



Julia Hamm

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Les McKeown: Hi, everybody. Welcome back to another episode of scale with Predictable Success. And today I am really delighted to have Julia Hamm, the president and CEO of Smart Electric Power Alliance (sometimes called SEPA with us). Julia, welcome to the podcast.

Julia Hamm: Thanks so much for having me, Les.

Les McKeown: Well now you and I go back a while. We've worked together for many years, but for our listeners who don't know what the Smart Electric Power Alliance is, who Julia Hamm is, Eust tell us a little bit about your background, your, your own history of how you got to SEPA, and what it does.

Julia Hamm: Sure. Well, let me start with the organizations. So SEPA is a nonprofit and it's been around for multiple decades now. So it was formed back in 1992 and actually has changed a lot over the course of the years. But today we are focused on fulfilling our vision, which is a carbon free energy system by 2050. And so we work across the electric power industry to help all stakeholders with keeping up to date with what's happening with technology, policy and markets, and, really focusing on the electric utility industry, the entities that regulate that industry and the technology companies and other solution providers that work with electric utilities ultimately to, provide more clean energy on the system for the benefit of customers. And we do that through education, through research, a lot of stakeholder convening and facilitation. We are not a trade association, so we don't do any advocacy or lobbying, but really focused on being a unbiased resource for information and problem solving for the industry.

Julia Hamm: So I have been, I first started working for the organization a long time ago and 20 years ago now when I was just a year out of college in 99. And I came in again, very entry level, fulfilling, sort of, a role where we're, we're, we're multiple paths working with the board, helping with membership, doing some meeting planning. I left after a couple of years of doing that to go take on a different position in a related organization, but then came back as the CEO in 2004. And so I have been the CEO for a long time now - for 16 years, and it's been a fun ride.

Les McKeown: It's looked like a fun ride. And, you know, our listeners are, many of them, just like me, they're business model nerds. What's your essential business model. How do you, how do you stay around?



Julia Hamm: Sure. So we have a relatively diverse set of revenue streams. Although once we start talking about COVID, we'll talk about where, what needs to happen with that going forward. But about 50% of our revenue comes from trade shows and conferences. So convening in person events about 20% is from membership dues. Another 10 to 15% is from government grants. And then the rest is from contracts with individual companies where essentially on a fee per service basis, we are helping them, with their own specific needs related to introducing more clean energy into their system.

Les McKeown: Got it. And so you alluded, you know, all of that's being abandoned, obviously we'll talk about that in a moment or two, but if we could just, spool back, just, I don't know, it depends how you look at it either three months or 400 years to the pre COVID time, just as you, as you were coming into 2020 in your world and the world of SEPA, what was new, exciting, challenging? You know, what, what did your big 30,000 foot strategic challenges and excitements look like before this all hit?

Julia Hamm: So well, we've been around for a long time and it's been working with the industry on incorporating more clean energy, really where we were coming into 2020 was that we, we as an industry have reached this tipping point where it was a bit of a challenge in the years and decades past to pull people into this momentum of the importance of more clean energy for the purpose of really reducing carbon because of climate change. And, but we, we, again in 2019 really was the tipping point where the industry realized that they had to up and play a leadership role. This could not be the industry being reactive to policy mandates or reactive to individual customer requests. And instead that they need to play a leadership role in driving change. And that is a significant change and really put massive momentum behind SEPA because that is all, you know, it is what we're about is helping companies do that. And so there was the swing from, for decades, really trying to handhold and sort of pull people along to this momentum change of, we don't need to pull people along anymore that they're going on there, they're going, and they need our help.

Les McKeown: Right, right. And that was a long time coming and must have felt, you know, really good to have got there. And maybe beginning to get less of a sense of you, you know, with this Sisyphean task of pushing the rock uphill, you and SEPA and your fellow organizations and beginning to feel, okay, there's something happening here and we can follow along and build on it. There's a lot happening here and we can follow along and build on. And then March early March mid-March happens. I think I get the feeling just as we were recording this coming towards the end of June, I think we're beginning to come to a point where we starting to be able to see a bit of a shape of a narrative back in March. You know, I know for me, I, I, at the time I just was doing what I needed to do, but I can now step back a little and say, okay, the first signs for me were this...

