Headquarters

BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE MEETINGS INDUSTRY

MAY 2025 #119

HQ

THE ASSOCIATION MAGAZINE



A Conversation with Sandy Biback
Is Your Event Secure from Human Trafficking?

BEFuture
How Can Events Bring Real Value for People, Communities and the Environment?

Prague Event Hub
A Comprehensive Event Solution with Top-tier Facilities

Salzburg & Valencia
How Are They Building Legacy Into Their Attendee Experience?

Victoria Matey
Behaviour, Psychology and Neurodesign at the Service of Your Event

Cover Photo:
Cubex Centre Prague

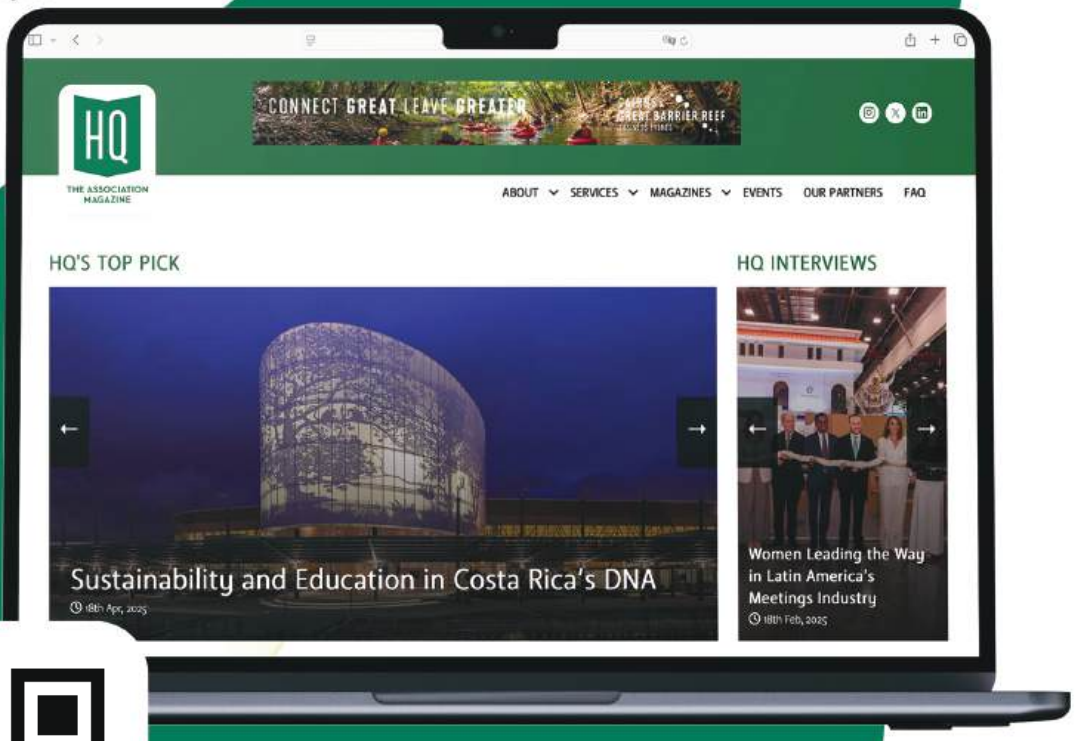
ICCA Member

DELEGATE EXPERIENCE: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE HIDDEN RISKS!

The HQ you know.
Now easier to explore.

Refreshed web design. Same mission:
Building Bridges in the Meetings Industry.

Explore our redesigned website with sharper content, new PCO & Event Management services, and Association Research consultancy, all tailored to support your growth and elevate your events.



Scan to visit meetingmediagroup.com

Subscribe to our newsletter for updates and curated meetings industry insights.

HQ
THE ASSOCIATION MAGAZINE

Editor's Letter



Delegate Experience and the Changing World of Work

Author: Marcel A.M. VISSERS, HQ Editor in Chief

My lifelong interest in motivational psychology has always stemmed from a desire to understand why people choose to act or not act in certain ways. My academic background focused largely on Human Resources Sciences, and this foundation led me to spend over a decade working in HR management. Yet the world has changed considerably since then. The evolving social environment shapes not only our personal lives, but also profoundly influences how people behave within professional settings, including the business events sector.

In this May edition of *HQ*, we explore a series of themes that reflect the shifting perceptions of work and engagement among today's professionals. One of the most pressing questions centres on the risks of over-personalisation: how can organisations, and indeed, event organisers, balance innovation with privacy and well-being?

The ideal working environment is often defined as a balance between employer and employee: where employees engage with passion and commitment, and employers provide a framework that nurtures this engagement. However, reality is more complex. Motivation levels vary, and individuals differ in their perspectives on the relationship between work and leisure. In the meetings industry, where personal connection and face-to-face interaction remain central, these shifts in expectations present both challenges and opportunities for event planners and designers.

Labour psychologists broadly agree that today's conversation revolves around aligning employees' needs with organisational goals. In the context of business events, this alignment now extends to the delegate experience. Events are increasingly being shaped with participants' mental health, sense of belonging, and overall well-being in mind, recognising that meaningful engagement depends not just on content, but on how people feel.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, remote working and digital communication have become entrenched parts of professional life. While reducing travel can bring environmental benefits, the meetings industry is built on the irreplaceable value of in-person interaction. Understanding how hybrid models, online engagement, and physical meetings complement each other remains a vital field of exploration for our sector.

In this new context, well-being has emerged not only as a workplace concern, but as a critical pillar in the design and delivery of meetings themselves. I encourage you to read the contributions on this topic carefully throughout this issue. I am confident you will find valuable perspectives to guide your future strategies.

HQ #119

READ ONLINE
meetingmediagroup.com

WRITE TO US!
press@meetingmediagroup.com

CONTENTS
MAY 2025

EDITOR'S LETTER — 3
INTRO — 6

SPECIAL FEATURE
HQ Fam Trip Tips — 7
WCO 2026 — 8

ASSOCIATION INTERVIEW
Comité Européen des Entreprises Vins — 10
ICCA Advantage — 13

HQ ESSENTIAL
Meeting Professionals Against Human Trafficking — 15
Victoria Matey — 18

THE ASSOCIATION MAGAZINE

BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE MEETINGS INDUSTRY

EDITOR IN CHIEF
Marcel A.M. Vissers
marcel@meetingmediagroup.com

MANAGING DIRECTOR
Vivian Xu
vivian@meetingmediagroup.com

MAGAZINE MANAGER
Manuel Fernandes
manuel@meetingmediagroup.com

DEPUTY EDITOR
Jesús Guerrero Chacón
jesus@meetingmediagroup.com

COMMERCIAL MANAGER
Jesús Parrado
jparrado@meetingmediagroup.com

EVENT PROJECT MANAGER
Jerilee Pinto
eventsupport@meetingmediagroup.com

GRAPHIC DESIGNER
Xu Shihao
design@meetingmediagroup.com

RESPONSIBLE EDITOR
&
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE
Mechelseplein 23/1
2000 Antwerpen, Belgium

FINANCE & ACCOUNTING
finance@meetingmediagroup.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Press@meetingmediagroup.com

RATES
80€ in Belgium
95€ in the EU
110€ in the rest of the world

CEEV
Regulations, Climate Policies, Trade Tariffs and Public Health



MPAHT
When We Outsource Labour, Are We Buying a Legal Service or a Human Being?



Victoria Matey
When Human Psychology and Neurodesign Leads to Event Solutions



INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATIONS

DESTINATION
BEFuture — 22
ICCA Iberian Chapter — 24
New Zealand — 26
Prague Event Hub — 28
Salzburg — 30
Valencia — 32
Australia Destination Report — 35

EVENTS
IMEX Frankfurt 2025 — 37

ASSOCIATION INSIGHTS
AIPC — 39
ESSA — 40
Mark Levin — 42
CityDNA — 44

PCO INSIGHTS
Kenes — 46
IAPCO — 48

TECH
Expoplatform — 50

New Zealand
Incorporating Māori Culture into Your Conference



Valencia
Legacy Embedded in Their Destination Strategy



CityDNA
A New Era of Delegate-Centric Experiences



IAPCO
Balancing Technology and Personalisation in Modern Events







A Blended Meeting Experience: **Mind**, **Body** and **Soul**!

Author: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager

The cradle of Western civilisation, of politics and democracy, of art and philosophy, of temples and gods, **Athens** also displays through its tangle of museums, monuments, and ruins, the basic pillars of this industry and the foundation of the concept of association (i.e. 'joining partners'). Whilst sitting on one of the countless rooftops of Monastiraki, my eyes gazed in awe at the majesty and timelessness of the Athenian **Ágora**. Acting as the heartbeat of the city, the Ancient Ágora was the centre of Athens' social, political and commercial life in classical antiquity, where political meetings and debates took place, as well as elections, religious celebrations, trade decisions, theatrical performances and athletic competitions. A large square surrounded by several prominent public buildings, the Ágora (from the Greek 'assembly') was the theatre of oratory, the art of persuasion, and the symposium, playing a fundamental role in the formation of Athenian democracy – the quintessential place for public discourse, political intervention and negotiation.

Understanding the notions and perceptions of what is 'beautiful' and 'right' today requires a stroll through history, in the way the body has been thought of, felt and interpreted. In ancient Greece, being a handsome man was fundamental; but being a beautiful woman was a sign of trouble. Life was easier for muscular, well-groomed men, where beauty was a gift from the gods and a sign of honour and integrity. Beautiful women, on the other hand, were considered perverse and the standards of the time favoured full-bodied ladies with red hair. Many philosophers were also lovers of physical exercise. In their teachings, they recommended that their disciples cultivate the training not only of the mind, but also of the body, because body and mind are inseparable – what the Romans later adapted as *"Mens Sana in Corpore Sano"*. According to the masters, it would be much easier to have a "healthy mind in a healthy body", and they even had a word for it – *kaloskagathos*. (small note: in an interview I recently did with the **Vice-President of Sales** at **Sands Resorts Macao**, she told me that the "big post-pandemic trend emerging at the moment is health and wellness. The truth is that most planners are asking for wellness proposals to be incorporated into their event programmes.")

Many of the concepts that exist in modern neuroscience have their origins in these more systematic observations about the structure and functioning of the body, the mind and the relationship between these two entities. Central questions about the origin of human thoughts, the mechanism of cognitive activity and the nature of emotions, perception and voluntary movement, for example, were raised by the Greek thinkers. In my interview with event psychology advisor, **Victoria Matey**, we explore how a greater understanding of human psychology and behaviour can lead to more effective event solutions through neurodesign and biophilic design. After all, the rules, norms and values of a specific society are inscribed in the body, as it is the individual's primary means of contact with their environment.

Human trafficking in the meetings sector? It may be closer than you think.

Did you know that in Canada, 93% of sex trafficking victims are Canadians, not foreigners? That the vast majority of victims of human trafficking reported by the police were women (97%). Or that First Nations, Inuit and Métis women and girls, youth under guardianship, homeless youth, people with disabilities, refugees, migrants, and LGBTQ2 people are the most vulnerable. From an **Action Plan against Human Trafficking**, we spoke to one of the project's partners – the meeting planner **Sandy Biback**, who gave us some startling revelations about this harsh reality on the meetings and hospitality industry. Check it out in this issue.

HQ Tips

Rethinking Fam Trips: What They Reveal About Your Destination

First impressions count, and for many association planners or trade media, a familiarisation trip is the first real test of your destination's event potential. It is where planning meets practice, and where a rushed or generic programme can create more doubt than confidence. With tighter travel budgets, busy schedules and increased scrutiny of long-haul travel, these experiences need to feel focused and well-structured.

At *HQ*, we attend dozens of fam trips each year. While each destination is unique, some patterns emerge. The strongest itineraries reflect the real delegate journey. The weakest leave participants unsure of what the destination truly has to offer. When planning a fam trip, do you wonder if your fam trip is tailored to the right audience, and does it showcase your destination's strengths? We share key observations from our own experience to help destinations design more focused, impactful programmes.

Authors: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager
Jesús Guerrero Chacón, HQ Deputy Editor

For us, the concept of attendee experience often begins long before the delegate steps into the conference venue. For many participants, whether journalists or association planners, the first impression is made by email. From how invitations are written, to the clarity of the programme and ease of travel, every pre-trip detail sets expectations. When logistics feel disorganised, the trip already starts at a disadvantage.

Here are some tips:

1. Define The Purpose And The Right Audience

Is the trip designed for association buyers who need to convince their Board? Or for media representatives who will write about the experience? Mixing the two is possible, but only if the programme serves both. Know who you are inviting and be clear about what they need to see and understand. One-size-fits-all will fall short.

2. Show, Do Not Tell

If your destination highlights sustainability, inclusion, or social impact in its marketing, show it in the programme. Let participants experience it: use public transport, minimise catering waste, partner with local legacy projects. Values shown through real choices leave stronger impressions than those explained in presentations.

3. Avoid Overload

Avoid squeezing in too many venues and hotel site inspections or sitting guests through presentations that could be emailed. Have a new marketing video? Share it before or after. People remember what they experience, not what they are told. Use the precious time of the trip to create tangible impressions that they will take home with them.

4. "I did not come here on holiday, I am here on business!"

You would be surprised how many times we hear this DURING fam trips, dear reader. Of course, as a destination manager, you should draw attention to the identity and lifestyle of your city and include some incentive activities to get guests off their feet, but do not turn your trip into a playground of futility. Participants travelled to exchange views with your partners, meet your stakeholders and hear from your leaders. They are not there for three days of wine tastings!

5. Connect the Dots – Vetting Process is Critical

Considering your key sectors and event leads as a 'backdrop' for these fam trips, do not forget to make a smart match with travel professionals. Scout and pick agents, journalists, associations or companies that make the most sense given the cross-sectoral areas and commercial aspirations of your destination. You would not want to invite a resort blogger to visit your convention centre, right?

6. Be Professional, Be on Time, Stick to the Schedule

As the saying goes, we never mind being late unless we are on the receiving end of it. Respecting people's time shows respect. If a particular visit has taken longer than expected, track the time to the next stop or politely ask to proceed. Also, keep itinerary changes to a minimum. Your guests' professional and personal commitments do not end just because they have taken three days off from the office.





Meeting Media Company Makes its Debut as PCO

Marking an ambitious turn in our trajectory of more than three decades in the association event industry, Meeting Media Company (MMC) has decided to embark on a new journey as a Professional Congress Organiser (PCO) by taking on the **World Customs Organisation (WCO) Technology Conference & Exhibition 2026**.

With extensive experience and expertise in supporting associations as a publishing house dedicated to the MICE sector, MMC – publisher of *Headquarters Magazine* – has now expanded its services to offer comprehensive PCO and event management solutions for international organisations.

Due to be launched this year, our company's brand new services offer complete event planning and management solutions, including strategic planning and logistics, exhibition and floor plan design, networking and catering, and sponsorship acquisition and management.

"Adding our PCO services to our media portfolio is no easy task, but we have been preparing for this moment for quite some time. Winning the bid for the WCO Technology Conference & Exhibition 2026 is a test of MMC's ability to compete and grow in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. We are truly excited to collaborate with WCO's event and content team to deliver a truly remarkable event," says **Vivian Xu, MMC's Managing Director**.

With the recent appointment of **Jerilee Pinto** as **Events Project Manager**, MMC is ready to take on the new role of WCO's official PCO for its 2026 conference and exhibition. "I am thrilled to be onboard with MMC as part of the team and contribute to such a significant project. I thrive on collaboration and building connections. I look forward to working closely with the team, strengthening relationships, and contributing to our collective success," Jerilee says.

Furthermore, MMC will also focus on destination-focused events, including association gatherings and networking events in Brussels and around the world, such as the collaboration with **Vlerick Leadership Club in 2024**, a corporate event for key corporate leaders to network and discover their potential incentive destination.

Following on from this, our company will resume its yearly association event in Brussels with a reimagined format. This annual gathering will continue to recognise and celebrate association leaders for their organisations' achievements, while also offering a valuable opportunity to network with destinations and meetings industry suppliers.

