

THE MANY BENEFITS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF ASAP:



A Look Back and Forward from Its Earliest Leaders

Time can be a measuring stick for gaining perspective, and as the old saying goes, "Hindsight is 20/20." ASAP Media caught up with some of the early leaders in ASAP on the 20th anniversary of the association, which was formed in 1998. I spoke with an early founder and first chairman of the board, **Robert Porter Lynch, CSAP**, president of the Warren Company, and also an early European thought leader, **Ard-Pieter de Man**, professor of strategy and organization at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. The two master orchestrators provided the following fascinating perspective.

By Cynthia B. Hanson

It's the 20-year anniversary of the launching of ASAP in 1998. Is the organization today what you envisioned it would become, and why or why not?

Robert Porter Lynch: ASAP is a remarkable organization that has evolved over the years because it listens to its members, and they have responded wonderfully by contributing their insights and ideas to raise the standards of our profession. Most importantly, people running alliances are now considered "professionals," not a ragged amalgam of different skills with no central core. This is a notable achievement. The world of alliances has grown remarkably. In the middle 1980s, many thought alliances were just the next "flavor of the month." By the late 1990s, alliances became an integral part of corporate strategy. Today, alliances and partnering are accepted as an essential element, an important part of most businesses.

However, talking alliances and doing alliances well are two very different things. Most companies still don't do alliances well, and they haven't discovered ASAP to learn better methods. Unfortunately, however, after working in the alliance world for 40 years, we still have

not made the idea of “collaborative excellence” the heart and soul of business. This is the next quest. We need to demonstrate—with stronger thought leadership and more rigorous metrics—how our collaborative approach to business produces better performance, profitability, and competitive advantage. Mike Leonetti [president and CEO of ASAP] and John DeWitt [editor and publisher of ASAP Media] are doing great work using *Strategic Alliance Magazine* for focusing our profession’s thinking as well as influencing the mindsets of senior executives about the power of collaboration. This must continue—the long-term impact is massive, especially when we broaden our horizons to the larger picture of collaboration beyond alliances.

Ard-Pieter de Man: What ASAP achieved in those 20 years is that it is now a thriving community of alliance managers with a solid program of activities. It has acquired a strong position as the go-to organization for alliance management. When we started with a small group of people, we had that ambition, but there were many times when that ambition seemed far away. Particularly when the Internet bubble burst, ASAP only just survived. When I see that it survived the last crisis, which was much deeper, I think that is a great sign of the strength of ASAP. My only wish would be to get more industries on board. It is great to have pharma, biotech, and IT, but there is a vast world in finance, public-private sector, and other sectors where we haven’t even scratched the surface.

What was your role in the founding of ASAP?

Lynch: Along with my dear friend and colleague, co-founder Bill Lundberg, ASAP’s first executive director, we had a dream:

To enlist a team of early-stage alliance pioneers to build a professional organization that would set alliances on an equal status with other professions. We understood that those engaged in alliances were a breed of their own. What alliance people were doing was based on a set of standards and unique thinking that set us apart from people in business development, strategic planning, or project management.

To create an organizational structure, including governance, and programs to advance our profession. We needed a structure that could deliver value that met the needs of a very unique membership.

To enable ASAP to become a magnet for the evolution and proliferation of best practices.

To enable members to network with each other, primarily to form new alliances, share experiences, solve mutual problems, and create new opportunities.

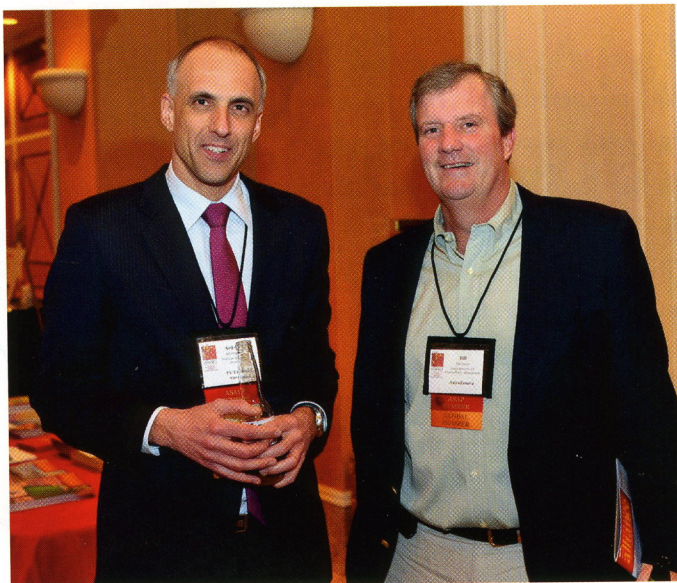
To ensure that the association would be led by corporate members, while taking advantage of the value added by thought leaders, educators, and consultants.

De Man: I came in in the early days, but ASAP was already founded. But as one of the first movers, I was mainly involved in trying to get ASAP on the agenda in Europe (and vice versa, I must say). Together with Mike Nevin and a small group of other pioneers, I organized various meetings and conferences in Europe to bring ASAP to a European audience. As I also am an academic, I started the *ASAP State of Alliance Management* research series that gathered data about which alliance management tools were effective, and which were not. Over the years, we published various studies that all showed the importance of good alliance management to create value. After 2003, I got elected to the ASAP global board, was active in the accreditation committee and the ASAP Alliance Excellence Awards Committee, co-edited the alliance handbook, etc.—all alongside my work in Europe and executing five *State of Alliance Management* studies between 2000 and 2012. In all these roles, I encountered people with a great passion for alliances. I was part of some really fun teams!

