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INDUSTRY TRENDS

**OH, THE CHANGES I'VE SEEN!**

# Oh, the Changes I've Seen!

Written by Wes Trochlil

## INDUSTRY TRENDS

I've been working in association management system (AMS) software since 1990. That makes me old. But it also means I've seen a lot of change over the years. In no particular order, here are the changes that have had the greatest impact on associations:

### Moving from DOS to Windows to the web

Clearly this is the single most significant change in all of database technology over the past two decades. When I started my first association job, managing my membership database consisted of updating company records, people records, and product codes. All of this took place in a DOS environment. No cutting and pasting, no viewing multiple records or screens. Just heads-down data entry.

Fast forward 20 years, and now the majority of database products are web-based, which means easy access to your data from anywhere, and easy access for your customers, as well. Which leads me the next big change

### Putting more control into the customers hands

Twenty years ago, short of the mailing label on their mail from my association, my customers had no idea what kind of data I had on them, or how good (or bad) the data was. And if a customer wanted to change their contact information, they could call you, write you, or fax you.

Fast forward 20 years, and now the customer expects to be able to go online and update their contact information, with no staff intervention required. And not only that, your customer expects to be able to go online to join and renew membership, buy products, register for events, and more, all without staff intervention.

### Moving from flat files to relational databases

This is a bit geeky but is critical to how associations can manage more data with less staff. Two decades ago, many databases were still essentially flat file systems. This meant that while you might be able to manage membership, events, and product sales all in one database, there were essentially a bunch of spreadsheets with a lot of redundant data spread throughout. What this meant was that if a data change occurred for a contact (say a change of address) that information did NOT flow to other parts of the database. With the mainstream use of relational databases, were now able to manage a single individual or organization record and relate all kinds of information to it. This drastically reduces data redundancy and allows staff to do more with less.

### Putting more control into staffs hands

As a self-proclaimed geek who loves to fiddle with software, this is one of my favorite changes. There was a time not so long ago where it was nigh impossible for staff to make any significant changes to the structure of the database. Want a new field? Call the vendor and pay to have it added. Don't like the way that screen looks? Call the vendor and pay to have it changed. (This assumes either change was even possible!)

Today many databases allow you to not only add fields or customize screens, but they are smart enough to automatically make those fields available for querying and reporting.

### Functionality goes up while prices come down

For my clients, this may be the most important advance of all. Generally, as products mature, their pricing becomes commoditized, and we've seen that to a great extent in the association management software arena. In addition, the lower cost of technology and easier access via the Internet has allowed AMS vendors to provide greater and broader functionality while continuing to lower prices.

I think back to the first DOS-based database I used and can recall that the system itself cost tens of thousands of dollars and provided very limited functionality. Today I can go online and rent association management software with functionality I didn't even dream of 20 years ago, at for only a couple of hundred dollars a month. The change is breathtaking.

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I'm loathe to predict the future, but I believe we won't see as much change in the next 20 years as we did these past 20. The change from DOS to Windows to the Internet was so radical that I'm hard-pressed to see how technology could top that. But I plan to stick around to find out.

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## About the Author

For more than 20 years, Wes Trochlil has worked in and with dozens of associations and membership organizations providing a range of consulting services, from general consulting on data management issues to full-scale, association-wide selection and implementation of association management systems. Follow Wes on Twitter @westrochlil. His website is [www.effectivedatabase.com](http://www.effectivedatabase.com)

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