

Chapter 6

Maintaining Your Network

Lessons from Others' Experience

Frequently asked questions about the WOWnet experience

How much money do we need?

The most expensive investment in a peer-learning network is time. If you are a 100 percent volunteer organization with no paid staff, then you don't need a lot of money to get together. You might revisit Chapter 5 (Funding your Network) to pursue this further.

How much leadership do we need?

Nicole's story: When I first formed the Oregon WOWnet, I had a vision of a self-supporting system, akin to a book club. We don't need "leaders" for book clubs, we just get together, and then pick the next book, date, and place to meet. I've learned, however, that this doesn't seamlessly translate to woodland management. Someone has to lead, and that involves staying in touch and helping organize sessions.

Depending on the size of your group, the time commitment could range from 4 hours a month to a full-time job!

Very few organizations can afford to hire people to do this kind of work, so in order to succeed we need everyone to pitch in. Some reasons to contribute might include:

- Strengthen my community
- Acquire experience that can help me professionally
- Improve my personal development and confidence
- Learn new skills
- Have fun with other people

Even if you just help someone else host a program at their property by showing up a little early, you will help keep the network going. In most cases, you will need one or more people to:

- Pick dates and topics
- Host a tour or class on their property
- Market the event
- Connect with potential instructors



Oregon retreat group.

Photo by Nicole Strong, © Oregon State University

- Maintain communication with the network (email, mailings, etc).
- Update the network mailing list or database
- Write articles or posts for the network
- Take pictures or video at events
- Help the coordinator

How much time does it take to coordinate a group?

This depends a little on the size of the group. A large group, like the Oregon Women Owning Woodlands Network, is actually comprised of nine small groups that total more than 350 members! It takes a part-time, paid person to keep all these small groups going. But thinking about each individual group, here is approximately the time it takes per month to keep one local group going.

1. Organizing and marketing a session. 4 hours/month

If you host one session per quarter, you will spend what adds up to 30 minutes per week talking to instructors and hosts getting all the logistics together. (You might not spend time on this every week, but this is what it will be on average.) You will also spend another 30 minutes per week crafting your marketing materials and getting them out there, taking RSVPs, sharing directions, and other tasks.

2. Maintaining communication with the network. 4-8 hours/month

Time spent doing this depends on your outlets. I probably spend a couple hours every week looking for interesting stories, compiling upcoming events, or writing blog posts and articles. I try to do this consistently so that WOWnet stays useful and on participants' minds. Hopefully, WOWnet members themselves will contribute more over time, which would enrich the content and reduce the need for me to write so often.

3. Attending sessions, teaching sessions, or both. Time/month varies.

I work statewide, so I have to travel to each site (usually the day before) to set up any field activities, be there for the session, then drive home. I usually plan for instructional preparation time equal to the time of the session (for example, 4 hours of instructional prep for a 4-hour session). Then add travel time, which in Oregon can be up to 5 hours each way!

4. Updating the database. 2 hours/month

WOWnet members are dynamic moving targets, so their mailing and email addresses change all the time, and they don't always remember to tell me.

What communication tools do we use?

Mailings

Mailing flyers or letters can be a useful way to grow as a group and introduce yourself to potential new network members. A benefit of mailings is that they allow you to reach people who have not adopted digital technologies yet. Drawbacks are that printing and postage can get expensive, and there is the risk that people who don't know you might just throw the flyer away.

Email listserv

An email listserv is an electronic mailing list that allows you to send a single email to a number of people without it registering as spam. It can also allow you to send nicely formatted emails and track how many people read them. There are several companies that offer this service fairly cheaply to nonprofits and associated educational groups.

The advantages of a listserv are the low cost and the ability to distribute information efficiently to a large group. The disadvantages lie in people not knowing how to use them well. Someone who doesn't know how to use a listserv might send an email intended for one person to the entire group, which quickly gets frustrating for other members.

Newsletter

Newsletters are useful for sending information to a member group that has mixed access to technology. For the Oregon Master Woodland Manager program, we create newsletters in both print and digital form. We send print copies only to those we know can't access the Web version, or to those who request one.

It takes a lot of time to gather content, format, and design a newsletter. Choose your iteration (monthly, quarterly, annually) wisely!

Website

Almost everyone is on the Internet these days, so a website is almost a necessary component of your marketing and communication plan. Websites take some money and time to design well, though there are several free services to create simple “blog” type websites. It is absolutely worth it to hire a web designer to help you solidify your vision for what a website will accomplish, how interactive it will be, and what kind of information it will house.

Blog

A blog is a simple, free way to share information with your network. It is not as interactive as a website; usually only one or a few people manage and put content on it. You can use a blog to help market upcoming programs, and you can add “widgets” such as a calendar or maps.

Social media

Facebook and other social media allow interactive sharing of information. A well-managed Facebook page or group is a free way for your network to share photos of work done on woodlands, advertise upcoming events, find assistance, and more. It usually helps to have an appointed administrator (or two) for the Facebook groups and pages to ensure regular posting and appropriate activity.

There are many social platforms; Facebook is just the most popular. Find the tool that works best for your group. (For example, if you just want to share photos, Flickr, Instagram, or Pinterest might better suit your needs.)



