

When to Hire Staff: Building Operational

Capacity for Growth in State SEAs

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ORGANIZATIONAL LOAD **VS** ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY



ORGANIZATIONAL LOAD

The total amount of work, demands, and responsibilities placed on your organization.

- Programs & Services
- Meetings & Commitments
- Reports & Compliance
- Community Expectations
- Growth & Expansion



ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

The resources, time, and ability your organization has to get work done well.

- Staff & Volunteers
- Time & Bandwidth
- Budget & Resources
- Systems & Processes
- Well-being & Sustainability



KEY TAKEAWAY

When load consistently exceeds capacity, something has to give.

That's when it's time to add staff.

The Reality Facing Many Associations

Today's SEAs are expected to provide:

- Continuing education programs
- Conferences and events
- Monthly board meetings
- Advocacy
- Membership management and renewals
- Sponsorship management
- Job board management
- Financial oversight and reporting
- Website and communications management
- Student outreach
- Leadership development
- Governance and board support

KEY MESSAGE

The load has increased. The infrastructure often has not.

The Hidden Cost of Remaining Understaffed

Staying Lean Can Become Expensive

Operational Strain

- Delayed communication
- Volunteer burnout
- Inconsistent follow-up
- Event overload
- Reactive operations
- Administrative burden on board

Organizational Impact

- Lower member satisfaction
- Leadership turnover
- Lost sponsorship revenue
- Reduced program quality
- Strategic stagnation
- Reduced leadership effectiveness

KEY MESSAGE

The cost of NOT hiring is often larger than the cost of hiring.

Capacity Stress Test Exercise

Is Your Organization Operating at Capacity?

Score each statement: 0 = Never 1 = Sometimes 2 = Frequently

OPERATIONAL INDICATORS

- Board members handle administrative tasks
- Emails or requests are delayed
- Event planning dominates leadership bandwidth
- Strategic initiatives get postponed
- Communication feels reactive

GROWTH INDICATORS

- New ideas cannot be implemented
- Sponsorship opportunities are missed
- Programming expansion limited by manpower
- Committees struggle to execute initiatives

LEADERSHIP INDICATORS

- Volunteer burnout is visible
- Leadership recruitment is harder
- Same people carry most responsibilities
- Succession planning is weak

Capacity Stress Test Results

Score	Interpretation
0 – 6	Current model may still be sustainable
6–12	Operational strain is emerging
13 – 20	Growth is constrained by capacity
21+	Organization is likely overdue for staffing support

What "Operationally Full" Really Means

Being Busy Is Not the Same as Being Scalable

An organization is operationally full when:

- Daily operations consume all leadership bandwidth
- Existing programs strain volunteers and systems
- New initiatives require sacrificing current services
- Leaders spend more time maintaining than building
- Strategic work consistently loses to operational work

Examples of operational strain include:

