

Research Report:

# Engagement is Profoundly Human.

Book 3 - Later Engagement

Based on the results of the 2024 Member Engagement Labs

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## Engagement probably isn't what you think it is.

When you think of engagement, do you think of members joining, registering, renewing, clicking, or volunteering? If words like these popped into your mind first, this is totally normal, but these actions are not engagement. They might be outcomes of engagement, but they are not engagement.

*If you have not read the first two eBooks in this series, check them out.*

[READ BOOK 1](#)

[READ BOOK 2](#)

Engagement is profoundly emotional. These emotions drive decisions, and understanding how people make decisions to engage is the key to creating more engaging associations. With the help of the combined minds of 478 association leaders, we have been diving into the human side of engagement.

The most difficult segments to engage are **prospective and new members**, and, oh boy, we have lots of great insights for you in Book 1.

Next, we move on to **middle or core members**. These members tend to be benefits-super-users, but what if a few valuable benefits are not all that engaging? We'll give you the tools to tweak them to be super engaging.

And now, here we are in the last and final third book, talking about our critical **long-time members**. It is here where engagement can wane, so let's dive in and figure out what to do about that!

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# Engaging Long-Term Members

How is it that super, *super* engaged members can be engaged for YEARS and then fall off the side of the planet (or so it seems?)

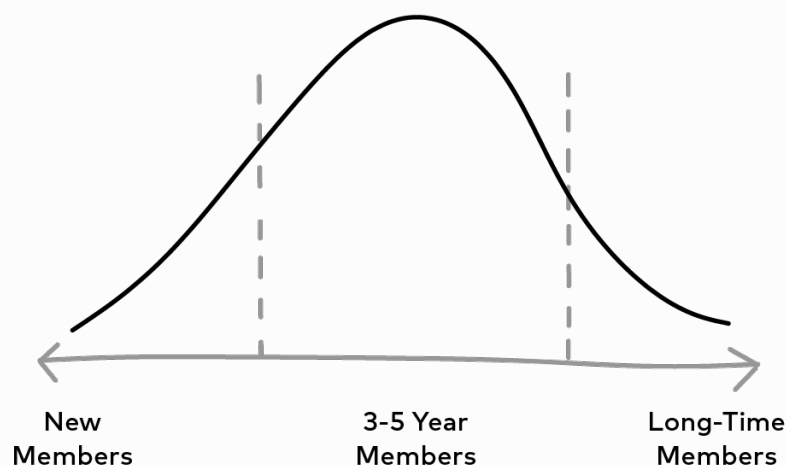


Illustration from [Elevating Engagement](#), page. 143.

Lab participants said they can tell when long-time members are pulling away because they RSVP and become no-shows. They stop participating, volunteering, posting, and

donating, go inactive, start to ignore emails and phone calls, and complain more (yay, complain, our favorite).

You might start seeing this trend: “They go to socialize, not sessions.” I’ve seen and heard so many variations of this thread, such as “long-time members come to the conference, but they don’t come *TO* the conference. They come for the hallway conversations.” Does this sound familiar to you? During the keynotes and concurrent sessions, will you find a group of your long-time members in the halls, at the bar, or chatting in the foyer? It is totally okay that they miss an hour or two, but when paying attendees miss *ALL* the content to catch up with friends and colleagues, they are sending a message.

**Long-time members often tell me it felt like they “outgrew” the association**, or “it was so helpful in my early years, less now,” or “I could take the place of any of the speakers,” or “they are not covering the topics that really matter.”  
*What is going on here?*

# Engagement by Career Stage

A participant said, "Career stage matters a TON for my members. I feel like our benefits have diminishing returns for people who are more senior in their careers. [If] they stay involved [it is] from the loyalty they developed as younger members." Yes! Many associations' benefits are focused on early and mid-career members. **Here's what member needs can look like by career stage:**

## Early-Career (Me)

Well-trodden path of challenges

→ Articles, sessions, webinars, courses, and other resources.