Case study: Arkansas Women in Agriculture

Arkansas Women in Agriculture (ARWIA) is a nonprofit organization comprised of approximately 100 women who are agricultural and livestock producers across the state. Agricultural producers include row crop farmers as well as organic and small vegetable farmers. ARWIA is a membership-based organization, although anyone can access information through its social network and website. The group emerged from a university-led effort to provide more education to women in agriculture and livestock production. Its history illustrates how groups emerge, grow, and change over time and offers some key lessons that might be helpful to others interested in forming organizations or networks.

History

The ARWIA conferences began in 2005, led by research and Extension professors at the University of Arkansas and a steering committee composed of women involved in agriculture around the state. The committee was made up of land-grant professionals, farmers, ranchers, Farm Bureau Women's Committee members and officers, representatives from the three Farm Credit offices in the state, and representatives from the nonprofit sector. The first conference was very successful, and over 200 women attended. However, a few university professionals expressed unease and resentment about the conference and the possible creation of an agriculture educational effort that purposely targeted women. The fact that the Farm Bureau already had a women's committee was used as an excuse to discourage efforts to create the ARWIA, despite the fact that leaders from the Farm Bureau committee were already on the ARWIA steering committee for the conferences.

At the 2006 meeting, conference participants unanimously decided to incorporate as an Arkansas nonprofit (Arkansas Women in Agriculture, Inc.) and seek 501(c)3 status, thereby placing direct control of fundraising, financial management, and outreach efforts in the hands of the new organization and not the university. An interim board of directors included women from all quadrants of the state, including farmers, ranchers, farm credit professionals, and women from other public and private agencies. Although Extension personnel helped create the organization, they were strongly discouraged from taking any leadership positions within the group. Extension personnel did continue to help in planning and facilitating the conferences, but they could only offer support from behind the scenes.

Following the 2007 ARWIA conference, the board appointed an interim CEO/project director to oversee its operations and administer its educational programs and outreach efforts. The group also added a membership component to its structure, with more than 100 members. During the 2008 conference, members elected a full board of directors and finalized the CEO position. It was a part-time, paid position.

Funding for the CEO position was solidified when ARWIA received funds to implement risk management workshops through Annie's Project. Workshops were held at various locations across the state from 2007 through 2011. The CEO, with the board's assistance, continued to hold ARWIA conferences during this time as well. Funding became increasingly scarce as the economic downturn worsened.

The CEO resigned in March 2011 to pursue other opportunities, but she stayed on the board at the board's request until September 2011. She was then elected treasurer. As a volunteer, she maintains communication with board members, manages the social media accounts, and communicates with members via social media.

ARWIA did not conduct a statewide conference in 2012 because of budget, personnel, and time constraints. It received funding from Southern Risk Management and instead used that funding to host four regional conferences in 2012 (one of those was cancelled due to low registration). ARWIA is working with a private donor to bring Annie's Project back to Arkansas in 2013. According to the ex-CEO, "Although ARWIA has made changes in order to adjust to funding concerns, etc., we are still alive and kicking." The organization is currently advertising the 2013 conference on its website and via social media.

Lessons

ARWIA was created to meet an expressed demand for education and networking among women working in agriculture and related fields. It is still "alive and kicking," but in a somewhat diminished state. Here are some key lessons:

- Trying to include all stakeholders in agriculture, livestock, and forestry can lead to an organization that tries to be too many things to too many people. The key is to focus! Start small and grow slowly over time. Set achievable and measurable goals.
- Time constraints for board members, leaders, or other volunteer staff will eventually exhaust their ability to maintain a high level of involvement and effort. A realistic assessment of volunteer skills and commitment should be conducted annually. Volunteers should also be rewarded and recognized for their contributions. Annual awards, special name badges or soft goods like hats, shirts, or travel mugs that identify them as volunteers are all effective ways of recognizing the effort your volunteers make.
- Although hiring staff can help alleviate the workload for volunteers, the expectations for paid staff need to be realistic. One part-time staff person cannot possibly run an entire organization including fund raising, conferences, workshops, board management, and membership service. Learn to delegate responsibility across board members and other volunteers. To be sustainable, an organization cannot entrust the entire workload to one individual, be she a volunteer leader or staff member.
- Needs change. Although an evaluation was conducted each year as part of the annual ARWIA conferences, the format, location, and often the topics remained the same. An in-depth needs assessment should be part of your network's yearly plan to determine if you are meeting the needs of your membership. It's very easy to get stuck in a rut and perform the same tasks, the same way, over and over.
- To be successful, you also need to be aware that not everyone will be supportive, including agencies and organizations. Be aware of hidden agendas and power plays within and between organizations. Competition for funds, recognition, and access to resources can be intense.

- Internal conflict can destroy an organization. Transparent operating procedures and communication can help alleviate conflict. If conflict cannot be resolved, seek assistance from an outside group that works with nonprofits. For example, the Ohio Association of Nonprofit Organizations (OANO) is a statewide association of more than 500 nonprofit organizations representing Ohio's charitable nonprofit sector. OANO's mission is to provide leadership, education, and advocacy to enhance the ability of Ohio's nonprofit organizations to serve their communities.



"I think WOW will promote self-confidence because it allows a woman to learn at her own place... and talk about what she knows and what she loves."

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