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A Business Event 'Breturn?'

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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

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

FINANCE & ACCOUNTING
finance@meetingmediagroup.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Press@meetingmediagroup.com

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How **Copenhagen** is Forging **Impact-driven Events** to Inspire People, Business and the Planet

In an ever-changing world, Copenhagen is setting the tone when it comes to responsible tourism and conscious travelling. Initiatives such as **CopenPay**, **Legacy Lab**, and the **EarthCheck certification**, are raising the city's standards both locally and globally.

Conscious planning and ESG principles are at the heart of how Copenhagen is designing the future of its tourism and events sector for the greater good and with an eye to local and global sustainable development. The destination offers a favourable environment for events that seek to integrate climate-friendly practices, with initiatives within sustainability, mobility and hospitality. For this reason, the city is a front-runner in the development of sustainable solutions across the board, from pioneering bike infrastructure to climate-smart planning – arguments that led it to special honours such as the third most sustainable destination in the world or the **Innovation Award** for its 'CopenPay' initiative (see below), both awarded by the **GDS Movement**. Crucial endeavours for an industry seeking to tackle the urgent challenges related to climate change, geopolitical instability, and over-tourism through partnerships for action throughout the supply chain.

Following a cohesive trajectory of many years, in 2024, the city launched its '**Copenhagen, All Inclusive**' tourism strategy, one of the most ambitious tourism strategies seen to date, to accelerate the sector's green transition with an ambitious climate roadmap that lays the foundations for carbon neutrality in Copenhagen by 2050. Tourism accounts for nearly 8% of global CO_2 emissions, and with international arrivals predicted to reach 1.8 billion by 2030, critical action is key. 'Copenhagen, All Inclusive' has set out to redefine an outdated and passive form of travel into an active and conscious approach through shared responsibility between the industry, stakeholders, and guests/delegates.

"Copenhagen has shown tremendous leadership in embedding sustainability into its tourism strategy and operations," **Stewart Moore, CEO and Founder of EarthCheck**.

To ensure the success of this strategy, **Wonderful Copenhagen** has dedicated years to the development and continuous refinement of the pioneering **Copenhagen Sustainability Guide** that includes pre- and post-planning indicators to help planners reduce their CO_2 footprint and resource consumption, along with long-lasting social impact benchmarks for their events. This interactive guide, developed as a digital pre-emptive tool, calculates and reports CO_2 emissions broken down into six categories – international transport, virtual participation, local transport, accommodation, venue and event design, food and beverages, and indirect mitigation efforts – in line with the **UN's Sustainable Development Goals**. An efficient and useful method to incorporate the positives and reassess the negatives of trips and the different phases of any given event.

A World-Leading Certification And Other Initiatives!

But the cherry on top came with the highest certification for destinations: the **EarthCheck Sustainable Destination certification**, granted in 2024. Copenhagen's green efforts have been rewarded by this label, which reinforces the credibility and harmonisation of tourism products and services in systematising, documenting and accelerating the local industry's transition within a comprehensive and pragmatic agenda. This international recognition, which came about through a close collaboration between the City of Copenhagen and Wonderful Copenhagen, also sheds light to the broader design of the destination's new tourism strategy by forging a common language and structured approach for cross-sector collaboration with multi-stakeholders in urban development. It also signals one of the most important goals of the **National Tourism Strategy**, in which all destination management organisations, as well as 70% of accommodation and amusement parks in Denmark, will have to be sustainability certified by 2030.

Through benchmarking, data-based documentation and annual audits, the certification will create an overview of key indicators – such as energy consumption, water use, CO_2 emissions, waste and social conditions – crucial to navigate this sustainable journey. Since 1987, EarthCheck has been helpng businesses, communities and governments to deliver sustainable, clean, safe, and prosperous destinations for travellers to visit, live, work and play. As a 'third-party certification,' it is subject to a rigorous science-backed, people-focused certification process, providing a framework for destinations to measure, monitor and improve their environmental, social and economic performances. The

Copenhagen certification process will be independently verified annually by external auditors, guaranteeing its accreditation and transparency.

"In addition to working with sustainable certification of our tourism organisation, individual partners, and now Copenhagen as a destination, we also wish to influence, and guide actual tourism behaviour in a more sustainable direction," **Søren Tegen Pedersen, CEO of Wonderful Copenhagen**.