## Mid-Career (Us)

More complex challenges

→ Research, networking, certification, coaching, conferences, and more.



## Late-Career (Everyone)

Big, hairy, seemingly unsolvable problems

→ Collaboration





## Early-career members

Early-career members have many problems that nearly everyone in the profession or industry has had. They are trying to learn the profession or about the industry, and they tend to be **most focused on “Me,” i.e., focused on their success.**

They are on the well-trodden path of challenges and because these problems are well known, there are many solutions. These solutions are often published in articles, webinars, conference sessions, and training courses.



## Mid-career members

Mid-career members are usually gaining more responsibility. They might be managing a team, department, or big project. In that role, they **focus more on “Us,” the success of the team, department, or project team.**

As they enter the realm of people/HR/big project issues, their challenges become more complex. They may find answers to their more complex issues in research data, networking, getting certified, etc.

When members have been in the industry or profession for a long time, they need something new. Their focus has expanded even more to “Everyone.” They might be managing a large team, department, or organization or thinking about how to give back to the profession or industry through their chapter or association.





## Late-career members

Late-career members often tell me they are bumping up against many long-standing, big, hairy, seemingly unsolvable problems. What are big, hairy, hard-to-solve problems?

Quick articles, posts, or conference sessions cannot adequately address these big, hairy problems. Often, the challenges are so big and complex that even a single member or member company can't find or act on viable solutions. Sometimes, members intuitively realize that if more minds are put together, they might find some good ideas, and they splinter off and form their own group or association.

Other times, we hear many worried conversations with no solutions or action. However, associations can help by offering more opportunities for in-depth collaboration.



### Examples from Lab participants:

- Government regulations
- Burnout in the industry or profession (like in healthcare)
- People getting along with people/ promoting civility and professionalism
- Not enough younger professionals entering the industry or profession
- Keeping up with new technology developments (like AI)
- Fear of the future
- Global Warming



# Offer Opportunities to Collaborate

Here's what problem-solving collaboration could look like for associations **virtually**:



Creating more online communities/web boards for members to collab with staff experts.

We're doing yearlong roundtables (virtual) that focus on large problems. The groups develop ideas that working groups can then develop into solutions.



We have a private social network on our site. We allow organizational members to post to a community on this network where they can share ideas. When we get questions that involve problems for organizations, we suggest they post to that community.

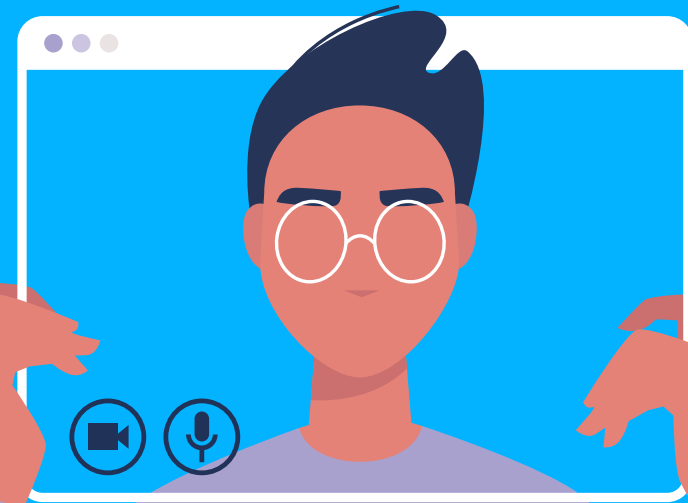


I would really like a good, simple collaborative content space, even something as simple as the shared Google document... but most of my members have trouble accessing Gsuite at work.

I'm looking at Padlet to replace Jamboard. Anyone have any experience with Padlet?



No, but would love to hear how it works! We've tried the whiteboard on Canva, and it seems harder to use.



Here's what problem-solving collaboration could look like for associations **in-person**:

We do annual virtual peer groups by invite for new and long-time members based on member size regarding what keeps them up or issues they have or are trying to solve. Then, use some of the topics to put resources together. Also, to use it to keep them engaged.

