

Ecosystem Economics

for Modern Associations

*How Participation, Governance,
and Platform Thinking
Reshape Value Creation*

$$\pi = \sum_i^n P_i Q_i - \left(cf + \sum_i^n C_i Q_i \right)$$

Sean M Johnson

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How Participation, Governance, and Platform Thinking Reshape Value Creation

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For Nancy and Chasely

Preface

Why This Companion Exists

Ecosystem Economics for Modern Associations: How Participation, Governance, and Platform Thinking Reshape Value Creation is the companion book to *The Modern Association Playbook*. The latter was written to catalyse action. It offered a practical, step-by-step guide for association leaders to rethink strategy, modernise governance, and build platforms capable of sustaining relevance and trust in a fast-changing world. But beneath every strategic shift lies an economic logic. This companion book exists to unpack that logic, and to equip leaders, analysts, and policy thinkers with the tools to interrogate, design, and future-proof the value systems that underpin modern associations.

Associations today operate as economic actors, but they do so outside traditional market norms. They coordinate participation, broker trust, and facilitate value in ecosystems where profit is not the sole objective. This complexity requires its own economic architecture, one that blends platform theory, incentive design, governance dynamics, and public value framing into a coherent analytical foundation.

This book is not a rehash of the Playbook. It is the scaffolding behind it. A guide not just for what to do, but why it works, and when it doesn't.

Sean M. Johnson

Disclosure

This book reflects the synthesis of extensive professional experience, original intellectual frameworks, and a commitment to supporting associations as they navigate change. The author acknowledges the support of a range of digital research and writing tools that assisted in shaping, editing, and refining the manuscript. These include artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT (OpenAI), and Perplexity based AI models, which were used under human supervision to support research collation, enhance clarity, and streamline editing processes and generate pictures.

All ideas, analysis, and frameworks presented in this book remain the intellectual property of the author drawing on a wider range of literature. No generative tool was used to substitute for professional judgement, theoretical development, or the original articulation of concepts central to this work. Care has been taken to critically assess, adapt, and validate any content derived from digital assistance to ensure it reflects the strategic, legal, and governance standards expected of a professional publication.

Where third-party material or references have been used, they have been cited in the Bibliography. All case studies are either based on publicly available information, used with permission, or anonymised and adapted for illustrative purposes.

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Note on Sources

This playbook synthesises concepts from a wide range of governance, economic, and platform design literature. While the text is original, it draws conceptually on the work of authors such as Elinor Ostrom, Oliver Williamson, Ronald Coase, Jean Tirole, ISO 37000 governance standards, and others. A complete reference list is provided at the end of the book. Specific diagnostic tools and strategic models have been developed by the author unless otherwise stated.

About the Author

Sean M Johnson is a governance advisor, company secretary, researcher, and strategy consultant with a career spanning law, policy, education, and digital transformation. He has worked with national associations, not-for-profit boards, professional bodies, regulators and industry peak organisations to rethink governance, develop future-focused strategy, and implement change with impact.

A Fellow of the Governance Institute of Australia, Sean combines practical boardroom experience with deep expertise in risk, regulation, and strategic innovation. His approach is grounded in systems thinking and informed by both economic theory and real-world practice.

Across his work with association leaders, Sean has seen a consistent pattern: legacy systems, good intentions, and hard work are no longer enough. Navigating today's complexity requires new frameworks, ones that integrate platform thinking, governance agility, and digital enablement.

This book brings together Sean's experience in advising, designing, and leading association transformations. It is shaped by years of collaboration with CEOs, boards, and change agents committed to building organisations that are not only sustainable, but future-ready.

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Part I: The Story is in the Numbers

Understanding the Economic Shifts Reshaping Associations

To lead in a platform-enabled world, associations must do more than update programs or adopt new technology, they must rewire how they think about value, participation, and purpose. That rewiring begins with economics.

This section lays the analytical foundations for the journey ahead. It explores the structural shifts redefining the associative form, not just as a governance entity, but as an economic actor embedded in networks of trust, contribution, and exchange. From the collapse of information scarcity to the rise of multisided value creation, these changes aren't just external pressures, they are signals of a deeper systemic realignment.

The numbers tell the story: declining retention, stagnant revenue per member, fragmented engagement. But behind the metrics lie dynamics, platform logics, incentive architectures, and economic feedback loops, that must be understood if they are to be designed for.

In Part I, we reframe associations as platforms of coordinated participation. We introduce the core economic principles that underpin this model, and we begin to answer the critical question:

If associations are no longer just service providers, what, exactly, are they becoming?