Copenpay 2025: Arrive By Train For A Guided Tour Through A Museum

Among the innovative ideas that Danish officials will be presenting at this audit will certainly be the latest generation of CopenPay, a great case study of how a 'green action' incentive can be a game-changer to get consumers to act out of the box and adopt more conscious behaviour. This impact-driven experience economy allows visitors to 'pay' for leisure experiences in the city with concrete actions. You can, for instance, enjoy a boat trip, take part in an excursion or get a discount at a museum if you choose to swap your car for a bicycle, help clean up the city or work in an urban garden. The initiative's resounding success with visitors is now reflected in the nearly 100 attractions in Copenhagen lasting nine weeks (from 17 June until 17 August) – from a simple pilot in 2024CopenPay was responsible for collecting 29% more tonnes of waste with a 98% approval rating.

Meanwhile, cities and DMOs worldwide have already shown interest in adopting a local version of the initiative, rewarding their visitors for more responsible behaviours. Berlin, Bremen, and Helsinki are creating their own local incentive schemes inspired by CopenPay, which defines the cross-city scope and nature of this project. Probably the biggest perks for business travellers are transport and accommodation. This year, CopenPay rewarded travellers who arrive by train and, once in the city, also encouraged visitors to stay longer. CopenPay 2025 also brought a new surprise, which was the use of CopenPay at congresses. Selected international events were able to test local activities as a pilot element in their social programme. During the **23rd European Symposium on Organic Chemistry**, for example, early risers were invited to *plogging* (pick up + jog) in exchange for a packed breakfast, to help keep the city's harbourfront clean and tidy.

Last but not least, final words for the **Copenhagen Legacy Lab** that *HQ* has been following from the start – the ground-breaking project that is ample proof of how a short-lived event can leave lasting transformations in both the organisation and the place where it takes place. Last year, the Lab expanded its legacy framework for congresses to include events, identifying specific legacy opportunities within its systematic approach, and the work does not stop here.



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Living in the **Third Evolutionary** Phase of **Association Events**

Author: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager



"It is human nature as well as current thinking for the majority to assume that if we invest more in technological innovation, in digital transformation, in AI, problems will solve themselves, instead of focusing on investing in social innovation, teaching our leadership to be humble, collaborative, instead of egoistic, power-driven." This striking observation was taken from one of the respondents (in the social entrepreneurship sector) for the white paper '*Exploring the Geopolitical Landscape: Implications for Associations*.' In my discussion with the Head of **The Hague & Partners**, I was able to outline the four topics under discussion – Events, DEI, Cybersecurity, Innovation – in a feature article that you can read on the following pages.

In a global scenario that is (paradoxically) interconnected and fragmented, risk management has become one of the main responsibilities for associations. While it is true that economic and membership flows depend on international dynamics, the mantle of a unified and unbroken platform has given way to the unpredictability of a multipolar world. As a result, geopolitical instability is having a significant impact on associations, leading to changes in supply chains, regulatory challenges and reputational risks. Growing rivalry between major powers, conflicts in various regions and the rise of ultra-nationalism are reshaping trade relations, creating uncertainty and dismantling old ways. So much so that even the **World Economic Forum** is calling on organisations to create a **Chief Geopolitical Officer** role. Perhaps the most striking conclusion about the aforementioned paper comes from the operational divide and disruption in the face of these pressures. Associations are being called upon in real time to come up with instant solutions, and their responses range from reactive limitations to proactive mobilisation – depending on their governance, means and value structure.

From here we jump to my conversation with **Ioannis Pallas, ESAE Director** and co-producer of this study. "If it had not been for COVID-19, we would not have been able to work as quickly and as smoothly as we do now. Crises are engines of change and progress, and I believe that they lead associations to become more relevant." The underlying message of our conversation (which you can also read further on) follows what he calls 'the third phase in the evolution of association events.' Highly professionalised associations no longer see their conferences as a one-off, fleeting opportunity, but are aligning their mission and values with the profile of the destination – where the issue of political alliances is influencing associations' decisions. Leadership is therefore essential, and the way in which this industry should advocate its rights to policy makers (one of the most hotly debated points in this column) was also highlighted in my conversation with **Anna Golden, CEO of the UK Association of Event Organisers**: "One of the major issues has been that we fall between the cracks of different government departments and do not have one sole department advocating on our behalf."