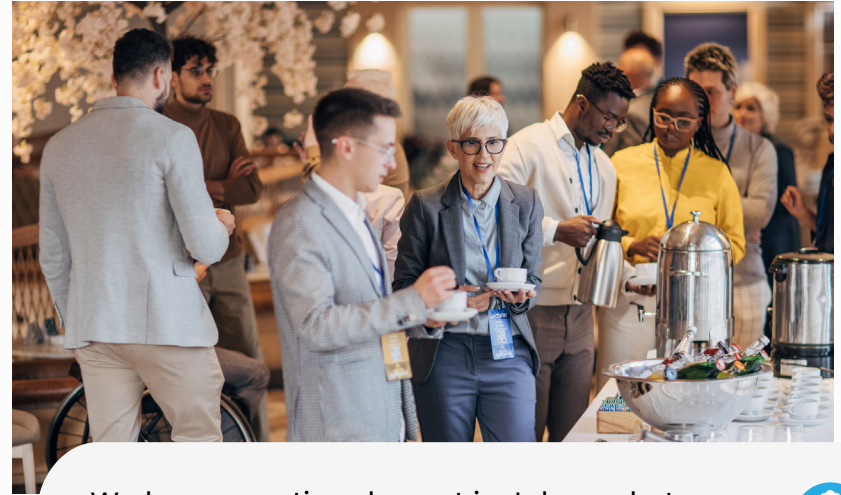


I love the [World Cafe](#)-style sessions. This is a great way to get people to discuss solutions to real-time problems with small groups.

I have challenges with how to keep those conversations going after the event. Any ideas?



Personally, I like to start small group chats for people at my table on LinkedIn. Maybe your association could help bring these groups together via an online community?



We have a national event in July, and at a networking breakfast prior to the event, we welcome chapter leaders to come together and brainstorm challenges facing the profession and what the project the future of the profession will look like.



I like the idea of doing "micro" opportunities since people have so little time. Like volunteering for one focus group as opposed to a two-year workgroup.

The participants liked the idea of offering more collaborative offerings but noted **these new programs could be a heavy lift for staff.**

Switching from the usual sage-on-the-stage format to collaborative formats might be challenging to manage, monitor, or moderate, at least at first. But fear plays a part, too. “Fear of how to respond to things that can come up. And fear that we aren’t going to come up with a solution.” As well as “Expectations. If ideas are generated and people think everything needs to be done ASAP.”

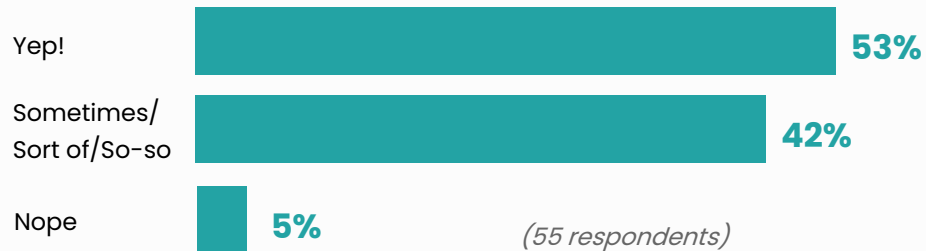
*Start small* if you’d like to add more opportunities for members to collaborate. [Here’s an article](#) offering three ways to start something new without dedicating much time and resources.

Opportunities for collaboration might re-engage the sub-segment of your long-time members who are ready to fade away. What about engaging your volunteers?



# Recruiting Prospective Volunteers

95% of the respondents find volunteer recruitment to be sort of to very challenging.



What do you do when potential volunteers tell you they don't have time to volunteer?

- "Shorten the task. Break it up if possible."
- "Clearly define the expectation and set an end date." And communicate "upfront on the number of hours per month is expected."
- Make volunteer opportunities more valuable by enabling "some kind of connection to work or credit like continuing education."
- "Ask members how they want to be involved (short-term project, year-long committee, leadership, etc.) Tag every role."