Chapter 1. Why Economic Thinking Matters

1.1 Setting the Stage: More Than Mission

Associations are not just mission-driven organisations, they are economic actors. Whether they realise it or not, every decision they make about structure, membership, pricing, and participation rests on implicit economic assumptions. These assumptions shape how value is created, who contributes to it, how revenue is earned, and how costs, both financial and social, are managed.

As the association sector navigates a period of profound disruption, the need to make these assumptions explicit has never been more urgent. Member expectations have shifted from passive receipt to active participation. Revenue streams once taken for granted, dues, events, and sponsorships, are fragmenting. Technology platforms now mediate engagement, not just deliver services. And governance systems are under strain, stretched between oversight, agility, and trust.

Economic thinking helps leaders make sense of this. Not to turn associations into businesses, but to understand how they function as systems of value exchange, and how they must evolve to remain viable, legitimate, and impactful.

1.2 From Service Provider to Platform Orchestrator

In *The Modern Association Playbook*, we introduced the idea of the association as a *platform*, a facilitator of interaction, co-creation, and shared outcomes. That model challenged the assumptions of Association 1.0: centralised delivery, static value, and one-directional engagement.

But behind that structural shift is an economic one. Platform associations operate according to a different logic, where value emerges not from what the association produces, but from what it enables others to create.

Understanding this shift means engaging with foundational economic principles: network effects, transaction costs, externalities, and scaling dynamics. These aren't abstract ideas, they are the mechanisms through which associations generate value, risk, and relevance. These are attributes that many associations are neglecting and failing to capture the latent value.

1.2.1 Why Traditional Models Are Under Strain

Most legacy associations were built on a *cost-recovery model*. Services were priced to cover expenses, not to scale impact. Value was measured in outputs delivered, not outcomes achieved. This made sense when:

- Professional knowledge was scarce and centralised.
- Membership conferred exclusive access.
- Governance systems operated in a stable regulatory environment.

That world is gone. Today, associations compete not just with each other, but with platforms like LinkedIn, Slack, and Coursera. These platforms enable professionals to build networks, learn, and contribute, often for free, and often with more immediate feedback and reach.

Associations that continue to price for access rather than value, or operate as closed systems rather than open platforms, will struggle to remain relevant, or solvent.

1.2.2 What This Chapter Does

This chapter introduces the key economic concepts that underpin the platform model of associations. It sets the stage for the deeper analysis that follows by explaining:

Why linear cost-recovery models are fragile in a platform economy.

- How **network effects** shift the logic of value creation.
- How **transaction costs** are restructured by digital infrastructure.
- Why **externalities** must be governed, not ignored.
- What it means to evaluate association performance through an **economic lens**.

It then connects these concepts to practical realities: monetisation decisions, member participation design, risk and governance trade-offs, and strategic metrics.

In short: this chapter explains why economic thinking is not just relevant, but essential, and how it can equip leaders to design better associations for a complex, participatory, and impact-driven future.

Scene: The Cost of Doing Everything Right

The meeting started like so many others.

The Finance and Strategy Subcommittee had gathered for its quarterly review. The papers pre-read, the dashboards updated, nothing obviously off-track. Membership dues income was holding steady. Event registrations were down slightly, but within tolerance. A new sponsor had just signed on.

“So why does it feel,” the Treasurer finally asked, “like we’re working harder than ever... for less?”

Silence.

The CEO, a former policy leader now juggling technology procurement, risk briefings, and member churn data, nodded slowly.

“We’re doing more than ever, more webinars, more micro-credentials, more stakeholder engagement. But the margins are getting tighter. Engagement is scattered. We’re subsidising participation that doesn’t always translate to retention or revenue.”

The Head of Member Strategy added quietly, “It’s like we’re delivering services... but not generating value.”

That was the moment it landed.

Not just a budget challenge, or a staffing stretch, but an underlying economic mismatch. The association was operating with the structure of a service provider, but in a world that rewarded platforms.

The problem wasn’t effort. It was logic.

1.3 Framing the Shift

This is the scene playing out across association boardrooms everywhere. Organisations are delivering more programs, more access, more personalisation, but seeing diminishing returns.

Why? Because the assumptions that underpin their business models haven’t evolved. Behind every strategy, every engagement tactic, every pricing model is a set of economic beliefs, often unexamined, frequently outdated.

This chapter is about making those beliefs visible.

1.3.1 A Hidden Discipline

Economic thinking in associations is rarely taught, and even more rarely discussed. Yet every major decision, how to price access, design participation, measure value, or manage growth, is an economic one.

Until now, many associations have relied on inherited structures: fixed fees, bundled benefits, access-based monetisation. These made sense in a world of information scarcity and professional gatekeeping. But today’s members inhabit a different world:

- Knowledge is abundant.
- Networks are distributed.
- Value is co-created, not delivered.
- Participation is fluid and episodic.