The Beginning of a Great Story

Founded by MICE writer **Marcel A.M. Vissers** in 1992, MMC was created to fill a critical need in the industry through its flagship magazines: provide innovative leadership, industry updates and strategic guidance, while offering clear and reliable content to an entire community of associations, planners and destination marketing professionals.

Today, under the new leadership of Vivian Xu, who has led the company through nearly a decade of growth and innovation, MMC remains dedicated to its mission of building connections and driving progress in the meetings industry through collaboration and expertise.

Based in Brussels – one of the four global hubs for international associations – our Belgian company has found itself in a privileged position to leverage the deep connections built up over 30 years, and to offer impactful events that demonstrate the connection between these two ecosystems.

For more information about these services, contact Vivian Xu at vivian@meetingmediagroup.com



HQ ESSENTIAL INTERVIEWS &STORIES



"The **US Wine Market** is Crucial to the **Sustainability** of Our Sector and There is Currently no **Viable Alternative**"



The ***Comité Européen des Entreprises Vins (CEEV)*** has been the voice of European wine companies since 1960, involved in the production of wine and aromatised wine products, such as vermouth or sangria, throughout the European Union. Representing over 90% of European wine exports, the organisation's main mission is to identify, monitor and influence legislation that could impact the sectors and members they serve. In turn, the EU is the world's largest producer, consumer, exporter and importer of wine, accounting for 63% of world production and 57% of world wine consumption.

In this conversation with **Ignacio Sánchez Recarte, CEEV Secretary General**, we talk about challenges and opportunities related to a wide range of issues, from wine-specific regulations and fiscal measures to environmental policies, trade concerns and public health issues.

From the point of view of the producers to the current nexus with consumers, what is the commercial landscape before us? What is your assessment of the current European framework?

Representing the voice of the European Union wine sector certainly facilitates our work, as we are widely recognised as the point of reference by both the European Commission and the European Parliament. We actively participate in official advisory groups and stakeholder dialogues that the EU institutions rely on to gather insights and shape future legislation. However, while EU legislation can serve as a powerful catalyst for growth, it can also present challenges – particularly when it becomes a barrier to the competitiveness of our companies. The final link in the value chain – the moment a product meets the consumer – is critical. Our role is to help shape a regulatory environment that allows companies to arrive at that point in the best possible condition. The outlook is not without its challenges. We operate in a fragile sector, one that relies on a delicate balance. Safeguarding that balance – and ensuring a fair, competitive, and coherent framework across the Union – remains a top priority for us.

Between April 2020 and March 2021, CEEV issued two "COVID-19 Wine Packs" assessing the impact of the pandemic on the sector's trade and suggesting a set of recommendations to the European Commission. Almost four years after the second pack, how do you see the sector's growth and progress?

Under the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, the wine sector does not benefit from direct support in the same way as some other agricultural sectors. Instead, we have access to a tailored set of specific measures, designed to support our unique needs. One of the main instruments is the promotion programme, which allows wine companies to receive up to 50% co-financing for activities aimed at developing third country markets. This includes participation in international events, fairs and exhibitions, as well as the preparation of essential studies for export expansion. In addition, support is available for investments in tangible and intangible assets to modernise grape and wine production. These measures are crucial for enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of our production systems.



In recent years, the EU wine sector has shown a remarkable degree of resilience in the face of unprecedented challenges, including the COVID-19 crisis, ongoing geopolitical instability and the growing impact of climate change. However, the cumulative intensity of these pressures is making it increasingly difficult for our companies to remain competitive on the global stage. It is therefore essential that the EU continues to recognise and strengthen the strategic value of our sector, maintaining and improving the tools that allow us to adapt and thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape.

> *"Threats or opportunities can be initially identified either by a company – which then alerts us through our network of national associations – or directly by our team in Brussels.*

How can the wine industry fight bad press and dispel exaggerated stereotypes about the sector? How has your association been working to recreate a 'sexier, cooler' image towards consumers?

Fortunately, awareness of the risks of alcohol abuse is growing. For over 15 years, the European wine sector has been promoting responsible drinking through our '**Wine in Moderation**' social responsibility programme. The aim is to educate and empower consumers to enjoy wine responsibly and appreciate its cultural value. Our sector is made up of over 99% SMEs, who do not engage in aggressive, large-scale marketing – it is not in our culture or in their budgets. Instead, the connection with consumers is built locally, usually through wine tourism. With 36 million oenotourists in the EU annually, this growing trend helps link the product to its producer, landscape and heritage in a meaningful way.

How has your association guided its partners, suppliers and SMEs towards best practices and sustainability standards for the sector? Do you provide benchmarking tools, sustainability indices or quality seals to your members?

We work closely with our members to ensure that sustainable wine production practices are properly identified and recognised by legislators, retailers, and consumers. Our efforts begin at the international level, where detailed technical standards are adopted by the **International Organisation of Vine and Wine** – an intergovernmental body established in 1924. At the national level, our members have developed various quality labels to reflect these practices. The next important step is securing recognition at the EU level for the general principles of sustainable grape and wine production.

What is your take on the regulatory landscape for the European wine market? Is CEEV satisfied with the rules imposed by the EU or would it like to see some changes to protect the sector?

The wine sector operates in one of the most complex and regulated legal frameworks, and we welcome this in order to maintain fair and secure conditions for our operators. This specific legislation has allowed us to be the first sector authorised to use a digital label – e-label – to communicate certain mandatory information (the list of ingredients and the detailed nutritional declaration) to consumers. This new rule has been instrumental in simplifying the marketing of our products across the EU.

The EU Single Market is a vital pillar of our sector's success. Preserving and strengthening it is essential. Unfortunately, in recent years we have seen a gradual erosion of the Single Market. Increasingly, national legislation is creating fragmentation, making it more complex, more expensive and more difficult for businesses to reach consumers across the EU.



In a climate of tariff crisis, how do you plan to deepen ties with other American associations so as to protect transatlantic trade? How does the association intend to better represent its members in a highly pressurised economic context?

The US wine market is crucial to the sustainability of our sector and there is currently no viable alternative. We have been actively talking and collaborating with the European Commission and Member States to ensure that wine is not again caught in the crossfire of unrelated trade disputes. We maintain a strong and trusting relationship with our US counterpart, the **Wine Institute of California**. In 2020, we signed a joint declaration outlining the principles of wine trade, advocating a 'wine for wine' approach – ensuring that wine is excluded from unrelated trade conflicts. With our US partner, we also try to facilitate dialogue between our two administrations.

> *"Our sector is made up of over 99% SMEs, who do not engage in aggressive, large-scale marketing – it is not in our culture or their budgets.*

Can you outline the main projects and partnerships in which CEEV is currently involved?

On a cultural level, we launched ***VITAEVINO***, a grassroots campaign aimed at defending and promoting wine culture. On the technical front, we are involved in a significant EU project centred on soil health. We are also part of an alliance advocating the use of digital tools to improve consumer information, as well as the '**Close the Glass Loop**' initiative, which aims to achieve 90% collection of glass packaging for recycling across the EU by 2030. Internationally, we work at the **International Wine Federation (FIVS)**, where I currently serve as co-president. Through the FIVS, we work to promote the overall sustainability of the global wine sector.

What will be the highlights of the meetings for the CEEV community and its members in the coming months?

We are currently preparing for our **General Assembly**, which will take place in July in Lisbon - a particularly special occasion as we will also be celebrating the 50th anniversary of our Portuguese member, **ACIBEV** (Association of Wines and Spirits of Portugal.) This milestone will be marked by a high-level Summit with important institutional and industry figures - more details soon. We are also actively working on the 2025 edition of the **CEEV Club of CEOs**, our advisory group made up of around 30 CEOs from leading European wine companies. This meeting offers a unique platform for strategic dialogue and high-level exchange within the sector.

ICCA Advantage: **Keeping up** with the Demands of a **Fast-changing** Industry!



Never has it been more important than today to adopt a proactive mindset in seeking out new learning opportunities and keeping up to date with the drivers of an ever-changing sector. Two months ago, ICCA announced a new programme designed to increase this awareness among event professionals with their minds on international meetings. **ICCA Advantage** is a targeted solution to propel business events forward with real-life case studies and tailor-made, personalised training sessions.

With more than 1,000 members across 91 countries and territories, ICCA is not only the association events industry's leading benchmark but also the preferred one-stop shop for courses and training that meet the demands of these areas. Following this rationale, ICCA Advantage offers organisations the opportunity to face challenges that may be holding back their progress by providing practical solutions. "ICCA Advantage aims to provide customised training on various subjects that are top of mind these days, including bidding, sales, business and market planning, technology, AI, DEI and more. The sessions are especially designed for the needs of each individual organisation, making each training tailored to the issues voiced by the organisation itself," **ICCA CEO Senthil Gopinath** tells us.

Reaping the benefits of over 60 years of history, exchange, knowledge and trust, the ICCA database allows members to access exclusive statistics and analyses. By providing relevant white papers and guidebooks, tools and resources for associations, this two-way avenue also makes it possible to curate a library that reflects the methods and templates with which associations bring their events to their members. "The topics we plan to include in this first phase include convention bidding, marketing and branding for destination promotion, risk and crisis management, sustainability, impact and legacy, DEI and AI. On the latter, we are working with **Insights Lab** to produce a programme focused on how to use AI to generate and qualify leads, maximise trade show ROI, and develop data-driven actionable propositions," says Gopinath.

Two months ago, a group of German DMC professionals took part in '**BidSmart**', a two-day programme organised by the Berlin Convention Office and supported by ICCA Advantage with a focus on convention bidding. Instructors led participants through practical exercises and discussions focused on essential topics, including feedback on current bidding documents, a summary on the most defining and promising leads in the market, and bidding strategy assistance. **Marco Oelschlegel, Director of Conventions, Berlin Convention Office**, said: "We are delighted that ICCA introduced its seminar 'ICCA Advantage BidSmart' especially adapted to the needs of team members who are new to the topic of bidding. Together with the international experience of the ICCA team, it provided valuable impetus for future bidding processes." Adopting new technologies and innovations becomes more user-friendly for those who prioritise continuing education. ICCA Advantage seeks to harness the power of cutting-edge technology and new forms of personalised learning to empower its participants. "The Berlin example incorporated topics such as generating and prioritising business leads, along with insights on how to improve current bid documents, competitor insights and analysis, and advanced bidding techniques. This allowed the teams to work together on concrete case studies, opening up many opportunities for optimisation," adds Gopinath.

ICCA Learn: A Collection of Courses for Our Members

Additionally, ICCA Advantage is yet another segmented proposal that adds to the vast list of offers within **ICCA Learn**. The educational portfolio aims to support members at different stages of development and help them on their lifelong learning journey. "Professionals need to update and re-train regularly, and ICCA wants to be their partner in this endeavour. ICCA Learn is our roster of programmes aimed at providing the skills

needed to succeed in all areas of the industry and in many different roles and career stages," says Gopinath. From those starting out to executives, **ICCASkills** offers the only globally recognised certification for suppliers in all sectors of the meetings industry; **ICCAUni** is the home of the ICCA academic community, designed to promote collaboration between academia and the events industry; finally, the **Association Impact Masterclass** – co-created with **#Meet4Impact, GainingEdge** and with **Business Event Sarawak** as a seed fund contributor – was an innovative training programme, sponsored and hosted by **BestCities Global Alliance**, held in Dublin last January, that looked at sharing and assessing impact activities for association professionals from around the world who want to invest in their legacy programmes. "ICCA Advantage is a fantastic addition to the existing ICCASkills and Masterclass programmes in that it gives organisations the opportunity to home in on 'pain point' issues and address challenges, as well as giving participants the cutting-edge information necessary to get a leg up on the competition," Gopinath continued.



ICCAUni's Pedagogical Vocation

ICCAUni was introduced in 2024 with the clear purpose of encouraging collaboration, innovation and mentorship between academia and the events industry, and relaunched in 2025 with a clearer value proposition. We asked Senthil how colleges and universities are playing this binding role and fostering access points to the world of global events. "We have set ourselves three objectives. First, to create a framework for exchange. This means an exchange between both worlds, but also among universities themselves. In other words, channels where universities in Europe can easily connect with universities in Africa and create their own network." The second is research: "We want to have a better idea of what type of research is being done and create a better alignment with what is most relevant to each sector. We would like to ensure that research can serve industry more effectively and increase, for example, the number of PhD students involved." Finally, the global association also wants to focus on talent development. "This means ensuring that the student journey is perfectly in line with the needs of the sector and also that professionals continue to learn throughout their careers," concludes Gopinath. ICCA is currently working with 40 universities from around the world to develop a special course at the **64th ICCA Congress** in Porto to better meet the needs of academics at global meetings and events.

Actions Against **Human Trafficking** in the **Meetings Industry**: A Conversation With **Sandy Biback**

Ottawa Tourism recently implemented a comprehensive **Action Plan against Human Trafficking**, a pioneering initiative that underlines the city's ethical commitment to safety, social justice and human values at the forefront of the business travel and hospitality sectors. This is especially relevant when, today, tourism and business events are seen by many economic strategists as the most important service sector for the GDP of several countries. Human Trafficking is the world's fastest growing criminal enterprise and is an estimated $150 billion-a-year global industry.



Meeting Professionals Against Human Trafficking (MPAHT), a group of Canadian grassroots volunteers, helped shape this plan with Ottawa's DMO on improved access to information, reporting forms, training programmes, and destination-wide evaluation using audits and data collection. The **Founder, Sandy Biback**, is an event planner with 40 years' experience who began to take a closer look at this darker side of the industry while roaming the lobbies of some hotels at the crack of dawn. She opens up to *HQ* in this interview:

Sandy, what are we really talking about when we link this harsh reality of human trafficking to the context of event professionals?

It is about taking collaborative action. In the case of Toronto, the aim was to understand what was really going on here. On returning from a trip to Cambodia, I felt the urge to dig into these issues and ended up contacting the Toronto Police Department. They confirmed that, yes, it was happening here, in low-end and five-star hotels. When I started holding conferences, we opened the door to a lot of discussions about training and measures that some hotel chains have in place on a global scale. What we tried to do was go beyond lip service and collect the hoteliers' experiences in their properties. It has definitely opened our eyes to the fact that, in many cases, profit can take precedence over people. Nowadays, it is especially important to be transparent and community-engaged, and so, the hotels opened up. Far beyond training and performance models, we want to know what happens a year later: how to act if you see something suspicious, or whether your structure will be there to help you. I have already been taking part in several meetings, one of them with the anti-human trafficking committee of **Meeting Professionals International**.

How can this partnership with Ottawa position the city at the forefront of efforts against human trafficking to other destinations?

What Ottawa Tourism did with their DMOs just blew me away, because we had a very hard time reaching these areas. Their **Business Events Manager, Lizzie Low**, sits on our Board, while the **CEO, Michael Crockatt**, is on our Advisory Board. Best of all, they allowed what we developed together to be put into practice in their organisation, with the necessary tweaks and adjustments for a model application. Which is rare, as sharing such blueprints has been a problem in our sector for as long as I have been in it. Together with **Voice Found** and the **Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking (CCEHT)**, we have given this project a boost by drawing attention to the cause. As I said, I think we need to cooperate at an institutional level. We cannot hold things back any longer. I was one of the original members of **CanSPEP (Canadian Society of Professional Event Planners)**, and we have always been in favour of collaboration with independent meeting planners. I believe that what Ottawa Tourism is doing is breaking precedents with the support of the respective associations working with survivors and everyone involved. Our relationship with Ottawa Tourism is very close.

Because the bigger picture is somehow related to the migration crisis, right? Is that what you found in your research?

