

Strategic Interest Groups (SIGs)

All you need to know to get started

What is it?

A Strategic Interest Group (SIG) is a professional development and networking forum that enables members to get together to discuss issues and challenges, explore emerging trends, exchange ideas and network with peers in like specialties.

SIGs can be role, location, medium or issue specific. For example, one-person communication shops, intranet webmasters, crisis communications, employee communications, managing a blog on your website, communicators that work in Surrey...and the list goes on.

SIGs are member-driven and chapter-supported.

This means that as interests arise, one keen member would take on the volunteer role of being that SIG's coordinator and liaison with the chapter. For the chapter's part, it would provide the coordinator with the "how-to" guide to stage a SIG and promotional support.

How was the SIG program created?

In 2005, a pilot was held with a dozen communicators focused on employee communications. Their year-long experience of as part of the SIG, input and feedback have created a program that works for our chapter. This "how-to" guide is meant to make it easy for members to start a SIG, as well as enable the chapter to potentially manage a number of SIGs at the same time in addition to the other programs and services it offers.

How do SIGs fit into overall chapter programming?

The volunteers with the chapter's Professional Development portfolio stage and manage the chapter's main professional development and networking events, at least once a month. These may include half-day workshops, evening networking socials and everything in between. These are usually geared toward the majority of members.

SIGs are niche programming that supplement main professional development events. They meet the specific needs of a small group of members. They do not conflict with chapter programming, but actually complement it.

How long do SIGs last?

The beauty of SIGs is that they last only as long as there is interest. So, if after 6 meetings interest has waned, the SIG can fold. Or if interest is steady, it can last for years. The members of the SIG decide its fate.

How does it work?

As mentioned, SIGs are member-driven and chapter-supported. This means a volunteer coordinator takes on the responsibility for the SIG and liaises with a dedicated chapter volunteer to schedule and promote it.

"Keeping it simple" is the key to organizing a SIG. You'll see so in the details:

- SIGs meet every 4-6 weeks over a 60-90 minute breakfast, lunch or drinks/dinner.
- Meetings can be held in the same location, same time of day, same regular intervals, or not, as the coordinator and attendees deem appropriate.
- Meeting locations are either in a restaurant or a meeting room at a member's company.
- Attendees are responsible for their own refreshments (brown bag or bought onsite).
- There is no charge for attending or for food or the like. (This keeps it simple and doesn't leave organizers on the hook for food costs if planned attendees don't show.)
- Registration is not required. Plan for about 5-10 attendees. Members that really want/need to be, there will be.
- Group size is recommended to be limited to 10 people to encourage lots of dialogue but not be so big that conversation is difficult.
- Each meeting should feature a "table topic," which would be the main focus of the discussion, facilitated by a volunteer. A suggested format is to spend 60 minutes on the table topic and leave 30 minutes at the end for informal discussion on whatever's on attendees' minds. The value of this format is discussion, so whatever works best for the group, but give it some kind of structure so attendees know what to expect.
- Rotating topic discussion facilitators is recommended but the SIG coordinator can also do this role on a regular basis.
- SIGs are intended for discussion and idea sharing. They should not involve PowerPoint presentations or guest speakers on general topics that could conflict with the chapter's regular professional development events. Remember, SIGS are primarily about talking to each other, not listening to one person.

How to get started?

Do you have peers you're always saying to, "We should get together and talk about this?" Then here's your chance. Make a few calls to some peers or members listed in the chapter directory you think may have a similar interest to see if there may be appeal in starting a SIG.

If there is, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Are you willing to take on the volunteer role of coordinating this SIG? It may take few hours a month of your time. The coordinator is the key to a SIG's success, so if you can't commit the time, don't take it on.
2. Do you have a back-up volunteer that can step in for you should something come up?
3. Have you reviewed the details of how a SIG works? Do you understand them and are willing to work within the guidelines?
4. Have you clarified the focus of your SIG? Its intended audience, the potential topics you'll discuss and the role of the facilitator?

IABC/BC SIG Step-by-Step Guide

1. Designate one volunteer and a back up to be the SIG's coordinators.
2. Contact the chapter's SIG Liaison at sig@iabc.bc.ca. Have a date, location, time and SIG name in mind for your first meeting. Have an alternative date scoped out.
3. The SIG Liaison will check the chapter's events calendar to ensure no other events are happening that week. FYI: IABC/BC hosts only one event per week at the most to ensure we aren't competing with ourselves for member involvement.
4. Fill out a publicity form supplied by the SIG Liaison. The form is a template for the events listings on the website. It cannot be altered or changed but does have some flexibility for the text. You will be responsible for the accuracy and timeliness of the information provided.
5. The chapter strives to promote events at least four weeks in advance. So, you are encouraged to submit your publicity form five weeks in advance to allow time for posting by the volunteer webmaster.
6. Return the completed publicity form to the SIG Liaison. The liaison will ensure it gets to the right volunteers to be posted on the website and included in the weekly e-blasts. FYI: Posting on the website is what triggers events to be included in the weekly e-blasts. This will be the case for your event as well.
7. Enjoy your meeting.
8. Repeat. Or, if you decide to make your SIG a "standing meeting" at the same time and location each month, fill out a publicity form for this.

What if I need more info?

Contact the chapter's SIG Liaison at sig@iabc.bc.ca.

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