Sometimes, "People are afraid to volunteer because they get stuck in that role. What are ways to get around this?" Good question! People are afraid to step up because the role might be too time-intensive, and the duration might become too long.

## Many organizations consider volunteerism to be volunteerism with capital "V."

Capital "V" Volunteerism roles are time-consuming positions that take time to work up to and consume lots of time for the duration of the role (think a year or years). Sometimes circumstances conspire so that other members don't readily volunteer, leaving the incumbent with no choice but to slog it out for another year. Their fellow members see this and become more reluctant to raise their hands and take a turn.

So, how do you avoid this at your organization?

Potential volunteers ignore or decline volunteer roles because they are too busy, don't know about, or are unqualified for these roles:



## Create volunteer opportunities with a little “v.”

I was talking to the chair of the content committee for one association. The association doesn't have editorial staff, so the members do the research, interviews, writing, and editing.

Members consider writing, speaking, and being interviewed as volunteer opportunities.

You can consider them little “v” volunteer projects. Because they are project work, they tend to be opportunities with a finite time commitment and are perfect to help members start building that volunteerism muscle. Even with these little projects, ensure these projects stay little so you don't burn out your little “v” volunteers.

The committee chair told me that committee members were spending too much time writing big, in-depth, heavily researched articles, so they searched for lighter lifts and settled on Q&A articles. These articles were more manageable and fun for the authors while still delivering valuable content.





## Scope Down

Scope down, not to be confused with “down periscope,” means breaking every volunteer role down to its essential parts and tossing whatever is unnecessary. Perhaps the organization has always hosted four in-person board meetings.

There is a lot of time associated with in-person. Can you relieve some of the burden by making two of those meetings convene virtually? Or can you reduce any given role’s burden by slicing off bits for little “v” volunteers?





## Re-scope Every Time Someone Steps Down

Sometimes, people who have been in Volunteer roles for a long time or are very passionate take on more and more duties, leaving considerable shoes to fill.

Re-scope the role when they leave and communicate this to interested stakeholders so someone else can be successful while expending a reasonable amount of time.

Just like there is a member journey, there is a volunteer journey. Attract potential volunteers with small projects.

At the same time, ensure more significant volunteer roles are manageable. You may find an excellent pipeline of qualified, enthusiastic volunteers when redesigning both ends of the volunteer journey.



