The word ‘association’ simply means ‘a group of people organized for a joint purpose.’ But in the context of the professions, the word ‘association’ has acquired an additional meaning. In the context of the professions, the term ‘professional association’ has come to refer to the organization which serves the interests of, and provides services to, the members of the profession. In this context, the term ‘association’ is used in contradistinction to the term ‘professional regulatory body’ which refers to the organization that serves the public interest by governing and regulating the members of the profession. The fact that the word ‘association’ has these two different meanings has caused and continues to cause, all sorts of confusion. HRPA is an association is the sense that it is ‘a group of people organized for a joint purpose,’ but HRPA is not an association in the sense that its purpose is to serve the interests of, and provide services to, its members.

Take the expression ‘regulatory association,’ it can be heard in two different ways. HRPA is a regulatory association in that it is ‘a group of people organized for a joint purpose’ and its core purpose is to govern and regulate its members in the public interest. But others hear something different—some hear ‘HRPA is an association which serves the interest of, and provides services to, its members but which has also been granted powers to regulate its members.’ The former interpretation is correct, the latter interpretation is not.
It is sometimes said that HRPA is both the professional association and the professional regulatory body for Human Resources professionals in Ontario. In this context, the term professional association is clearly meant to refer to an organization that exists to serve the interests of and provide services to, its members. HRPA is not both the professional association and the professional regulatory body for Human Resources professionals in Ontario. HRPA is both an association in the meaning that it is ‘a group of people organized for a joint purpose’ and it is a professional regulatory body in that its core mandate is to govern and regulate its members in the public interest, but that is not what is usually meant or understood when it is stated that HRPA is both the professional association and the professional regulatory body for Human Resources professionals in Ontario.

Actually, HRPA is not the only professional regulatory body to struggle with this confusion. The regulatory body for professional engineers in Ontario is the Professional Engineers Ontario (PEO). But this is not their statutory name. The name of the professional regulatory body in the Professional Engineers Act, 1990, is the Association of Professional Engineers of the Province of Ontario. In 1990, the Association of Professional Engineers of the Province of Ontario chose to operate under the name Professional Engineers Ontario (PEO) for two reasons. The first was that Professional Engineers Ontario sounded more modern, but the other is that it did not want the public to confuse it with a member benefit or member advocacy organization. More recently, the Certified Professional Accountants used the same approach. The professional regulatory body for Chartered Professional Accountants in Ontario goes by the name Chartered Professional Accountants of Ontario or CPA Ontario. There is no mention of ‘institute’ ‘association’ or ‘society.’ Using this approach, the professional regulatory body for Human Resources professionals in Ontario would be the Registered Human Resources Professionals of Ontario or RHRP Ontario.

Although the ambiguity of the term ‘association’ does lead to confusion and misunderstandings as to the mandate of the HRPA, it is not as if getting rid of the word ‘association’ as was done by the Professional Engineers and the Chartered Professional Accountants would solve the problem. An interesting discussion in this respect is the one that occurred at the, then, Law Society of Upper Canada (LSUC) in 2017. In the context of meeting the organization’s strategic priority to ‘engage stakeholders and the public with responsive communications,’ the Law Society of Upper Canada had come to the conclusion that the name of the organization, particularly the words “Upper Canada”, were a barrier to connecting with the public¹. Research had shown that only seven percent of the public were familiar with the Law Society. The reasons for a name change were given as (1) overcoming confusion over the geographic area the Law Society represents; (2) to make the organization more accessible; (3) to present a name more reflective of the diverse population of Ontario; and (4) to have a name that is consistent with the institution as a modern, forward-looking regulatory body acting in the public interest. In November 2017, the Law Society of Upper Canada voted to change its name to the ‘Law Society of

Ontario. The Law Society did choose to retain the word ‘society,’ despite the fact that some felt that the term ‘society’ was confusing to the public as well.

It is not only HRPA but many professional regulatory bodies that struggle with the fact that their name doesn’t help in communicating to the public exactly what it is that they do—whether they use the terms ‘society,’ ‘college,’ ‘association,’ or none of these in their name.