After all, as the respondent above concludes: "We need to invest in having better leaders, less egos, we need more mechanisms and raising of leaders and citizens in general to not vote for people who demonstrate tough decision-making – and selfishness – as a sign of strength and people who can stop to act out of fear, feelings of scarcity, and a need for power. We need to have those in power who genuinely care for the world, for others, for the future generations and the world these people will live in."



Editor's Notes

Diplomacy or Dracarys: The Decline of Negotiation in Global Leadership

Author: Jesús Guerrero Chacón, HQ's Deputy Editor

"*Enemies to the east, enemies to the west, enemies to the south, enemies to the north. Whatever stands in our way, we will defeat it.*" These were Queen Cersei Lannister's words in *Game of Thrones*, spoken with defiance but against a backdrop of collapsing power. Today, some world leaders display the same belligerence, struggling to distinguish between allies and enemies.

Across the sea, Daenerys Targaryen began her journey as a liberator, but soon demanded loyalty through fire and fear. '*Bend the knee*,' she repeated to those she called allies, as her reign descended into tyranny. Her command, '*Dracarys*', brought not justice, but civilian casualties and destruction to the capital she was meant to rule. In *Westeros*, bending the knee was an act of submission. In today's diplomacy, it has become the norm. Leaders are giving way to coercion and humiliation, bending the knee for trade, security, or favour, or else face their own version of dragonfire.

Where fiction once served as warning, reality has caught up. The dystopias of *Years and Years*, with collapsing norms and a politics of spectacle, no longer feel far-fetched. In 2025, the line between theatre and diplomacy has blurred. At the NATO Summit, the now-infamous 'daddy' moment with Secretary General Mark Rutte and President Trump gained online traction, a troubling signal. Humiliation became part of the negotiating toolkit.

The EU's trade agreement with the USA in July confirmed this shift. President von der Leyen accepted Washington's 15% tariff on most EU exports. The outcome was seen as a concession, not a deal. Switzerland's neutrality provided no buffer. A 39% tariff was levied with little warning, a sudden move that shocked observers.

As armed conflicts persist, Europe's strategic influence continues to diminish. When Trump and Putin met in Alaska to discuss Ukraine, European leaders and President Zelensky insisted that no decisions should be made without Ukrainian involvement, highlighting Europe's growing frustration at being excluded from crucial negotiations. This exclusion is not an isolated incident. The EU's inability to present a unified position on Gaza, fractured by divergent national perspectives, inconsistent messaging and silence in international platforms, has further weakened credibility.

As political leaders hesitate to act, civilians bear the consequences. Protesters are criminalised in democracies. Immigrants and refugees are traded for votes. Disinformation fills the gaps left by silence. We risk becoming a generation that looked away while technology made everything visible.

Today's geopolitical landscape is unstable. For associations, this is not a theoretical moment. Visa restrictions, rising costs, polarised discourse, and reputational risks shape how and where we meet. Challenges include integrating technology, bridging generations, ensuring financial viability, and adapting to shifting expectations.

In this environment, associations have an opportunity to remain a steady light amid uncertainty. They hold strategic influence beyond their sectors, and as global instability and institutional distrust grow, their congresses and links to research centres, universities, governments, and members are key to cross-border collaboration and democratic resilience. By protecting purpose, values, and embracing diverse members, they can counter fragmentation with cooperation. They can train future-ready leaders, elevate diverse perspectives, and challenge disinformation. Values must guide governance, inclusive event programming, and everyday decisions.

These times shall pass, only if we stand firm. Only if our values remain embedded in our work, if civil society refuses to bend the knee.

HQ ESSENTIAL INTERVIEWS &REPORTS





"Even in a price-sensitive environment destinations that continue to invest and innovate are likely to remain strong contenders," Rachel Parker

A Business Event '**Breturn**?'

EIA Calls for a Mutual Recognition Agreement with the EU

The **Events Industry Alliance (EIA)** launched a campaign at the beginning of July urging UK and EU policymakers to prioritise the establishment of a **Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA)** for the business events sector in future trade discussions. **Manuel Fernandes** spoke to EIA's trio of leaders about the need for this continental convergence.