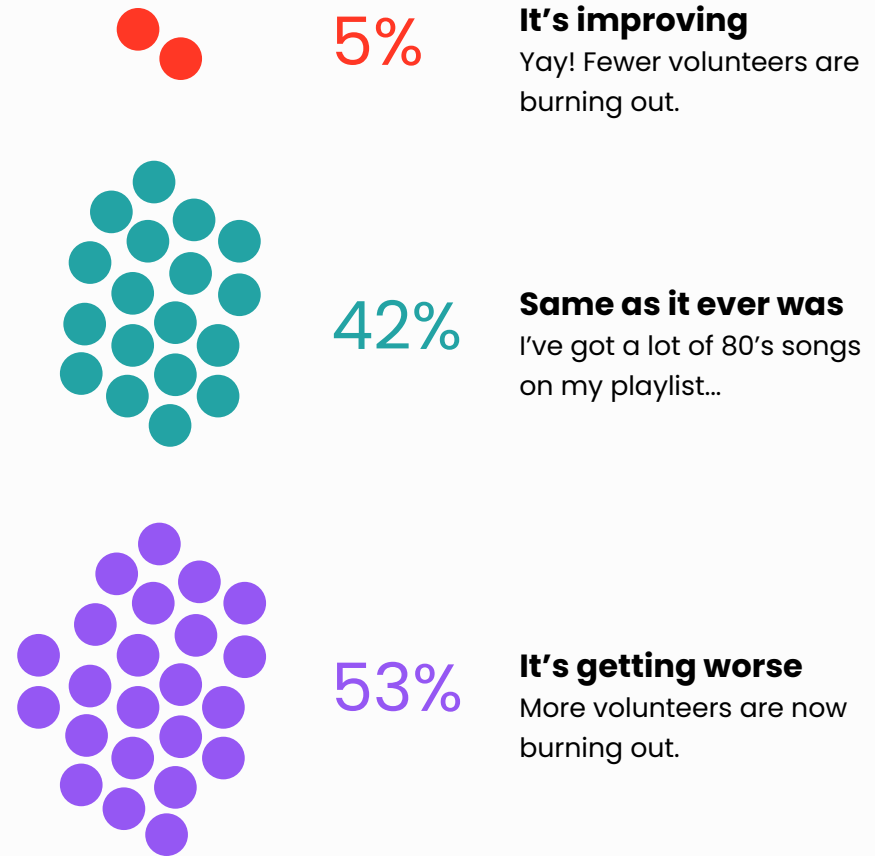
# Re-engaging Current Volunteers

But as difficult as recruiting volunteers is, it's nothing compared to keeping volunteers engaged. When asked which is more challenging, 62% said keeping volunteers engaged versus 38% recruiting volunteers.

Volunteers don't stay engaged because "Board service often leads to burnout, sadly." 53% said volunteer burnout is worsening (42% said it's staying the same, and 5% said it's improving.)

Here are two ideas to combat burnout, "I'm cultivating a person for future presidency by forcing him to stop volunteering for things for a couple of years." And "Promote a "year of jubilee" - a year of rest for a re-set." Fortunately, some associations note that their board members take a break, and "a lot of them come back around after 2-3 years off and start taking on lighter responsibilities."

## Is Volunteer Burnout Changing?



Not every unengaged volunteer is on the board or is experiencing burnout. So how do we re-engage them?

*(43 respondents)*



A “personal ask” might work, or “assigning them a particular task.” Some associations “ask the chair/president to call – what is going on in their life right now.” During the call, you may find, “they’re bored with what they’re doing and would prefer to be doing something else.” **But remember, “no shame, no blame.”**

There also might be different motivations for volunteering that impact outcomes, “I would love to have an honest answer to “I’m volunteering because mission” vs. “I’m volunteering because I’m professionally ambitious”... and a way to leverage those self-serving folks well anyway.”

## Why do people join/volunteer for an association?

**Question:** I want to explore the raw reasons WHY people join associations. Like “I joined to grow my business” or “I joined because I wanted an excuse to leave the office during the day”. I think we often begin things because of WHAT we will get out of them, and we STAY because we got more than we expected from the experience. I think understanding this dynamic would help with recruiting new members and retaining existing members. How do you explore this topic within an organization, tactfully?

**Lab Participant 1:** At my previous job, I tagged all the volunteer opportunities to career stage, type of role (local, leadership, short term project, virtual, ongoing) volunteer reasons ( give back, gain recognition, expand contact, gain satisfaction I don’t get at work, etc.). The sign-up process allowed for filtering so you would be presented with the opportunities that fit your interests.

**Lab Participant 2:** My answer is simple: just ask your new members. I think knowing this in aggregate is helpful (for example, 40% join for professional development, etc.), but it’s also important to know what that individual wants and needs because that’s the roadmap to helping them see value. You could ask during membership application process, or during an onboarding sequence – and I think the key is to then actually putting that into action with some automated onboarding/engagement communications.

There are many different kinds of volunteers; the trick is to match each person with the proper role whenever possible.

The decision to engage is rarely a simple one-to-one comparison. Not only are they considering things like their available time and the role's time requirements, but they are also considering whether I will meet new friends on the board/committee/project team? Will I feel belonging? Will my contribution be appreciated?

Again, return to the super flexible shortcut-for-increasing-benefit-engagement process we discussed in [book 2](#) because we can reframe it into the engaging-or-reengaging-volunteers-process. Consider these two questions: 1) How do we want people to feel when they [volunteer for this role]? And 2) How can we help people feel [the positive emotion(s) you selected]?

When you, your staff, or your volunteers want to engage volunteers, focus on creating great experiences by asking and answering the above questions.

