

TO: ALA Executive Board

SUBJECT: Impact of Commercial Posting on ALA Connect

BOARD REQUEST: Board Action

ACTION REQUESTED BY:

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DRAFT OF MOTIONS:

The ALA Executive Board to vote that commercial posts for paid programs or services are prohibited on the ALA Connect platform

The ALA Executive Board to vote that job postings are restricted to a singular opt-in community on the ALA Connect platform.

DATE: Wednesday, March 23, 2022

BACKGROUND:

Updated report on activity for commercial and job postings on Connect since Code of Conduct change in June 2021 and how this has impacted engagement.

ATTACHMENTS:

Updated report on activity for commercial and job postings on Connect since Code of Conduct change in June 2021 and how this has impacted engagement.

Recent Background:

The ALA Code of Conduct Working Group presented [EBD #12.46](#) to the ALA Executive Board in June, 2021 which included an ALA Online Code of Conduct to apply to all online platforms used by ALA in a consistent and transparent manner.

Per the [minutes from this meeting](#), the ALA Executive Board approved the adoption of the ALA Online Code of Conduct with one amendment. The Amendment was to remove the following clause "Don't spam the community with paid products, events, services, or job posts. If you'd like to reach all ALA members and others in the profession with your career-related opportunities, you can use JobLIST career center or Core Jobs Service."

As a result of this change, all commercial posts and job postings are allowed on all communities on Connect. This has impacted Connect in the following ways:

- Given competitors the ability to promote their products directly to our members (two recent examples are [this January post](#) and [this June post](#)). This contrasts with ALA's practice of limiting direct access to members and instead encouraging paid advertising or sponsorship.
- Decreased replies to posts in the ALA member community by 82% with smaller decreases in our divisions and round tables (data for the largest two divisions and round tables is in Exhibit A).
- Increased the number of job postings on Connect which may be outside of ALA's JobLIST platform and therefore not vetted for compliance with legal requirements and best practices and resulting in the majority of posts some days on the daily digests.
- Increased the number of messages members receive through Connect.

In the January 2022 Board Meeting and in a subsequent conversation, it was discussed that there are two distinct components of this conversation – commercial postings and job postings.

Commercial Postings:

ALA extends numerous opportunities to those wanting to increase visibility of their products to ALA members. A few of these include purchase of the membership print mailing list, exhibiting at an ALA or division conference, purchasing advertising on American Libraries or other platforms. While many of these opportunities include member discounts, they are all paid opportunities for exposure.

Association best practice is to exclude commercial posts from community platforms and direct users to the paid opportunities that the association provides.

Historically, promotion of free events, call for proposals, and surveys have been allowed on Connect as a value of membership and it is recommended that these continue.

ALA JobLIST and Job Postings:

JobLIST generates more than \$800,000 in revenue annually (typical non-pandemic years) and is visited by library and information science professionals at least 70,000 times per month. JobLIST is also free to all job seekers.

In reviewing best practices of other Higher Logic users, job postings are either explicitly prohibited, or channeled into one community specifically for job seekers. This community could also be open to the public, but users would need to opt into the community manually versus being auto enrolled. This approach would allow for non-ALA job postings to be promoted on Connect so further research would need to be done to distill the impact to JobLIST revenue and organizational membership revenue as discounted job postings is one of the primary drivers of this membership.

To continue this research, Core and ALA staff worked together to activate a pilot using the Core community. Effective, February 1, 2022, a new community called "[Core Library Jobs](#)" was activated and job posts were no longer permitted in Core communities. Core Library Jobs is now a community of 94 members and has had approximately 40 posts about jobs. This has also created a space for more conversation and engagement on the Core Member Community.

This pilot has only been in place for less than 60 days, so additional observation is required. It is important that we do not create a shadow job board that directly competes with JobLIST as well.

We also know that any changes to the Code of Conduct on job postings will need a thoughtful communication plan to accompany it.

Alongside, ALA staff is working to prominently feature JobLIST on the ALA member community using banner ads and job widgets. These are other opportunities to increase exposure of an ALA product while also creating space for job postings.

Goals of Connect:

Per the [ALA Connect Roadmap](#), the Connect community was created with the primary objective of providing members with one centralized place to do their ALA work and connect with other members around issues and interests relevant to the profession. Connect was designed for peer-to-peer connection within our membership.

Participation on Connect is one of the few exclusive ALA member benefits. Most membership benefits are available to the public at large, but most Connect member communities are a privilege of membership. At the ALA level, both the ALA Member Community along with the Student Community (launching January 2021), are limited to current members.

ALA Connect costs ALA \$42,172 annually in licensing fees.

Industry Best Practices with Community Platforms:

Per the [Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report](#), over 50% of associations offer an online community for their members and the Higher Logic software is the most used platform. These branded professional communities differ from other social platforms such as LinkedIn or Facebook because they are moderated spaces where users should feel a sense of comfort about their privacy. Branded communities such as ALA Connect, are designed as safe spaces where people are comfortable asking questions and can showcase their expertise. The content shared should be creating an informal body of knowledge to increase the value of membership.

According to industry best practice, online communities that are built for engagement require moderation of content. Per the [7 Do's and Don'ts of Online Community Moderation](#), posts that hinder community discussion should be excluded from online platforms. This includes promotions from vendors soliciting products and can include job postings.

Since ALA Connect is a benefit of membership, increasing engagement on Connect is a direct contributor to membership retention and to the ALA Pivot Plan. Per the [Higher Logic 2020 Engagement Report](#), members will remain within the communities once they are participating and finding value so we need to be intentional about what content is being posted within our communities and tracking engagement.

A second factor that leads to retention is keeping members engaged enough to regularly read posts from Connect. In November 2021, a member of Core would have had to read through a minimum of 170 messages from Connect (more if they're members of interest groups and sections), compared to only 88 in April. In addition to doubling the number of messages, the additional posts consist of commercial content, job ads, and calls for proposals. This additional content can make it difficult for members to find the messages where peers are posting requests for help and sharing information.

We seek to define sharing information on Connect in six distinct ways:

- 1) Peer-to-Peer discourse as replies to Discussion posts, along with the utilization of curated content in ALA main communities,
- 2) relevant discourse and curated content in designated spaces on Division main homepages and Division Communities,
- 3) relevant discussion and passion-driven collaboration in Round Tables communities,
- 4) sharing key resources through discussion posts and with collaboration through Committee spaces,
- 5) private Peer-to-Peer sharing through mentorship and private messages,
- 6) increased usage of all community libraries to highlight the identity of Connect as a knowledge base for members and a reservoir of institutional knowledge.

Strategic Direction

There are many suggested KPIs that are industry practices to track the health of an online community. In many of these categories, we are outpacing the metrics of the pre-allowance of commercial posts and post allowance of commercial and job post. There is now relevant data on how commercial posts are negatively impacting the user experience and value for members in Connect. Data shows that use of Connect is growing, and we should take this opportunity to realign our strategy for it with Online Community Best Practices, our ALA Connect Roadmap and ALA Business strategy/needs to increase value for members.

Next Steps:

Once the motions are adopted, the Code of Conduct Committee will finalize the update to the Code of Conduct. In addition, staff will work to develop the email moderated messages that will be sent to individuals who post commercial messages directing them to the appropriate channels.

Additional Resources:

What is an Online Community? The Basics and Benefits: <https://www.higherlogic.com/blog/what-is-an-online-community/>

Your Playbook for Online Community Moderation: https://go.higherlogic.com/rs/016-CFB-719/images/Higher%20Logic_eBook_Your%20Playbook%20for%20Online%20Community%20Moderation.pdf