The UK business events sector is a vital economic engine, hosting more than 1,100 trade shows and seven million attendees annually with an economic impact of around £10.9 billion (approx. €12.75 billion). With more than 100,000 jobs created across the country, the sector makes a significant contribution to regional and national economies. In 2023 alone, the sector grew by 17% – far outstripping the UK's GDP growth of just 0.1%. "It is clear that the business events industry is extremely valuable to the UK economy and drives business travel to every part of the country but often our industry does fly under the radar. That is partly why the EIA is actively working to change that perception and lobbying for a strategic business events strategy, similar to the one recently announced by Ireland," says **Anna Golden, EIA Co-Director and CEO of the Association of Event Organisers**. "One of the major issues has been that we fall between the cracks of different Government departments and do not have one sole department advocating on our behalf. We have been working successfully over the last few years to build political support for the sector across **Westminster** and **Whitehall**."

Almost five years after the official departure from the EU, the knock-on effects on the UK industries are still being felt across the board. In addition to set-up challenges and increased supplier costs, a recent ESSA survey reveals that 82% of business events suppliers believe that Brexit has negatively impacted their operations, with 67% reporting direct business losses. "It is clear that the Brexit scenario, and the following period of uncertainty, partnered with the pandemic, had a significant bearing on the UK business events industry," says **Rachel Parker, EIA Co-Director and Director of the Association of Event Venues**. "However, our members continue to create, build and host world leading business events, attracting domestic and international visitors and exhibitors across the UK." While other creative sectors have received assurances of support and safeguards to tackle their obstacles, such as touring musicians, the events sector has remained largely excluded from the debate. Yet, "our recent report presented some positive findings; it concluded that by 2024, the number of exhibitions showed further recovery growing by 4% to reach their highest level since 2017. The average number of exhibitions per venue was also up compared to 2023 and the volume of trade exhibitions was up above pre-Covid levels," Parker states.

The EIA is calling for a set of continental recognition agreements to reduce the current administrative, bureaucratic and mobility barriers through a sector-specific MRA. Members of the **Event Services and Suppliers Association (ESSA)**, which represents contractors and suppliers of goods and services in the UK, are feeling the consequences most acutely. "They are at the cliff face of changes affecting the ability to transport goods across Europe, changes which are impacting the competitiveness of UK suppliers. While it is

clear that the UK's exit from the European economic area has had consequences, we are encouraged by the Government's ambition to seek a closer trading relationship with the EU and believe that this will bring significant benefits to the industry if a mutual recognition agreement is reached," says **Andrew Harrison, EIA Co-Director, ESSA Director** and a regular ***HQ* contributor**. One high-profile casualty of these trade barriers was the relocation of the world's largest gaming and technology fair – the **International Casino Exhibition (ICE)** – from London to Barcelona, resulting in an estimated €287 million loss to the UK economy. "At the UK/EU summit in May, we saw a commitment to continue working on making it easier for touring artists, travel, and cultural exchange amongst other agreements around food standards, defence and security, and youth mobility with the bloc. Our campaign is designed to ensure our industry does not miss out on the benefits of this closer relationship which are already being worked towards in other sectors," adds Golden.

According to various reports, European and British planners are now very anxious about value for money and destination support. Economic challenges, increased paperwork and tariffs can lead to a mountain of inflation throughout the supply chain. "We have found that economic pressures are driving destinations and venues to be more creative and competitive in the way they attract and stage major events," says Harrison. "While the most cost-effective destinations may get a short-term boost as planners look for savings, venues that combine solid infrastructure with adaptability and partnership-driven approaches will remain highly competitive." For EIA, in many cases, improved infrastructure can help level out production costs by reducing operational friction, increasing efficiency and offering integrated support services. "**Excel London** recently completed a €252 million expansion to improve its facilities, with a focus on sustainability and flexible event spaces. **Olympia London** is investing €1.5 billion which will see a new international convention centre opening in 2026. Smaller venues in London continue to modernise and invest, including the **Barbican**, which has announced a €275 million investment programme. Similarly, **ICC Birmingham** and **Manchester Central** have both rolled out upgrades to improve connectivity, hybrid features and the attendee experience. These investments are not just about capacity; they are about higher quality support and services that justify the value in a challenging market," explains Parker.

