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**RESILIENCE OF A MASONRY ASSOCIATION - LESSONS LEARNED AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Resilience is often thought of as a property of a material or product, but resilience is in fact, much broader than that. While the concepts of resilience are applicable to building products, they can also be applied to organizations and other systems. Resilience exists only in response to stressors. In 2020, the emergence and impact of the COVID-19 virus created an unexpected stressor on the world, and it has severely impacted individuals, families, communities, and countries. The impact on the economies of nations, companies, and individual families has justifiably gained much of the attention. Associations are also being affected, not only in how groups meet and conduct business, but also in the impact on the organization's staff and members.

This paper reviews the principles of resilience for organizations and discusses the resilience of one association, The Masonry Society (TMS), as an example related to its preparedness and its response to the unprecedented challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**KEYWORDS:** *association, finances, membership, resilience, response, staffing, stressor, virtual*

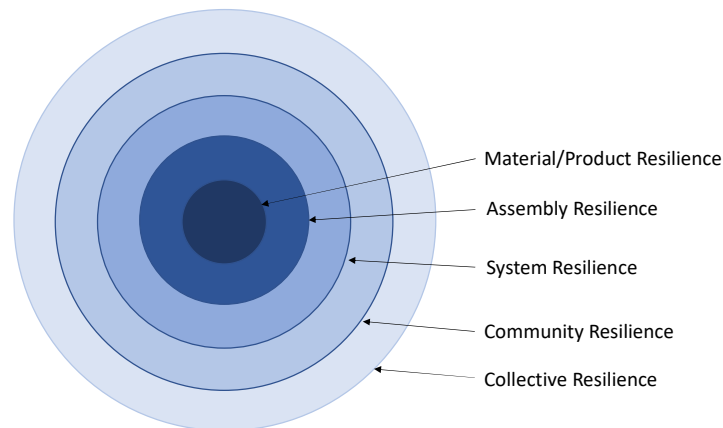
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## INTRODUCTION

Resilience is a concept that is increasingly talked about but often is not well understood. Some in the masonry industry think of resilience only as a property of a building material itself, related to the product's ability to withstand a stress or to recover from that stress. While this is one facet of resilience, the concept of resilience has much broader application. Consider the built environment with the image of concentric rings, with a material or product at the center. (Figure 1) Beyond that is the resilience of an assembly. Beyond that, a system such as a building, and beyond that, the resilience of a community, and extending on in similar fashion to resilience on a global scale. In this way, resilience does not only apply to products and materials. The concept of resilience can be applied to organizational and social systems as well.



**Figure 1: Conceptual View of Growing Resilience from Products to Systems to Resilient Communities**

## RESILIENCE DEFINED

VanGeem [1] reviewed definitions of resilience from numerous organizations as applied to the built environment and proposed the following definition.

“...resilience is to:

- Plan or prepare for the natural or human-caused hazard or event by anticipating the risk, which can include addressing risk and mitigating risk
- Adapt to changing conditions
- Withstand, absorb, or limit the impact while preferably maintaining functionality during the event
- Recover (preferably rapidly) and regain functionality after the event”

She also reports this definition proposed by the Resilient Design Institute, which applies beyond the built environment: “Resilience is the capacity to adapt to changing conditions and to maintain or regain functionality and vitality in the face of stress or disturbance. It is the capacity to bounce back after a disturbance or interruption.”

As noted earlier, resilience can be applied to organizations. According to the article, *British Standard (BS) 65000 – Guidance for Organisational Resilience*, [2] “BS 65000 defines organisational [sic] resilience as the ability to anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to events – both sudden shocks and gradual change. That means being adaptable, competitive, agile and robust.” Furthermore, the British Standards Institution’s *Organisational Resilience Index* report [3] identifies four “key areas of Organizational Resilience; Leadership, People, Process and Product” and 16 elements within them that business leaders have identified as central to supporting, developing, and maintaining organizational resilience.

This paper uses these definitions and framework to apply the principles of resilience to The Masonry Society, and examine its response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 as an example.

## **EVALUATING RESILIENCE**

This paper considers the status of TMS prior to the pandemic and the application of the four aspects of resilience to TMS: preparing for the event or stressor; adapting to changing conditions; maintaining functionality and vitality in the face of stress or disturbance; and recovering after a disturbance or interruption. The authors examine these aspects as they relate to the areas of leadership, people, process, and product.

