

Concise Club Insights

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Happy almost spring!

It was so great reconnecting with familiar faces and meeting new friends at the CMAA World Conference on Club Management last month. The energy was high and there was definitely a buzz around **Notable**, which made it even more fun! This issue shares a few highlights from the conference — with more insights coming soon. Stay tuned!

With great appreciation,



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Introduction



Notable is a printable resource

This publication is designed to be easy to share with management teams and board members whether in print or uploaded to a private board or staff portal. Simply click the button below and ensure the print settings are at 100% scale (avoid "Scale to Fit" settings to maintain the intended layout).

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01

The Myth of the Plug-and-Play Employee

In the private club industry, leaders often pride themselves on their ability to hire great people—those with resumes that feature employment at other private clubs, high-end resorts or fine dining restaurants and who get glowing references from credible sources. While hiring for cultural fit, attitude and personality is a necessity, many leaders assume these employees can hit the ground running. They believe in the plug-and-play myth.

According to James Cronk of Guru Collective, these “experienced” new hires still require training. Long-tenured employees who know the club, the members and how things work also need regular training. “Even if the employee is competent, experienced and trusted, you must still invest in training,” he explained. “Experience does not guarantee alignment. Someone may be too formal, too casual or shaped by habits that don’t reflect your club standards. No matter how experienced, valuable and confident an employee may be, they can’t fully understand your club culture, expectations and the subtleties that make your club unique without proper training.”

Training is not just about the skills; it is about orientation, clarity, communication, expectations and consistency. Without clear, standardized training, each person or department creates its own version of the club brand which leads to inconsistent member experiences, inefficiencies, frustration and even resentment between departments. When training is ongoing and learning is part of the culture, even the most seasoned team members understand that improvement is a necessary element for success. Cronk says online training is ongoing, repeatable, consistent, adaptable and far more efficient than manuals or one-off in-person sessions can be.

Yet training is often where clubs try to save money, usually because of time pressures or the futility of investing in people who might leave. Cronk says **training is one of the few investments that directly impacts every member interaction, making it an investment that quickly produces a return.** Effective training helps:

- › Ensure employees understand and embody the club brand, values and service philosophy.
- › Deliver a consistent experience across departments and touchpoints.
- › Reduce costly mistakes and meet health, safety and compliance standards.
- › Improve cross-department communication.
- › Reinforce accountability and learning while building confidence and pride in every role.

“Experience is a strong foundation, but it’s only a starting point,” explained Cronk. “Training must be a priority that is intentional, ongoing and aligned. Not because your people aren’t capable, but because your standards are worth reinforcing.”

Listen to E06 of The Notable Exchange with James Cronk for more on the importance of employee training!

Resource: James Cronk, [Guru Collective](https://www.gurucollective.com)
James@golfindustryguru.com

LISTEN TO EP 06 OF THE NOTABLE EXCHANGE WITH JAMES CRONK

02

2026 Outlook: Clubs Enter with Optimism

The McMahon Group recently conducted a *Pulse Survey* of more than 240 club executives nationwide and found that leaders entered 2026 with renewed optimism.

- › 62% of clubs believe 2026 will be better or much better than 2025.
- › Nearly **40% of respondents plan to implement an inflationary dues increase in 2026**, while 54% will raise dues above inflation—a notable jump from the 38% who expected above-inflation increases at the start of 2025. The average planned increase is just under 7%, with several clubs considering higher or even double-digit adjustments.
- › 44% of responding clubs are increasing initiation fees for full/regular membership in 2026 while 54% reported keeping them the same.
- › 49% report a wait-list for full/regular membership while 51% do not.
- › **54% plan to spend more on facility improvements in 2026**; 25.5% will maintain current spending and 20% will spend less.
- › 77% reported that members make a separate capital payment in addition to or as part of dues. Of these, 48% plan increases in capital payments ranging 5 to 50%.

