

## **LEFT IN THE LURCH: THE CASE OF THE VANISHING WEBMASTER**

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*The newly elected president of a professional academic association faces a critical issue in his first few weeks of service. Based upon some interpersonal conflicts and disagreements over the financial arrangements for next year’s conference, the Webmaster for the organization resigns. A critical component of the organization’s success relies upon an accurate and effective website for this organization. However, the Webmaster vanishes from sight after resigning and he is the only person who has the information to access the website and make appropriate updates for the coming year. After all means to contact the Webmaster have failed, the new president must determine how to address the problem of a hijacked website.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Association for Education and Learning (AEL) was in its 37th year of existence, but remained relatively small and averaged only 80 to 100 people per conference. Part of the reason for its limited size was AEL’s narrow academic niche, with many attendees considering it a second or third priority for attending annual conferences. The other reason for its relatively small membership was AEL’s inability to attract new and younger members. Although the current membership was extremely loyal, many long-time members were nearing retirement. AEL officers have always cited marketing as the weak link in the organization’s operations.

Part of the marketing problem stemmed from a poorly designed website, which was a liability for the organization. When Mike McManus was elected president of AEL, one of the visions he shared was to develop and execute a more effective marketing and communications plan. The thrust of the vision was effective and timely communication of critical information. The sole focus of that effort was the AEL website.

### **THE AEL WEBSITE**

Historically, the AEL website suffered from a lack of expertise, both in terms of operation and design. When Mike McManus joined AEL six years ago, the website offered little information and what was available on the site suffered from inaccuracies and non-user-friendly formats. Although AEL members complained about the website for many years, there was no expertise available in AEL to improve it. The officers did not even know enough to go about purchasing such services.

For four years, the person in charge of the website attempted to keep it operating, but he was seemingly unable to admit that he lacked the ability to produce an effective website. As AEL members waited and hoped, the website just seemed to get worse. As Webmaster, he was also unresponsive to e-mail and phone contact. When he responded, it was not timely. Very few, if any updates were made when requested and sometimes months passed before changes occurred. Old information from prior years existed in places that required current information for an upcoming conference. The website was also poorly designed since it made use of random fonts, dissonant colors, poorly positioned items, broken links, and inconsistent information. It was both unattractive and unprofessional. The website sent the wrong message to viewers, and was thus characterized as a liability by AEL members. Because the site was hosted by the Webmaster's university, he was unwilling to release the password and other website access information when asked. Mike's thoughts were that the organization could not attract new members as long as the website portrayed AEL as an unprofessional operation.

### **AEL LEADERSHIP**

Leadership was also a significant issue that arose over the past six years. Long-time members of the organization criticized younger officers for the way in which the official processes of the organization were conducted. In particular, a senior AEL member called the election process undignified. At one meeting, an unruly process involved 50 or so people shouting out nominations for various positions. The nominees were not asked ahead of time, which created an awkward situation when most rejected their nomination. Members began to joke about people not wanting to serve as officers, which made the jobs seem more like a penalty than a privilege. Within a few years it became difficult to find enough people to fill all of the board positions.

Eventually the board expressed concern about leadership and operating the organization in a serious and dignified way. Although a well-qualified, but somewhat reluctant member agreed to accept the nomination for president in the coming year, this person would later resign due to significant health issues. This event created a small crisis for the officers since an interim president was needed as soon as possible. The first suggestion was to nominate a person who was relatively new to the organization. This offer was countered by an AEL member who suggested that the board recommend someone



who was more experienced and might restore the order that had been lost in recent years. In response to the suggestion for more experienced leadership, three long-time AEL members agreed to serve in the positions of President, Local Arrangements Chair, and Webmaster for the next conference. All three of the volunteers were retired faculty members and two were engaged in their own consulting business. This turn of events proved to be very beneficial for AEL. That year the conference was preceded by numerous effective planning meetings, as well as excellent and frequent communication. Although the conference was very well organized, attendance was still relatively low.

The following year saw a new high-point in AEL's effort to develop effective leadership. More capable and responsible people were elected to officer positions. In particular, the new Webmaster had improved the website with timely and effective information. He was continually updating and monitoring the site to ensure its usefulness. Because that year's conference was in the hometown of the Webmaster, he also took charge of local arrangements and put a great deal of effort into organizing the event. The members subsequently characterized it as one of the best conferences they attended. However, the same attendance problems plagued it and registered attendees hit a low-point not seen in many years. Some officers speculated that the location of the conference in a Midwestern town, as well as economic issues might have contributed to lower than average attendance.