This is especially important when we hear countless stories of conferences that have been moved, cancelled or rescheduled to more reliable and stable destinations due to changing political trends and regional tensions. "While it is important to recognise that there are new challenges in the market, some of our members are excited about the new business. Excel London recently announced that it will host ten major international congresses in 2026 – a record for a single year that will generate £250 million (approx. €292.5 million) for London's business economy. **P&J Live** in Aberdeen will host 375 events this year, all with a significant economic impact for the city and the region. Finally, ICC Birmingham has also won a number of medical congresses in 2026 and 2027, which points to the UK's cherished opportunity as a destination for the sector," Parker reassures. Finally, the rise of destinations in Asia and the Middle East to the top of international event rankings represents not only the economic vitality of these regions, but also the expansion of a global industry that is tangible to various sectors. This could be another strong argument for a closer working relationship between the UK and the EU. "In an increasingly multipolar market, standing still is not an option. The UK must ensure, as far as possible, that exhibitors enjoy frictionless cross-border operations. As we have seen in recent years, destinations that remove regulatory and mobility barriers gain market share, while those that add complexity lose it. That is why we have launched this campaign, because we need to act fast to position the UK as a reliable and accessible destination again," concludes Anna.

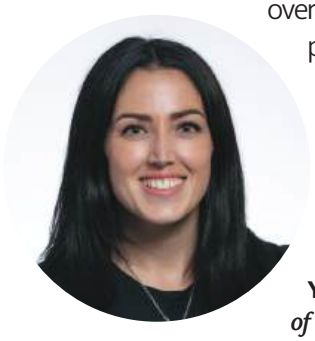


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The Civic Power of **Adult Education**

Lifelong learning plays a vital role in promoting democratic participation, social inclusion and community resilience throughout Europe. The **European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA)** represents over 120 member organisations in 43 countries and advocates access to non-formal adult learning, particularly for under-represented groups. Its network reaches more than 60 million learners across the continent. In this interview, **Dearbháil Lawless, Vice President of the EAEA Board and CEO of AONTAS Ireland**, the country's National Adult Learning Organisation, shares her insights into how adult education supports civic engagement, addresses digital and climate challenges, and shapes more flexible and inclusive learning pathways.



Your 2024 Manifesto *The Power and Joy of Learning* describes adult learning as a transformative right. How is EAEA making lifelong learning empowering and relevant for adults, especially those on the margins, amid today's digital, democratic, and climate-related challenges?

The Power and Joy of Learning frames adult education as a transformative right and this reflects our vision as an organisation, considering the needs of society and current and future challenges. We call for a Europe that provides meaningful opportunities for people to engage in Adult Learning and Education (ALE) and recognise that ALE is both a human right and a common good.

By this I mean, ALE can directly influence and improve democracy, environmental issues, well-being, social justice, employment opportunities and so much more. Take for example, digital literacy. The world is rapidly changing with banking, shopping, medical appointments, government services and more being provided online. Often these services are largely only available online. Without digital literacy and resources like internet access and a digital device, people are being excluded from basic practices and services in society. They cannot pay bills, update their driver's licence, book flights or keep up-to-date with transport information. This change is happening in every country, and we must ensure that every adult is provided with digital literacy through ALE to protect their basic needs.

ALE is also vital for a healthy and authentic democracy. People need to understand elections, their voting rights, candidate and legislative information, and ensure their vote is informed and logistically possible. In Ireland, for example, you check an online register to see if you are registered to vote and this must be checked and updated in advance of the polling day. For someone with little knowledge of the voting system or who has unmet literacy needs, ALE can and does address this through voter education programmes, communication skills, and literacy classes.

There are also certain types of ALE like Community Education, Folk High Schools or Popular Education as discussed in the manifesto that focus on areas like critical thinking and critical media literacy. This helps people to question systems, challenge oppressive forces, and recognise misinformation, malinformation or so-called 'fake-news'.

The manifesto not only outlines some of the challenges faced in areas like democracy, digital changes, or the environment, but it talks about what adult learning can do, providing research evidence and examples of good practice.

With Flexible Learning Pathways as your 2025 theme, what have you learned about making adult education more inclusive and accessible across Europe? Where do the limits of flexibility still lie?

