

pic then and NOW

1998

IABC/Toronto's Professional Independent Communicators: A Brief History 1998 to Now



Toronto



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IABC/Toronto's Professional Independent Communicators: A Brief History 1998 to Now

IABC/Toronto has long counted solo professionals among its members, but we didn't form an official group – originally called the Alliance of Independent Practitioners (AIP) – until September 1998. A few members met regularly to discuss specific topics, refine our mandate and develop productive ways to gain visibility within IABC. The group was small and quite casual, meeting mostly in public libraries.

Now named Professional Independent Communicators (PIC), this group of independents has more than 135 members – most of whom have been IABC members for

many years, and have actively volunteered in different IABC/Toronto portfolios and activities. Today, the group is known as a supportive network for indies, as well as an important resource for other IABC/Toronto members who need communications help.

The origins of PIC

Jane Naczynski recalls “agitating” for a group of independents within the chapter in the mid-1990s. “Then the board challenged me to come up with some hard data that there was a need for such a group,” she recalls. In 1998, Jane combed through the entire IABC/Toronto membership directory and polled everyone who at least appeared to be a freelancer.

Of the 70 or so people, 50 seemed interested in forming a group. Jane worked with Adrienne Jones, Kalene Morgan and Veronica Feihl to develop a survey, which they mailed to the confirmed freelancers.

Jane was the first chair of a taskforce charged with investigating the needs of independent IABC/Toronto members. Beginning in 1999, the chapter invited AIP leaders to join chapter board meetings. A flyer was developed, and member Bert Freeman created a logo, which was published beside AIP member names in the print directory. The first AIP presence on the chapter website was in 2001.



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In the early days, IABC/Toronto funded monthly meeting expenses, and a new chairperson stepped forward each year to plan the meetings and act as liaison with the IABC/Toronto board. By May 2003, membership in AIP had grown to 55 people. However, soon funding was withdrawn, and volunteer chairs were difficult to find, in part because the job was quite large for one person. Some monthly meetings were spent on AIP business rather than on topics that would attract member interest. Attendance was as low as just four people, only averaging five to eight of the same regulars per meeting. New IABC/Toronto members were not aware of AIP, and contact with the IABC/Toronto board, which

changes every year, lapsed. Some AIP members did not renew their IABC membership, citing a lack of value with decreased AIP activity.

IABC statistics in 2004 showed that about 6% of worldwide members were independents, and the number continues to grow. If IABC/Toronto statistics mirrored those worldwide, there were potentially more than 70 independents in the Toronto area, although AIP membership had dropped to 44 people in August 2004. AIP needed to do a better job of finding and serving the growing number of independents; otherwise, it appeared in danger of collapse.

Building on a mission

A new AIP board refined the group's mission, out of which many actions flowed to support independent IABC/Toronto communicators through professional development, networking and marketing.

AIP leaders realized that monthly meetings were the most visible benefit of the group, and needed to ensure a steady lineup of interesting topics and engaging speakers to encourage greater participation and attract new members. We also needed to better promote the meetings, and share learnings to benefit communicators who were unable to attend. By circulating learnings from the previous meeting, we also



2001

AIP and its original logo first appeared on the IABC/Toronto chapter website in 2001.



2003

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hoped to create “buzz” about what people had missed, encouraging members to make a point of coming to the next meeting.

Evaluation forms after each meeting measured response to the topic and speaker, and indicated future topic suggestions.

A podcast produced by current past chair Donna Papacosta also helped to build interest in upcoming meetings and guest speakers.

A member survey in October 2004 helped AIP gain a better understanding of members, and determine the types of topics that would be most likely to attract attendance at meetings. With the results in hand, the executive team found and booked speakers with expertise in target areas such as marketing and pricing/ negotiation. In the absence of a speaker for a particular topic (or last-minute cancellation), the backup plan was to rely on a panel of members, many of whom are experienced professionals, to share their own expertise.

We promoted upcoming meetings in direct email messages and reminders to current and potential members, and were also invited to promote AIP meetings in IABC/Toronto's regular chapter eLert bulletins. We introduced a monthly e-newsletter for AIP members to share professional development tips from that month's meeting and promote the next event. Recognizing that our members are dispersed geographically across the Greater Toronto Area, we also felt the newsletter would help members feel a stronger connection to the group.

We established an outreach process, checking each month's IABC/Toronto *Communicator* newsletter and the online Communicators' Marketplace for new IABC members who appeared to be independents, looking them up on Member Search, and inviting them to join AIP.

AIP first published a newsletter (*The AIP Connection*) in 2004. It became *The Buzz* in mid-2008.