Les McKeown: ...and the biggest challenge was that, how did, how did that, I want to trace through to where we are now and then spend the majority of our time talking about where you



see the future for you, for you and SEPA, and how you're trying to design that future. But how did this all build - What's the narrative for you? What was the first inkling that you're going to have to do something and, you know, talk us through just the pragmatics - our folks love to hear, you know, just the reality of what it was like to take your organization, - you maybe can share something about number of people, if you're comfortable with that - what were the mechanics of being the CEO? What did you need to do in March and April?

Julia Hamm: Sure. And I can talk about that both from sort of an internal perspective with our staff or team, and then an external perspective in terms of our work with the industry internally. So we are a team of about 50, and 75% of us are based in a DC headquarters office. The other 25% of folks always worked remotely from home offices in various locations around the country, not necessarily by design, but because they are subject matter experts and a relatively limited pool of people who are qualified for those jobs. So

Julia Hamm: We were already as an organization quite far along in terms of our ability to effectively have people work remotely with 25% of the people always doing that. You know, we had the technology solutions already in place. There was already an expectation that when we did meetings, we were using video so that our remote employees could video into those meetings and see the people in the room. So the actual transition going from an office environment to a remote work environment, I would say relative to a lot of other organizations, I think was pretty simple for us. There were a couple of last pieces. So actually this is, I seem like a genius in hindsight, there were, there were a couple of trial policies that I've put in place at the, in the fourth quarter of 2019 that made it seem like maybe I had a crystal ball when I didn't.

Julia Hamm: It was just coincidence. But one of them was that I had put in place a trial policy that all employees could work from anywhere one day a week. And so, you know, we were testing that out. I can see how it was going to get, to see how it went, and then it's going to make a decision at the end of whether that would be a, mmm, you know, a, I don't want to say permanent, but a policy with no specific end date. So that putting that trial policy in place actually forced our team to start working on some of the last pieces of the puzzle, that it would effectively let everybody work from home remotely. So for example, we had, moved almost everything to the cloud already over the past few years, but our accounting system and our HR files and documents were all still on an in house server. Well, when I put in place, the everybody can work from anywhere one day a week policy. It forced our IT folks to start working on how do you move those things to the cloud as well. And sort of, there are a couple other things like that, that, coincidentally. So we started also working remotely on March 13th, which was a Friday. So whatever that, whatever that Tuesday was 10th or whatever, the date March 10th or 11th, it was the day that everything officially I had moved to the cloud.

Julia Hamm: The other thing I had done was put in place a trial policy that everybody that we would, we used to have a policy where people could wear jeans and dress relatively casually. We're generally sort of very business, casual environment, but jeans and sort of more dress



down was for Fridays only before, but at the end. But in last, the second half of last year, put in place a trial, Everybody can wear jeans and dress more casually every day, unless you have external meetings, you know, and of course, of course now we are all wearing, you know, shorts and, you know, whatever we want every day trial policies are both now, you know, really, truly embedded.

Les McKeown: And then as far as your, your forward facing client activity, what, what were the biggest changes to hit you in the early stages.

Julia Hamm: Yeah. So it's interesting to manage the team through this because I've got, we have a phenomenal team and they are wonderful. Yeah. Many of them, especially our subject matter experts are very action oriented and they're very mission driven and action oriented. So when this all happened, they immediately wanted SEPA to pivot and start doing things, to help our members With things that were they're new problems that were resulting from COVID.

Les McKeown: Right.