### ***Background***

The Masonry Society (TMS) is a not-for-profit professional society located in Longmont, Colorado, USA, dedicated to the advancement of masonry knowledge, development, and its application. It was formed in 1977, and is led by volunteer members and a small staff of three full-time employees: an Executive Director, a Meeting Planner/Membership Coordinator, and a Publications Manager/Web Designer/Bookkeeper. The Society develops and disseminates knowledge and products through its volunteer committees, led by a Board of Directors, Executive Committee, Administrative Committee Team, and Technical Activities Committee. Products it develops include codes, standards, guides, and other technical publications, and educational offerings such as seminars, webinars, conferences, and workshops. Income is primarily received from sales of these products and services, as well as from membership dues, and occasional grants and sponsorships. Typically, the Society conducts two business meetings annually and has increasingly been using virtual meetings in work with stakeholders.

Current information on TMS, its committee structures, products, and services are available through the Society’s website ([masonrysociety.org](http://masonrysociety.org)), and an early history on the Society, its challenges and successes, was written by Tawresey and Wakefield [4]. More recently, Samblanet [5] discussed the Society’s development of structural standards, early struggles, and the effort to make the Society more resilient by becoming sole sponsor of TMS 402/602 [6].

## ***Preparing***

Though TMS has never considered preparations to deal specifically with a pandemic as part of office policy and operations, a number of strategic decisions made in recent years (prior to the pandemic) in preparation for other potential stressors, enhanced the resilience of TMS. These include:

- Development of financial reserves
- Expansion of products and services
- Initiation of virtual committee meetings
- Initiation of digital offerings (products and services)
- Re-creation of its website including adding an e-store
- Creating procedures and systems for digital sharing and access for staff and volunteers.

As discussed in more detail below, these and other preparations helped the Society better respond to the pandemic.

### Leadership – Preparing the Society

One of the key factors in the resilience of a business or association is its leadership; and in the case of associations like TMS, that includes both paid staff and especially the volunteer leaders. The leaders have important roles and responsibilities that are essential to ensure a resilient group. Leadership attributes contributing toward organizational resilience include vision and purpose, resource management, and financial management [3]. TMS leadership includes a full-time Executive Director, a 6-member volunteer Executive Committee, and a volunteer Board of Directors. In addition, an Administrative Committee Team oversees meeting, membership, outreach and other administrative duties, while the Technical Activities Committee leads the Society's technical work.

TMS leaders regularly review and utilize the Vision, Mission, and Strategic Goals of TMS in developing and implementing the yearly projects for the Society. In 2015, recognizing the possible decrease in revenue from printed publications and standards due to several factors, TMS's leadership embarked on a detailed financial study to forecast the cash flow and future revenue of the Society in order to prepare for potentially lean years in the future. These actions demonstrated resilience in preparation for potential adversity.

### People – Preparing for Change

People in this context refers to both the employees of TMS and its stakeholder relationships. As noted previously, TMS has three full-time employees. TMS's stakeholder relationships include those with members, outside organizations, and consultants. In a broader context, People also includes clients/customers/members, and being aware of their wants and needs and responding appropriately.

Staff preparedness is one area in which TMS experienced minor shortcomings due to the impact of the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, staff worked predominantly in the office in Longmont,

Colorado as a group, handling inquiries, shipping publications, and developing product. Staff requires secure computer access to do much of the work of the Society. Prior to the pandemic only the Executive Director used a laptop computer, and only he was set up with the tools necessary to work from home. Other staff relied on desktop computers located in the TMS office to do their work. The pandemic restrictions limited access to the office to one staff member at a time. This meant that other solutions were needed for staff to do their work. Equally important, training, hardware, and networks solutions were needed to be fully effective.

TMS members experienced challenges in responding to the pandemic in varying degrees as they were also prepared to varying degrees to adapt to a completely virtual environment and in most cases entirely work-from-home. Some members already worked from home and thus already had the necessary equipment, experience, and mindset to work virtually. Other members were not prepared, physically or mentally, for the change.

### Preparing Processes

Process refers to management and use of the organization's information assets, governance, and business continuity. Organizations need to have in place processes to do their work and supply their products by the people in order to be resilient in less favorable times. Many of TMS's processes had migrated to electronic and web-based forms prior to the pandemic as more efficient and effective means of conducting business. These changes prepared TMS well in light of the pandemic.