Thinking about how you want volunteers to feel at every stage of the volunteer journey and for every role or project, you'll find more ways to make the experience great.



# Conclusion

Often, we find ourselves talking about engagement in terms of renewals, opens, the number of volunteers, or the number of posts made in an online community. Measuring engagement is okay, but a myopic focus on metrics can alter our view of what engagement really is. After all, metrics are linear, logical, cut and dry. But engagement from our member's point of view is anything but.

It turns out the decision to engage is very human—it is far less logical and much more emotional. Fear, anxiety, boredom, and time worries drive disengagement, and at the same time, we all are pulled toward connection, belonging, and community.

The associations of the future with thriving member communities will have staff and volunteers focused on creating not just great value but also positive experiences at every stage of the member journey.

You might be saying, “Oh no, now we’ve got to create great experiences on top of everything else we are doing?!?” I hear you! The good news is that often, creating great experiences is something you can easily incorporate into what you are already doing. Or you might want to expand, innovate, and experiment with some of the ideas in this mini-series, and, yep, you are right! Expanding, innovating, and experimenting can take time!

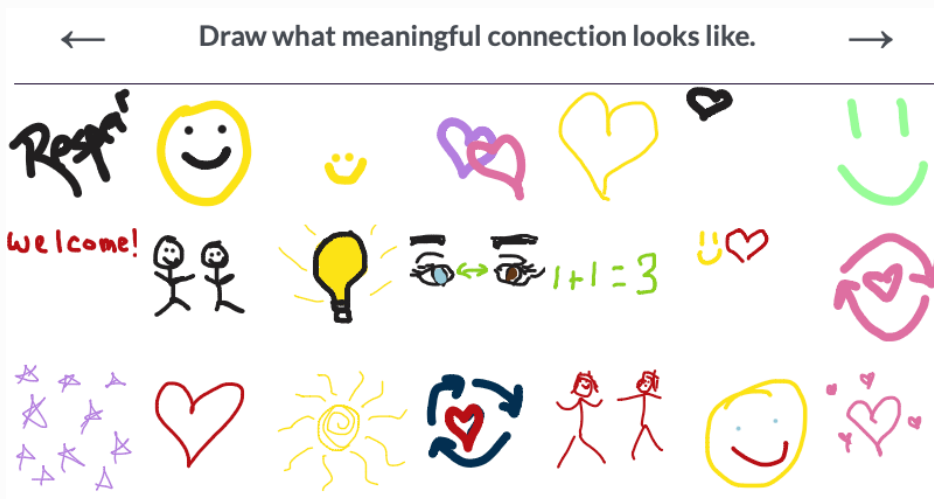
That is where [re:Members](#) has your back! The brilliant staff at re:Members has designed an association management software platform for associations of all sizes that makes managing the software a breeze so you can focus on what matters—creating lovely experiences, improving value, and connecting with your members.

Are you thinking of implementing a new AMS? Make sure to put [re:Members AMS](#) on your list of options.

# Afterward

So, the Labs produced 107 pages of debrief reports (that's right, we took notes so participants didn't have to in the form of debrief reports. Curious? [Here's an example.](#)) Okay, with 107 pages of debrief reports, not every fantastic result made it into this mini-book series. But there's one more thing we wanted to share with you.

Associations are why many connections between colleagues (and future friends) are made. So we want to celebrate you! YOU GO!!!!



## More Resources

### Watch

[Register to watch the Lab replays](#) and download the debrief reports.

### Read

Three popular articles inspired by the labs:

- [Got Potential Volunteers Who Are Afraid to Step Up?](#)
- [Members and Associations: Who Supports Who?](#)
- [What Do You Do About Latecomers?](#)

Associations are AMAZING! Engaged members call their associations their “professional family” or “intellectual home.” And there are many reasons to be excited about the future of associations. Here are some:



(65 responses)

# About the Respondents

The intrepid experimenters in the Member Engagement Labs set out to discover how to engage our stakeholders in many new ways because engaging people is getting waaayyy more difficult. Four hundred seventy-eight association professionals like you collaborated to solve some BIG engagement problems. They come from all sizes of associations.