Julia Hamm: And, you know, I had to help the team take a step back and say, listen, I understand our customers, our members, have this new set of problems in front of them, but they're not directly connected to our mission. So in fact, what we need to do as an organization, okay. Get out of their way. Right. We actually, we actually need to let them know we are supporting them by not bombarding them with information right now, or by not distracting them with things that are important, but not urgent.

Les McKeown: Yeah. It's easy to forget this back in the days when, you know, somebody I bought a 99 cent app from on the app store sent me you know a four page email reminding me to wash my hands. We were, everybody was doing that. So you took this view not do that. And I guess I was part of not being a trade association - it's not your job to fix everything for your members. It's your job to stay focused on your mission. Right. That makes a lot of sense.

Julia Hamm: Yeah. Yeah. And I think that was tough for a lot of members or at least some members of the team who said, no, no, no, but we, we are a membership. We're not trade association, but we are a membership organization. We should do whatever we can do to help our members. And I said, well no, are, we are a mission based organization that happens to have members - I had to remind people of that. So, so yeah, so, you know, we really, you know, when we took the pulse through our board and some other members who are customers were particularly close to, to that, that was the right approach. and, and that it was, they said, yeah, you know, and you have to keep in mind, a lot of our members are electric utilities. So they're the people who are providing all of us with the electricity we receive every day. And these are companies who don't ever have employees work remotely, and many of them have thousands or tens of thousands of employees. So they were not only trying to figure out how do we keep the power on, how do we maintain the system How do we, when somebody has a service problem



at their house, so we're not supposed to be interacting with people or getting close to people, how do we do that But at the same time, they had to figure out how to transition their entire workforce to work remotely. So

Les McKeown: They're mostly not - I've gotta be careful because these are your customers and clients, but, you know, utilities historically are rarely that nimble. I mean, immediate flexing is not something that, that industry has required. The half life of the information and products that they're offering they're offering is quite long. So that, that in itself has got up in a challenge. Right.

Julia Hamm: Well, you know, but, but it's, but it's actually a fantastic, and that's one of the big takeaways I'm hearing people talk about already out of us is that they have proven that they can do it. They can be nimble, they can act quickly. They did a phenomenal job in this situation, pivoting to doing something totally different. And so that they've actually proven that they can do it.

Les McKeown: And I just, I I'm, I'm talking as a total lay person, obviously here, that feels to me like a relatively untold story. You know, when we're thinking about emergency workers, we're going to the medical side of stuff. So, you know, delivery drivers are being talked about and no doubt, you're hearing a lot more of a being in the industry, but for those of us, a little distance from it, I'd never really thought about that from the utility point of view, just keeping the lights on and needing to pivot to do that.

Julia Hamm: They're absolutely essential workers. There's no doubt about that.

Les McKeown: So then we start to realize this is not a bad dream and it's going to have impact. What, what were the biggest moving parts in terms of perceived and likely impact to your own business model

Julia Hamm: Yeah. Well, for us, like I said, 50% of our revenue comes from getting people together in person trade shows and conferences. So, yeah, we, you know, we host probably somewhere on the order of 15 to 20 in person events of varying sizes every year. And, you know, they, they literally range from taking a group of 30 people abroad for a week to study what happens in another market up to a 20,000 person trade show and everything in between. So we, okay. You know, again, in those early days, and I think sort of just as I'm talking to you, I'm sort of realizing what, one of my own sort of personal takeaways out of this and sort of, what I think we did right. Was patience - having patients was the right answer in so many of these situations because when March 13th came, that sort of seems like the day, right

Julia Hamm: Like March 13th, suddenly the light bulb seemed to go off that this was real and meaningful for the US you know, we had a meeting, we were supposed to be a conference. We were supposed to be hosting in early March of, you know, 400-ish people. We had, you know, another one and basically every month we have at least one big thing like that. And then our big



trade show or 20,000 person trade show was scheduled for September. I watched as other organizations like us, that host meetings all scrambled to postpone their events in late march

Julia Hamm: And April originally, it was sort of late March and April, everybody scrambled to postpone them to July and August. And we waited. and in hindsight, right, all of those people that postponed to July or August had to do it again. Right. And they're back in the same position. And we waited to make decisions. We monitored what was happening. We knew what the trigger points were. If there were specific dates that were contractual or related to our constituents, our customers having to make decisions about whether they're going to go to something or not, but we did not rush to make changes to our plans. And I think that worked out for us well.