TMS interfaces with its members, stakeholders, and customers primarily through electronic means via its website, emails, and via an online ballot portal, and occasionally through printed pieces. The TMS website and ballot portal not only contain numerous resources of the Society, but are also a primary means of conducting the business of the Society. In 2016 TMS invested substantially in a new website allowing a more stable ballot portal used by Committees for their business, and incorporating an e-store that would be critical during the pandemic. In early 2017, TMS added the sale of electronic versions of its publications to its e-store. In 2019 TMS obtained a Zoom account for hosting meetings and webinars. This allowed TMS members and staff to quickly transition to virtual meetings during the pandemic.

As the Director travelled frequently for work, accessing Society electronic files had become a necessity many years ago, and as such, the Society has a Dropbox account for online file access. This system has also assisted with Committee access to key documents and jointly working on documents. This file access system was essential to adapting and maintaining processes during the pandemic.

Development of TMS's products, especially by Committees, follows strict rules and procedures that are included in the Society's Bylaws, Technical Committee Operations Manual, and internal policies and practices. Fortunately, in 2007, the Society had changed its Bylaws to permit electronic correspondence and balloting. These and related actions enabled the Society's online presence and online work platforms to continue throughout the pandemic.

In addition to the processes to engage members, customers, and stakeholders and to continue work of the Society, processes had also been put in place to protect the Society financially. These include creating reserves and savings to provide a minimum of three months of operating expenses. Processes to monitor the Society's financial health, and especially to project future sales/demands have been serving the Society in planning for a number of years.

### Product Preparations

Product includes not only the work products of the Society such as standards and educational resources, but also the capacity to adapt the output of the Society. Identification of changes, risks, and opportunities with products and potential innovations are also part of preparedness for products. In the case of TMS, its products serve as one of its primary revenue sources.

Forward-thinking is a sign an organization will likely be resilient when tested as they will be able to respond and innovate as needed. Over the last 5 years the leadership of TMS identified the need to diversify offerings and to offer alternatives to printed publications and in-person education. As a result, the Executive Committee worked to position TMS to increase virtual offerings in the form of electronic publications, webinars, and most recently, a Night School webinar series. All of these products and offerings were in place or under consideration prior to the pandemic, and each has helped TMS respond in a more resilient way to the needs/wants of its customers forced to work from home.

### *Adapting*

In order to be resilient, a system must be able to adapt to changing conditions. For an organization such as TMS, changing conditions may include environmental conditions, employee health conditions, financial conditions, regulatory conditions, and marketplace conditions. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, TMS adapted to all of these conditions in order to continue to operate, and in some instances, to grow and thrive.

### Leadership Adapts

Leadership quickly adapted to a virtual environment at the beginning of the pandemic thanks to processes in place for virtual meetings, email communication, online balloting, and more. A planned Executive Committee budgeting meeting transitioned to a virtual event early in the pandemic and was successful in part because of the small number of people involved, their familiarity with Zoom and other virtual meetings prior to the pandemic, their access to a home office environment, and a willingness to be flexible and work within the confines presented by the pandemic to ensure continued operation of the Society. However, planning required for the meeting was greatly increased on the part of the President and Executive Director. In addition, there was loss of the comradery that normally occurs with this gathering.

### People Adapt

For TMS staff, adapting to enable work from home was a primary consideration. Fortunately, the Publications Manager has a strong computer hardware and software knowledge and was able to

work with existing computer systems and networking options to enable access for all staff to office files while they worked from home. Because the Executive Director was already using Dropbox, file sharing was readily available. Some training and new hardware was required, but overall, TMS was able to use existing office equipment with minor additional purchases for employees to be able to work from home reasonably effectively.

TMS members also had to adapt to new conditions. In a survey conducted by TMS in March 2020, very few members expressed a willingness to travel and attend in-person meetings. Reasons for not attending included employer travel restrictions, concerns about contracting the virus, and general unease about the pandemic. As a result, TMS committee leaders adapted quickly to a virtual format for the 2020 Spring Business Meetings. The effectiveness of these meetings was enhanced by developing methods to allow hand voting during virtual meetings and handling discussions in an orderly manner. Taking into account feedback from the spring meetings, TMS leaders refined their approach to the fall 2020 Annual Meeting to provide not only an effective forum, but also an enjoyable one with a number of virtual social events including “show and tell” type events, a “Leaders and Legends” session, and a Game Night.