I do not disagree with that. However, statistically, around 93% of people who are victims of sex trafficking in Canada are locals. They are Canadians. I recommend taking a look at the latest CCEHT research. From the perspective of the people arriving, the greatest need is housing, so you can already see an intersection with the vast majority of our countries. In terms of labour trafficking, we know how difficult it is to check supply chains along the line. To do this, we have to work with data analysis and sales strategy. Along the way, I have learnt that everything comes down to money. Let's say the most important thing for conference organisers is the price of a coffee urn. I could simply base it on a standard price and ignore tracking it. But if a hotel starts analysing its supply chain down to the smallest detail – where the coffee beans are picked, who selects them, and what wages they receive – and if employees pass this screening, your event can be certified as socially sustainable. If you ask your attendees to support this cause, you can offset the investment of those coffee boxes – you can use this as a selling point. The meeting organiser can then tell delegates that their conference cares about human rights and that they are on the right side by opting for 100% socially conscious properties and providers.

> *"I started out as one of those philosophical people who just wanted to do good in the world, but I quickly learnt that it is really about money.*

We all know that hotels and venues are public spaces where, despite all the security protocols, sex trafficking events do happen. How should a delegate react if confronted with such a situation?

It is important not to draw attention to the victim, as this could cause even more problems. It is also not advisable to approach the trafficker if you spot them. What I would suggest is that the person take the matter up directly with the barman or steward. If the hotel has some kind of professional organisation, the barman will report it to their supervisor, and from there to the director of security, going up the chain to the management of that location. The aim is to find the first line of defence within that specific property. The MPAHT has convened several meetings with security directors from a number of hotels in and around Toronto on this subject. This is tracked in five-star properties, but small guesthouses and two-star hotels are rarely considered. For me the question is, where does it go when it is tracked?. Then there is also a legal layer in between. In the USA, signage is mandatory in some states. **PACT – Protect All Children from Trafficking USA**, part of ECPAT, lists the laws in the states and cities regarding signage on site. It is a matter of taking it and adjusting it to your needs. We do not have that in Canada, which was one of our recommendations for Ottawa Tourism's action plan.

With your vast knowledge of the field, what would you recommend to event destinations looking to embark on this journey?

Awareness. Let me come in and talk to your group, and I will make the connections. I am a people connector. First, I would ask what you already have in place; then, I would come in and guide an individual group through a 40-minute session. Most of all, I am talking about local awareness because I think that is what is missing. We all think this battle has to be fought internationally (of course it does), but the fact-finding has to be done locally first. We can support mentoring in that sense. What I try to avoid are generic models that lead to abstract programmes. Most of these multiple-choice tests and educational grids reduce complex questions into 'A, B, C or D'. Instead, I want to know why you answered "A". These are the things I want a local hotelier and meeting organiser to understand. So that, together with employees, customers and the chain of command, we can move on from problems and challenges to integrated solutions. In today's world, due to migration, climate change, etc., there are around 50 million people who are victims of human trafficking, be it sexual, labour, child marriage, etc.

Furthermore, the vast majority of victims are women (97%).



> *Ultimately, we need to realise what we are buying. When we outsource labour, such as housekeeping, are we buying an up-and-up service or a human being?*

Child trafficking has tripled in the last 15 years, fuelled by new technologies and digital platforms. How can the meetings industry take control of its cybersecurity activities in this regard?

If many of these cyber-terrorists manage to hack into governments and large corporations with more sophisticated security systems, they will not find much resistance in venues and hotels. It is like a game of catch. When we get smarter at strengthening our networking systems, hackers get even smarter at breaking them. During COVID-19, child pornography and human trafficking on the internet skyrocketed because it was the only way to do it. At the beginning of the pandemic, I saw somewhere that they were advertising COVID-free girls.

When we invited the **Toronto Police Department's Former Chief of Human Trafficking, Nunzio Tramontozzi**, to one of our events, he shared one of the many ways these things happen: "I want you to think about this – John, a banker who works in the financial district, kisses his wife and children goodbye and leaves on a business trip. He goes on the dark web, and books a 14-year-old blonde virgin. John meets her in a luxury hotel in the city centre, enjoys his 30-minute session, pays and then goes about his business." Who is to say that this banker is not an important delegate at an international conference? What happens to the 'Johns?' Generally, nothing.

At what events, conferences, forums or summits will MPAHT be present this year to discuss these elements and issues? Have you been invited to any conference sessions to explain your vision and mission?

I worked with **Tourism Victoria** and **Tourism Nanaimo** in Western Canada and was invited to a meeting of **ECPAT (End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism)** in Mexico City. For me, this is a grassroots issue. I also took part in a few government meetings in recent years, and we have started to make progress with ECPAT, with more points of contact with its **Executive Director, Guillaume Landry**, due to our role as Local Country Representative. Regarding conference participation, we do not have the economic independence to go beyond our means. We have no public or private funding because, as I said, we are all volunteers and work on a mutual basis. We have a programme called '**Change for Change**', which calls for individual action in the form of donations, impact and volunteering. These funds will now be distributed to two groups in Ontario that work with survivors. We do not have charitable status in Canada for various reasons, so we define ourselves as grassroots volunteers. For instance, our **Board member, Robert Thompson** grants us all kinds of technological sponsorship through his company **AV Canada**.



"A Poor Understanding of **Human Psychology** Leads to Ineffective **Event Solutions**"



Before you even enter the convention lobby, your meeting experience has already begun in the perception, behaviour and mental set-up of the attendees. Fairly new areas among meeting professionals, behavioural science, psychology and neuroscience provide us with extra insights into the success of an event, helping us to decipher delegates' mental disposition. Neurodesign, for example, is a multidisciplinary field that seeks to understand how the human mind reacts to sensory stimuli and built environments through insights from neuroscience and psychology, thus making it possible to create more effective events.

With a background in event management and cognitive linguistics, **Victoria Matey** turns science into practical strategies for real-world events – whether it is making events more brain-friendly, designing spaces that guide behaviour or helping partners apply psychology in lasting ways. Today, Victoria helps event professionals use psychology to create smarter, more human experiences as an event psychology advisor. She is also the creator of tools such as the **Event Psychology Lab** course, the book ***10 Principles of Strategic Event Planning*** and the **Event Psychology Strategist** certification with MPI. She also runs the **Event Psychology Hub** and serves as **Vice President of Events & Outreach** at **Bescy**, a non-profit behavioural science nonprofit.

In this interview, she unpacks complex and interesting concepts ranging from emotional measurement to biophilic design:

What are the biggest mistakes and false truths that event professionals often make when it comes to human psychology design?

On a strategic level, I see two mistakes: either completely ignoring the psychological angle or assuming that starting from a gut feeling is enough to create a human-centred design. In fact, adopting the event psychology approach means working from a comprehensive system rather than applying one-off solutions as patches – they will not have the desired effect. It also means constantly updating yourself on the latest insights: human behaviour is not set in stone, and the effectiveness of solutions depends on how well you keep up with the latest developments. That is why I advocate for a separate role of the Chief Behavioural Officer on every event team – it is only going to bring outstanding value.

On a tactical level, a poor understanding of human psychology leads to ineffective solutions and, at best, just keeping up with trends rather than truly innovating and facilitating outcomes for both associations' teams and attendees. For example, one key psychological mechanism is cognitive ease: it means people are more likely to act when the action is simple. Yet, for years, we have seen registration forms that take forever to complete, confusing instructions or signage at venues, complex language, and slides overloaded with text during presentations. All of these are basic mistakes, rooted in a lack of awareness about human psychology. As a result, they affect the experience and make it harder to get the results you want. On the flip side, understanding cognitive ease helps event organisers spot the bottlenecks in the attendee journey and remove them ahead of time, so people can make decisions in favour of your event without unnecessary friction.

Can we say that the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to a pandemic of behavioural disorders? Will there be a high cost to mental health with this new normal in the context of meetings and events?

I actually believe the pandemic has forced event professionals to change their views on how to design events, for the better.

That said, the new societal and work norms add a specific toll to a job that has always been stressful. That is why it is so important to look after physical and mental well-being, and to do it intentionally.

Physical health is not exactly a new topic, but I want to emphasise the powerful link between body and mind. Getting enough sleep, staying hydrated, and exercising are not just 'nice to have.' Research tells us the connection between body and mind is built right into our brain structure: the areas that help us move are closely linked to the areas that help us think and plan, as well as to our automatic functions like blood pressure and heartbeat. That is why people who work out regularly tend to be more positive, and why meditation or breathing exercises help – they calm the body, and in turn, calm the mind.

Social habits are critical to our emotional and mental well-being. Studies show humans are wired for connection, and low social connectedness has a negative impact on daily life, work productivity, and even how long we live. Taking some specific steps to improve your social life habits is absolutely necessary if you want to reduce stress and be happier and more productive.

> *"I am confident that literally every aspect of event design and marketing can be viewed through a behavioural lens.*

How can event and association organisers unlock the untapped potential of neurodesign for their clients? What is the perceived relationship between networking and participant engagement when implementing different types of environments?

The link between behaviour and the built environment is fascinating. A room layout is not just about making specific seating arrangements or fitting people in – it impacts our cognitive processes, our emotions, and how we network.

That is why it is critical to learn more about space factors that can positively impact people at events. Some questions to ask:

- How many natural elements are there in the space (or can be added)? Biophilic design makes people feel more relaxed and less anxious.
- Does the room have a high or low ceiling? It can influence how comfortable people feel in the room and even affect their style of thinking.
- What is the temperature? Warm temperatures (75–77°F, 24–25°C) increase feelings of social closeness, making people more likely to go along with others.

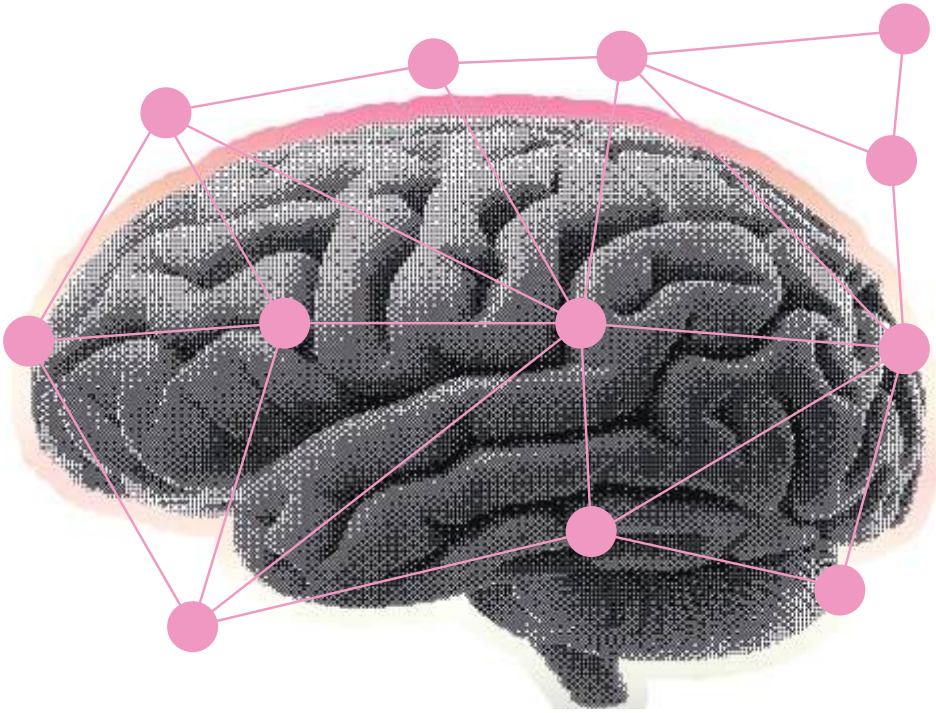
How can we move from an isolated variable to a holistic emotional framework? How can event professionals measure the emotions of an audience without falling into abstraction?

We are only now beginning to realise the importance of intangible metrics such as emotions, which are a very complex subject. Current technological advances allow us to understand them better and be more precise; however, leading neuroscientists warn that we cannot achieve 100% reliable measurements due to the great variations between cultures, races and individual differences. I believe that a combination of hard data and soft metrics is the best and, as a starting point for a holistic framework, I suggest a few points:

- Asking yourself questions like '*What emotional environment are we trying to create?*' and '*What do we want our attendees to feel?*' as early in the design process as possible.
- Adding emotion-related questions to traditional surveys. Have you ever asked your attendees on a post-event survey, "*What made you feel surprised/anxious/delighted?*"
- Adding observation to the mix of evaluation methods that is still underestimated in the industry. We are obsessed with data and feedback, but asking delegates questions is enough only if we assume people are rational and make perfectly logical decisions. Watching what people actually do, on the other hand, will bring you one step closer to fixing your event issues and discovering innovative solutions.
- Mixing surveys with observation and tech-based insights to gain true insights.

How can event segmentation, personalisation, and creativity bypass cultural nuances to encourage social interaction?

Cultural differences are one of the big factors that impact experiences. I always emphasise cultural diversity as one of the five main types of diversity I talk about, along with demographic diversity, neurodiversity, cognitive and emotional diversity. Understanding and celebrating different cultures does not just mean fulfilling requirements: it builds bridges and creates connections that are essential to the success of an event.



> *When you add solutions based on human psychology to the mix, you come up with very interesting and often low-cost ideas.*

In practice, this manifests itself in various ways, for example:

- Customising your communications and activities with cultural references and considerations in mind;
- Considering cultural norms, holidays or traditions that an international audience should be aware of;
- Looking for innovative ways to respect and showcase cultural diversity. This could mean creating themed breakout sessions that encourage cross-cultural dialogue or designing interactive experiences that celebrate diverse traditions.

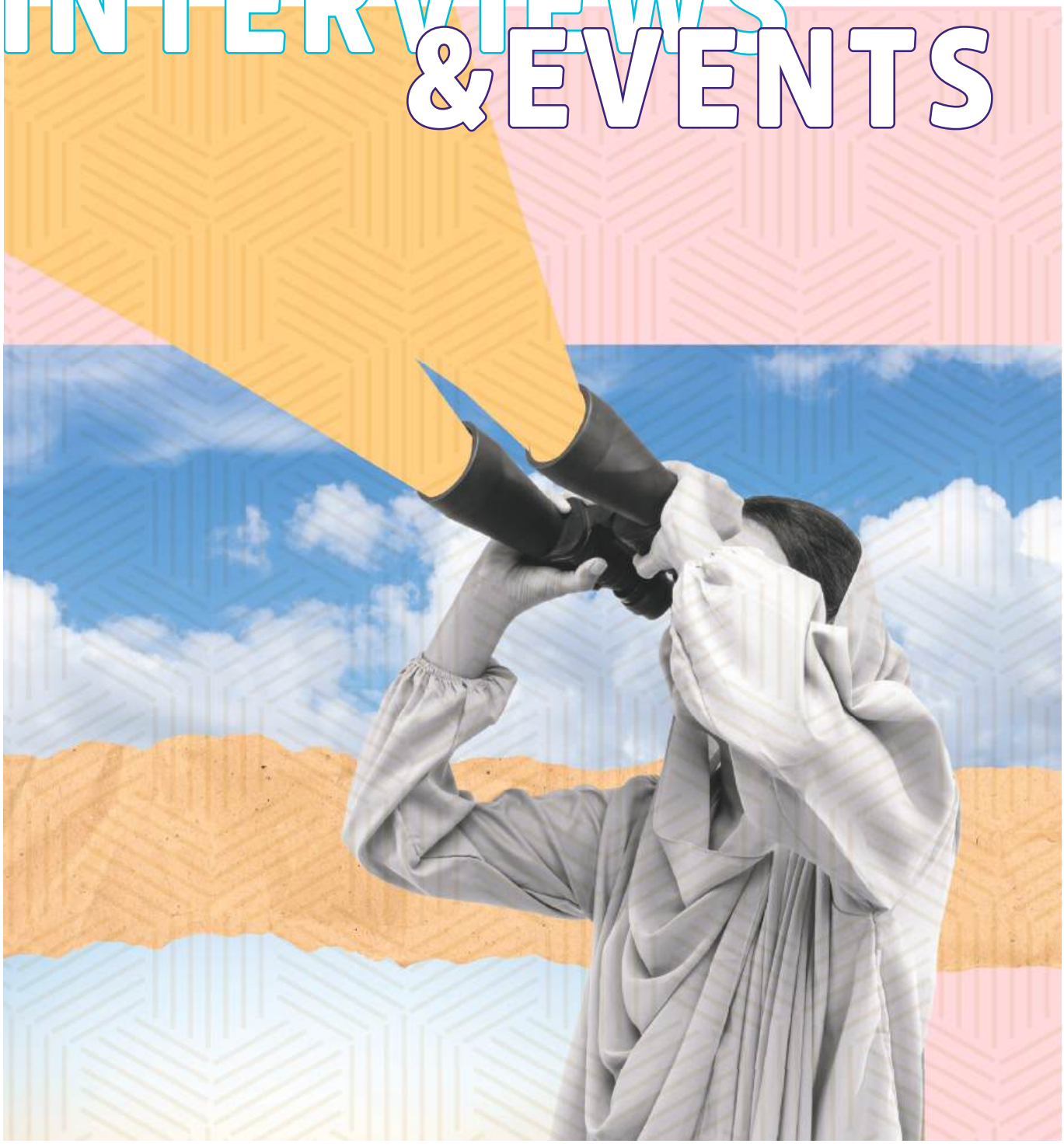
That said, I want to point out that, despite our careful attention to the cultural aspect, we should always start with human values and psychological principles in mind – the need to belong, the value of connection, the subconscious desire to follow the path of least cognitive resistance – because these are universal, regardless of culture.