Les McKeown: Clearly did - and that give you some breathing room then. And, I noticed in the interactions that you and I have had during this time that you're following an arc, that I see the upper quartile of responsible organizations have followed as well, which is, you know, immediate triage, all hands on deck just to mechanically what's needed. Hold off, hold off, hold off. Pivot. Sure. Any immediate pivots, do that, but what for the, not for the smoke to clear, cause we're nowhere near that yet. But least to get enough, of a view, to begin, to start to think creatively about what do we do next. I've been calling it leading from 5,000 feet. You know, typically we're used to being up here at the 30,000 feet level as leaders, we went down to a runway level and we were good at because it needed to be done. But now we're just up a little bit, 5,000 feet level - it's nothing like what it was before, but we've got to start at least thinking about how to plan now. What has that felt like for you? Have you been off on the mountain top on your own a lot? Do you have a small team, a group that you've worked with a lot? What are you, what are you doing, what tools are you reaching for to try to get your head wrapped around What next, what do I do next?

Julia Hamm: Yeah. So I would say that it varies well at the, at the organization level. I mean, obviously, you know, I have, I've got an executive team, so it's myself, my chief operating officer, my chief strategy officer. So the three of us obviously do a lot of, yeah,

So that team gets together. And what have you been, you know, where's your head as a team? What are you looking at? Are you looking at three months? A year? Just throwing things against the wall...?

Julia Hamm: Yes. Yeah. You know, we're thinking about things sort of the longer term things. And I'll talk about that in a second, but I think it's also important to note that we are also, there are other teams of people that are focusing on specific pieces of the business and what that needs to look like. So, and that has been working well. And you know, you and I have had a lot of conversations about how to facilitate innovation in this environment and within sort of where SEPA is and the Predictable Success model. And okay. I do think it has been working well that we've got different teams of people thinking about planning and plans and shifting and innovating



and but yes, at that, at that executive level, it wasn't until again, I was waiting for the dust to settle a bit. So at that executive level, our executive teams started talking about scenario planning in June.

Julia Hamm: So probably mid to late April was when I felt as though the dust had cleared enough that I could reasonably start thinking about scenarios. Right. And so, and really from a timescale perspective, really primarily focusing on the next 18 months and thinking about what - I already had a grip on what this year looks like. I, you know, and this year is a wash, you know, this year is just, it is what it is. It's not pretty, fortunately we're financially healthy enough that we can ride through using money we've got in the bank for this year. So my primary concern was around what 2021 would look like.

Les McKeown: With that emphasis on event, planned events, you don't have the option to wait until you get there. You've got to start thinking about that. All right.

Julia Hamm: Yeah. Yeah. Yep. And so, you know, we created three scenarios for what we thought 2020, really getting focused on 2021, but also one of the scenarios is sort of like absolute worst case, which then bleeds beyond 2021. But I think the more real, you know, we're hoping, and I think of the more realistic scenario is that if we can manage through 2021, well be okay again. So we have not made any decisions about 2021 at this point, but we have the scenarios we are in the midst of our 2021 planning process. We always start planning for the next year in May or June. And so the team is planning now, but we won't make decisions until fourth quarter. Right. Then, you know, so obviously we're never going to have all the information we need. There are still probably going to be a lot of uncertainties, but it's sort of back to this patience point, right

Julia Hamm: I'm going to wait until I have as much information as I can possibly have until we have to make decisions about what 2021 is going to look like. So the team is planning with the full acknowledgement that from a resources standpoint, we don't know what resources we're going to have available. And so they're planning with that in mind so that when we get to fourth quarter, we have a better sense of sort of what the financial picture might look like. We can then put into the official sort of final plan, which is always important, the possibility that could change as we get into 2021. But the plan as we head into 2021 will be based on the best available information we have fourth quarter.

