Great Resignation-turned-Great Reshuffle is upsetting traditional ideas around compensation, benefits, and retention strategies. Navigating today's job market requires good data around industry best practices, especially around salary.*

[Pew Research<sup>2</sup>](#) found in a study that 63% of employees who quit their jobs in 2021 cited low pay as the top reason. The reasoning was consistent for both blue and white-collar employment sectors alike. Salary studies can help association members ensure their pay practices are competitive, and help bridge disconnects between employer and employee compensation expectations. As salary studies become more common, this association trend is further expanding on the value these surveys can provide.

»» 63%

*of employees who quit their jobs in 2021 cited low pay as the top reason.*

2. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/09/majority-of-workers-who-quit-a-job-in-2021-cite-low-pay-no-opportunities-for-advancement-feeling-disrespected/>

## What Is a Salary Survey?

Even without the upset caused by today's labor shuffle, the cost of onboarding a new employee is far more expensive than the cost of retaining one at competitive wage. One [benchmarking study](#)<sup>3</sup> from the Society for Human Resource Management put the average cost per hire at nearly \$4,700. However, some employers estimate the total cost of hiring a new employee as closer to three to four times the position's salary. If you're hiring for a job that pays \$50,000, you may end up spending upwards of \$150,000 to fill that role.

As a result, salary surveys have become valuable tools for providing information around companies' pay practices. These surveys are often used to collect data that helps determine if they are competitive for a specific industry, geographic location, company size, position, and other benchmarking factors. This information can arm your members with data that helps them make informed decisions to competitively attract and retain top talent.

Salary studies can provide additional value as well. For example, pay studies can help determine if employees' salaries are in compliance with current employment, state, and federal laws. More recently, pay equity studies have emerged as a specialized type of compensation review and association trend. Pay equity studies analyze pay according to demographic information about gender, race, or other factors. These studies have been driven by factors that include the rise of remote work, new laws involving pay transparency, and increased calls for workplaces that embrace diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Many companies have formed benchmarking committees specifically focused on improving their organizations' DEI and making their compensation practices more consistent. For many of these committees, pay equity is high on the agenda.

An internal salary review can also provide associations with benchmarking data that ensures they compensate their staff based on data comparing their compensation with that of similar organizations. In many instances, associations don't need to perform a full survey to secure the data needed for an internal salary review. Benchmarking data may be available from organizations such as ASAE: The Center for Association Leadership, the Society of Human Resource Management, and other organizations that have a data collection role.



3. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/benefits/pages/shrm-hr-benchmarking-reports-launch-as-a-member-exclusive-benefit.aspx>

## What to Consider Before You Survey

The more data that associations collect through salary surveys, the more useful a breakdown can be provided to members. Breaking down wage data can provide a clearer picture of comparable wages at similar companies based on size, revenue, number of employees, geographic location, and more. The more ways you slice and dice the data, the more useful it is to your audience.

That said, it's critical that associations pay attention to the context in which data is provided. Benchmarking pay data can be a slippery slope. While the aim of a salary study is to make sure that companies remain competitive with what they're paying, providing data without context can risk deflating wages in the industry. It's critical that associations ensure compliance with all relevant regulations and security around pay data.

The sensitive nature of this data also makes many companies understandably hesitant to be completely forthcoming about their data. Many organizations find it helps their cause to engage with a trusted third party to gather and analyze the information. This association trend provides a level of distance between associations and member companies, instilling trust in security practices.

With these guardrails in place, organizations provide members with data that allows them to better care for their employees and achieve their goals.

## Chapter 4



## Using Data to Create the Virtual Content Members Want

*While online communities, events, and training have been mainstream for many years, many people believed that business connections were best formed in person. 2020's pandemic dramatically changed how we all communicated and built relationships. Associations had no choice but to shift to virtual content due to global shutdowns. Since then, virtual solutions have proven to be more than an association trend—they have staying power.*

Yet the question remains of how to deliver value to association members through a blend of virtual and in-person events, education and communities. This value varies and depends on the industry sector and the specific offering, which are both in turn shaped by what members consider of value. For this reason, a strong feedback loop between associations and members will steer the future direction of virtual content.