Considering that there is a common thread between environmental sustainability and meetings, how can event psychology contribute to a new reflection on sustainable design?

Biophilic design is a fascinating area of knowledge that can instantly transform your event space and also contribute to sustainability goals. From a brain science perspective, biophilic design elements such as natural light, greenery, colour and fresh air are proven to promote physical, emotional and intellectual wellness, reduce stress and spark creativity.

To address sustainability challenges from an event psychology standpoint, we have to tap into the motivations and perceptions that make people naturally lean toward eco-friendly choices. For example, when we incorporate biophilic elements into our design, we are not only making the space pretty, but also appealing to the core psychological drives of comfort and well-being. By utilising nudges based on social proof or default bias, we can subtly encourage attendees to adopt sustainable actions. It is also important to think about how to maintain attendees' eco-friendly behaviours even after the event ends. This should be part of any event strategy.

HQ DESTINATION INTERVIEWS & EVENTS



Europe's Moment to **Reinvent Itself** Begins With **BEfuture**

As global power centres shift and environmental urgency becomes more pressing, Europe is challenged to lead by example. Among the region's boldest responses is **BEFuture**, a pioneering EU-funded initiative that aims to reimagine the role of business events as platforms for innovation, inclusion and resilience. Supported by €4.2 million from the **European Commission**, the project focuses on transforming the MICE sector into a future-ready industry that extends far beyond tourism.



The project has its origins in Catalonia, but its goals are undeniably European. At its heart is **Sònia Serracarbassa, Director of the Catalunya Convention Bureau**, who was awarded the **JMIC Profile & Power Award** in 2024 for her contributions to global meetings industry transformation, including BEFuture. Now is the time for Europe to rethink what professional events can deliver for delegates, destinations and society in general.

The global lockdown did more than cancel or postpone events; it actually gave professionals in the meetings industry enough time to pause and reflect on the sector, forcing a wake-up call. Across Europe, business event professionals began to question not just how things were done, but what the purpose of getting together really was. For the Catalunya Convention Bureau, this was a key moment.

"We began reflecting, not just on formats, but on fundamentals," says Serracarbassa. "What were we doing out of habit? What needed to evolve? And how could events become spaces that generate real value for people, for communities, and for the environment?"

These conversations in Catalonia would soon lead to an unprecedented initiative. With the support of the **Catalan Tourist Board**, Serracarbassa and the European projects Unit proposed a bold idea: to position professional events as a strategic platform for economic and social transformation, rather than a side effect of tourism policy. The European Commission approved it, and BEFuture became the first-ever EU-funded initiative focused exclusively on the MICE industry, awarded under the **Single Market Programme**. With €4.2 million in funding, the project launched with a cross-sector consortium of eight partners from six countries (Spain, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands). The partnership brings together convention bureaux, business accelerators, research universities and communication specialists, forming a pan-European network designed to prototype a new model for business events: one that is resilient, regenerative and relevant to Europe's future.

"It is not just cross-border, it is cross-sector," Serracarbassa says. "We are bringing together destinations, universities, accelerators, tech partners. Because if we are serious about innovation, we cannot keep thinking in silos." Her point goes beyond the consortium structure, BEFuture actively seeks collaboration with other industries and professionals, recognising that many of the most relevant innovations often come from outside the traditional events sector.

At the heart of BEFuture is a conviction that innovation must serve a purpose. The project's strategy is grounded in four pillars, each tied to major systemic challenges facing the events industry. These were shaped through a pan-European research phase, now published in the **BEFuture White Paper**.

- **Talent and inclusion**: ensuring accessibility, diversity and skills development;
- **Impact and governance**: improving measurement and accountability;
- **Climate change and circularity**: addressing waste, decarbonisation, mobility and the broader transition to regenerative practices;
- **Event experience**: improving how events are designed and delivered, from delegate participation to the daily realities of organisers and suppliers, through smarter processes and technology.

Scan the QR code to explore the full report

Each pillar has informed the structure of the **Acceleration Programme**, which supports up to 80 innovation-led projects across partner countries. Selected initiatives receive up to €30,000 in funding, plus expert mentoring, visibility at major events such as **IBTM** and **IMEX**, and integration into an international knowledge network.

"The delegate experience is not only about comfort or logistics," she explains. "It is about feeling involved. People need to know that their presence (physical or digital) has meaning, that they are not just attending, but contributing, connecting, and helping shape what comes next."

Many of the selected projects explore how technology can enhance this involvement, not by replacing the human element, but supporting it. From real-time data tools that optimise mobility and energy use, to inclusive digital interfaces that personalise access and participation, BEFuture is turning abstract priorities into practical experiments. "Technology is not the goal, it is the enabler," Serracarbassa adds. "It needs to help us become more sustainable, more inclusive, more impactful. That is how we stay relevant."

The call for projects was also extended to startups and entrepreneurs outside the traditional MICE landscape, a deliberate move to bring in fresh thinking from other industries such as smart cities, education technology, and mobility. According to Serracarbassa, this kind of collaboration is already changing the culture of innovation in the sector.

"What we see is that our own benchmarks are changing," she explains. "For years we have talked about innovation, but now we can check what it looks like when others apply it to us. It is humbling, and that is exactly what we needed."

What sets BEFuture apart is not just its funding structure or the scale of its European ambition, but its ability to inspire alignment across the industry. The project continues to gain visibility through its presence at events such as IBTM, IMEX and the **63rd ICCA Congress** in Abu Dhabi (2024), where it hosted the workshop *Innovating the Future of Business Events*, as well as at **PCMA Convening EMEA**. It has also been part of strategic dialogue with the **Strategic Alliance of the National Convention Bureaux of Europe**, a network of 29 national DMOs committed to long-term sectoral transformation. One example of this alignment is **Convene 4 Climate**, an emerging initiative co-led by PCMA and European partners. Launched in Barcelona in 2024, the event reflects a growing determination to address business events' environmental impact and explore their role in shaping climate-conscious futures. "The goals of Convene 4 Climate are fully aligned with what BEFuture stands for," says Serracarbassa. "We need to ask ourselves how we want to transition, not just as individual organisers or destinations, but as a connected industry with shared responsibility."

This renewed focus comes at a time when Europe is at a geopolitical crossroads and, with it, an opportunity to lead by example. With polarised narratives dominating the discourse in other regions, the European meetings industry is finding a new meaning by focusing on environmental responsibility, digital transformation and inclusive design.

"We are not just reacting to change. We are shaping what comes next and doing it in a way that is collaborative, equitable and grounded in values," Serracarbassa concludes.

As the selected projects begin to take shape, their potential to inspire replication across countries is already being felt. BEFuture is more than a response to industry challenges. It is part of a wider European shift towards a new business event model, defined by purpose-driven design, collective accountability and a commitment to measurable, long-term impact. As global expectations evolve, Europe is no longer a follower of trends; the region is ready to build a future-proof framework for what meaningful meetings can look like, and why MICE events matter.





Zaragoza Hosts Record-Breaking ICCA Iberian Chapter Meeting

The **ICCA Iberian Chapter Annual Meeting** took place from 2 to 4 April, bringing together more than 70 industry professionals and partners – a record for the chapter. Held during **Global Meetings Industry Day**, the event reinforced the value of face-to-face meetings and the urgency around exploring AI's real-world applications for business. Set against the architectural and historical richness of Zaragoza, the meeting was hosted by **Zaragoza Congresos**, the city's Convention Bureau, with a clear focus: to turn in-person exchange into long-term collaboration and measurable outcomes for the region's business events network. *HQ* attended this annual meeting for the first time, gaining a first-hand insight into the chapter's specific challenges and priorities in the meetings industry.

Author: Jesús Guerrero Chacón, HQ Deputy Editor

The first day of the meeting kicked off with a *tapas* tour in Zaragoza's emblematic El Tubo district. This relaxed and social start reflected the informal strength of face-to-face connections in the business events industry. Long-standing ICCA members used the occasion to reconnect, while newcomers found a welcoming way into the chapter's community. The tour included three stops, each offering a distinctive take on Zaragoza's *tapas* culture and serving as a fitting introduction to a city recognised as the Grenache Capital of the World, known for its internationally prized red wine. Afterwards, a walking city tour led participants through Zaragoza's multicultural heritage, exploring its Roman foundations, Islamic and Hebrew legacy, and Baroque and Renaissance architecture, like La Seo Catedral del Salvador, Catedral-Basílica de Nuestra Señora del Pilar, and the City Hall.

The day closed with a welcome dinner at **Restaurante Aura**, located by the Ebro River and facing the Basílica, allowing attendees to experience the city's culinary identity alongside one of its most iconic sights.

"Zaragoza is an ideal MICE destination. We are compact, walkable and culturally layered, with a strong track record of hosting major events," said **José Francisco García, General Manager** at **Zaragoza Turismo**. "Our location, just a short train ride from Madrid or Barcelona, makes us highly accessible, and this meeting gave us a chance to show our full potential, from the historic centre to the Expo legacy zone, venues, gastronomy and innovation hubs." Also present was **Asun Navarro**, recently appointed **Head of Zaragoza Congresos**."

Content with Purpose

Held at **Hotel Alfonso** and **Grupo San Valero**, the programme focused on strategic learning and peer dialogue. Over two days, participants tackled some of the most pressing challenges and opportunities facing regional destinations, including the adoption of AI, legacy creation, the use of business intelligence to improve new lead research and bidding for new association congresses, and the design of ambassador programmes.

Artificial intelligence was a standout theme throughout the programme. The discussion began with an opening keynote titled *'Work Smarter, Not Harder: AI Tools Transforming the Meetings Industry'*, delivered by software engineering researcher **Alejandro García Fernández**. His session offered a grounded overview of current AI tools and workflows, outlining a practical framework that demystified the technology for industry professionals.

In a highly practical session, **Sara Correia, CEO of Spring Events**, led a hands-on session showing how to create a custom AI assistant for tasks like RSVP analysis, attendee insights, and automated communications. The session offered concrete applications for planners seeking to enhance operational efficiency while embracing ethical innovation.

The case study session offered a clear window into how destinations and providers translate big ideas into real-world impact. **Bnetwork** opened with its commitment to

sustainable hospitality, sharing how its ISO 20121 certification and internal eco-tracker have helped reduce waste and support responsible event practices. **Porto Convention Bureau** followed with a strong example of sustainability in action. During the **IAPCO EDGE Seminar**, delegates partnered with **Associação CAIS**, an organisation supporting individuals experiencing homelessness, to create puffs from recycled materials. These were later donated to a children's cancer hospital in Porto, linking creativity with meaningful legacy.

Madrid Convention Bureau presented its "**Share Knowledge, Share Life**" campaign, a blood donation initiative developed in partnership with the **Spanish Red Cross** and the **Madrid Blood Transfusion Centre**. The campaign was organised around the **European Hematology Association Congress** and mobilised over 2,300 donors through mobile units deployed across the city and beyond. The model is now being offered to other congresses hosted in Madrid. Finally, **Gijón Convention Bureau** explored long-term strategies for sustainable destination growth. Gijón's Ambassador Programme, established in 2004, prioritises quality over quantity, with 24 ambassadors driving its competitive edge in medicine and engineering.

The conference offered a deep dive into **ICCA Business Intelligence (BI)**, moderated by **Juanjo García, Chief Sales & Marketing Officer** at **Bco Congresos** and one of the strongest advocates for using data to transform lead generation. The session was led by **Kate Yates** and **Luísa Magalhães** from **SFA Connect**, who unpacked the practical applications of a sector-first approach when using the ICCA database. Effective business development starts with aligning local expertise and economic strengths with the right kinds of international events, and destinations can unlock new opportunities by identifying sector synergies as part of their strategy, crafting keyword-driven searches, and building coalitions with local ambassadors early in the bidding process.

The discussion on destination strategy highlighted how stepping outside bigger or traditional destination choices can transform the delegate experience. In a panel session, **Diana Tejerina** from **Fundación NovaGob** shared her experience organising the **Public Innovation Congress** in smaller Spanish cities, demonstrating how these settings foster stronger community ties, increased local impact, and more meaningful engagement. Her message aligned with the contribution of **Ana Encinas, Managing Director** of **AUSAPE** (the SAP users' association in Spain), who emphasised the value of immersive environments for interaction and knowledge sharing. "What we are looking for is not just infrastructure," she noted, "but the kind of environment where connections and learning truly happen." The panel showed how less traditional destinations can foster more authentic, collaborative delegate experiences.



Zaragoza: Legacy And Future

As part of its commitment to showcasing the city's evolving business events infrastructure, Zaragoza Congresos invited *HQ* to explore the legacy of **Expo 2008** and its long-term impact on the city's meetings offer. The **Palacio de Congresos de Zaragoza**, one of the main venues built for the Expo, remains a central hub for conferences, corporate gatherings, and cultural events. With a 1,400-seat auditorium and flexible spaces, the venue remains key to Zaragoza's large-scale event strategy. Held in March 2025, **The Wave** attracted 15,000+ attendees, 11,800 professionals, and 200+ speakers, focusing on AI, digital transformation, and entrepreneurship.

Across the Expo site, Zaha Hadid's **Bridge Pavilion** now houses **Mobility City**, managed by **Fundación Ibercaja**. Dedicated to the future of transport and urban mobility, the space blends exhibition, education, and public-private collaboration. Together, they preserve the Expo legacy while advancing Zaragoza's smart city ambitions.

This year, the ICCA Iberian Chapter welcomed six new members. It was also a moment of farewell for two respected chapter figures – **Carolina García-Suárez (Gijón Convention Bureau)** and **Manuel Macías Moreno (Sevilla Congress & Convention Bureau)** – who were honoured for their contributions to the chapter.

Looking ahead, members are invited to take part in several upcoming ICCA events:

- The **ICCA World Congress** (9-12 November 2025) in Porto, Portugal. Under the theme '**Charting the Course**', the congress will feature a multivenue format inspired by the city's navigational heritage, human-centric design and Portuguese innovation.
- The **ICCA Global Association Forum** (7-9 July 2025) in Granada, Spain, co-hosted with **Granada Convention Bureau** and **Andalucía Tourism** and featuring association-destination matchmaking and educational sessions.
- The **ICCA Iberian Annual Chapter Meeting 2026** (11–13 March 2026) in Coimbra, Portugal.

For *HQ* readers interested in how ICCA is addressing the fast-evolving needs of global members, **ICCA CEO Senthil Gopinath** shares insights in this edition (pages 18-19) on available programmes such as **ICCA Advantage, ICCA Learn, ICCASkills, ICCAUni**, and the **Association Impact Masterclass**.



"Haere mai ki Aotearoa": How **New Zealand** is Building an **Event Powerhouse** in the South West Pacific!