Why did you personally invest so much time in getting ASAP launched?

Lynch: Several factors played into my commitment to build ASAP.

- First, I saw the alliance framework as a vehicle for developing methods to shift the business world from thinking about commerce as transactional entities (independent “dealers”) to a collaborative system of interdependent value creators in value chains/networks.
- Second, I realized the power of strength in numbers and common interest. If those engaged in alliances never communicated, shared, or evolved into a professional network, many good people would be eaten alive by their own organizations, because others didn’t understand what was intended or what



Left: Ard-Pieter de Man with ASAP member Bill Dwyer

great results had been produced. (Over the 10 years prior to ASAP's founding, we were dismayed by how many great champions were branded as "irritants" within their own companies.) Early on, we realized that ASAP attracted people because our first members felt isolated and unappreciated in their own organizations. When these disaffected champions joined ASAP, they felt reunited with "family." This led to having awards, and later certification to acknowledge their contributions (neglected by their parent corporations).

- Third, I thought we could all learn from each other. We were still a nascent field. Universities were not providing thought leadership. If people with practical expertise around the world had the opportunity to share their insights and best practices, we would benefit from the "network effect" that would accelerate our understanding and utilization of collaborative methods.
- Fourth, when Bill Lundberg and I conceived of the idea of "partner of choice" back in 1992, we realized that "all ships rise on a rising tide." By focusing entire industries on becoming "partner of choice," all could benefit from having a "collaborative advantage." By getting better at collaboration, each company would, step by step, raise the bar for all companies.

De Man: I strongly believe in the value-creating potential of alliances for companies and for society at large. I am also

fascinated by forms of organizing that are different from the traditional hierarchy. So where better to go than ASAP?

Next, my own learning and networking are important, and ASAP is instrumental in that. ASAP members provided a great source of data for my research and gave me access to their cases. My last book on designing alliances would not have been published without the generous collaboration of many ASAP members giving me access to their companies. I was always amazed by how much people were willing to share.

Finally, I just like the people who are active in alliances. They have a different way of seeing the world. Therefore, I never saw the things I did for ASAP as "work."

Looking back over the past 20 years, how do you think ASAP has had an impact on the business world?

Lynch: Several industries, particularly pharmaceuticals and high tech, have benefited enormously. Our best practices have spawned successes resulting in the introduction of new drugs and saving lives, which might have never happened without lowering the risk of development. New technologies are embedded across the world that might never have seen the light of day had our professionals not been in the vanguard. We can track our work into governments, insurance, consumer goods, and the automotive industry, among many others. All told, alliance professionals should be proud we have contributed to building a better world.

Assuredly, the work our profession has performed internally within the ranks of our companies is also worthy of admiration. We have provided the wisdom, architectures, language, practices, and tools to further the better functioning of companies. Our deep commitment to collaboration has helped companies tear down silos, build bridges between business units, and foster a new breed of collaborative leaders.

De Man: In the early days we still needed to sell alliances as an option that could be valuable for organizations to use. Alliances needed to get on the agenda. Soon, the agenda shifted from "alliances are important" to "alliance management is a profession." You don't just do alliances on a Friday afternoon: There is method in it. It is now well-known in the business community that alliance management is a

specific profession with its own rules, tools, and behavioral norms. The fact that the ISO 44001 norm exists now is testimony to that. There is no doubt in my mind that ASAP was instrumental in these shifts in thinking about collaboration.

What is the future of collaborative business practices, and how can ASAP foster that vision?

Lynch: We should view the past from the perspective that our journey has just begun. Like a young adult reaching his or her 20th birthday, our future is bright, we have become enlightened realists, and our leadership has a vital role ahead. There are several quests I foresee we have not yet attained that should be at the forefront in the near future.

C-Suite:

Because we are so well equipped strategically and operationally to guide companies to a bold new future, we have always sought to have ASAP members work their way into the senior executive ranks.

Innovation:

We've proven that collaborative cultures are engines of innovation. This is fertile ground for development of stronger architectures of innovation that can be replicated across many platforms.



Robert Porter Lynch

Collaborative Leadership:

We have mastered managing alliances, but must step higher to the mastery of collaborative systems—enabling our members to build stronger companies with internal alliances, stronger cross-functional teams, collaborative cultures, and collaborative adaptation to rapidly changing environments.

ISO 44001:

The collaborative business standard presents a great opportunity to promote and proliferate our message. ASAP should capitalize on this opportunity to bring in new industries and take the lead on new strategies and practices for building better companies, creating value chains/networks, and engaging our younger generation.

Business Schools:

MBA graduates with little understanding of alliances or collaborative systems. We need to do more to team up with business professors to conduct the research to validate what we've proven in practice. This includes pioneering more in collaborative economics and finance.

De Man: The future lies in ecosystems, increasing digitization of collaboration via smart contracts and platforms, and a continued blurring of the boundaries of firms. The joint creation of innovative value propositions will be at the heart of the future of collaboration. The more traditional alliances will continue to exist but always as part of a broader ecosystem. ASAP can help foster that vision by doing what it does: bring people with experience together, and have them share knowledge around this theme.

In addition, ASAP will have to innovate, for example, by improving the handbook and certification requirements to reflect this new collaborative reality. Important questions ASAP needs to set on the agenda are: Which types of collaboration can be automated via smart contracts, and which cannot? What new roles for alliance managers emerge in this digitized ecosystem context? What should be the mix of online and offline collaboration, especially in globally dispersed alliance teams? How do you maintain collaborative relationships in this fast-paced world? ■