Les McKeown: And I'd love to move to talking for a bit about the internal communications of all of that and how you've been handling that as leader. But before do I just want to pick up on one issue here, but I happened to know that many of our listeners would love to hear just a little bit more about it when you talked about, putting those internal teams together. So you've got your, you know, in our work "TI", the senior leadership team, doing their work. And then you mentioned, you've got a number of teams doing stuff on individual aspects, innovating and individual topics. Are those by and large silo-ized teams, or are they cross functional, or are you



doing both, which what's been your approach to that. Do you let the subject matter experts do that? Do you encourage cross-functionality or some of both?

Julia Hamm: Culturally, everything we always do is cross functional. It is very rare that there is ever a siloed team working on something that is part of our nature. You know this 'cause we've talked about it, but we work in this team of teams environment. Right. And so any project, you know, whether it's a well-established project or some sort of innovation project always has people from across different functional areas to provide different input and perspectives into it. So, yeah, so yeah, it really is a cross functional effort. Although there are cases I will say, you know, with some of the things we're focused on right now, in terms of really sort of future looking, how might we need to pivot if large in person events are more challenging in the future and potentially could generate less revenue for us. There are some things that the team is working on where I have provided specific guidance that like, I know normally this is the group of people that you would have, you know, you are, you know, saying, Hey, you executive 'A', you are accountable for this innovation project, including putting together the team. And I know that this is normally the people you would probably pull for that, but in this environment, I want you to be think outside the box about who are other people on the team who really are good at thinking outside the box and put some of those people on the team as well, because, and this is just a place where we've got to think differently and not just think the way we've always

Les McKeown: In our terminology here. As you know, in Predictable Success that we talk about injecting the 'V', you know, getting the visionary aspect of the VOPs model to broaden that out a little bit, Julia, talk to the challenges you have faced as a leader, generally just communicating all of this. And talk to us a little bit about that. What's the approach you've taken with internal communications is often, as a, infrequent, but content driven. What's been your style and nature.

Julia Hamm: Yeah. My style has definitely been, there is no thing as over-communicating, and I've gotten amazing feedback from the team about that. And so as soon as we went all remote, we started having weekly, all hands staff meetings. So prior to this, we used to have monthly all hands staff meetings. So we've now been having weekly all hands staff meetings, and one of the technology tools, is that, that hadn't been in the plans, but was not prioritized until we all went remote was essentially Slack. I mean, Slack is not the brand we use, but an internal Slack chat tool. Yeah. So that launched within a week of us going virtual and I am in every group. And I am constantly in, it's both the work-related things, but also the social things in the recipes group and in the parents, the parent support group.

Julia Hamm: And, you know, it's, I'm in the social distancing, funny memes group, you know, and I'm contributing. And so people are seeing I'm, I'm making sure that I'm really visible, both, both on a professional level and a personal level, so that people still feel very connected to me, but yeah, over communicating, you know, I feel like this is, I I'm saying this too many times, but not again, this is sort of, I feel like I'm over communicating, but I'm not, because I'm saying it to different audiences. But one thing that really has stuck with me was a comment from a member



of our team. So we do, we've always done quarterly staff surveys. So when we did the end of Q1 step survey, you know, sort of it was happening in the first two weeks in April. So I got the result in mid April.