New Zealand's appeal is at a 10-year high for international visitors. The Oceania country has all the elements required to host an inspiring and unforgettable conference: access to innovative knowledge hubs, unique culture and rich experiential programmes, seamless delivery, great venues and amazing activities. Plus, an emphasis on a warm welcome, reducing your event's environmental footprint, and leaving a positive societal impact. In the following interview, we discussed all these elements with **Penelope Ryan, Tourism New Zealand's Global Manager Business Events.**



New Zealand's business events industry recently received a $3 million investment from the government (approx. €1.66 million). How will this funding be used to attract high-value international conferences?

The additional $3 million in funding will supercharge the work our team is already doing to bring conferences and incentives to New Zealand. The money will increase our existing **Conference Assistance Programme**, enabling us to bid for 110 conferences this financial year, up from 90. Our business development managers will collaborate with our venue and convention bureau partners on new bids. The fund also allows for some strategic subvention funding to convert some of the conferences already on our radar. The funding will also boost New Zealand's international presence at trade events, including the **Meetings Show Asia Pacific** in Singapore in April and **IMEX Frankfurt** in May, allowing us to get more traction with key conference decision-makers while we are in their region.

With Te Pae Christchurch, Tākina Wellington, and the upcoming opening of New Zealand International Convention Centre (NZICC), how is New Zealand's investment in world-class venues transforming the business events landscape?

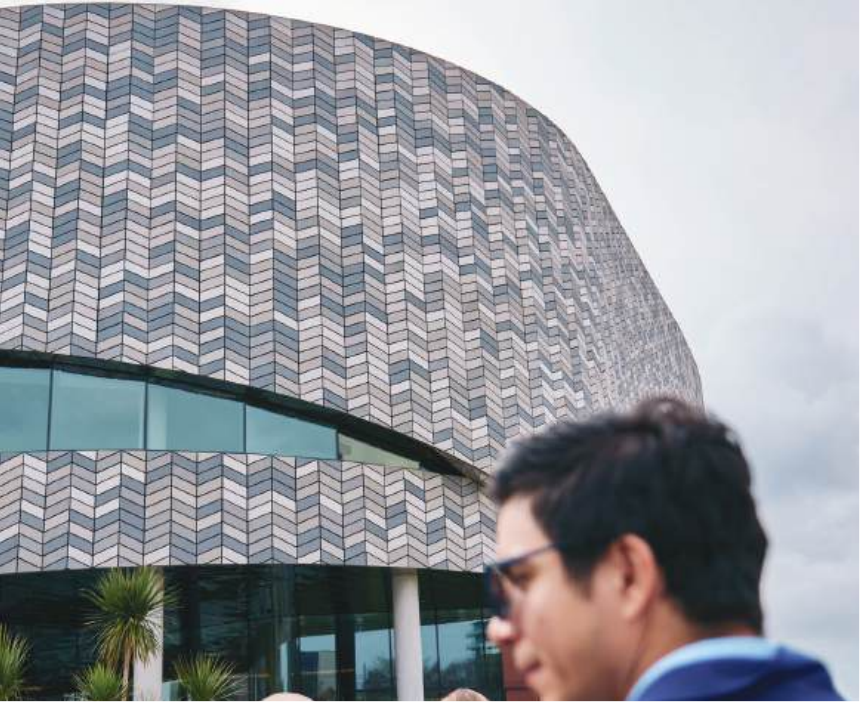
We have gone from having no dedicated, purpose-built convention centres to having three new, world-class ones in four years. We are able to bid for and host conferences of up to 4,000 delegates, which we just could not accommodate previously.

All three centres look spectacular, but beyond that, they are also at the forefront of technology, sustainability, and incredible food and beverage delivery. **Te Pae Christchurch** is a world-leading net carbon zero convention centre. The executive chef at the **NZICC** used to be the Executive Chef at the Royal Palace in Jordan. **Tākina Wellington Convention Centre** can leverage the creative spaces and experiences of its portfolio mate and neighbour, the **Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa**. So, conference organisers and delegates can be certain they will have a seamless, impressive experience.

In addition, all three are becoming increasingly integrated into their respective city centre precincts. New hotel infrastructure has been added, and there is a real buzz around the local restaurants and activities when conferences come to town.

Māori values such as *manaaki* (hospitality) and *tiaki* (care for people and planet) are shaping New Zealand's event experiences. How are these cultural principles practically integrated into conferences, and how does this impact delegate engagement?

Manaakitanga – our warm welcome – is an integral part of the way we treat all our visitors and is evident in our conferences, which emphasise building relationships based on respect and reciprocity. And *tiaki* shows up in the sustainability initiatives we embrace across the conference journey, from inside the venue to the regenerative tourism activities on offer outside.





Māori culture is unique, enabling a memorable experience delegates can get nowhere else in the world. There is something thrilling and moving in experiencing a Māori *pōwhiri* welcome, or *kapa haka* performance. But beyond that, there are also increasing moves to integrate Māori culture into New Zealand conference content and speaker programmes. This can facilitate deeper connection and unlock new thinking by bringing fresh perspectives from *te ao Māori* (the Māori worldview), leading to better outcomes for the hosts and delegates.

For international event planners unfamiliar with Māori customs, what guidance is available to ensure culturally respectful event planning?



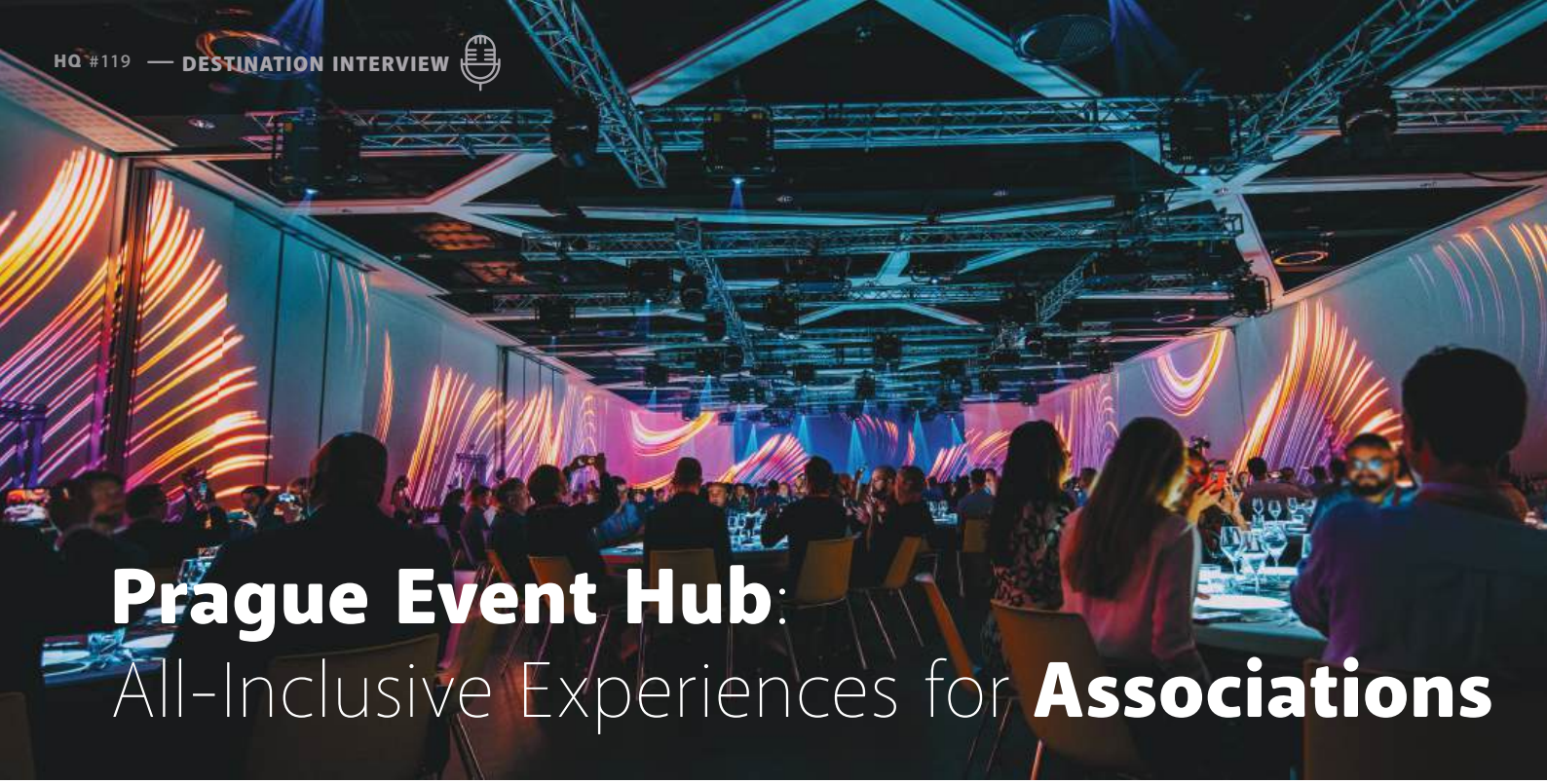
We have produced our own guide, '*Incorporating Māori culture into your conference*', which introduces some of the Māori concepts and opportunities for engagement at events. Beyond that, our local convention bureaux, major venues and PCOs have extensive relationships with iwi groups at a local level and can make introductions, whether that is for cultural performers, or connections to thought leaders. For instance, **Auckland Convention Bureau** can connect event organisers with the **Treasures of Tāmaki**, a collection of Māori-owned tourism businesses that can help event planners access a range of experiences from food and beverage and performers to authentic storytelling tours.

Looking ahead to 2026 and beyond, what are the biggest opportunities and challenges for New Zealand's business events industry, and how is the sector preparing for the future?

We are known for being a magical tourism destination year-round. There is growing awareness of our great events infrastructure, which will be boosted even further when the NZICC opens in February. The challenge we often find is people's perception of the distance and complexity of getting here. New Zealand is only a 9/12-hour overnight flight from most countries on the Pacific Rim, with excellent direct access from Southeast Asia and North America. The latter market has seen a dramatic rise in connectivity in recent years. You can get on a plane in the US, put a movie on, go to sleep and wake up in New Zealand, ready to start the day.

For those with environmental concerns, New Zealand has plenty of opportunities to support sustainable event delivery. This includes measuring and mitigating your carbon footprint through **Toitū Envirocare's** science-based certification, or through partners such as the native tree planting programme, **Trees That Count**. Choosing **Qualmark**-accredited venues, accommodation, transport, and service providers ensures you are using an operator that has been judged against criteria recognised by the **Global Sustainable Tourism Council**. And you can encourage your delegates to embrace New Zealand's **Tiaki Promise**, to care for people and place. We are working in tandem with our partners to reduce risk and increase international confidence that conferences in New Zealand will be well attended and financially successful. We look forward to welcoming more conferences and showing the best of what New Zealand has to offer.

Explore more at *businessevents.newzealand.com*



Prague Event Hub: All-Inclusive Experiences for Associations

Prague's business events landscape has welcomed a new project that brings together three of the city's leading venues: the **Cubex Centre Prague (CCP)**, the **City Conference Centre (CCC)** and the **Panorama Hotel Prague (PHP)**. Together, they create a comprehensive event solution that combines top-tier event facilities, expanded meeting capacity, and nearby accommodation for a seamless experience.



The **Prague Event Hub (PEH)** offers event organisers and association planners a comprehensive solution in a single location, with state-of-the-art technology, increased capacity and convenient accommodation. CCP is a premier event venue offering cutting-edge spaces designed for conferences, corporate gatherings, and large-scale events. However, it does not provide on-site accommodation. This is where PHP, located next door, plays a key role by offering convenient lodging options for event attendees. Meanwhile, the CCC, which is directly connected to Cubex via a shared foyer, enhances uptake by providing additional meeting rooms and event spaces. This seamless integration allows for hosting larger and more complex events effortlessly. "The collaboration between these entities began shortly after the inauguration of Cubex, and formalising it into a unified business project was the next natural step," **Jarka Krizkova, Director of Cubex**, told us. PEH now aims to expand its partnerships in the Pankrác district – often referred to as the 'Manhattan of Prague' – due to its status as the city's business hub. "This initiative goes beyond event spaces to include leisure activities that complement conferences and corporate events. The result is an innovative and comprehensive approach to event planning, setting new standards in the industry."

The combined conference capacity of these three venues includes 20 rooms with adaptable layouts, accommodating events ranging from 30 to 2,000 participants. "Our flexibility lies in the ability to operate as a single entity, while retaining the option to provide services independently," adds Krizkova. "This approach allows us to adapt to a wide range of client needs, scale events properly and allocate resources efficiently for marketing and promotion." Another important advantage of this Hub is its compact layout, allowing easy navigation between locations and direct access to Prague's historic centre. The Pankrác district boasts excellent infrastructure, a variety of restaurants, one of the city's largest shopping centres and leisure activities. "This strategic location eliminates the need for complex transport arrangements. Unlike large conference centres on city outskirts, PEH offers convenience and efficiency, reducing unnecessary travel time and environmental impact," says Krizkova.

> *"Cubex is not just a venue – it is a dynamic, immersive space where technology meets creativity, setting new standards for how events are hosted and experienced.*











Cubex: More Than Just An Event Space, An Entire Experience!

As the name suggests, Cubex's interior was inspired by Cubism. "We wanted to offer something as unique as Prague's renowned Cubist architecture, while at the same time bringing this cultural heritage to a wider consciousness." This cubist-inspired design was a key factor in CCP receiving the award for 'best new venue' in the 9th international competition of the **Global Eventex Awards 2019**. "Similar to how this avant-garde art movement was initially considered impractical, some sceptics questioned our decision to integrate such complex architectural elements," Krizkova revealed. "However, several clients from all over the world tell us now that they have never encountered a venue like ours. For example, last year PEH's three venues organised an event for a leading American technology company that maximised Cubex's capabilities with remarkable impact." While size and cost were once the main concerns, today priorities are increasingly focused on sustainability, cutting-edge technology and unique interior design – trends confirmed by international associations who choose Cubex precisely for these reasons.

"More than ever, clients are prioritising carbon footprint calculations following sustainability standards and criteria that both the event and the venue must meet," says Krizkova. Cubex is located in a **LEED Platinum-certified building**, awarded only to structures that achieve the highest standards in energy efficiency, environmental design, water conservation, indoor air quality and sustainable development in general. "Among Czech venues, Cubex is at the forefront of sustainability, offering features such as rainwater harvesting for sanitation, electricity from renewable sources, automated LED lighting, among other environmentally friendly technologies. Thanks to this certification, we can provide not only a sustainable environment, but also accurate data for our clients to calculate the carbon footprint of their events." The CCC is also dedicated to sustainability, actively participating in recycling programmes and minimising environmental impact through waste reduction efforts. In turn, PHP takes an environmentally responsible approach by implementing energy and water-saving processes, tackling food waste, ensuring the efficient use of resources and prioritising locally sourced products and suppliers in favour of the local economy.

The Chameleon Concept

Beyond its striking interior, Cubex excels in large-scale projections. With its avant-garde design, cutting-edge technology and attention to detail, CCP offers an environment where visual presentations take on a new emotional dimension, allowing event organisers to convey critical information and unique audiovisual experiences. "Traditional lecture and presentation formats that were common a few years ago no longer resonate with today's audiences. Modern technology allows for captivating visual effects that increase audience engagement, influencing not only content but also the form and delivery methods," explains Krizkova. At the heart of the venue's **Chameleon concept** is a minimalist, neutral interior offering ample branding opportunities. An innovative approach that, with advanced lighting and projection technology, allows clients to transform events into unforgettable experiences. "Our main hall has 325 ceiling-mounted lighting bridges, allowing for infinite colour and lighting combinations. It also features immersive panoramic projections of up to 360 degrees, made possible by its column-free, curved-wall design. Additionally, our Media Wall – a 102m² projection surface in the foyer – allows planners to create an immediate 'wow effect' upon entry. Whether it is a corporate forum, product launch or membership conference, each event can be fully customised according to the organiser's identity, creating a visually captivating environment," she concludes.