TMS people continue to adapt offering new and better ways to virtually meet, conduct business, and develop products.

#### Adapting Processes

The restrictions of the pandemic required formerly in-person events and meetings to be conducted virtually. At the time this paper was written, TMS converted 5 in-person meetings to virtual meetings: its spring 2020 and 2021 Executive Committee Budgeting Meetings, its spring 2020 Business Meeting, its fall 2020 Annual Meeting, and its spring 2021 Business Meeting. The change from meeting in person to meeting virtually affected the Society’s finances, staff obligations, the function of Committees, and members themselves.

As noted above, TMS leaders, staff, and stakeholders quickly pivoted to planning the 2020 spring Business Meeting as a virtual event. Lessons learned from this meeting were applied to preparations for subsequent meetings. Throughout the virtual meetings, staff and attendees learned tips and new options to better conduct virtual meetings and to engage participants. As part of the adaptation of these meetings to virtual events, TMS leadership recognized the need for and engaged outside resources needed to provide effective offerings, particularly for the social events that were part of the Annual Meeting.

Recognizing the potential decrease in revenue from canceling in-person events, staff efforts and marketing focused on promoting webinars and virtual education opportunities which yielded higher registration numbers than in the past.

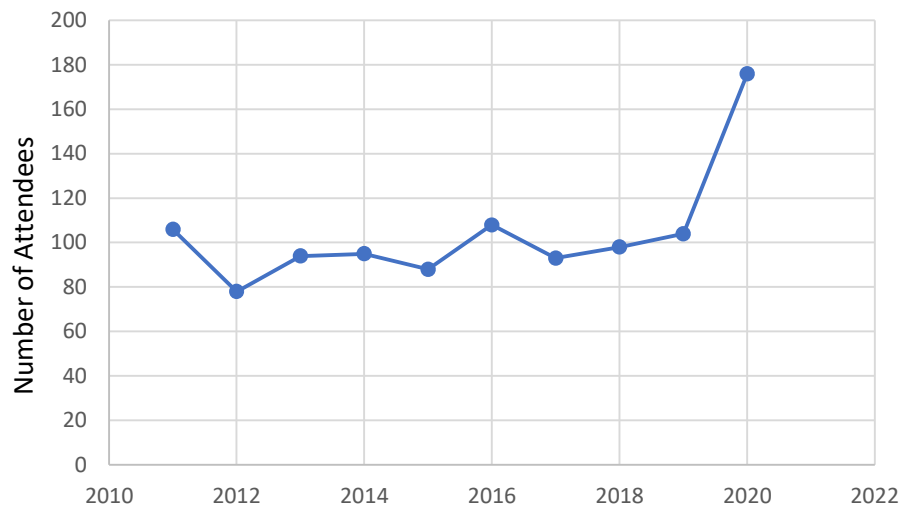
#### Adapting Products – Publications, Meetings, and Education

The Society’s delivery of many products was initially established based on physical offerings (books, guides, etc.) delivered to customers, members, and others. Fortunately for TMS, work

towards a more virtual environment for meetings and delivery of “e-publications” was started before the pandemic. Distribution of electronic publications increased by more than 50% during the pandemic, likely related to stay-at home orders encouraging some to have online access to publications and standards.

The products of the Society also include the business of its committees. Most committees adapted well to the virtual environment. One positive outcome was the increased engagement of members that would not normally attend in-person meetings. While attendance for TMS 2020 Spring Business Meeting was not directly recorded, attendance to the 2020 Annual Meeting was over 175, compared to an average of around 100 attendees over the previous four Annual Meetings (Figure 2), an increase of 75%.

TMS leaders also considered ways to offer additional “live” and “on-demand” virtual education. The concept of the virtual Night School during the fall of 2020 was expanded to another in the winter of 2021, and the decision was made to record all future live webinars for use in a new Masonry Education Hub/Learning Management System. This system allows “on demand” learning, capitalizing on the newly expanded repertoire of recorded webinars, and is nearly complete at the time of the writing of this publication. Currently TMS leaders are considering adapting other products to a virtual format, including a virtual educators’ workshop and other new e-products.



