



“When an investor sees the SIOR designation beside a broker’s name, they know it comes with experience and quality.” This is how Landon Williams, SIOR, sums up the importance of continuing professional education (CE).

But notice the wording. Implied therein is the expectation that said broker is on top of his or her game; that the designation is more than alphabet soup bunched up after their names, but that they’ve kept up with the trends, technologies, and twists that the commercial real estate industry takes and can deliver on that expectation. It’s always been true that, to meet those client expectations, brokers need to feed on a steady diet of CE courses. What’s more, in the post-COVID

era of changing protocols dictating how we work and gather, it has become critical.

“Everyone,” says the Memphis, Tenn.-based senior vice president of Cushman and Wakefield, Commercial Advisors, “whether it’s new entrants to the field or the most savvy and experienced professional, everyone needs to keep learning.” Not only is it necessary in order to stay on top of new information, such as advancements in technology, but also, he says, to lay new information alongside old, to analyze the two against each other “to determine how they mesh.” That, he says, stands at the core of personal advancement.

“I wouldn’t be where I am today if it hadn’t been for the education available

within the real estate industry,” says Jeff Johnson, SIOR, president of NAI Black in Spokane, Wash. But, he adds, in order to do its job properly, a robust CE program needs some important ingredients: a combination of learning delivery systems—especially in this post-COVID, tech-enhanced era—as well as a mix of instructors, those pulled from the ranks of colleagues who can delve into the specifics of the business as well as “big picture types,” and thought leaders from beyond the industry.

David L. Liebman, SIOR, the managing broker of Chicago-based Merit Partners, LLC, provides a case in point: “I’ve had a business coach since about 2005 or so. It’s been a real help keeping me on track in terms of my professional

accomplishments, as well as helping me to explore other ways to do my business smarter, better, and more efficiently." Importantly, the idea of aligning with a coach came to him when he saw her present at an SIOR conference.

Your Attention, Please!

As Johnson indicated, more than ever, education programs are being offered in a variety of formats, in-person or virtual, via the digital device of your choosing, although he admits his first choice is in-person.

"I find that I get the most out of in-person formats," he says. "You sit down at a table of 10 brokers in the morning and then another 10 in the afternoon, so there's great networking. Plus, when it's live and people ask questions there's a great opportunity for the speaker to go down a rabbit hole with a story. That experience has the most value."

In-person or virtual, but especially for the latter, he says, the most important things are content and delivery: "I've been on calls where halfway through I'm asleep." He praises any program that offers both of those two essential elements, plus "the ability to interact and ask questions."

Williams agrees on the format issue, but not just for the better networking that one gets in person. Committing to attendance—and then showing up—provides what he calls "a built-in system to make sure we clear out the noise and clutter of the day and focus on the subject at hand. It forces the opportunity for us to focus, to pay attention, to learn and grow."

Yes, it's easier online, he notes, and he can get right back to business

afterwards. But it's more subject to the distractions that surround us. "During the hour, I find myself checking a couple of emails or responding to text messages." Online, therefore can become a trade-off between full attention and convenience.

Mythbusters

Now it's time to break a couple of myths. The typical assumption is that millennials, being the digital natives they are, would be more accustomed or maybe even more comfortable with online training.

"That's not to say education is less important to younger brokers," says Johnson, "but I do think younger brokers are more focused on social media and video." It was a view shared by all of the SIORs interviewed here.

But the truth is more highly nuanced than that, as SIOR Communications Director Alexis Fermanis explains. On one hand, "Early-career professionals typically adapt to virtual technologies faster," she says, "but we're actually seeing that emerging brokers find it more difficult to receive mentorship online."

This, she says, is a function of the opportunities that naturally come with lessons learned "in the field," including that all-important face-to-face networking. Of course, the demands of social distancing have severely limited those opportunities. Nevertheless, she says, that challenge is being identified and addressed by SIOR brokers who care deeply about the next generation of brokers and the state of the industry. "The beauty of SIOR is that it's all about the power of an excellent network—be it live or virtual—and our members have risen to the occasion to ensure that

education, mentorship, and collaboration are all at the forefront of their business."

Fermanis adds that the value of online education cannot be under-estimated, especially right now. Not only has the association been able to share critical COVID-related information to members constantly in search of answers through its ongoing virtual CE sessions, but "We've also been able to reach new audiences, since traveling isn't a factor currently."

CE in the Age of COVID-19

As she wrote in a recent blog,¹ associations such as SIOR that are strongly network-driven are "faced with rethinking their events and designation courses, conducting virtual events when possible and finding new ways to keep their members connected online."

It's an initiative that reaches far beyond the need to network. It speaks as well to members maintaining their certifications.

"Nearly all states require CEs to maintain licenses," she writes, "and many associations—including SIOR—require that licenses are active and valid to obtain designations. It's critical to ensure that brokers are staying updated with the latest tools and knowledge to excel in their field, both professionally and ethically."

Fermanis cites Lizzy Lokken, vice president of programs for the association, who addresses its pivot to more virtual events in this Year of Pandemics. She explains that if a member has had a course approved for presentation, it can be presented online, but that comes with certain guidelines. "What you present online has to follow

the same structure of what it was applied and approved for," Lokken says, adding that many states are lifting restrictions on the formats used to provide education requirements.

Flex to Stay Agile

Indeed, COVID taught us many things about CE. One of the other takeaways, as it pertains to content, is flexibility, says Williams, who says he's attended sessions that have both been done well and done poorly. "SIOR does it well," he says, especially when it comes to the need to pivot to address the ever-changing nature of the pandemic. "You can't plan 60 days out. You can pencil it in as an event but in terms of the details of content, everything is shifting too much."

Liebman agrees. "Over the past three or four months in particular we've had tremendous online meetings of specialty groups, such as tenant representation," he says. And it's not just at the national level. "One of the best was one put out by the SIOR Iowa-Nebraska Chapter about eight weeks ago." The presentation, by a small group of architects and space planners, focused on the post-pandemic reconfiguration of the office environment. "It was sensational—provided at the local chapter level."

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The past few months have challenged all of us to pivot, in Williams' words, and for our associations to redefine their messaging and respond to expectations for how continuing education is delivered. Nevertheless, a few constants remain.

"My expectation, whether it's SIOR or CCIM or through our firm," says Williams, "is the continued investment in our teams, which means investing in continuing education. Now more than ever, something you knew yesterday may be out of date today."

Liebman agrees. "We need to keep pushing the envelope farther," he says, "and continuing education is key to keeping our professionals fresh and up to speed in the marketplace. I can't think of anything more important." ▼

1. <https://blog.sior.com/covid-19-impact-on-commercial-real-estate-education>

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