Julia Hamm: So, so there were a few weeks of, of COVID in that. And that was what was fresh on people's minds when they were taking it. And one of the, one of my employees, I made a comment in the survey that, that a takeaway for them out of all a learning from them out of this already was that no news is still news. And what they meant by that was that, you know, as we're having these weekly staff meetings, I'm very conscious of saying, I know you guys are really anxious about XYZ thing last week. I told you that this had happened. This had happened with it. Nothing has changed since then,

Les McKeown: Right. So important. Otherwise people - it's a vacuum, people fill it, you know, they, they they'll imagine stuff or presume stuff. That's really powerful and, probably a great segue into the two questions I'd love for us to close out with. One is just for you to reflect back on your own journey thus far. And I, sorry to say that, I think just literally this week as we're recording this, I'm beginning to get the sense that thus far as not as far as we thought it was, but thus far, what have you learned about yourself as a leader? And also just as we speak to hold myself transparent, that's towards the end of June. What do you feel for sure for next year for SEPA? So what are the, what, what have you learned about yourself as a leader thus far and what, if anything, do you know for sure for SEPA for next year?

Julia Hamm: What I have learned about myself is that prior to this experience, if you had asked me, so what are my strengths and weaknesses as a leader, I would have said that my strengths are all of the external facing things that I do, and that my weakness is all the internal stuff. And what I've learned is that that's not an accurate statement. What I enjoy and what I get energy from is the external facing stuff. But I'm actually very good at the internal stuff. I just don't enjoy doing it. So it's not a matter of it being a weakness and that I'm not good at it. It's just not what I, how I prefer,

Les McKeown: Not what your preference was. Right. Cause I do, I do recall you said that to me, many times that, you know, the forward facing stuff is where you felt your strengths were, but this has proved that you've actually got all that it takes to do the internal stuff. It's just not what was floating your boat. What about the future?

Julia Hamm: Oh, geez. I don't know. I feel like there is a lot of uncertainty. I mean, the only certainty is that I don't think the future will look like the past.

Les McKeown: Right. That's as far as it goes, right?

Julia Hamm: And what I think about it from a, how we operate standpoint, you know, we have had, for years, we've had a lot of our employees are based in the DC area saying, "I don't



understand why I can't work remotely". Right. "Why can't I work remotely all the time?" And No, I never had a good answer for that. And then now I'm like, well, we, there isn't any reason. I mean, do we lose, do you lose some value from not being together in person? Yes. But do you gain as much, if not more in other areas than what you're losing in sort of that rapport, you know, sort of the, the water cooler chat that happens physically? And yeah, I think I land at it's either a wash, you gain as much as you lose, Or maybe even in a number of cases you gain more than you lose.

Les McKeown: Right Right. Certainly March wasn't the time to assess that maybe not even early April, but I think we have all begun to get a sense of whether this has been a net positive for each of us individually or not. I do think one of the things that, hearing and watching and seeing is if, and when we do get to about to the point where that's an option, I think the cohort of folks who will always want to come in every day, they'll still be that cohort, but it will be smaller. The cohort of people who given the option would want to continue to work from home will be much larger. But I think there's a whole new thing evolving, which are folks not only entirely comfortable, but who want a distributed approach, who want to be able to come in and get that vibe when they need it.

Les McKeown: Maybe use it for strategic thinking, creative thinking just as a break in routine, but who can then snap back and maybe get into ultra productivity mode when they're working in a more isolated environment one way or another. You know, one of the reasons I asked you on, Julia is because of the, just the sheer privilege of watching you operate. In a sense I've had the privilege of seeing your brain work through a lot of those things we've discussed - many of the options that you have. And it's just as a remarkable job that you've done, I really appreciate you coming on and sharing with us here. I know our listeners will take so much away from it. I've said to some of the other folks, recently on the podcast that, I really want to come back in a year from now and wherever we are, and touch in and see, you know, how things develop, because we're, we're in a massive change, amongst many, many other things, much of which is, you know, hugely negative. We're in the middle of a fascinating case study, you know, I would love to explore it a little longer, but for now, Julia, thanks so much for joining us.

Julia Hamm: Oh, thank you Les - and not just thank you for having me on, but thank you for all the guidance you've given me. You're been a huge help and Couldn't have gotten to where I am without some of the insights you've given me throughout this journey.

Les McKeown: My pleasure.