Resource: [The McMahon Group](#)

03

Interesting Findings from the NGF

The National Golf Foundation's latest annual report highlighted sustained growth over the last five years. Key findings are:

- › Off-course participation—including driving ranges, simulators and golf entertainment venues — has surged 63%, while on-course play has increased 20% in the last five years.
- › **Total golf participation has reached 48.1 million, a 41% increase** in the same period.
- › Youth engagement (ages 6–17) is up 58% and is more diverse than ever.
- › **Women's participation has grown 46% in the last five years.**
- › Influenced by social media, celebrities and lifestyle trends, golf is increasingly viewed as social, healthy, welcoming and fun—a significant shift from perceptions just a decade ago.

Resource: [The National Golf Foundation](#)

04

It's Not Strategic Planning OR Capital Planning—it's Strategic AND Capital Planning

Today's clubs operate amid aging infrastructure, rising costs, generational shifts in membership, labor challenges and heightened expectations around transparency and governance. In this environment, **separating strategic planning from capital planning is not just inefficient—it creates governance risk**. High performing clubs understand a fundamental truth: capital planning is not separate from strategy. It is what makes strategy executable.

A strategic plan defines *where* an organization is going and *why*. It clarifies priorities, establishes measurable outcomes and aligns leadership around a shared vision. Yet without a clear understanding of capital requirements, funding capacity, timing and tradeoffs, even the strongest strategy stalls during implementation. As Ryan Doerr of Strategic Club Solutions notes, “Boards often believe they have a capital plan because they have a reserve study or asset inventory. But in reality, they have a list —not a strategy.”

One of the most common mistakes clubs make, according to Doerr, is blending operating and capital decisions into a single annual budget process. This forces boards to make 25-year asset decisions using 12-month financial logic. High performing clubs intentionally separate the operating budget (focused on annual service delivery and staffing) from their capital budget (which addresses multi-year investment, renewal and risk management). “This distinction allows boards to **evaluate capital investments based on strategic value, asset condition, lifecycle costs and member experience** rather than short-term cash pressure,” he explained.

To fully integrate strategy and capital, Doerr recommends the planning framework includes:

1. Relevant input from the stakeholders, typically through professionally facilitated focus groups and surveys to ensure objective and unbiased data.
2. A comprehensive capital reserve study with a 20+ year horizon, not merely an asset list.
3. A distinct capital budget with a rolling 10-year outlook, evaluated through multi-year lenses.
4. Scenario-based planning tools, not static spreadsheets.
5. Integrated systems that link finance, banking and long-range planning.
6. Ongoing governance discipline that creates capital as a strategic function.
7. A clear people and professional development strategy.
8. Defined reporting and accountability structures that build trust through communication and follow through.

Strategy without capital is an aspiration. Capital without a strategy is a reaction. **Together, they create a roadmap that strengthens alignment, builds member confidence and position the club for long-term success.**

Resource: Ryan Doerr [Strategic Club Solutions](https://www.strategicclubsolutions.com) | ryan@strategicclubsolutions.com

05

PPP Loans...Should You Be Concerned?

The recent headline “*Wisconsin golf club to pay \$1.2 M for ‘improperly obtained’ PPP loan*” sent a rush of panic through the club industry. Westmoor Country Club in Brookfield, Wisconsin, must pay \$1.25M to the federal government to settle claims that it improperly obtained a loan through the Paycheck Protection Program, which was intended to support small businesses during the economic struggle following the Covid-19 pandemic. The *Golfweek.com* article reported the repayment was nearly double the amount the club requested.

At the time the club applied for the PPP loan and loan forgiveness, **the club limited its membership for reasons other than capacity, making it ineligible to participate in the PPP program**, the U.S. Attorney’s Office said in its statement.

Robyn Nordin Stowell, club attorney, shares that PPP Loans were tricky because the government was updating its guidance on a regular basis, sometimes more than once per day and advisors (banks, lawyers, and accountants) were giving conflicting advice. “These cases are impacted by when the money was taken and the borrower’s type of legal entity. **The lawsuits against clubs are primarily filed under a federal law that makes the resolution even more complex**,” she explained. “My firm has helped clubs, and communicated with other clubs and their lawyers, thus we have seen a range of resolutions, including dismissals. My advice is to bring in experienced counsel promptly because some early missteps may not be correctable so certain planning can be extremely helpful.”