> *"The main aim of this partnership is to increase the competitiveness of Prague Event Hub by expanding its capacity and range of services, thus attracting major international events.*





Salzburg: Meetings With a Vintage Alpine Twist!

Widely recognised as one of the most charming European tourist hubs, Salzburg is much more than an idyllic film set or a stop-off point for classical music *aficionados*. Its human capital, built infrastructure and knowledge centres have led to pioneering achievements in culture, medicine, social sciences and technology. But what exactly makes this city stand out in an increasingly competitive market?

Austria's fourth largest city is not only the birthplace of Mozart or the setting for the *Sound of Music*, attracting filmmakers and musicians from all over the world to its Alpine setting. The old town is a treasure trove that seems to have come out of a fairytale, full of buildings from the Middle Ages, Romanesque and Baroque, testimony to the passage of time in a UNESCO World Heritage city. Beyond all this cultural heritage, Salzburg has also become a popular destination for congresses, conferences, events and incentives in recent years. This is echoed by current figures with around 5,700 events with almost 300,000 participants in 2023 alone – an increase of 37% compared to pre-pandemic results – placing the metropolitan area as the second most popular meeting destination in Austria. "The main advantages of Salzburg are the mix of urban city and nature in the surrounding Alps. Of course, the short walking distance between venues and proximity to the airport are another advantage, so you can better invest that time and money," says **Elisabeth Kassanits-Pfoess, Senior Marketing Manager** at the **Salzburg Convention Bureau**. With more than 40 years' experience in the sector, this team of experts offer a personalised service guiding associations from the first contact to their arrival in the city.

This compact dimension is also reflected in the collection of conference venues with excellent infrastructure, value-for-money accommodation and heritage spaces with a keen eye for detail. "Our list ranges from modern, well-equipped conference facilities such as the **Salzburg Congress** and the **Messezentrum Salzburg Exhibition & Congress Center (MZS)**, social events in the unique, baroque atmosphere of the **DomQuartier Salzburg - Residence Palace**, to a more casual, traditional atmosphere in the authentic **Stieglkeller**. Of course, something really special is that our Opera houses, theatres and museums can be implemented as conference rooms as well, which gives a very special charm," adds Kassanits-Pfoess. In the heart of the city, the Salzburg Congress is a multifunctional conference centre offering event space over five floors and up to 15 conference rooms of various sizes and degrees of transformability. The MZS, the largest multifunctional event venue in Salzburg, has 21 conference rooms with state-of-the-art equipment, ten halls of various types and sizes, as well as the **Salzburgarena**, which can accommodate a plenary hall up to 4,500 people. Finally, the city recently saw the opening of a new, modern conference centre called **Zentrum für Visionen**, with 4,200 m² of event space across six conference rooms.



> *The character of our destination will steer the pace of your conference, giving you a touch of exclusivity and a unique experience.*

Within its offer, Salzburg also presents various social programmes to ensure the sustainability and cultural diversity of its hosted events. This can range from a Jodeling workshop where participants can perform breathing and posture exercises, to an environmentally friendly experience such as building your own bee house. Other classic activities include a private Mozart concert in his birthplace, or a trip back in time to the famous salt mines near the city that adds an extra slice of local heritage. "We even had the opportunity to build some solar panels at certain events, which were then donated to a village in a less developed country."

As a medium-sized city, Salzburg has become increasingly important as a centre of knowledge and innovation, bringing together clusters of excellence and leading figures who play a decisive role as a convention venue. To this end, the Salzburg Convention Bureau carried out a study to find out which industries and scientific groups would feel particularly suited to the Austrian city's ecosystem. In the medical sector, advances in the fields of robotic microsurgery, neonatal medicine or cancer research at the **Paris Lodron Salzburg University** leap to the fore, while the biological sciences sector underpinned by the establishment of pharmaceutical companies, biotechnology, medical technology and personalised medicine also excel. "In 2025, we have already hosted a number of international and European conferences, such as the **23rd International Electronics Recycling Congress** or the **Interventional Radiological Olbert Symposium**. What is important to note is that many of the associations we have hosted in the past, ended up returning. Of course, we try to engage with our universities, hospitals and research centres to define the main focus of our events. By instance, the **International Data Week** in 2023 led to a study programme on data science at the **University of Salzburg**," says Kassanits-Pfoess. One of the highlights of 2026 will be the **29th Meeting of the European Society for the Advancement of Cell Technology**, which will be held from 7 to 10 June at the MZS. Meanwhile, the city has also won the international bid for the **16th World Congress of Paediatric Dermatology** to be held in spring 2029.



Sustainability has been at the heart of the CVB's concerns, so they have proceeded to certify a wide variety of venues with the national 'green venue/meeting' label. "We have a certified catering partner that offers high-quality cuisine with a local focus as well as free access to our transport network, where delegates are encouraged to choose green transport." However, it is not just environmental sustainability that is key, but the influence a conference can have on local society. "We are encouraging clients to include new campaigns, such as a student day at universities, and attracting conferences in specific areas such as forestry, where partners in the region have developed a special reforestation programme for the region." Social impact means a lot to this city, as proven by the **Salzburg festival**, which has been held for over 100 years, where experts from all over the world meet not only to enjoy the local culture, but also to collectively chart the future of musical sciences. "Together with the various stakeholders, we try to figure out what is valuable in order to give back to the city. This ranges from fundraising campaigns for research centres or even external partnerships for bachelor's and master's theses." But this spirit of co-operation even goes beyond borders: "We are a proud member of the EU CVB network. It does not matter if it is with our hotels, venues or suppliers, or with our local scientists and doctors – together we can grow and generate great conferences," concludes Kassanits-Pfoess.

Valencia: "We do Not Just Talk About **Legacy** – we Integrate it Into Our **Events Strategy**"



Valencia has gradually become a multi-faceted destination for different visitor segments, bringing together business delegates with numerous association activities. These events contribute to the city's international reputation, not just for tourism, but as a place to do business, invest and live. *HQ* profiles Valencia over the last few years in this report:

In the last *HQ*, talking about the EU CVB Network, **Manuel Ferrís** uncovered his city's transition to a business events hub: "Valencia was known from the start as a business city and only later developed its tourist profile. Now this ratio is more balanced due to the impact of leisure tourism and business events." The MICE industry is now at the centre of Valencia's tourism and urban development strategy. Unlike other visitor segments, association events are distributed more evenly throughout the year, involving high-value travellers and leaving behind intellectual and social legacies. The figures are there to prove it: in recent years, Valencia has consistently ranked among the top 50 meeting destinations in the world and third in Spain (just behind Madrid and Barcelona), consolidating its international recognition as a congress destination. According to a recent study, the convention bureau estimates an annual impact of 800 million euros and more than 500,000 delegates a year in business events alone within the metropolitan region. As a standout case, **KubeCon + CloudNativeCon Europe 2022**, the first major post-COVID conference, exceeded all expectations by bringing together more than 7,000 technologists from the leading open source and cloud native communities at the **Feria Valencia** exhibition centre.

From a sales standpoint, Valencia has also become a reliable choice for associations looking for a well-connected, cost-effective and sustainable destination with the ability to deliver events of all sizes. On the other hand, the tragic floods of 2024 have made it even clearer how essential climate resilience and sustainable urban planning are, not only for the events industry but also for the most diverse communities and residents. "As a medium-sized city, we offer a compact and accessible urban layout where everything is 15 minutes away, including our international airport. In 2024, Valencia held the title of **European Green Capital**, which reinforced our commitment to sustainability – a key factor when making decisions about events today. We also highlight our cutting-edge venues, strong local ecosystems and a city philosophy where 'every event matters'. We work hard to ensure that each congress connects with the local knowledge base and industrial centres, leaving a legacy that goes far beyond hotel nights," the Director of the Valencia Convention Bureau told us. With more than 21,000 hotel beds and dozens of exclusive meeting spaces, Valencia is defined by the combination of history and tradition in monuments such as the **Cathedral** or the **Silk Exchange**, with the iconicity and modernity of architectural works of art such as the **Queen Sofia Palace of Arts or the Valencia Conference Centre**. "We are fortunate to have exceptional complementary venues that give our events a unique identity. The **City of Arts and Sciences**, a cultural icon of the city, is perfect for large-scale events; located in the Marina area, Veles e Vents offers a spectacular seaside setting; while the Roig Arena, our next state-of-the-art indoor venue, will open in September this year. We also have charming and historic venues outside the city such as **Masía Xamandreu, Campo Aníbal, Cartuja del Ara Christi, Huerto de Santa María** and **Aldamar**, ideal for more personalised gatherings," says Ferrís.

> *It is not always easy to quantify our ambassadors' impact, but we know that they have helped shape our strategic direction and led to major congresses being held here.*

In terms of local partners, the city bureau's strategy involves a collaborative MICE ecosystem to harness the diversity and strength of its scientific and business community. For example, **Invest in Valencia** attracts companies and international investors, guaranteeing a constant flow of innovation that spills over into major congresses. On the academic front, event managers can collaborate with both the **Polytechnic University of Valencia** and the **University of Valencia**, whose faculties are internationally recognised in areas such as Agriculture and Forestry Sciences, Engineering, Mathematics, Medicine, Astronomy, Chemistry, Pharmacy, Psychology, Accounting and Finance. By instance, the **International Congress of Industrial** and **Applied Mathematics 2019** was the result of the joint efforts of these two universities, underlining the strength of the 'Valencia Team' approach. "Association's congresses are in line with our positioning as a knowledge-based destination, bringing experience, connections and visibility between global sectors. The specific legacy celebrated with the **World Design Capital Foundation** reinforced the role of design, art and innovation in every aspect of the event experience. Moreover, we connect with the start-up and business incubator community through ***Marina de Empresas***, our entrepreneurship hub. We nurture a true cross-sector collaboration that also includes the music and cultural sectors to shape more meaningful and innovative events."

Meanwhile, the **Valencia Ambassadors Club** programme triggers activities planned by MICE professionals for target groups and relevant entities in each professional field. The programme currently has more than 60 members, and Manuel describes it as a strategic tool for identifying and attracting high-level events to the city: "These individuals, usually academics, scientists and professionals from key sectors, are not just ambassadors; they are opportunity-makers, trailblazers and connectors within their fields. The synergies they generate between institutions and the trust they inspire in associations have led to important victories and strengthened our positioning in various industries." For these professionals, social legacy means creating long-term value beyond the event itself, realising this vision with real, practical initiatives. "For example, **Ilunion Hotels** employs more than 70% of employees with different types of disabilities in its Valencian properties, **Gourmet Catering** collaborates with **Asindown Valencia**, offering employment opportunities to people with Down's Syndrome, and following the **European Conference on Networks and Communications 2019, Huawei** decided to invest in a 6G research programme at the Polytechnic University of Valencia," explains Ferrís.

A number of events in the pipeline are confirmed for the near future, including the **World Congress on Vascular Access 2026, the European Congress of Medical Physics 2026**, and the **17th International Congress of the International Radiological Protection Association 2028**. "Due to the overlap of several events during that period, the **European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology Congress 2024** became one of the most complex and demanding events we have ever managed. However, it once again reaffirmed our resilience and determination as an event destination," Ferrís concludes.

> *For us, MICE is not a parallel segment – it is a strategic driver for the city's innovation, sustainability and global engagement.*



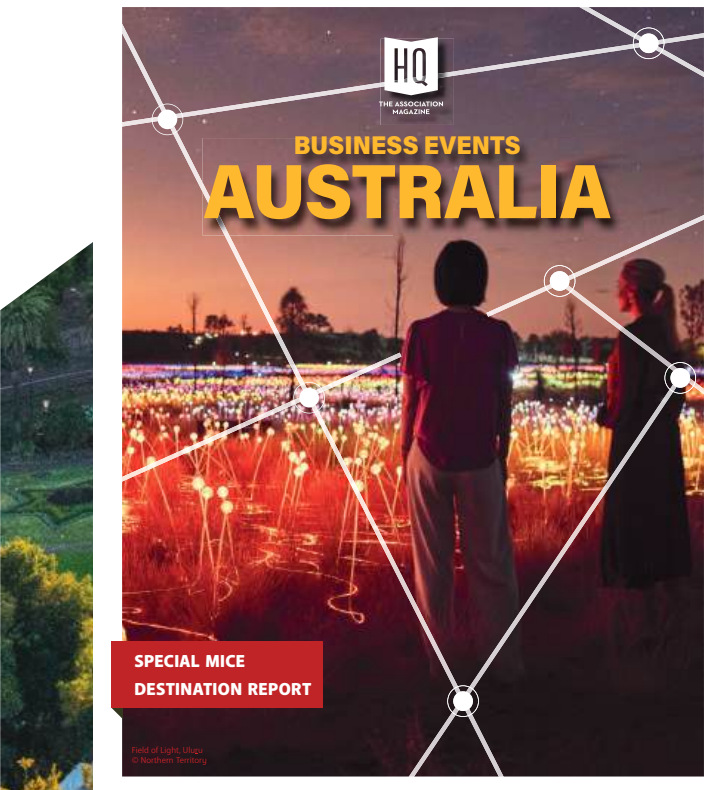

DON'T ALL CONFERENCES
COME WITH
KANGAROOS?
THERE'S NOTHING
LIKE AUSTRALIA
BUSINESS EVENTS AUSTRALIA
Lucky Bay, Western Australia

Australia, Inspiring Connections

From deep First Nations heritage to world-class research institutions, Australia offers a business events experience shaped by cultural depth, laidback professionalism and a strong sense of place. Whether across the red sands of the outback, the Coral Sea, or the corridors of leading convention centres and universities, the country delivers more than infrastructure; it connects global associations to local expertise and sectoral strength.

In our special destination report, *HQ* uncovers the people, industries and ideas shaping Australia as a destination for purposeful meetings, with global leadership in health, clean energy, agri-tech, quantum science and beyond.

Discover the full report in our Australia supplement. Available now on *meetingmediagroup.com*




SOME EVENTS PROMISE THE WORLD...
...WE ACTUALLY DELIVER IT
imex-frankfurt.com
Let's go where the buying power is.
IMEX
FRANKFURT 20-22 MAY 2025



IMEX FRANKFURT Taps into Business Needs of 2025

The currency of live events shines through in latest edition of the global show

Strong associations thrive on delivering membership value through education and networking while staying ahead of change. **IMEX Frankfurt** is where association leaders can meet to share ideas, hear insights, and learn from sector-leading experts. It is where associations can connect with peers facing similar challenges and explore strategies to engage members, drive growth, and deliver lasting impact and reach.

Registration is now live for the show, taking place May 20-22. The 2025 edition is set to bring the needs of today's event professionals into sharp focus. Through a series of improvements across customer service, event design and the education offering, IMEX Frankfurt has been reimagined to ensure attendees have the new skills, knowledge and contacts to respond to both global and regional changes.

One constant remains: delivering business value sits at the heart of the show with IMEX continuing to invest in a new and dedicated customer service team and technology to ensure a friction-free and time efficient experience from start to finish. The show brings buyers face to face with a broad range of international suppliers, and is designed to make meeting new destinations, new venues and new partners both straightforward and fun.

Association Focus

Association Focus, a dedicated programme for association professionals, takes place on Monday May 19, the day before the show. Led by expert global speakers, the collaborative program offers insight, inspiration and resolutions for both association leaders and association events professionals.

Expect a deep dive into how associations are using AI to create authentic, lasting value for their members, teams and audiences. **ASAE** will deliver a high-level overview of the key drivers of change shaping the association landscape, drawing from their **ForesightWorks** research. A workshop around meeting design and the delegate experience promises to flip traditional formats upside down. Planners will be invited to share elements of their association's meeting design with a panel of experts on hand to offer parallel examples, practical advice and creative solutions.