**Figure 2: TMS Annual Meeting Attendees by Year**

### ***Maintaining functionality and vitality***

Maintaining functionality and vitality through a stressor is essential for a resilient organization. TMS has been generally successful in doing this during the pandemic.

### **Leadership Key to Maintaining Functionality**

TMS leadership has effectively navigated the pandemic as evidenced by the continuing strength and vitality of the Society. TMS continues to groom new leaders, appointing needed officers,



directors, and chairs thanks in part due to processes in place prior to the pandemic. TMS leaders have also worked to maintain the financial health of the Society, monitoring cash flow and investing reserves and savings.

#### Maintaining functionality and vitality through People

TMS staff has been able to remotely view orders, access emails, make website updates, participate in virtual meetings, and access recording of phone messages. One staff member is able to go to the office daily to process orders, receive mail, process payments, and conduct other office business. Some tasks are not handled as effectively at home, and the synergy of working with the other staff is lost working remotely, decreasing effectiveness and efficiency, though a weekly Zoom meeting for staff and coordination of in-office time has minimized negative impacts. In addition, to promote staff morale, staff held a creative joint lunch, via Zoom, over the holidays with a trivia contest and other non-work-related de-stressors.

The pandemic resulted in one key loss, that of connection with colleagues that occurs during in-person meetings. These personal interactions and networking opportunities are an essential element of all TMS gatherings. TMS has attempted to address this loss in several ways including adding social events, more frequent emails to members, and more personal correspondence. For example, a concerted effort was made at the 2020 Annual Meeting to include virtual social events to allow members to connect and to maintain vitality of the Society. This expanded program was successful in providing light-hearted opportunities to interact and see each other's faces, including those who would not normally attend in-person meetings, and was appreciated by many.

#### Maintaining Processes

TMS has been successful in continuing association business. TMS committees are functioning well after a somewhat slow start at the beginning of the pandemic. Committee chairs and participants have adapted to the Zoom format, and have held effective meetings. Much work is getting done. However, the aptly named "Zoom fatigue" is increasingly evident with virtual meetings, and presents a challenge to maintaining a vibrant Society.

#### Maintaining Vitality Through New Products

In 2015, the Society moved to a one-time 6-year revision cycle (versus the previous 3-year revision cycle) for its primary product, the TMS 402/602 [6]. This decision allowed for development of new products that could sometimes not be developed during a shorter revision cycle. This decision helped TMS adapt its products to the pandemic, and maintain vitality of the Society through new product offerings. Work continues to create an Education Hub/Learning Management System and a number of new Committee guides and standards.

#### ***Recovering***

It is obvious that recovering from the pandemic and its effects will take time and will be a gradual process. In terms of office operations, recovery will be dictated in part by government regulations and the availability of a vaccine.

### Leadership Aids in Recovering

Continued emphasis on the virtual environment is likely to remain, even after the stay-at-home orders and other travel restrictions have been lifted. As a result, TMS leadership plans to continue many of the virtual offerings and is exploring further additions in the areas of hybrid meetings and additional virtual training/education.

### People Work to Recover

The effects of contracting COVID-19 have the greatest potential for negative effects on those with underlying health conditions and those of advanced age. In addition, the risk of a healthcare worker contracting the disease and then spreading it in their home or work environment is also a high concern. These risks impacted all of TMS staff in one or more aspects. Having all employees at heightened risk makes recovering ‘normal’ office operations more difficult.

Recovering is also related to one’s emotional health. In-person meetings are desired by nearly everyone, as staff, leaders and members miss engagement with their other TMS friends. New opportunities for people to engage are being considered, from retreats to “safe” social events.

### Recovery Through Processes

For TMS, many processes related to committee operations and Society governance are well established, but those procedures and processes were originally developed for in-person meetings and gatherings. As part of the recovery process, TMS is evaluating these processes and considering needed changes. For example, based on strong virtual attendance at meetings throughout the pandemic, TMS is discussing potential for “hybrid” meetings in the future, where some attend in person and others participate virtually. However, this model has many challenges associated with it, including complications with voting, managing discussions, and ensuring reasonable participation and fairness. In addition, costs to provide this service at a meeting venue can be high, and the impact on in-person attendance, and thereby the effectiveness of committees, is another unknown.

With regard to committee operations, other changes are needed to the Society’s procedures and manuals in order to maintain compliance with association rules.

Staffing needs are also being considered as some business will need to be conducted at the office or at in-person meetings, but some staffing functions may be able to be continue to be conducted remotely.