### Exploring Virtual Opportunities

The shift to online offerings is happening in a number of areas for associations. Having had to move annual meetings online, many associations are continuing to explore the possibilities of what a virtual annual meeting can look like.

Associations have also found that online communities can be a strong driver of member engagement. “Branded communities are considered safer spaces than public social networks... People feel more comfortable showing vulnerability by asking questions,” according to engagement platform provider [Higher Logic's 2020 Engagement Trends Report](#)<sup>4</sup> notes, These online communities allow members to discuss specific topics and elicit relevant insights from the field's thought leaders. Better still, topics from these forums can shape association trends and find support from content built around those trends.

In addition, online education offerings — from webinars to certification training — have grown significantly. In 2020, demand for online learning opportunities rose by as much as 400%, according to [Global Market Insights](#)<sup>5</sup>.

As associations navigate these virtual offerings, many are recognizing the push from outside industries. For those groups ready to reinvent their member benefits, this can be a tremendous source of inspiration, as one medical association discovered. Having always relied heavily on in-person training, the association suddenly found itself competing with platforms like YouTube, challenging leadership's expectations around how its community wanted to learn. In its goal to become a go-to digital learning platform, the association soon began evaluating technical training solutions from outside the surgical space. This included finding out what other technical skills were being trained virtually and how that could crossover to their space.



## Gauging Value for Virtual Solutions

Before choosing from a variety of virtual content options, associations need to take a step back and ensure that the value of a virtual offering outweighs its challenges. Is the ability to reach a broader audience worth the cost and time to navigate new technologies? Will a shift to virtual content alienate existing members who rely on in-person events?

It's important to also determine if there is value in delivering a virtual solution along with an in-person option. This might look like a flagship in-person event with some combination of an in-person conference with virtual webinars or online training tailored around more specific association trends.

4. [https://go.higherlogic.com/rs/016-CFB-719/images/Higher%20Logic\\_Report\\_2020%20Engagement%20Trends.pdf](https://go.higherlogic.com/rs/016-CFB-719/images/Higher%20Logic_Report_2020%20Engagement%20Trends.pdf)

5. <https://www.gminsights.com/industry-analysis/elearning-market-size>

Making decisions around the value propositions for virtual and in-person content will also require data from your members and other stakeholders. It's important to determine what is motivating your members. Is your association's vision of a virtual solution truly what your employees need? To make virtual solutions effective, it's important to uncover the motivators behind people's participation in virtual versus in-person communities, training and events.

Your members aren't the only stakeholders of your virtual content; exhibitors, sponsors, advertisers, and other partners have a stake in its success. For this reason, it is crucial to consider how any virtual content will benefit all stakeholders before it is developed. This is an area where technology can help. Some associations are using mobile platforms to drive engagement for sponsors and exhibitors while providing an easy-to-navigate experience for members.

So how do you secure this information? One strategy is to expand current surveys to incorporate qualitative research. Post-event surveys don't always provide enough detail and context to guide decision-making. Conversations with event attendees, online community members, and members who opt out of these offerings can offer insights and a more balanced perspective on what's working and what could work even better.



*To make virtual solutions effective, it's important to uncover the motivators behind people's participation in virtual versus in-person communities, training and events.*

## Chapter 5



# Presenting Insight More Effectively for Stronger Decision-Making

*Perhaps the biggest advantage of a modern data program is enhancing an association's ability to personalize output. Different audiences want information in various formats. Modern data and insights programs expand associations' capability to provide members and other industry stakeholders with information in the most meaningful ways.*

With the right tools in place, associations can more easily let their audiences' needs guide their data presentation strategy – and expand their impact and potential for generating revenue.

