

What I wish I had known about pursuing the CAE designation

By Kimberly Hopkins, DFWAE Board Member and 2021 CAE candidate

I recently started my 14th year in the association industry. About 8 years in, I discovered that there was a designation for the industry and started contemplating whether it was something I wanted to pursue, and its value in my career. In hindsight, I realize I spent much of my early career in association management entrenched in the industry in which the association I work for represents. When I decided to join DFWAE in 2014, it provided an outlet to build my professional contacts and gain access to relevant education for career growth that I had not had before.

As I attended DFWAE events, I would frequently come across DFWAE members who had earned their designation and it was a constant reminder and inspiration to me. I continued to question whether I had the time and focus needed to earn my designation and thought about it as being a far-off goal.

Then, I attended DFWAE A Day in 2018. I was introduced to Darrin Scheid while browsing the expo booth and there is no way he could have known how encouraging his words were. He briefly shared his CAE journey and how the designation has positively impacted his career. It was likely a 6 minute conversation from what I remember, but it inspired me and gave me the first realization that there are study resources available to CAE candidates. After A Day that year I decided that this far-off goal was something I did desire and for the first time, it wasn't as overwhelming to think about it.

In 2019, I wrote down on a sticky note that my career and personal goal was to take the CAE exam in 2020. The timing for this felt slow and steady and manageable. I had accumulated about 1/3 of the required continuing education hours in 2017 and knew that the hours were

good for up to 5 years so also had a sense of urgency and found the focus that I needed to launch me on the designation path.

2020, you were not the year any of us imagined! I ultimately decided I was not capable of adding to my responsibilities in my personal life so let my CAE exam goal slide into 2021.

2021 - a new year offers renewed focus and energy! I registered for the DFWAE CAE Study group, joined ASAE, purchased the recommended reading and for the first time clicked "Start CAE Application" on the website. Once again, it felt overwhelming as I realized I was not as organized as I wish I had been with tracking my continuing education hours, and literally went on a hunt to gather my hours which were captured in various emails, pdf certificates and account log ins. I could have easily decided to forego pursuing the exam, I thought "technically we are still in the middle of a pandemic and life is still a bit crazy". As I wavered again I attended the first CAE study group meeting and again felt inspired. The small group conversation and guidance I could envision receiving throughout the spring put a stop to my procrastination. Before the application deadline, I submitted all of the required items, and four days later I received notification that my application was accepted to take the exam in May or December.

To other individuals who have thought about pursuing their CAE, here are a few things I wish I had known the first time I dreamingly thought about my desire to work towards my CAE:

1. You are not alone in the CAE pursuit. Through DFWAE and other professional groups, there are individuals who are happy to share their experiences and they just might provide the inspiration you didn't know you needed.
2. As a member of DFWAE you have access to one of the most valuable membership resources; CAE's. DFWAE members who are CAE's openly share their wisdom and guide you - whether organically through your interactions on a committee, during networking or more formally such as the study group meetings.
3. It is never too early to start tracking your continuing education hours. Start a spreadsheet and have columns for the date, total hours, title of the education, brief marketing blurb, instructor name(s) and who the continuing education was through (i.e. DFWAE, ASAE etc.).
4. Take a brief inventory of where you feel you are lacking in knowledge based on the CAE Exam Content Outline and look for continuing education that addresses your gap areas.
5. When you register/attend a DFWAE event, your CAE hours are tracked in your member profile, making it easy for you to import into your application.

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Joining DFWAE to be inspired was not something that crossed my mind in 2014 but the opportunities are plentiful!

Congratulations to the 43 current DFWAE members who are Certificate Association Executives! And, a final thought to anyone who has contemplated their own CAE journey, get a sticky pad and write down "CAE exam _____" and fill in your year and get started.