The line-up of learning sessions continues during the show across nine learning tracks which form part of a revamped education program. This includes new – and very current – areas of focus such as Design Matters as well as Leadership and Culture (where the speakers are shining examples of 'extreme leadership' – expect more details soon). All learning tracks focus on sharing insights that are meaningful, applicable, ROI-driven and often surprising.

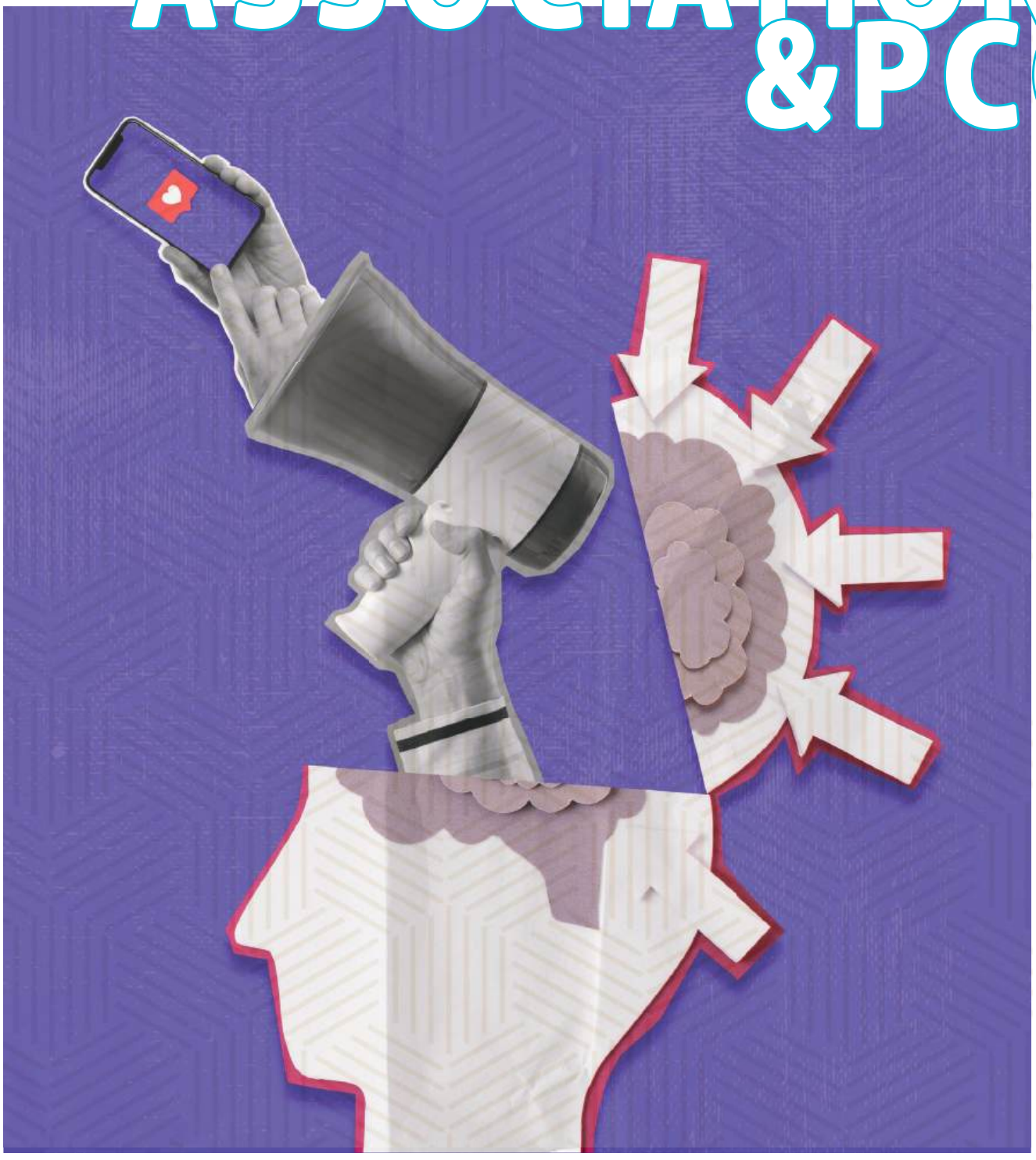
The Currency of Live Events

"Live experiences hold significant currency in 2025. When everything can be clicked, streamed or viewed online, it is the real-life moments that many people crave. IRL experiences are not only an important way to establish trust and nourish our need for social connection, but they enable us to immerse ourselves in a community of common interests – and that is great news for the next cohort of young people entering the workplace, explains **Carina Bauer, CEO** of the **IMEX Group**.

"The latest iteration of our show has been shaped by our fundamental human needs and will help event professionals to deliver more positive business impact, build powerful global relationships and – let's not forget – have fun!"

IMEX Frankfurt takes place at Messe Frankfurt from May 20-22, 2025. The show's overall attendee satisfaction levels rank in the top 25% of global trade shows surveyed in explori.

HQ INSIGHTS ASSOCIATION & PCO



Customer **Experience** is a **Journey**



The key challenge with delivering a great Customer Experience (CX) is ensuring that the entire journey is at the same level of excellence. Therefore, associations need to step away from measuring post-event CX and focusing on a sub-set of elements of the journey. This means that processes need to be put in place to capture feedback continuously, allowing to adapt and predict the experience and measure the impact.

Author: Sven Bossu, AIPC CEO

As event professionals, we are all aware of the fact that post-event customer satisfaction surveys do not work. Response rates tend to be low, resulting into non-representative and often non-actionable output. Just to be transparent: at AIPC we have a response rate of less than 15% when it comes to the survey on our annual conference. But the key problem with these surveys is that they are, per definition, reactive and do not allow to predict and adapt the customer journey while happening. If I – as an organiser – only find out after the event that my registration platform is not up to standards, it will be of little use.

That is why a different type of measurement needs to be put in place. For example, when it comes to registration, it is very interesting to know what the percentage of delegates is that managed the complete registration in one go and the average time it took. Having that information at hand instantly, allows to detect and repair problems, which can ultimately have an impact on registration figures.

Because that is the other problem with satisfaction survey: how do you translate the results into increase of revenues, decrease of costs or any other objective the association might have? We all strive to increase our Net-Promotor-Scores (NPS) and it is a really good indicator of the fact that a member is satisfied with the value offered. Ultimately, however, NPS and other Voice-of-the-Customer (VoC) metrics provide useful data, but they do not provide enough context to truly identify a CX problem – or solve it.

So, how do you start with journey measurement? The first step is to understand the goals of your members – when, for example, they attend your conference – and to link these goals with the objectives you have as an association. By instance, one of the primary goals of the AIPC members when attending the annual conference is to network with their peers, which is linked to a key objective of AIPC – the creation of a global network of convention centre professionals. The second step is to map out the journey the delegate will make to achieve that goal, which will most probably be a multi-channel journey. The AIPC delegate will look at the delegate list to identify the persons she/he wants to connect with, use the event-app to connect with that person, use the signage at the event to make it to the networking zone, look for a place to sit and have a coffee while having that meaningful conversation, and exchange contact details via the event-app. The third step is to track the different elements of that journey. If the "connection" functionality of the event-app is not used, but the networking zone is full all the time, it means that we are missing an element in the journey. Which in the case of AIPC could simply mean that, because it is a relatively small event, participants do not use the app to connect, but simply look at the delegate badges to find somebody – in which case, the badges need to be designed to this purpose, in order to facilitate the journey. In an ideal world (we are not there yet) there would be a fourth and final step: to measure the number of new connections made and the stickiness of that connection – have the persons involved stayed in touch after the event – which would be linked to the AIPC's community objective.

Now, AIPC members have of course several goals when attending the AIPC conference and so, multiple journeys need to be defined and tracked. But doing so is allowing us to better understand the needs of our members and therefore to design our events accordingly – and to adapt on the spot when needed.

ESSA: The Role of Insurance in Event Planning

Putting on successful events requires an incredible amount of work from several different parties, but what happens if something goes wrong? **Mark Blair, Executive Director** at **InEvexco,** and **Andrew Harrison, Director** at the **Event Supplier** and **Services Association (ESSA),**explore the ever-growing importance of insurance in event planning.





Over 400,000 events take place at venues across the UK every year, and each and every one of them involves an incredible amount of planning and communication between multiple parties. For organisers, suppliers, subcontractors, exhibitors and even the venues themselves, successfully putting on an event requires collaboration between lots of different people.

Most of the time, these events go off without a problem, helping to inform, entertain and delight the 85 million people that attend UK events each year. But to protect those involved in the event's creation should anything go wrong, insurance needs to be put in place – yet, doing so successfully can sometimes be a challenge despite its ever-growing importance.

The Importance Of Insurance In The Events Industry

"The world of events is very different from other industries when it comes to insurance," explains Mark Blair, Executive Director at InEvexco, a specialist insurance broker for the events industry and long-standing insurance partner of ESSA.

"With multiple parties involved, each organisation requires distinct yet interconnected insurance policies to ensure comprehensive protection in case of any issues. Understanding what these needs are can be a complex matter and is something we are seeing more of in our post-COVID world with contracts between parties becoming stricter, making it essential that everyone has adequate coverage."

Some of the risks involved in event planning may, at times, be obvious, yet some risks are also often overlooked. The unique nature of hosting a large two-day event, for example, means organisers have one major revenue-generating period a year, which makes cancellations or disruptions particularly costly.

For suppliers and contractors, accidents, injuries or damages during setup, execution or breakdown of an event can result in claims or lawsuits requiring coverage, as well as if disruptions such as property damage or inability to access the premises mean work cannot be carried out.

Other areas also do not discriminate between parties. Any party managing sensitive data for the event runs the risk of cyber-attack, which could have severe consequences such as data breaches, loss of access to systems, fraudulent payments and more.

Unique Challenges With Unique Solutions

There are always unique challenges to address, but as our industry so often shows in the face of adversity, we do have unique solutions.

"One thing we are seeing more of in the events industry is insurance provided on an all-risk basis, particularly when it comes to cancellation and abandonment cover," explains Mark. "While an organiser may only wish to take out limited Public Liability insurance during the few days they are working on the event, this typically would not cover them if anything unforeseen occurred outside of those dates, while cancellation and abandonment insurance on an all-risk basis would. It is about giving people broader protection and covering any pre-event risks that are often overlooked."

Yet, as the event industry continues to evolve and change, it is also about focusing on those areas that can often be overlooked.

"One of the main types of insurance I feel is often missed in events is cyber insurance," explains Mark.



"With changes to GDPR in recent years, protecting the data you hold is more important than ever, which in turn makes the risk of a cyberattack even more prevalent, especially with the additional risks of data breaches and loss of access to systems. Yet despite all this, the risk of cyberattacks can often be ignored with an 'it will not happen to me' mindset."

Striking The Perfect Balance

Better education in event insurance comes with a better understanding of the main risks in the industry and, in turn, what policies are available to help mitigate these risks.

While all-risk basis insurance would typically cover all the unforeseen, those wanting more specific insurance require more specialised options. Common options include public liability insurance to protect against injury and property damage, as well as professional indemnity insurance to help cover financial losses due to errors or negligence.

New policies have also been introduced in recent years, such as pandemic insurance, which helps protect a business from losses brought about by a future pandemic.

"COVID-19 highlighted the huge impact a pandemic can have on a business, and new pandemic policies allow events to be protected from severe financial losses should another pandemic or similar event occur," explains Mark. "It is also focusing on flipping the mindset from '*What is the absolute minimum cover I need?*' to '*What cover is going to protect me, the business and the shareholders?*'"

It is also vital those parties involved feel empowered to choose the right insurance for them alongside the support of a specialist insurance broker who can help navigate any nuances of event risks and help ensure the right level of coverage.

Better education also leads to better responsibility among all parties involved, leading to more informed decisions and the reassurance that everyone has their required insurance policy in place.

The world of insurance can be a complicated one. Yet, with better education and support, we can ensure our events continue to be world-class while also ensuring all parties involved are protected.

InEvexco Limited is authorised and regulated by the FCA, registered number 579079. InEvexco is a wholly owned subsidiary of AssuredPartners International Limited. Mailing address: 80 Churchill Square Business Centre, Kings Hill, Kent, ME19 4YU.

Getting **Attendee Feedback**: A **Combination** of **Methods** is Still a More **Effective** Way to Go



As I am getting ready to organise the **65th Summer Meeting*** for the **Chain Link Fence Manufacturers Institute** (the association for which I serve as Executive Vice President), I am looking at the results of the post-event attendee surveys we sent the past three years. As I am doing that, I am asking myself three questions:

1. Do we have a statistically valid number of responses to reasonably assume the data provides actionable information?

2. In addition to the response rate, did we get a 'representative' return within each of our major member categories or demographics?

3. As we are going to be in Montreal this year, does the uniqueness of the destination reduce the credibility of any of the previous years' data regarding meeting preferences?

There was actually another question I asked myself: is anyone actually going to read these attendee surveys and do anything other than say, '*Very interesting*'.

Here is something very important for all of us to consider before attempting to gather and analyse attendee responses to our event surveys: regardless of the method you want to use to get your attendee input, you MUST pre-determine how you are going to 'close the loop' on attendee/member participation.

One of the biggest reasons people do not respond to these types of surveys is that they do not believe their input will make any difference. Notice that I said they do not 'believe' their input matters. In many cases, that is not true. Most association executives and meeting planners do read attendee surveys and, when appropriate, make

recommended changes or improvements. The problem is that no one told them that their input was acted upon.

Of course, we are not obligated to act on comments or recommendations just because of one comment, or even a few people suggesting the same thing (we still have to identify that statistically valid number of responses.) But we are obligated to tell people what we did with their input! If we do not, there is no incentive for them to give us their input in the future.

We have to use the technology available to us in the 21st century to close this communications gap in our organisations. Here are a few suggestions:

- **If you are using some technologically based engagement techniques** such as apps, QR codes, or live polling to get quick, on-site feedback, sending an automated 'Thank you for your response' is just acknowledging that their input has gotten through. You should still use the information you captured (person's name, contact information, and response) to personalise and customise your follow-up. Even if you do that a week (or more) after your event, you can send a message saying something like: 'Thank you, again, for participating in our on-site polling at last week's conference. We wanted to let you know that your suggestions were sent to our Conference Services team, and they will add them to their discussions when planning next year's event. We hope we will see you there.'

- **Do not forget that you can combine old and new attendee input techniques** to help you offer a variety of ways for attendees to provide their feedback. Why not use an old technique such as focus groups, facilitated by a newer technology, such as Zoom/video? You could invite a specific demographic (i.e. first-time attendees) from a broad geographic range (worldwide) to participate. They will get the feeling of meeting others they may not have met at the event and also feel as though they have been involved at somewhat higher level in your organisation.

(Just a reminder: Focus group input can be very valuable for identifying areas that can be improved, but it is not a statistically valid survey technique, since the nature of group discussions means one attendee's opinion can influence the responses of others.)

- **Be careful about having input from groups that will skew your data**. If you are not already doing it, be sure to code your system so it allows you to identify your organisation's leadership group (Officers, Board, Conference Committee). Isolate those responses and match them to the responses of the other attendees. When included in the overall survey results, the leadership group members tend to respond at a higher rate than others and they also look at the event from a somewhat different perspective. It is interesting to see the differences in the responses.

Regardless of which techniques you use to get attendee input, pre-plan what your follow-up and acknowledgement system is going to be. The frustration many of us have had in getting good feedback on our events is partly our own fault. If we have not established a reputation for using attendee input constructively, and 'closing the loop' on participant feedback, then we are likely missing out on a great source of information and opinions that can improve the quality of our events.

*(***Note**: No, it is not my 65th CLFMI Summer Meeting. I have been around for quite a while in the association management business, but not that long!)*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Levin, CAE, CSP has more than 20 years of experience as an association executive and is also an internationally-known speaker and consultant to the nonprofit and association community. He currently serves as **Executive Vice President** of the **Chain Link Fence Manufacturers Institute**, an international trade association, and as **President of B.A.I., Inc.**, his speaking and consulting firm.