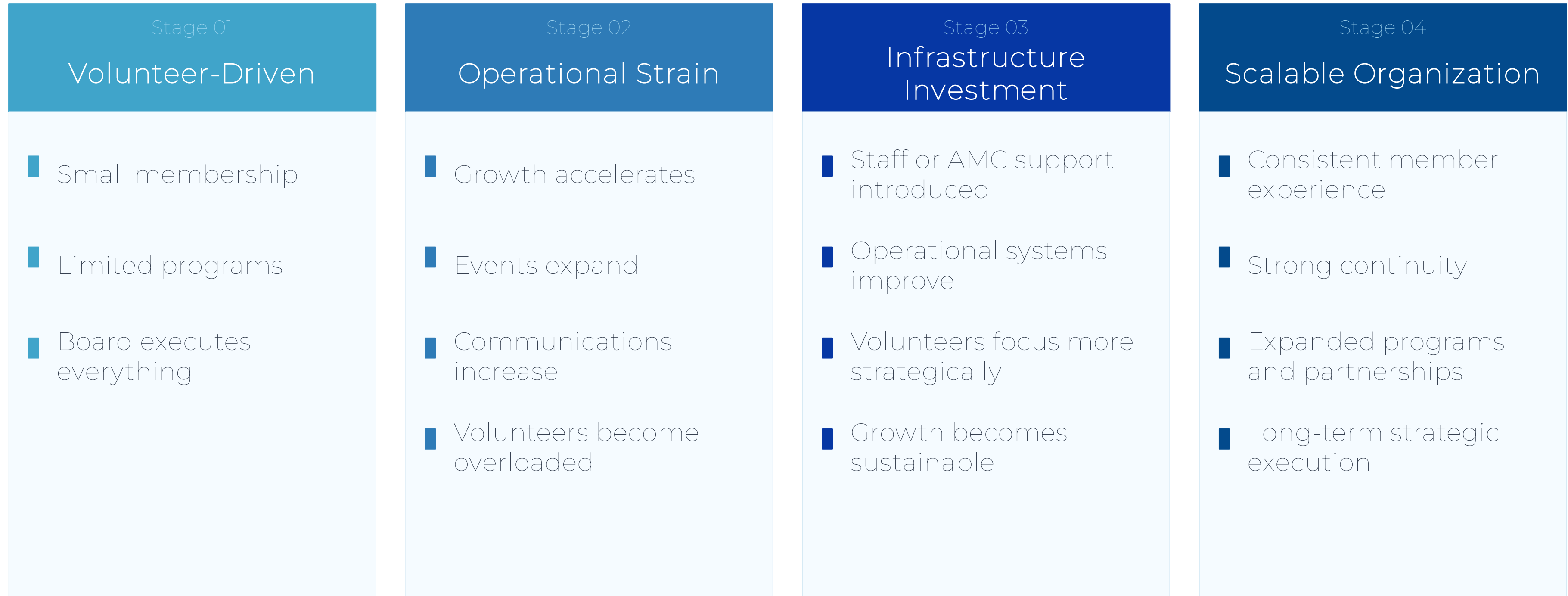
- Managing dozens of monthly communications
- Coordinating recurring event logistics
- Maintaining sponsorship follow-up
- Handling membership renewals and approvals
- Responding to member inquiries
- Maintaining websites and databases
- Processing reimbursements and financial reporting
- Supporting board governance and meeting preparation

KEY POINT

Capacity is not measured by activity. It is measured by sustainability.

The Organizational Capacity Curve

Most Associations Grow in Predictable Stages



KEY OBSERVATION

Most organizations wait until late Stage 2 — or crisis mode — before investing in staffing.

Reframing the Staffing Conversation

Staff Are Not Overhead — Staff Are Infrastructure

Instead of asking: "Can we afford staff?"

Ask: "What opportunities are we currently unable to pursue because we lack operational capacity?"

EXAMPLES OF UNLOCKED OPPORTUNITIES

- Additional conferences or webinars
- Expanded sponsorship programs
- Advocacy initiatives
- Student outreach
- Grant administration
- Membership growth campaigns
- Fundraising

KEY MESSAGE

Staffing should be connected directly to growth, sustainability, and mission impact.

Financial Justification Framework

How to Build the Business Case

Identify Bottlenecks

Step 1

Where is growth currently constrained?

Quantify Opportunity Cost

Step 2

Sponsorships not pursued · Programs delayed · Membership engagement gaps · Administrative inefficiencies

Estimate Capacity Gains

Step 3

What would dedicated operational support unlock?

Build a Multi-Year ROI Model

Step 4

Higher member retention · Increased sponsorship revenue · Expanded event participation · Improved operational consistency

Sample ROI Example

Example: Part-Time Operations Coordinator

Annual Investment

Item	Estimated Cost
Salary	\$35,000
Benefits / Taxes	\$7,000
Technology / Admin	\$3,000
Total	\$45,000

Potential Organizational Impact

Opportunity	Est. Revenue / Value
Additional webinars	\$12,000
Improved sponsor engagement	\$15,000
Increased member retention	\$10,000
Improved conference execution	\$20,000
Total Potential Impact	\$57,000

KEY INSIGHT

Strategic staffing can strengthen both operational quality and financial sustainability.

Case Study: Volunteer Burnout as Organizational Risk

The Hidden Structural Risk

Research consistently shows:

- Volunteer burnout reduces sustainability
- Leadership turnover increases
- Strategic initiatives stall when operational demands exceed capacity

Common warning signs:

- Board meetings become operational
- Key leaders step down exhausted
- Member communication becomes inconsistent
- Long-term planning disappears

KEY MESSAGE

Burnout is not just a people issue. It is an organizational risk issue.

Case Study: Associations That Invested in Infrastructure

Growth Followed Operational Investment

What research shows associations achieved:

- Increased member engagement
- Expanded non-dues revenue
- Stronger organizational continuity
- Improved program quality after operational restructuring

Examples of investments made:

- Expanded educational programming
- Improved sponsorship systems
- Dedicated communications support
- Staff-supported event operations

KEY LESSON

Organizations scale more effectively when infrastructure grows alongside ambition.