**68%**

Professional Associations



**32%**

Trade Associations

## Associations by region



**38%** Globally



**35%** Nationally



**18%** State



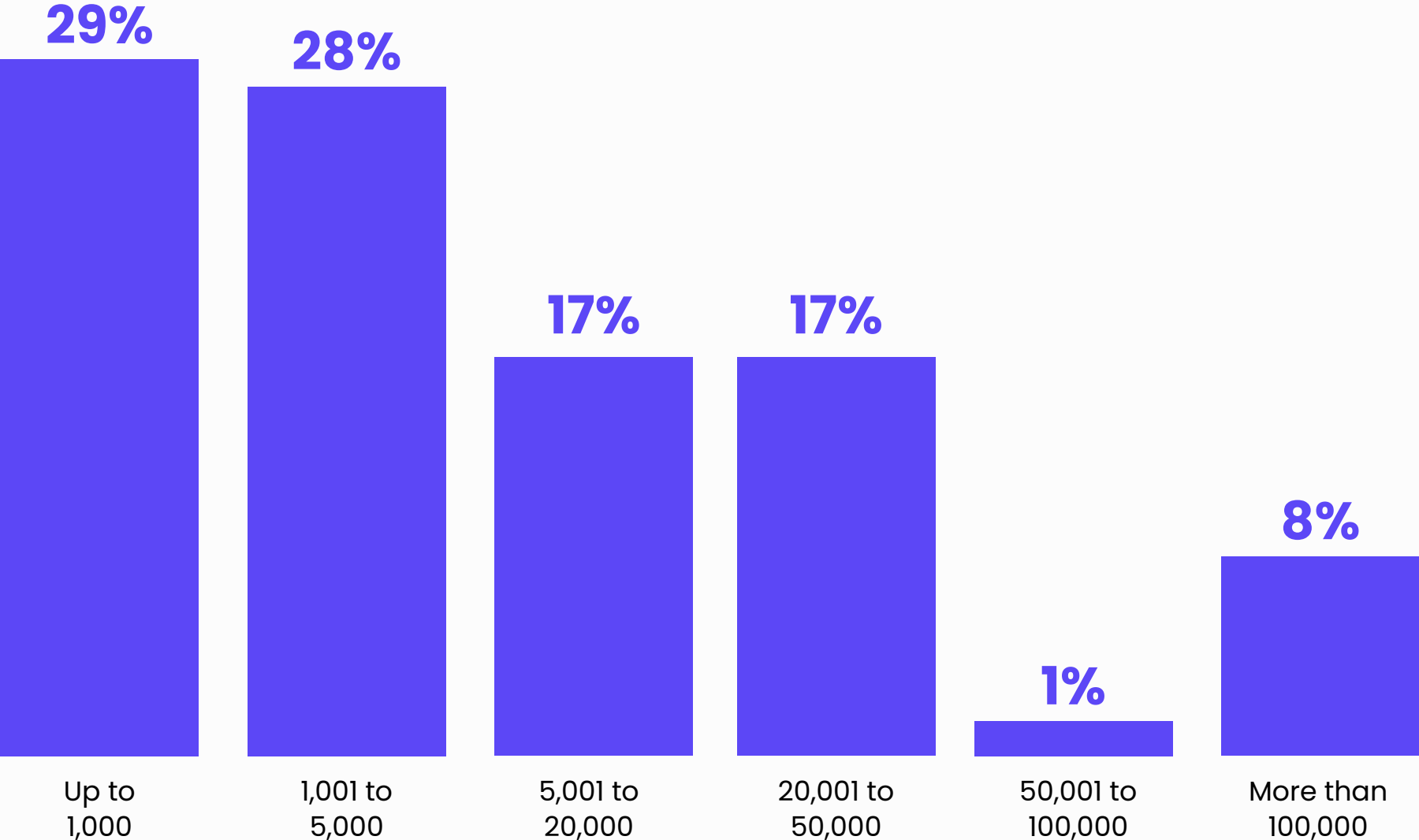
**7%** Regional



**3%** Locally

# Associations by size of membership

(72 respondents)