## Deliver More Value for Members

The ability to customize output within broader association trends offers tremendous value for your members and the participants of any benchmarking or data program. This audience will want the output that is most relevant to their needs. Interactive reports save members time by allowing them to drill down into the level of data that they need without sorting through pages of superfluous charts and tables. This precision is critical in supporting your members in making data-driven decisions on a moment's notice.

This output might look like overlays of company and industry data. It can also include interactive reports, which provide a deep dive into data and market research program

results without the overwhelm of traditional annual survey reports. Through the use of sophisticated APIs, associations can transform once-static hundred-plus-page reports into dynamic, customizable, easily searched dashboards that provide greater value to their members.

## Digestible Data for Thought Leaders

Modern data tools tailor information effortlessly. As interactive features make data more accessible, the data may appeal to partner organizations and the media. For example, a growing association trend is the use of infographics to present information in digestible snippets. Infographics can provide insights at a glance, and have become popular tools among the media.

Another popular example of brevity is the one-pager for issue advocates. This brief document can summarize research results for advocates who want to advance an industry cause on the Hill. These documents work best when they are easy to distribute and provide clear, eye-catching data points.

This brief data can play a powerful role in positioning your association, and its members, as thought leaders and go-to sources for data points and research topics.

## Drive Action and Revenue

Another association trend is the use of report information to provide high-level overviews of white papers. These documents are often offered as an incentive to drive action, such as securing prospective members' email addresses or securing participation in research in return for an additional output. The key is to turn data into gated content that requires users to fill out an online form in exchange for access. This feat becomes much easier with a modern data program.

This ability to create tiered access also makes it easier than ever for associations to turn research into a revenue generator. This was the plan for one association when they pivoted from a traditional lengthy PDF report on industry financial compensation to completely



online reports with an interactive dashboard. The association's report summary featured a high-level infographic, but gave readers access to the level of data they wanted. The association used this offering as an opportunity to overhaul their pricing structure. With the promise of increased customization and company-specific results, they were able to increase their pricing enough to offset their investment of an interactive dashboard.

There are likely countless other ways to use this research data, and that's the beauty of a tiered offering like this. By tailoring results to each potential audience's specific needs, a modern data program can deliver value to a broader audience.



*The ability to customize output within broader association trends offers tremendous value for your members and the participants of any benchmarking or data program.*



# Conclusion

*Associations and their members depend on data and research more than ever today, but data on its own is not enough to drive decision making. Organizations need actionable data that is relevant to their unique circumstances to help them pivot rapidly, particularly in times of great change.*

To be a part of this journey, and lay an equitable playing field for member companies of all sizes, associations must have modern tools and sound strategies in place to secure this input and deliver useful output. Modern data programs can help associations provide more immersive benchmarking data, capture industry trends without the usual lag time between data collection and results, and gather ongoing insights on critical business needs as they evolve in real-time.

Fortunately, you aren't alone in navigating these emerging association trends. Vault's Insights and Analytics group can help organizations identify, strategize and execute the right solutions to most effectively respond to members' data needs.

A photograph of a city at night with blurred light trails from buildings and traffic, creating a sense of motion and energy. The colors are primarily warm oranges and yellows, with some cooler blues and greys.

# About Vault

*At Vault, the nation's leading accounting, human resources, and research firm for nonprofits and associations, we help organizations thrive and grow.*

We establish the sound financial foundation you need to address today's most urgent challenges, the HR oversight to drive successful and compliant people practices, and the research-based insights to understand the changing needs of your members and engage them more deeply. To deliver these insights, we've broken the mold—nowhere else will you find more energy and personality! In fact, we've accumulated some of the highest client value and satisfaction ratings in the industry. If you are ready to take your organization to brave new heights, Vault offers more than expertise; we deliver a powerful new perspective and a clearer path forward. Vault serves clients nationwide with offices in DC and Charlotte.

The Vault logo is written in a bold, italicized, orange serif font.

To learn more about Vault, please visit our website at [vaultconsulting.com](http://vaultconsulting.com).