Flexible Learning Pathways has been a great theme for us in 2025. It has provided the organisation and our members with the space to reflect, listen to new voices, and inform our future work in this area. Flexibility is needed to build an inclusive society where all adults (including those from underrepresented groups, disadvantaged socio-economic

groups, etc.) are able to engage in learning. It is important to be mindful of what flexibility means to different people, too. For example, we will never reach some people if we cannot offer evening, weekend, summer or online programmes. For others, flexibility means breaking programmes into smaller modules or offering resources that support neurodivergent learners and different learning preferences. Education must be taught in a way that suits the learner. ALE has always been strong in this area, and I think higher education is now improving its offers through options like micro credentials. In the future, we will not meet the needs of society if we do not let go of traditional ways of teaching and learning and be innovative in our delivery of programmes.

Staff capacity, resources, and competing demands all affect flexibility, and we must consider the context in which educators work. But in education, there is often an old-school mindset of upholding traditional practices, and assuming that these are best. They are not or we would not continue to have people with unmet education needs. In EAEA, we are passionate about equality and we hope that educators, policymakers, and funders will recognise the value and power of non-formal education in being innovative and flexible. You can change a person's future, the future of their family, and strengthen a community through change-oriented non-formal education. A formal assessment or structured teacher-led programme does not always make something more valuable. It has just been validated. Both are important and from my experience, non-formal change-oriented programmes that are done well are far more impactful in being responsive and innovative. The pandemic provided hundreds of examples of that in Ireland alone within community education.

Your podcast series Beyond Learning 2.1 explores grassroots learning for the green transition. How are these community-led models shaping EAEA's broader sustainability strategy?

Through **Beyond Learning 2.1** people can find wonderful examples of community-led models that address climate change. The show provides a platform for people undertaking grassroots action dedicated to a more sustainable future. These are the changemakers of our time making a real difference in something that many of our governments are not prioritising appropriately. It is actually a great example of social justice movements more broadly in that it is local people identifying an issue, working together to create a change, and leading by example. Their work is then (hopefully) amplified and drives a movement for change at regional, national and European level. As an NGO, EAEA wanted to find opportunities to amplify these Community actions that are strong examples of ALE and are both informative and practical for local communities. The podcast is shaping our strategy by deepening our knowledge and understanding, and helping our members to learn about the green transition.

Through the AI4AL project, you promote mindful use of AI in adult education. How do you balance innovation with inclusion, ensuring trust and relevance in AI-supported learning environments?

AI is coming into play hard and fast. Big tech companies are downsizing to move funds across to AI and some companies are saying the quiet part out loud. Recently in London, I saw an AI ad on public transport that said "stop hiring humans". I could not believe that such unethical messaging was presented so boldly. I do not know why I was surprised considering the current political climate but it is disappointing and it is another focus on profit making in place of meaningful employment and stability for people. Yet, we cannot ignore AI. It would be foolish to think that if we sit back and wait, we will figure it out in the future. It is also an example of a rapid change whereby you either keep up and protect your community or you risk having people with more resources and power influencing strategies that will further harm working-class people or other communities that have been marginalised. While we cannot compete with them, we can at least be proactive and informed. From an EAEA perspective, this is why ALE is key. By providing opportunities for people to learn about AI, we can work with others in advocating for its ethical use and help to share people's understanding of the potential positive and negative impact in education, and more broadly.

Balancing innovation and inclusion can be done by keeping informed, creating guidelines for use, and ensuring that humans review content, and humans make decisions. AI might be a helpful tool, but it cannot replace people or educators. The human brain, human conscious, and the lived experience are far more complex than a machine or piece of software. But with careful and considered instruction from a human, learners can use AI to support their learning needs and speed up processes when an educator thinks it is suitable.

"Staff capacity, resources, and competing demands all affect flexibility, and we must consider the context in which educators work.

Intergenerational learning has long been central to your work. What role do you see it playing today in building more connected, resilient communities and teams across Europe?

Learning should be lifelong and life-wide.