After that meeting, Mike McManus assumed the position of President for the coming year. Mike expressed his optimism about the next conference, which would occur at a southern beach location on the Gulf of Mexico and was certain to attract attendees. Little did Mike know that various future forces would greatly impact his optimistic outlook.

### **THE WINDS OF CHANGE**

Although the board had approved the location for the AEL's upcoming conference, they had not yet approved the hotel contract arrangements. According to the bylaws, only the President of the organization or the Executive Director, who also acted as treasurer, had the legal authority to sign contracts. In some prior years AEL had experienced turmoil in the position of Arrangements Coordinator, whose job it was to research and solicit a contract from an appropriate conference hotel. On one occasion the Arrangements Coordinator delayed making arrangements, which caused a critical chain of events leading to an expensive and suboptimal hotel at the last minute. She also failed to attend the conference that year. Since the arrangements were rushed and unclear, the officers attending the conference had difficulty understanding the contractual obligations. One experienced AEL member was able to take the reins and determine that the organization was in financial distress due to the excessive obligations outlined in the contract. He was able to resolve the situation, but only after much trepidation.

The next Arrangements Coordinator was appointed by the board of officers. This indi-

vidual agreed to take the position for a period of three years. However, since that year's conference was being held in the hometown of the Webmaster, the Webmaster wanted to serve as the Arrangements Coordinator that year. Although it was not evident at the time, there was conflict between the newly appointed Arrangements Coordinator and the Webmaster. Both the Arrangements Coordinator and the Webmaster were committed and diligent workers who wanted to do a good job, but in doing so, problems arose that year too.

After Mike McManus' election to president, he immediately began working on the next conference. Because next year's proposed hotel contract caused some concern among the board members, Mike called the hotel sales manager for clarification. In doing so, he discovered that the contract had already been signed months before by the Arrangements Coordinator. This was a significant problem not only because the contract posed financial challenges for AEL, but also because the arrangements coordinator violated the organization's bylaws.

Mike did some investigating to determine whether or not the contract was binding or legal. He discovered that the contract was binding since it had been signed by an AEL officer. Since the signer acted in violation of the bylaws, AEL could disregard the contract and obligate the signer to fulfill the terms of the contract at his personal expense. However, Mike thought that was an inappropriate course of action. First, AEL liked the hotel location and it was one of the few suitable for AEL's needs. Second, Mike felt that the arrangements coordinator was acting in the best interest of the organization when he signed the contract. The AEL decision-makers at that time had been unresponsive to his requests for contract reviews and numerous deadlines had already passed. The arrangements coordinator felt as though he had gotten all the information he could possibly get prior to signing the contract. He later realized that he had violated the bylaws, but said that he did not intend to do so.

Mike shared the contract information with the board and recommended that AEL fulfill the contract requirements, with one reason being that AEL needed a hotel site regardless. Mike also shared that the Arrangements Coordinator violated the bylaws and was not forthright about having done so. Some AEL members wanted to back-out of the contract and leave the Arrangements Coordinator hanging. Other members called for his resignation. Still other members called for a change of location, even though it was already approved by the board. Some officers felt it was no big deal, and that AEL could fulfill the contract and press on. All agreed that, at minimum, the arrangements coordinator should be cautioned and reminded not to sign any more contracts.

There was ample e-mail interaction concerning the contract and the actions of the Arrangements Coordinator over a two-week period. The main issue was that AEL was required to fill a minimum number of hotel room-nights in order to avoid a \$7000 room



charge for the conference meeting space. This issue was of particular concern because of dwindling attendance. Mike verified with the hotel sales manager that the room arrangement was standard for beach hotels in the area and that the manager had already cut to their minimum.

Having negotiated the hotel contract for the prior conference, and in his capacity as a board member, the Webmaster disagreed with the proposal to fulfill the contract. He argued that the contract was too costly. He also argued that the signer should resign from the board. Mike felt that having the signer resign would not resolve the issue and AEL could still be held liable for the contract unless AEL employed a lawyer to argue that the arrangements coordinator was responsible. Such action would take too long and AEL would still be in need of a conference hotel. Regarding the contract cost, Mike thought it best to have the Executive Director analyze whether not the contract could be fulfilled. Although costs were higher at this hotel because of its beach location, the analysis indicated that the contract could be fulfilled, but if the minimum number of room nights were not achieved, then AEL could suffer a \$7000 loss.