2004

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Reaching the next level

In November 2004, our chair at the time, Cyrus Mavalwala, sought to reignite IABC/Toronto board interest in the group by presenting the results of the AIP survey. In particular, he highlighted the fact that AIP played a key role in member retention for IABC, in that 75% of AIP members said AIP's existence was a factor in joining or rejoining IABC (the main factor for 29%). Barb Sawyers, who followed Cyrus as chair, recalls: *“Cyrus and his team did a lot to take the group to the next level.”*

All these efforts paid off. In 2004-05, we strengthened AIP by greatly increasing

membership as well as participation in monthly meetings, and obtained tangible support from the IABC/Toronto board. A 2005 survey of IABC/Toronto members showed that 66% of respondents had heard of AIP, up from 2002's 44%.

AIP successfully advocated for a presence on the IABC/Toronto website. Janet Comeau, who was on the IABC/Toronto website committee, says, “IABC/Toronto leadership has been a key to AIP success, as the board started to include AIP leaders, giving them a ‘seat at the table.’ They recognized the value of the group as part of the member value proposition.”

Membership continued to grow. Many of these new members had been directly invited to join, and many joined as a result of referrals from existing members. The value of AIP to independents, and to IABC/Toronto, has been clearly stated by many members in our surveys:

“I found the content of the meeting and the calibre of the people in attendance to provide exactly what I am looking for in a professional association.”

“When I started my own business ... I began to question whether I was going to get much out of my IABC membership...Fortunately, I've discovered a dedicated subgroup of my



2004

The process of strengthening AIP in 2004-05 earned the group an IABC/Toronto OVATION Award of Merit in 2007.



2005

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The PIC executive now divides the work among six volunteers: a chair, past chair, and directors of communications, programming, membership and social media.

local IABC chapter that is made up of people like me who own our own businesses...My AIP membership is now the biggest reason I stay a member of IABC."

PIC today

The group rebranded in 2010 as Professional Independent Communicators (PIC), with a new logo developed by member Cathy Ledden, RGD.

Today, our band of indies attracts interesting and accomplished professional communicators to speak at our professional development events held every other month, interspersed with the occasional webinar and casual social

get-togethers where members can network and get to know each other better. Our newsletter, *The Buzz*, edited by current director of communications Sue Horner, has become a must-read, with news and insights relevant to independents. Regular member surveys help the executive to deliver topics and speakers that advance the particular needs and interests of independent communications professionals – with marketing, pricing, business development and social media as perennial favourites.

The PIC executive now divides the work among six volunteers: a chair, past chair, and directors of communications, programming, membership and social media. Current chair Sharon Aschaiek has helped to expand PIC's offerings by creating LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook presences for the group and introducing a mentoring program. She has also focused on diversifying PIC's offerings to include skills workshops, webinars, Tweet chats and themed socials. As well, she has initiated joint events with the IABC/Toronto chapter and with the Toronto chapter of the Professional Writers Association of Canada, in the latter case organizing a popular and well-reviewed day-long workshop focused on digital communications.



2010

AIP rebranded as Professional Independent Communicators (PIC), and a new logo developed by member Cathy Ledden, RGD (far left).



2014

PIC partnered with the Toronto Chapter of the Professional Writers Association of Canada to run Digital Day, a well-reviewed day-long workshop on digital communications.



“New members seem to be instantly comfortable with the group, and everyone is very open to sharing information, networking and being helpful with tips on business practices.”

In 2017-18, IABC/Toronto introduced a new board position that reflects the value of PIC to the organization: VP of Special Interest Groups. Sharon serves in this role and works to better meet the needs of the chapter’s independent practitioners, while also exploring opportunities for starting other special interest groups across the GTA.

Today, PIC has more than 135 members, many of whom tell us that PIC membership is an essential part of their continued membership in IABC. Some members are long-term independents, others are new to life as a solo practitioner. These members continue to endorse the value of PIC in our surveys, but no

one is more proud of the group than founder Jane Naczynski, who says: *“One way the group has evolved, that I hadn’t anticipated, is that today’s members are extremely professional (really, REALLY well-qualified to do what they do) and yet very warm and informal. New members seem to be instantly comfortable with the group, and everyone is very open to sharing information, networking and being helpful with tips on business practices.”*

She adds, *“The group has advanced beyond anything I ever dreamed of back in the mid-’90s. I hoped it would be a networking group, a referral group, a virtual chat-around-the-watercooler group. It’s been that, and so much more.”*

AIP/PIC Chairs:

1998: Jane Naczynski
1999: Pat Noble
2000: Ellen Gardner/Joan Endersby
2001: Adrienne Jones/Kara Kurylłowicz
2002: Adrienne Jones
2003: Maryjane Martin/Pat Noble
2004: Maryjane Martin
2004-06: Cyrus Mavalwala
2006-08: Barb Sawyers
2008: Frances Roberts
2009: Frances Roberts/Donna Papacosta
2010-13: Donna Papacosta
2013-18: Sharon Aschaiek



2017

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2018

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IABC/Toronto's Professional Independent Communicators:
A Brief History 1998 to Now
– By Donna Papacosta, with input from Sue Horner,
Sharon Aschaiek and past and present AIP/PIC members
Graphic Design Cathy Ledden RGD and Susan Mosdell RGD
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Toronto