Intergenerational learning is profound in its capacity to shift mindsets, create change, and provide practical ways to support learning. There are wonderful examples of this with digital literacy and migrant inclusion, for example. By bringing groups of people together from different ages (and backgrounds!), you can help people to learn how to use mobile phones or computers, and improve their digital literacy while also sharing local knowledge on community services, language, history and so much more. I have also seen programmes with older and younger women in the Traveller community, a nomadic Irish ethnic minority, where older women taught younger women traditional customs like paper flower making and younger women helped the older women with their reading and writing. Intergenerational learning brings people together, it is mutually beneficial and it builds connected and resilient communities by helping us to respect each other, listen to each other, and see the value of different experiences.

At your 2025 conference in Leipzig, Marina Weisband called for self-efficacy and democratic participation through education. In light of today's geopolitical climate, how is EAEA reinforcing adult learning's civic role, and what key outcomes from the event will shape your projects?

Everything we do reinforces adult learning's civic role. Adult learning is built on social justice movements like feminism and working-class action. But to ensure we are addressing immediate and relevant needs, EAEA is creating projects that strengthen communities, promote and support equality and social inclusion, and protect democracy. Learner voice is a democratic action that provides empowering opportunities for people to share their experiences, meet others, and inform future policy and structural changes. As part of our learner voice workshop at the conference, we asked attendees to commit to the learner voice and share their future intentions. We will use this strategic opportunity to check-in, support local and national actions, and drive learner voice for the benefit of learners themselves, the future of ALE, and, more importantly, the health of society.

> *Recently in London, I saw an AI ad on public transport that said "stop hiring humans". I could not believe that such unethical messaging was presented so boldly.*




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New International **Planner Report** Reveals **Shifting** Regional **Attitudes**



The Business of Events published its *2025 International Planner Sentiment Report* in June at an event held at Corrigan's in London, revealing a sharp divergence in the priorities of event planners across global markets. We broke down these data and findings with the **Director of News and Content** of this British independent Think Tank for the events sector.

Drawing on contributions from corporate, association, agency, and incentive and reward planners across the UK, Europe, and North America, the report is a vital resource for destinations and venues seeking to remain competitive in a changing landscape. Sponsored by **Tourism Ireland** and released to coincide with the opening of **The Meetings Show**, the report's findings show diverging regional priorities, particularly among North American planners, shaped by ever-changing economic, cultural and political landscapes. While most areas of sentiment remain relatively stable, suggesting that event planning trends, especially in Europe, have not altered dramatically, the marked cutback in North American planners' priorities in relation to 2024 raises further concerns, particularly in two areas closely linked to the new political climate in the US – 'Equity and Diversity', and 'Sustainability and Social Impact'.

"European event planners feel similar to how they felt in 2024. However, there is an increased focus on cost and value for money, reflecting economic challenges, cultural identity, and equity and diversity," says **Mike Fletcher, Director of News and Content** at **The Business of Events**. When asked if this will drastically change the business landscape, he has a few doubts: "Perhaps not, but we are likely to see a greater sentiment around cultural identity translate into more considered legacies, and an increased emphasis on equity and diversity turn into events that cater to everyone and better reflect the world around us." According to Mike, the two main areas of declining sentiment among US planners (Equity and Diversity, and Sustainability and Social Impact) will not have a huge effect on where the events will take place. "For one, association congresses are typically peripatetic and move around according to where membership is based. In addition, host city status is often awarded several years in advance, so plans seldom change unless there is significant political turmoil or conflict." That said, will international delegates vote with their feet and stay away from US-based conferences and trade shows, if they feel planners are not giving due consideration to the planet or diversity and inclusion? "That is certainly something to keep an eye on. According to ICCA's statistics, Europe remains the largest market for association congresses, so I do not believe we will see much change in the intent to travel from US-based delegates," he replies.

> ***"Planners in the UK and Europe are putting Cost and Value for Money at the top of the agenda amid ongoing economic pressures.***

Another point that stands out in this study is the apparent disregard of planners for aspects related to the destination's cultural profile, both in terms of identity and welcoming, in the North American market. Rather than a cultural shift, this could be interpreted as political isolationism and 'business as usual' behaviour in the region. "The shift in home-grown sentiment amongst US planners is almost certainly more a reflection of the 'America First' political climate. One might see this as an increase in isolationism, but I believe we need to separate the desire to conduct business and the exchange of ideas in a face-to-face environment from what

is happening in the White House." Although this might affect the synergies and complementarity of international associations in the Western world, location is not key: "International membership associations do what is best for their members. They want to bring together people from different territories, collaborate with international host cities and CVBs, and boost knowledge sharing at a global level. Associations have never prioritised certain regions. They relocate congresses and events to accommodate members' interests, regardless of their location."