# Associations by staffing size

(81 respondents)

**10%**

Very Small (0-1.5 staff)



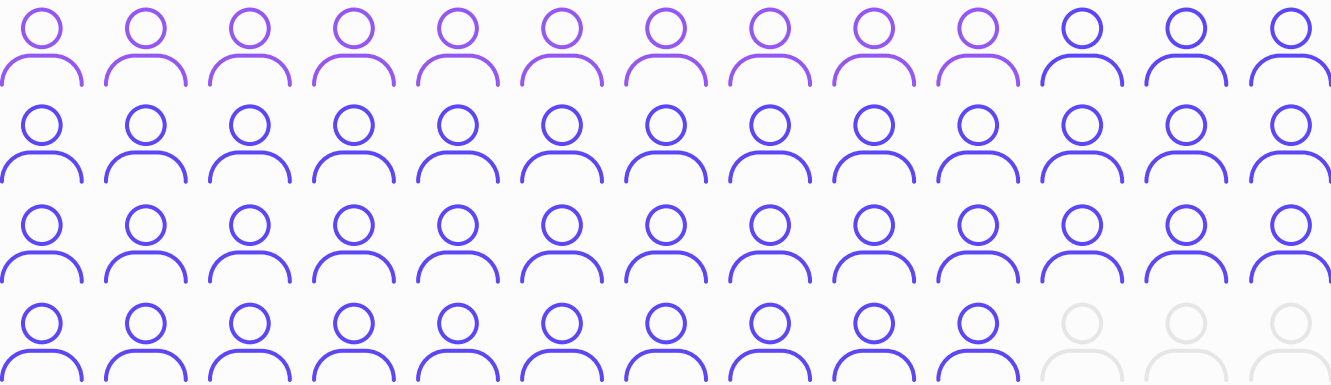
**27%**

Small (2-9 staff)



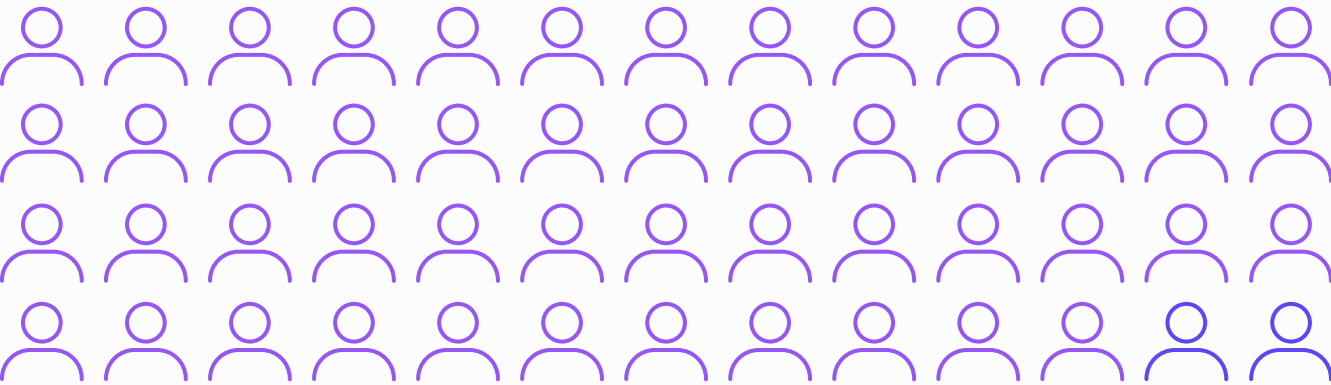
**33%**

Medium (10-49 staff)



**30%**

Large (50+ staff)



## About the Collaborators



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Marketing EVP, a.k.a., The Best Big Cheese



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