And platforms, not programs, are winning.

1.3.2 Why This Chapter Matters

Before we can redesign associations as adaptive, platform-enabled institutions, we need to rethink their economic architecture. This chapter lays the groundwork by:

- Introducing key economic principles relevant to association platforms.
- Explaining how value creation, exchange, and capture differ in networked models.
- Highlighting why transaction costs, network effects, and externalities must become board-level considerations.
- Framing economic design as a matter of governance, trust, and strategic foresight.

Because when associations don’t understand their own economics, they end up doing everything right, and still falling behind.

From Linear to Platform Value Models

Rewriting the Logic of Engagement and Exchange

After that boardroom realisation that more effort wasn't equalling more value the team did what associations often do: they commissioned a benchmarking review.

The results were confronting.

Their offerings were extensive. Their member benefits list read like a catalogue: CPD, journals, advocacy briefings, online forums, exclusive tools. Yet uptake was uneven. Retention was softening. New joiners were price-sensitive, disengaged, or simply indifferent. There was no clear line between what the association offered... and what members actually valued.

The consultants were blunt: "You're still operating like a utility. But your members are living in a network."

This wasn't a performance issue. It was a value architecture issue.

1.4 The Linear Model: Service In, Payment Out

For decades, associations operated on a linear economic model, borrowed from industrial-era businesses. The logic was straightforward:

- The association produced value (services, content, certifications).
- Members consumed that value in exchange for a fee.
- Engagement was periodic, mostly transactional.

This model worked when:

- Access to knowledge was scarce.
- Professional gatekeeping conferred exclusivity.
- Associations were the primary infrastructure for connection and identity.

But that world no longer exists.

Today's professionals can build communities, access CPD, and participate in sector dialogue without ever joining a formal body. Engagement happens continuously, across channels, and on platforms designed for interaction.

1.4.1 The Platform Model: Value as Interaction

Platform models invert the old logic. Instead of producing value and handing it to members, the association becomes an orchestrator of interaction:

- Members, partners, and stakeholders co-create value.
- The association curates, enables, and governs the conditions of exchange.
- Growth isn't driven by more content, it's driven by more meaningful connections.

Table 1.1 Linear -v- Platform

Linear (Association 1.0)	Platform (Association 2.0)
Organisation as producer	Organisation as enabler
Value delivered through services	Value co-created through interactions
Revenue from access and transactions	Revenue from participation, data, and network effects
Growth through service expansion	Growth through user engagement and trust infrastructure

1.4.2 The Tension Associations Must Face

Here’s the crux: many associations are still using linear pricing and governance structures to run what is now a networked, relational system. That’s why so many feel misaligned, they’re trying to monetise access while their members are seeking interaction. They’re tracking outputs while their value is increasingly intangible.

Without recognising this shift, associations risk doubling down on the wrong levers. They are increasing services, lowering fees, launching one more campaign, all the while missing the deeper transformation required.

This chapter now turns to the economic concepts that explain why the shift to platform thinking is not just strategic, but structural. It will introduce network effects, transaction costs, and externalities, not as abstract theories, but as practical tools for leaders redesigning association value.

1.5 What Is a Multi-Sided Platform?

Understanding the Engine Behind Modern Value Exchange

Back in the strategy retreat, the association’s CTO had shared an observation that landed awkwardly in the room.

“If we were a tech company,” she said, “we’d be classified as a two-sided platform. But we’re not acting like one.”

A few directors nodded, unsure whether it was a compliment or a diagnosis.

She explained:

“A multi-sided platform isn’t just a place where services are delivered. It’s an infrastructure that connects different types of users who benefit from interacting with each other. We have members, partners, learners, employers, sponsors, but we treat them as audiences, not participants in an ecosystem.”

That moment reframed the problem.

1.5.1 The Basics: More Than Just a Marketplace

A multi-sided platform (MSP) is an economic and organisational model that enables value-creating interactions between two or more distinct groups of users, each of whom relies on the platform to connect with the others.

Think of platforms like:

- Uber: connects drivers and riders.
- LinkedIn: connects professionals, recruiters, advertisers, and educators.
- Airbnb: connects hosts and guests, with data and trust systems in between.

The platform’s job is to facilitate interactions, not to deliver the product itself, but to design the conditions under which users can generate value for each other.

The result? The platform becomes more valuable as more users join and engage, because each side benefits from the participation of the others.

1.5.2 Why This Matters for Associations

Most modern associations already function like latent platforms, even if they haven’t realised it:

- They connect members with each other (peer-to-peer).
- They connect members with employers (jobs boards, credentialing).
- They connect learners with content creators (CPD, webinars, mentoring).
- They connect sponsors with sector audiences (partnership programs).