BAILEADERSHIP.COM

Beyond Logistics: How **CityDNA** Puts the **Delegate Experience** at the Heart of **Events**



In the fast-evolving landscape of business events, the delegate experience has emerged as a crucial differentiator for destinations and organisers alike. **City Destinations Alliance (CityDNA)** prioritises creating meaningful, seamless, and engaging delegate experiences as a cornerstone of successful in-person meetings. The power of face-to-face interactions is undisputed, yet the execution of these events must now consider new dynamics shaped by technology, personalisation, and evolving attendee expectations.

A New Era of Delegate-Centric Experiences

Today's delegates expect more than just well-organised conferences; they seek immersive, interactive, and value-driven engagements. DMOs and event organisers must shift from a logistics-focused approach to a participant-first mindset, ensuring that every interaction point, from pre-event communication to post-event follow-up, feels personalised and engaging.

Key strategies for enhancing the delegate experience include:

- **AI-driven personalisation**: AI is revolutionising how delegates interact with events. From AI-powered chatbots offering real-time assistance to machine learning algorithms curating personalised agendas based on interests and past participation, technology enables tailored experiences at scale. Tools like **Snapsight** enhance accessibility by providing real-time summaries of sessions, ensuring delegates can easily revisit key insights. CityDNA introduced Snapsight during the Bruges event in October 2024, and was also available during our **International Conference** in Budapest in April 2025, reinforcing CityDNA's commitment to leveraging AI for an enriched delegate experience. Keynotes and sessions by AI and technology experts provided practical solutions for how cities can drive innovative solutions.

- **Smart networking**: AI-driven matchmaking platforms help delegates connect with like-minded peers, cultivating valuable business connections. Personalised networking suggestions based on shared interests or professional backgrounds enhance engagement and maximise ROI for attendees. CityDNA also introduced **Brella** at the conference in Budapest to further elevate structured networking opportunities. This AI-powered networking tool enables delegates to connect with the right people, schedule 1:1 meetings, and optimise their time at the event. Brella's smart matchmaking algorithm provides personalised attendee recommendations, ensuring meaningful interactions.

- **Seamless hybrid components**: While CityDNA remains a loyal advocate for in-person events, the organisation

acknowledges the need for flexibility, particularly in alignment with its sustainability policy. Instead of full hybrid models, CityDNA accommodates remote speakers who are unable to travel due to distance or environmental considerations. This approach maintains the integrity of in-person experiences while allowing valuable contributions from experts worldwide, minimising unnecessary travel emissions.

- **Sustainability and well-being**: Today, delegates expect sustainable practices and well-being initiatives. Our members are focusing on key trends such as the conscious visitor. CityDNA carefully chooses event locations that meet sustainability standards, including eco-certifications, responsible waste management, and energy-efficient operations. A notable initiative is the **Bruges Train Challenge** launched during the **Autumn Conference** in October 2024, promoting train travel over flights and building a sense of community among participants while supporting sustainable transportation.

- **Bleisure**: Today's delegates are navigating a world in flux, with budget constraints and climate concerns. CityDNA works with our members to share best practices on how to make the most of one journey. We want planners to integrate opportunities to stay longer by combining a business event with an extended leisure experience. Larger gateway cities collaborate with smaller cities to encourage delegates to explore niche activities, experiences and specialisation.

Common Pitfalls in Enhancing the Delegate Experience

Despite best intentions, certain challenges persist that can negatively impact the delegate experience. Some of the most common pitfalls include:

- **Information overload**: Bombarding attendees with excessive details can overwhelm rather than assist. Clear, concise communication is key;

- **Lack of personalisation**: Events that fail to tailor experiences to individual needs risk disengaging their audience. Generic content and rigid networking formats are no longer effective in an era of customisation;

- **Poor technological integration**: Heavy registration systems, unreliable event apps, and technical failures during sessions can frustrate attendees and erode trust;

- **Inadequate accessibility**: Not all events account for the diverse needs of delegates, including those with disabilities or neurodiverse preferences.

Addressing Hidden Challenges in Delegate Experience

While many organisers focus on tangible aspects of event planning, several hidden risks can significantly impact the delegate experience:

- **Data privacy and AI ethics**: Personalisation relies heavily on data collection, but ensuring ethical data usage and compliance with privacy regulations is critical. Delegates must trust that their personal information is used responsibly and securely;

- **Cybersecurity threats**: As events become more tech-driven, cybersecurity risks increase. Protecting event platforms, attendee data, and venue networks is essential to maintain privacy and event integrity;

- **Sustainability trade-offs**: While digital solutions reduce physical waste, they have their own environmental footprint, particularly regarding energy-intensive AI operations and digital infrastructure;

- **Mental fatigue and burnout**: Packed schedules can lead to cognitive overload. Thoughtful event design that includes breaks, mindfulness zones, and networking downtime can enhance engagement without overwhelming attendees.

City Destinations Alliance: Shaping the Future of Delegate Experience

CityDNA actively collaborates with DMOs and meetings industry professionals to address challenges and leverage opportunities in delivering exceptional delegate experiences. By facilitating collaboration, sharing best practices, and embracing innovation, CityDNA empowers destinations to craft experiences that resonate with today's delegates. The organisation focuses on the core principles of human connection, sustainable development, and technological integration, while safeguarding the authenticity of in-person meetings.

As the meetings industry continues to evolve, one truth remains unchanged: an exceptional delegate experience is the foundation of a successful event. By combining AI, personalisation, sustainability, while addressing potential risks, CityDNA is committed to shaping a future where transformative experiences leave lasting impacts on delegates and enhance the appeal of host destinations.

Kenes AMC Insights: The Hidden **Architecture** of Member **Experience**



As part of our contribution to *Headquarters Magazine's* issue number 119, **Kenes Group**'s Association Management professionals took part in a session with me to reflect on the evolution of member expectations – unveiling what works, what must be improved, and what often goes unnoticed.

Author: Estefanía Zárate Angarita,
Media & Communication Manager at Kenes Group

From membership retention strategies and communication tools to the role of wellness and mental health services, the team explored the multifaceted nature of member engagement. The conversation featured insights from **Louise Gorringe, Kenes Association Management Associate Vice President**, and experienced **Kenes Association Executives, Lesley Jennings, Lorenzo Lupo** and **Ester Zoroa Rauet**.

This article delves into several key aspects of the association member experience, as discussed during the session. We explore the blurred line between conference delegates and association members, and the strategies societies use to recruit and retain them. The conversation also covers the importance of communication channels, the tools that enhance member engagement, and wellness initiatives that go beyond the traditional.

The Blurred Line Between Members and Delegates

"Most of the people attending our conferences are already members," explained Lesley Jennings. "However, a large percentage of non-members attend as well, and this creates a crucial recruitment opportunity." Past analyses developed by Kenes revealed that in some cases, only around 25% of conference delegates are members, even though it varies according to each society's case. As Louise Gorringe shared, "There is a really big pool to go after in terms of encouraging



those people at the conference to become members... the time to target them is either at the congress itself or just afterwards."

This observation highlights the importance of timing and engagement strategies in membership recruitment. The post-conference window is an ideal opportunity for associations to offer special rates or discounts to first-time attendees, thereby converting them into long-term members. Lorenzo Lupo added, "The best moment is right after the conference. That is when people are most engaged, and we take that momentum seriously."

Retention Requires Constant Communication

Once new members are recruited, how do associations keep them engaged? Constant communication is key: "It is about constantly reminding people of the value of their membership," said Gorringe. "Not just listing benefits, but actually showing them how they are receiving value."

Effective member engagement relies heavily on consistent and clear communication. At Kenes, email newsletters and social media platforms, primarily LinkedIn, are crucial tools in keeping members connected. Jennings noted. "LinkedIn really drives those post-conference conversations."

However, it is not just about where the communication happens; it is about how members are addressed. "We refer to our members as friends and family," added Jennings. "This builds a sense of affinity. We send birthday messages, highlight anniversaries, and celebrate those who have been with us for over 25 years." The goal is to foster a deeper connection, ensuring members feel personally valued and part of a community.

Listening through Data

Member experience is not static; it evolves. Kenes professionals recognise that understanding member needs requires active listening. Regular surveys are deployed to gauge interest, track engagement, and address concerns. "After the conferences, our events team will run an education survey to get a sense of what members want to see in our webinars or training," said Ester Zoroa Rauet.

Exit surveys also play a critical role in understanding why members leave an organisation. As Lorenzo Lupo explained, "When members decide not to renew, we send a survey to find out why. This helps us understand the gaps and refine our retention approach."

Additionally, tools like Google Analytics are employed to monitor website interactions, offering valuable insights into what content is engaging members the most and where improvements can be made.

Wellness: Beyond Yoga and Jogging

While wellness activities like yoga and morning runs remain part of the traditional conference offering, there has been a noticeable shift towards more creative approaches to mental health and relaxation. "Creativity, music, any sort of art form, is part of health too," said Lesley Jennings. "Our vice-chair hosts online poetry sessions as a form of wellness." This highlights a broader understanding of wellness, where creativity is integrated as a form of mental health support.

Zoroa Rauet shared an exciting development: "We are transforming the top floor of our venue into a relaxing space, with art, crafts, and paintings. A place to disconnect from sessions and use the other side of the brain." This initiative adds a new dimension to the wellness experience, inviting attendees to engage in creative activities as a form of mental relaxation.

However, these wellness initiatives are still largely confined to the event experience. As Gorringe pointed out, "It is clear that while wellness is gaining traction in events, there is still work to be done in integrating it into everyday association governance and operations."

A Circular, Strategic Approach

The recurring theme throughout the discussion was the concept of circularity in communications: learning from members, responding to their needs, and feeding that back into engagement strategies. As Zoroa Rauet put it, "We take every single opportunity to showcase what we do and invite members to be part of it."

The member journey is no longer linear. It loops through conferences, surveys, creative wellness, digital platforms, and personalised interactions. Each touchpoint carries risks, but also immense potential to deepen engagement. At Kenes Group, the priority remains clear: building meaningful, year-round relationships that adapt to the evolving needs of associations and their members.

This article was developed following a session with Kenes Group's Association Management professionals and reflects their shared expertise and commitment to advancing the member experience.

kenes group

The **Human Touch** in a **Digital World**: Balancing **Technology** and **Personalisation** in Modern Events



In today's rapidly evolving event landscape, creating meaningful delegate experiences has never been more crucial or more complex; associations strive to deliver value through the technology that now enables a level of customisation previously unimaginable.

Author: Johanna Tellechea Arellano, Project Events and Account Leader – Conferences, at Business Travel Consulting

As technology and artificial intelligence revolutionise our daily lives and professional gatherings, attendees simultaneously crave cutting-edge digital experiences and deeply personalised human connections. This tension defines the post-pandemic event industry, where success depends on mastering both the virtual and the personal.

Constant notifications, data entry requirements, and screen time can overwhelm delegates, particularly during multi-day events and paradoxically reduce meaningful in-person connections that remain the cornerstone of successful professional gatherings.

The contradiction is striking: as our world becomes increasingly digitised, the hunger for authentic, personalised experiences grows stronger. Event participants want immersive technology that wows them while still feeling seen and understood as individuals. They desire frictionless digital experiences without sacrificing meaningful human interaction.

When the pandemic forced events into virtual spaces, many predicted the permanent decline of in-person gatherings. Today's hybrid events are not merely physical gatherings with digital extensions. They represent distinct attendance channels that serve different audience segments with tailored experiences. Virtual components now attract participants who might never attend in person due to geographic, financial, or personal constraints. This digital dimension significantly increases overall participation, creating new revenue streams and expanding global reach. When the pandemic forced events into virtual spaces, many predicted the permanent decline of in-person gatherings.



Personalisation Through Technology

The most innovative event planners leverage technology not as an impersonal force but as a personalisation tool. AI-powered recommendation engines suggest relevant sessions based on attendee interests. Digital badges track participation patterns to deliver customised content. Mobile apps facilitate meaningful connections between like-minded participants.

Over-personalisation, especially in the context of the meetings industry, can certainly present significant risks when balancing innovation with privacy and well-being. While personalised experiences can create a more engaging and memorable event, an excessive or poorly managed approach can lead to various challenges.

Collecting too much personal data to customise experiences can violate attendees' privacy. The more personalised the experience, the more sensitive data needs to be handled. Over-personalisation may involve gathering too much information from attendees in an attempt to refine the experience. This could lead to discomfort for participants who feel their every move is being tracked or analysed.

Personalising experiences based on certain data points may unintentionally exclude or alienate attendees who do not fit into these narrow profiles. For instance, an event tailored only to tech-savvy individuals might leave out others who could benefit from the event but feel excluded.

Over-reliance on algorithms for personalisation may result in unintended biases. If the data being used to personalise experiences is skewed, it could reinforce stereotypes or exclude certain groups. To ensure that algorithms are regularly reviewed and updated to avoid reinforcing biases, designing personalised experiences with a diversity of perspectives in mind and making space for the unexpected.

Mental Health and Well-being: The Next Frontier

Perhaps the most significant shift in post-pandemic event planning is the growing emphasis on attendee well-being. Mental health considerations have moved from afterthought to central design principle. Progressive organisers now incorporate:

- Designated quiet spaces;
- Shorter, more focused sessions with some breaks;
- Mindfulness and meditation offerings integrated throughout the programme;
- Healthier catering options.

Finding Balance

As we navigate this new landscape, the most successful associations will be those that find balance, leveraging technology without becoming enslaved to it.

The future of exceptional delegate experiences lies not in choosing between high-tech and high-touch approaches, but in thoughtfully integrating both. By placing human needs

EP Lab: A New Research Centre For Event Industry Innovation

A collaborative research and development centre for the events industry has been launched to spearhead tech innovation. **EP Lab** is dedicated to driving digital transformation, supporting leadership and enhancing capabilities to leverage cutting-edge tools. The project, established by **ExpoPlatform CTO Mykyta Fastovets**, will bring together experts across events, universities and other partners to optimise research potential.

Author: Conor Riordan, Digital Content Editor at ExpoPlatform



The establishment of EP Lab comes as ExpoPlatform experiences an immeasurable surge in digital advances. Fast-growing developments in tech, such as generative AI, have hit many industries, fuelling an increased acknowledgement of their potential.

"The launch of EP Lab comes at a transformative time for the events industry," Mykyta said. "By fostering collaboration and driving innovation, we aim to develop cutting-edge solutions that redefine how events are organised and experienced. With rapid advances for technology in events, EP Lab will empower industry colleagues with the tools and insights to lead in this digital era."

EP Lab aims to take advantage of the gear change in mindset and become the epicentre of innovation in the events industry. It focuses on exploring and developing new technologies, methodologies, and insights that can revolutionise how shows are organised, managed and experienced.

The initiative will be available to event professionals through its public website, which will include features such as:

- **Project showcase**: A list of ongoing and completed initiatives. Developments will include summaries, key findings and downloadable reports.
- **Education**: Resources to help event professionals better understand how innovation can be implemented in their organisations.
- **Collaboration opportunities**: The centre has an open-door policy to event organisers and budding digital innovators to work together. Get involved!
- **Expertise services**: Detailed information about the technology stack and services utilised by the Lab.

If you are interested in joining the Lab or would like more information, visit *eplab.ai*



FIEXPO Latin America





9-12 JUNE 2025

COSTA RICA

#SOMOSLATINOAMÉRICA

ENHANCING THE **TRANSFORMATIVE POWER** OF THE MEETINGS INDUSTRY

essential COSTA RICA

ICCA Industry Partner

ufi Approved International Event

Approved International Event

www.fiexpolatinamerica.com

Where moments *matter.*

PRAGUE
CONGRESS CENTRE



How about hosting an international congress in a living-art gallery with a direct **view of Prague at your fingertips**? Or perhaps a business meeting in an **iconic interior design** setting? Imagine a conference that is not only **professionally enriching** but also purely **sustainable**. The Prague Congress Centre offers it all.

IMEX FRANKFURT
20-22 MAY 2025

VISIT US AT STAND F330

+420 261 172 222 booking@praguecc.cz praguecc.cz