Mike felt that through effective communication and promotion of the conference, AEL could achieve an increase in the number of conference attendees. He envisioned an excellent website and frequent e-mail notifications to current and prospective AEL members which would direct them to the website. Historically, beach locations drew the highest attendance at AEL conferences. During the period of conflict over the contract issue, and while strategizing ways to fulfill the contract and produce a successful conference, Mike received e-mails from the Webmaster containing the text illustrated in the following exhibits.

## **EXHIBIT 1**

### **E-Mail Text: The Webmaster's Comments to Mike and Other Officers**

*Mike,*

*I agree with you that we should not rush through this. I will try to be more patient in analyzing this problem. However, there are some discrepancies in the numbers both of us are using which I agree we need to resolve. Part of my frustration concerned your statement: "extremely high estimate of \$18 for breakfast, \$30 for lunch, \$20 for a box lunch, and \$40 for dinner".*

*First, I don't believe these are extremely high numbers. Secondly, I don't know if these numbers include taxes and service charges. In further discussions, we need to be sure to include taxes and service charges. I think it would be helpful if you and I had a telephone conversation. That way it would be much quicker to avoid misunderstanding of what we mean and how we arrived at certain conclusions. I*

*am asking for a telephone conversation. I am able to take calls a night until 11:00 or so p.m. Send me an e-mail as to what time would be best for you.*

*- Webmaster*

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**Subsequent E-mail to Mike and Other Officers:**

*Mike, Allen, John, and Sam,*

*Sometimes misinformation is not malicious or intentional. It is simply misinterpretation or based on poor communication. At the moment our means of communication to say the least is not ideal. After a week of discussion I am very unclear on what position has taken by the other members of this committee and what concrete action should be taken. Allen, I believe, is in favor of not accepting the contract and finding another hotel. I am very unclear about the position, tentative or otherwise, of John, Mike and Sam. Regarding what to do about the arrangements coordinator, it appears no one wants to put forth a specific proposal. I think it is clear what my position is. It is very simple:*

- 1. Remove him from his position as local arrangements director.*
- 2. Find another hotel in, if possible.*

*I hereby make this motion to the Executive Committee. I move that he be removed from his position as Local Arrangements Director. I move that we reject the contract with the Hotel and find another hotel. I realize that one on the committee needs to second this motion. Someone should second this motion to get some specific action underway. To second the motion does not mean that person necessarily has to vote for it. Unless we have a motion one way or another I believe further e-mails back and forth will not be productive. The problem is crystal clear. What we need are solutions and they should come forth in terms of motions.*

*- Webmaster*

**EXHIBIT 2**

**E-Mail Text: Resignation of Webmaster**

*EDEL Board Officers*

*This is to inform the AEL Board that I am resigning as Web Master and Communications Director, effective immediately. The Web Site now exists and maintained by me has been criticized as being unsatisfactory by one Board member and perhaps others. At the last Board Meeting, the Board was told "something has to be done*

*about the Web Site.” Because no positive comments have been made to me during or after the Board meeting, I have to accept that this comment represents the general feeling of the Board.*

*I was told that there are professional companies that will develop and maintain the AEL Web Site free of charge. My recommendation is that this Board Member be given the immediate responsibility for the AEL Web Site and that the company willing to develop and maintain an AEL Web Site be contacted immediately.*

*Sincerely,  
Webmaster*

Mike responded to the Webmaster’s e-mails as soon as he was able to read them. The text of his e-mail response appears in Exhibit 3.

### **EXHIBIT 3**

#### **E-Mail Text: Mike’s Response to Resignation of Webmaster**

*Webmaster,*

*I was in class all day and didn’t get to your e-mails until now. I echoed my sentiments in my reply to the whole Board; you’ve done great work on both the website and the conference. Your efforts over the past two years have pointed AEL in the right direction even though we have a long way to go. You’ve more than “paid your dues” recently and over the years, so you should not have to be the one to do the work anymore and I fully understand your resignation.*

*As far as I know, you are the only one who has the website access information/password. Would you please send the access information and any related passwords for the host server and/or domain name service as soon as possible so that we can effect a smooth transition to whomever takes it over?*

*Also, regarding your other e-mail, did you still want to talk on the phone? I am in my office tonight until at least midnight.*

*Thanks, Mike*

In addition to the critical concern over access to the AEL website, Mike was also concerned about the Webmaster’s reasons for resigning. He speculated that the Webmaster disagreed with the hotel contract and that his interpersonal conflicts with the Arrangements Coordinator were contributing factors. However, it is unclear why he rushed into this decision at such a critical time when there were important issues to be resolved. The Webmaster sent his resignation e-mail prior to Mike being able to respond to his first e-mail. Mike struggled with the idea that the Webmaster stated that he would be more patient in analyzing the problem, but subsequently rushed into resigning.