But these interactions are often fragmented, under-designed, or unintentionally siloed. They lack the architecture, what is referred to as the governance, that gives true platforms their power: trust infrastructure, dynamic pricing, feedback loops, and value-sharing mechanisms.

To fully embrace platform economics, associations must stop asking, “What can we offer our members?” and start asking, “What types of interactions are we enabling, and how do those interactions create mutual value?”

1.5.3 Key Features of Multi-Sided Platforms

Table 1.2 Key Features of Multi-Sided Platforms

Feature	Implication for Associations
Multiple user groups	Members, employers, educators, partners, sponsors
Indirect value creation	One user group benefits from another (e.g. employers gain from certified members)
Network effects	More users = more value for all, if interaction is enabled
Intermediation logic	The association’s role is to orchestrate—not own—all value exchange

Trust and governance infrastructure	Data, reputation, moderation, and transparency are core assets
--------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------

1.5.4 The Realisation That Changes the Conversation

Once association leaders understand their organisation as a multi-sided platform, everything shifts:

- Membership strategy becomes ecosystem design.
- Revenue planning becomes monetisation architecture.
- Engagement metrics become interaction analytics.
- Governance becomes stewardship of a complex network.

This isn't a radical reinvention. It's a recognition of what associations already are, but this provides and a blueprint for what they can become.

Now that we've mapped the basic anatomy of a multi-sided platform, we can explore the economic engines that make them work, starting with the concept at the heart of all successful platforms: *network effects*.

Side Bar: Von Hippel Innovation and Member-Created Value

Associations operating as platforms increasingly benefit from what Jason Potts¹ term's "von Hippel innovation", a paradigm of innovation driven not by producers or firms, but by end users, members, and communities engaged in innovation and solving problems relevant to their own practice, often motivated by localised benefit, peer reputation, or learning rather than commercial returns.

In contrast to the traditional Schumpeterian model, where firms develop and monetise innovations, von Hippel innovation is decentralised, community-led, and fuelled by the sticky local knowledge of practitioners. Potts argues that such innovation is not only more democratised, but increasingly more effective as digital platforms reduce the cost of sharing, collaboration, and visibility.

For associations, this paradigm is profound. It implies that the most valuable innovations and content may emerge not from central programs, but from the members themselves, through peer-contributed knowledge hubs, member-led CPD, community toolkits, or even collaborative advocacy campaigns. A well-designed membership model should enable, recognise, and amplify this kind of user-led innovation.

In this way, membership becomes a mechanism not just for access, but for contribution, a platform through which members create value for others in the

¹ Potts, J. (2025). von Hippel innovation. Prometheus, 40(2), 74-91. Based on the insight of Eric von Hippel. See: Von Hippel, E. (2006). *Democratizing innovation*. the MIT Press.

ecosystem. Supporting this requires low-friction contribution pathways, recognition systems, and governance models that balance decentralised participation with trust and quality assurance.

Von Hippel innovation is produced faster, with lower cost, and better fit to real-world problems, because it is created by the people who need it. Associations that provide the platform infrastructure for this kind of innovation can dramatically expand their relevance and impact.

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Ecosystem Economics for Modern Associations:

How Participation, Governance, and Platform Thinking Reshape Value Creation

What if your association could unlock new forms of value, by thinking like a platform?

In a world of fragmented attention, growing public expectations, and economic uncertainty, associations must evolve from membership-based service providers into dynamic ecosystem stewards. *Ecosystem Economics for Modern Associations* reframes value creation through the lenses of participation, platform strategy, and collaborative governance.

Written for executives, directors, and system builders, this practical and insightful book introduces a new economic logic for modern associations, one based on shared infrastructure, reciprocal benefit, and adaptive design.

Inside, you'll explore:

- How to apply platform economics to build network advantage
- Why transaction costs, match quality, and network effects matter
- Tools to evaluate and enhance return on platform investment (ROPI)
- The economics of engagement, pricing, and monetisation
- Governance frameworks for trust, resilience, and co-ownership
- Ecosystem mapping, scenario modelling, and diagnostic tools

Whether you're rethinking your strategy, launching a digital initiative, or designing for long-term resilience, this book offers the models and methods to lead with clarity and purpose in the platform era.

Practical. Strategic. Designed for impact.

This is the companion volume to *The Modern Association Playbook*, equipping you with the economic insight and design tools to transform not just how your association operates, but how it creates value for the system it serves.

About the Author

Sean Johnson is a governance strategist, board advisor, lawyer, and executive leader with deep expertise across associations, not-for-profits, and platform ecosystems. He is a recognised thought leader in translating good governance and risk analysis in to bold strategic adaptation.



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