### Recovery Through Products

As noted previously, in recent years TMS has positioned itself to provide more virtual learning opportunities and electronic publications. Current project plans for the Society continue and expand this focus, with the hope that such offerings will aid in the financial stability of the Society, as well as broaden access and potential membership.

Considering the impact of the pandemic however, the Society may need to recover or expand financial reserves. While still uncertain at this time, the Society could face a sizeable penalty for future meeting cancellations.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

In reviewing the actions and reactions of TMS related specifically to the pandemic, a number of observations can be made in addition to those noted earlier in the paper.

- The pandemic-induced virtual environment is one of the primary impacts on TMS. It has had short-term and long-term, positive and negative, consequences on the leadership, people, processes, and products of TMS.
- Overall, having capability for virtual operations in place prior to the pandemic enhanced the resiliency of TMS in responding to it.
- Many businesses are considering continuing virtual operations even after the pandemic restrictions are eliminated. Such a decision affects office inventory, the potential for future construction, home office needs, future meeting scenarios, and more. TMS Executive Committee recognizes this and plans further discussions on the topic. TMS is unlikely to transition to a permanent work from home model, but having this option available provides flexibility now, and in the future. TMS Executive Committee will also discuss the transition to more electronic publications as part of future physical office needs.
- Keeping up to date with technology use and training for employees is important, allowing for more nimble response to stressors.
- Selective use of consultants can be effective to provided needed technology and assistance for short-term needs.
- Employee health can have a factor in maintaining operations.
- In-person, communal work environments generally result in more efficient work and a more congenial personnel environment. This is true for staff in the office and for members and stakeholders conducting meetings and working on projects.
- While virtual meetings can be effective, the camaraderie lost from in-person meetings cannot be underestimated, especially to those new to the group.
- In regard to future meetings, the possibility of “hybrid” meetings to accommodate both physical and virtual attendees should be considered. Cost for such meetings would be significant, and increased management would be needed to facilitate discussions and voting. However, as conditions related to the pandemic improve, the pent-up desire to travel, may lead to more physical attendees in the short term. In any event, careful planning will be needed related to the number of attendees, increased safety protocols (such as avoidance of buffets and finger foods), and potential increased meeting costs.
- TMS was fortunate to not be severely impacted to date by the pandemic, and key leaders and staff have remained healthy. Had that not been the case, TMS’s reserves would have provided some relief for hiring temporary staff or consultants, and its processes should have allowed for reasonable replacements of most leaders until they were healthy once again. However, the pandemic also revealed that in some cases additional redundancy is warranted in staff operations and training to ensure effective operations in the absence of one or more staff members for an extended period of time.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The virtual environment resulting from the pandemic is likely to remain a part of many businesses operations for the foreseeable future, at least in some capacity. The virtual environment allows for broader engagement and participation. Tapping into these new resources is important

consideration going forward. Organizations such as TMS should strive to maintain these connections and make more. Many associations have had declining membership in recent years; virtual connections offer potential for new members and more importantly more member engagement. By identifying opportunities such as these, through an examination of an organization's resilience to the pandemic, organizations can recover in a way that prepares for responses to future stressors in a more resilient fashion.

When considering the definitions of resilience noted in the Introduction including: "the capacity to adapt to changing conditions and to maintain or regain functionality and vitality in the face of stress or disturbance" and "the capacity to bounce back after a disturbance or interruption" as applied to The Masonry Society subjected to the pandemic, at present, it appears the Society prepared well, adapted, and will recover. Other stressors may show a difference in the resiliency of the Society, and thus leaders need to continue to be mindful of that as other leaders, processes, and products are developed to strengthen the Society. Other organizations are encouraged to consider the resilience of their organizations and to strengthen their groups using the discussions in this paper and particularly the cited works.

Furthermore, as the example of TMS illustrates, preparation for one stressor may aid in the resilience of the organization to other, unanticipated stressors. This is particularly true in the case of TMS when the organization's leaders utilize strategic planning and forecasting with an eye toward trying to anticipate future stressors.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors would like to thank current and former TMS leaders, members, stakeholders, staff, consultants, and clients in helping the Society throughout the pandemic and during the months of recovery. The vision and planning of past leaders especially helped position TMS to be resilient to this pandemic which no one anticipated.

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