After days and a few weeks had passed, the Webmaster had not replied to Mike's e-mails or telephone calls. When the Webmaster failed to respond, Mike sought the help of other board members in attempting to contact the Webmaster or determine the information necessary to access and control the website. Only one officer responded and the text of the related e-mails appears in Exhibit 4.

#### **EXHIBIT 4**

##### **E-Mail Text: Request and Response for Website Access Information**

*Allen,*

*Other than the Webmaster, do you have access or do you know who has password access to the AEL website and related systems?*

*Thanks,  
Mike*

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##### **Allen's Reply**

*Mike - I have no idea. The Webmaster was the one working on things this past year. I believe before that the prior Webmaster was involved. Sorry I can't be of more help.*

*Allen*

At this point Mike was pretty well stuck. The website was locked and no one had any information about how to access it in order to change it. The prior Webmaster had left AEL three years before and could offer no information. No one knew who the host company was or where the website resided on a server. The Webmaster vanished after his resignation and had effectively hijacked the AEL website. Not only was the website critical to accomplishing Mike's vision for the coming year, it was critical to all forms of record keeping and communication necessary to maintain the organization and promote the next conference.

Mike had some knowledge of the general idea of website operations based upon his interaction with a Webmaster for another conference. That Webmaster wanted someone else to take over that website and had suggested various ways in which to do that. However, that was the extent of Mike's knowledge. He knew that methods and solutions existed, but he didn't know what those were or where to begin.



Mike consulted a professor in his department who teaches information systems. The professor did not specialize in websites, but helped answer some of Mike's questions. Together, he and Mike searched "who owns ael.org host domain name" using Google and found the following website: <http://www.whois.net/>. On Whois.net they were able to search AEL.org and generate the information shown in Exhibit 5. While the information systems professor was able to point out a few interesting bits of data in the AEL Whois information, neither he nor Mike quite understood where to go from there.

As Mike returned to his office, he knew that he must decide what to do next and pursue a course of action quickly. Mike also knew—if and when he found a way to resolve this immediate problem—he must also find a way to help AEL prevent this situation from ever happening again. But for the time being, Mike asked himself, "How do I get access to and control of the AEL website? Now what do I do?"

**EXHIBIT 5**

**Example of AEL information retrieved via Whois.net**

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[Querying whois.publicinterestregistry.net]
[whois.publicinterestregistry.net]
NOTICE: Access to .ORG WHOIS information is provided
to assist persons in determining the contents of a
domain name registration record in the Public Interest
Registryregistry database. The data in this record is
provided by Public Interest Registry for informational
purposes only, and Public Interest Registry does not
guarantee its accuracy. This service is intended only
for query-based access. You agree that you will use
this data only for lawful purposes and that, under
no circumstances will you use this data to: (a) al-
low, enable, or otherwise support the transmission by
e-mail, telephone, or facsimile of mass unsolicited,
commercial advertising or solicitations to entities
other than the data recipient's own existing custom-
ers; or (b) enable high volume, automated, electronic
processes that send queries or data to the systems of
Registry Operator or any ICANN-Accredited Registrar,
except as reasonably necessary to register domain
names or modify existing registrations. All rights
reserved. Public Interest Registry reserves the right
to modify these terms at any time. By submitting this
query, you agree to abide by this policy.
Domain ID:D24100855-LROR
Domain Name:AEL.ORG
Created On:03-Apr-2000 21:22:24 UTC
Last Updated On:05-May-2009 21:38:32 UTC
Expiration Date:03-Apr-2015 21:22:24 UTC
Sponsoring Registrar:Network Solutions LLC (R63-LROR)
Status:CLIENT TRANSFER PROHIBITED
Registrant ID:2218048-NSI
Registrant Name:AEL
Registrant Organization:AEL
Registrant Street1:5201 CASS AVE STE 300
Registrant Street2:
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