Resource: Robyn Nordin Stowell, [Spencer Fane](#) | rstowell@spencerfane.com

06

Leadership Today is Built on Relationships, Not Control

As organizational charts flatten and teams expand, **leadership is becoming less about oversight and more about navigating information, decisions and relationships**. Research highlighted in the recent article “Why the burden of leadership is really about managing relationships” shows that “multiplex relationships” — where colleagues share both professional collaboration and genuine personal connection — lead to stronger performance and more open sharing of critical information. Trust, not hierarchy, is what drives the flow of insight. Leaders who intentionally build trust and authentic relationships strengthen team cohesion, elevate their credibility and improve group performance. Those who rely solely on micromanaging daily interactions often limit communication and reduce engagement.

In service driven environments where coordination and culture define the member experience, **trust based relationships accelerate problem solving, improve communication and strengthen team alignment**. Trust is the multiplier. Manage the work but invest in relationships.

[READ THE FULL ARTICLE](#)

07

Early Indicators of Bad Member Behavior

Are there early signs that a membership applicant could present discipline challenges later? According to Paul Dank of Member Vetting, people leave footprints behind that are simply waiting to be found. While these factors are not automatic disqualifiers — **they are signals that warrant further understanding and thoughtful follow up before admission.**

- › Sponsor inconsistencies– **Sponsors provide conflicting or unusually limited insight.**
- › Repeated civil judgments– A pattern of legal disputes that may suggest ongoing conflict.
- › Lifestyle incongruence– Lifestyle or values appear inconsistent with observable behaviors.
- › Unexplained employment gaps– Significant gaps in work history without clear context.
- › Contradictory online presence– Public social media or digital footprint conflict with statements made in the application or interview.
- › **Defensive or vague responses**– Evasive, overly defensive or unclear answers when reasonable questions are asked.
- › Financial patterns misaligned with club tier– Financial profile suggests potential strain in meeting dues, assessments, or spending expectations.

“These indicators are not reasons for rejection on their own,” explained Dank. “But they are prompts for deeper conversation, verification and careful evaluation to protect club culture and the member experience.”

Resource: Paul Dank, [Kennis Member Vetting](#) | pdank@membervetting.com

Quick Notes

You Aren't Using AI Enough

During a session at the CMAA World Conference, Steve Lerch, a former Google employee, said he uses AI more than 60 times a day. He explained that human nature is to resist change, yet we will never go backward to a world without AI. **Rather than fight it, he urges leaders to embrace it.** He recommends four primary uses for AI in order to be as efficient and effective as possible. 1) Brainstorming or generating new ideas. 2) Simplifying processes or breaking down complexity to make it easier. 3) Drafting or creating written materials. 4) Improving clarity, tone or usability (make this sound more friendly, make these instructions for beginners, etc.). “If you save 30 seconds or if you get two good ideas, it was worth the 10 seconds it took to type into ChatGPT. We have to learn to use this free super power at our fingertips because it will only become more prevalent in the world,” he said.

Resource: Steve Lerch, [Story Arc Consulting](#)

A Little Friendly Competition

Last year, five country clubs in the Charlotte area collaborated to create the Local Country Club Tween Olympics. **Planned and executed by youth directors from each club, the event brought together children ages 10–13 for a friendly but spirited competition** featuring pickleball skills, a golf chipping challenge, a ninja warrior course, relay races and puzzles. Participants earned medals and a high-energy closing ceremony awarded first place trophies, creating a memorable, community building finale. The overwhelming response from families and participants has already cemented the Olympics as an annual tradition! This idea won the Idea Bank Award for it's category.

Is Padel the Next Evolution in Racquets?

Pickleball has evolved from an optional enhancement to a foundational amenity, prompting forward-looking clubs to ask what comes next to sustain participation and energy. A recent article in *Club + Resort Business* predicts padel as the natural next step. Positioned between tennis and pickleball, it offers greater athleticism and strategy than pickleball while remaining more accessible and social than tennis. With decades of global success and more than 30 million players worldwide, padel combines a built-in social format, fast rallies off glass walls and a modern aesthetic that attracts curiosity and engagement. As tennis remains foundational and pickleball has become a cultural pillar, **padel provides a compelling third lane—helping clubs diversify racquet offerings, maintain momentum and position themselves as leaders** in the next phase of racquets participation.

[READ THE CLUB + RESORT BUSINESS ARTICLE](#)