Composite SEA Case Study

A Mid-Sized SEA at Capacity

SITUATION — EXPANDING WORKLOAD INCLUDED:

- Membership programming
- Conferences and monthly meetings
- Sponsorships
- Advocacy and fundraising
- Communications and newsletters
- Membership renewals
- Financial reporting
- Website administration
- Board support and event logistics

CHALLENGES

- Board meetings became operational
- Communication delays increased
- Volunteer fatigue accelerated
- Sponsorship follow-up inconsistent
- Strategic initiatives stalled
- Leadership bandwidth consumed by administration

TURNING POINT

- Operational staffing investment
- Administrative infrastructure built
- Clearer role separation created

OUTCOMES

- Improved continuity
- Better sponsor engagement
- Expanded educational programming
- Faster member response times
- Stronger volunteer retention
- Leadership refocused on strategy
- Increased organizational stability

KEY LESSON

Staffing did not replace volunteers. Staffing amplified volunteer leadership.

Volunteer Leadership vs. Staff Support

Volunteers should LEAD the organization. Staff should RUN the organization.

Volunteers Should Focus On:

- Setting organizational vision
- Leading technical discussions
- Building industry relationships
- Advocacy priorities
- Mentoring future leaders
- Strategic growth decisions

Staff Should Help With:

- Event logistics
- Membership renewals
- Newsletters and communications
- Registration management
- Sponsor follow-up
- Website updates
- Financial processing
- Board meeting coordination

KEY MESSAGE

Staffing helps volunteer leaders stay focused on the highest-value work only they can provide.

Why This Matters for Growth

Growth Requires Operational Capacity

Growth often includes:

- Expanding membership databases
- Increasing event frequency and complexity
- Member communications
- Growing sponsorship programs
- Fundraising initiatives
- Business development efforts
- Launching new programs and services
- Additional financial oversight
- More vendor and partner coordination
- Increased board and committee activity

Without operational infrastructure:

- Growth becomes difficult to sustain
- Leadership becomes reactive
- Volunteers become overloaded
- New initiatives stall

DISCUSSION PROMPT

"What areas of growth in your organization are currently limited by operational bandwidth?"

KEY MESSAGE

Growth is not just about ideas. Growth requires operational capacity to support execution.

Common Objections

Reframing the Conversation

< We've Always Been Volunteer Run >

Growth often requires operational evolution.

< We Can't Afford Staff >

Can the organization afford stalled growth and burnout?

< Volunteers Can Continue Handling It >

Volunteers should focus on leadership and strategy — not unsustainable operational workloads.

< We're Not Big Enough Yet >

Many organizations need infrastructure before they feel fully ready.

Questions Boards Should Be Asking

1 What strategic initiatives are currently stalled?

2 Where are growth opportunities being missed?

3 What operational risks exist if key volunteers leave?

4 Is leadership spending more time maintaining than building?

5 Is member experience consistent?

6 What would additional operational capacity unlock?

7 What happens if we wait another two years?

Recommended Metrics to Track

Measuring Organizational Capacity

Membership Metrics

- Retention rates
- Membership growth
- Engagement participation

Program Metrics

- Event attendance
- Sponsorship growth
- Program expansion requests

Operational Metrics

- Volunteer workload
- Response times
- Delayed initiatives
- Board operational involvement

Financial Metrics

- Non-dues revenue
- Revenue diversification
- Operational efficiency

Building a Sustainable Staffing Strategy

Recommended Approach

Phase 1

Assess Capacity

- Identify operational bottlenecks
- Measure volunteer workload
- Define growth priorities

Phase 2

Pilot Support

- ■ Part-time support
- Contract support
- AMC partnerships

Phase 3

Scale Strategically

- ■ Expand responsibilities gradually
- Build sustainable funding models
- Align staffing with strategic goals

Final Takeaways

Sustainable Growth Requires Capacity

- Growth increases organizational load
- Volunteer capacity is finite
- Operational overload limits strategic progress
- Staffing is infrastructure
- Infrastructure enables sustainability

FINAL MESSAGE

Associations do not grow sustainably through effort alone.
They grow when infrastructure grows alongside ambition.

Discussion & Q&A

Questions for SEA Leaders

Q1

What operational pressures are you experiencing today?

Q2

What opportunities are currently delayed?

Q3

Where is volunteer fatigue most visible?

Q4

What would your organization accomplish with additional capacity?