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At the opening of last year's National Library Week in March, professor Shirley Walters of the University of the Western Cape stressed the importance of life-long learning - learning that continues beyond and outside formal education, under many different circumstances, at different times and in many different ways. A frequently underestimated learning opportunity and a very rewarding one is membership of a professional association and more significantly, as a member of the committee or sub-committees of these associations, particularly at a local level.

Many years ago the chairman of the former Cape Town Film Society said that, although an interest in films was a prerequisite for a member of his committee, what was more important for him was that committee member's particular skills, whether it be bookkeeping, minute keeping, organisational ability or a flair for publicity. To me this is the essence of a committee - essentially a group of people combining their interest, talents, and skills to either create or maintain a dynamic, viable organisation, enterprise or project. And it is in this combination that a number of skills can be learnt or further developed either by the team as a whole or by individuals in their different portfolios. So what is the knowledge or skills that membership of a committee provides?

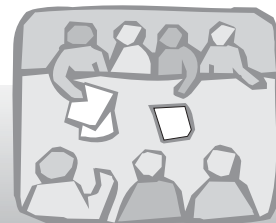
The first lesson that anybody learns is to operate as a team through the proper Rules of Procedure and Conduct of meetings. The essence of these rules is to ensure that issues are comprehensively debated, that everybody has an opportunity to be heard and that the decisions that are reached are, at least, consensual if not unanimous and hopefully fair.

Another lesson is exposure not only to different points of view but also to different levels of expertise and experience. This is particularly applicable in a professional committee where position and status figure less than that which the member brings to the table and is willing to share. This interaction cannot be over-estimated as the learning generated is often intangible and only appreciated when it is applied in another place and time.

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COMMITTEES

a chore, a bore or a learning opportunity?



Each portfolio also offers its own lessons:

- chairing a committee requires its own particular skills of applying procedure, keeping control (yes, control as committees can be sometimes somewhat unruly), delegating tasks to portfolio members and finally chairing plenary meetings of the membership. Not everybody can be a chairperson - often it is an inborn talent or gift requiring an ability to actively listen and to sum up with tact. Exposure to a good chairperson or different styles of chairing is an education in itself
- the secretary has the unenviable honour of being the lynchpin that keeps the committee together through efficient administration including minute keeping, correspondence and organising meetings
- minute keeping develops the skill of being able to keep up with the discussion as well as ensuring that what is said and, more specifically, decided is accurately noted, with no possibility of misinterpretation. And the art of writing letters is not only universally applicable but also an asset in any professional career
- organising meetings and functions usually involves a number of people. The experience and skills acquired can apply in any work situation as the basic organisational and logistical needs are often the same - they only differ in the number of people for whom the function or meeting is being organised
- anybody carrying the liaison or public relations portfolio has the enviable opportunity to develop relationships and create links with the media, to learn how to write effective press releases, and to speak in public.

The ability to perform these committee functions is invaluable in any library, professional or civic context. But besides the skills learnt in committees - the visible outcomes as it were - there are

also many intangible benefits such as:

- interacting with different people from different organisations and particularly meeting interesting guest speakers
- networking opportunities - or more blatantly put - making useful contacts. It is so much easier to telephone or email somebody you know in another organisation for either direct help or referral - on the understanding, of course, that you will reciprocate where and when necessary
- sharing problems and solutions - very often there are problems common to any library and the solutions may be there for the sharing
- keeping abreast of new developments not only in other libraries but in the profession as a whole, and finally,
- the thrill and satisfaction of working together with others on a project or task and the good feeling when it comes to its successful fruition - whatever its size or complexity.

Of course, there is a price to be paid - relatively insignificant in my opinion in relation to the benefits - and that is the willingness to devote time and energy to attending meetings and to getting allocated tasks done. Often this has to be done in one's own time, unless the exigencies of work allow, but whatever the cost, the learning gained is invaluable.

One accepts that not everybody is a committee animal and that some people have a particular aptitude. And it is true that badly run meetings can be time-consuming and often time-wasting. But the point that I am making is that for those who want to broaden their professional horizons and extend their personal development, serving on a committee is one of the more pleasurable ways of so doing. Incidentally it cannot be emphasised enough that a network of organisations and their committees in civil society is an essential element of any democracy involving, as they do, constitutions, candidates, elections, mandated power to take decisions on behalf of their constituents or interest group and, finally, to implement them.