Meanwhile, Cost and Value for Money has increased in importance among European planners, now rated at 10, up one point from the previous year. This mirrors trends in the UK and likely reflects inflationary pressures and economic uncertainty affecting budgets across the supply chain. Other decision-making factors, such as Accessibility, Destination and City Brand, Food and Hospitality, and Safety and Security, remained largely stable year-on-year across all regions. "According to the 2024 ICCA rankings, the appeal of what we would class as second-tier cities in the UK has grown enormously. Liverpool, for example, has risen 61 places to 112th worldwide, making it the fourth busiest city for congresses in the UK, while Birmingham has risen 87 places to 125th, its highest position since 2017. While lower venue and accommodation costs are undeniably attractive, they are only part of the 'Beyond the Capital' story. Events outside London also offer greater potential for local legacy, regional development and collaboration between stakeholders." For associations focused on knowledge transfer and impact, this can be a critical differentiator. "Smaller cities often create more intimate, community-driven event environments, which are ideal for meaningful networking and delegate engagement. There is no question that London remains the UK's number one city for major events and remains incredibly competitive when bidding against other European capitals. But its once-unchallenged domestic dominance is now being thoughtfully rebalanced by other cities across the UK, offering creativity, credibility, and purpose-led experiences to suit a range of mid-sized congresses and events," Fletcher states.

In the words of our fellow analyst, the race for sustainability will not end until organisations and governments reduce global emissions by 50%, in line with the **Paris Agreement**, and develop pathways to achieve net zero by 2050. "The fact that sustainability sentiment has remained the same in both the UK (7/10) and Europe (8/10) amongst event planners underlines this ongoing mission. It shows that sustainability is no longer a 'nice to have'. It is expected as part of organisational targets and is now ingrained into the planning process. In the EU, policy and legislation continue to push the agenda forward. However, globally, frameworks like the **GDS-Index** help to measure how destinations are truly performing in terms of sustainability, rather than just what they claim in their bids. Initiatives like this have shifted the narrative and helped to ensure that sustainability is an important 'given' and firmly embedded in everything that planners do," Fletcher says.

The *International Planner Sentiment Report* forms part of The Business of Events' wider research programme, which includes the *Quarterly Event Economy Tracker, and Global Destination Report*. "We will launch two further pieces of research around **IBTM World** in Barcelona in November. Our annual *Global Destinations Report*, along with an inaugural report into accessibility, will provide fascinating insights from global convention bureaux, venues, and delegates with accessibility requirements," Fletcher concludes.

> ***"Associations have never prioritised certain regions. They relocate congresses and events to accommodate members' interests, regardless of their location.***

Berlin Freedom Week 2025: A New Global Forum for Freedom and Democracy



Set to debut in November 2025, Berlin Freedom Week aims to transform the German capital into a global platform for pro-democracy leaders. The event will bring together the city's historical legacy and the present-day challenges to freedom and human rights. In this interview, *HQ*'s **Manuel Fernandes** speaks to **Marco Oelschlegel, CMP, Director of Conventions at visitBerlin – Berlin Convention Office**, about the event's vision, partnerships and long-term ambitions.

Berlin will host its first Freedom Week this November, spotlighting freedom and democracy through conferences, cultural events, and workshops. How did the concept evolve, and what led you to involve international partners?

Last year, on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the Fall of the Wall, the **Governing Mayor of Berlin**, together with **visitBerlin**, hosted a festive dinner where several members of the **World Liberty Council** were invited, in partnership with the **Axel Springer Freedom Foundation**, which curated and hosted several dissident-focused formats as part of the official anniversary celebrations. We realised, in light of the geopolitical situation, that there is a need to establish a forum for forum. Therefore, we designed Berlin Freedom Week as a living bridge between Berlin's historic legacy and today's global struggle for freedom. We joined forces with internationally recognised partners who embody democratic resistance and historical memory. Among the core partners are the **World Liberty Congress**, which unites over 200 pro-democracy leaders from more than 50 authoritarian regimes; the Axel Springer Freedom Foundation, active in supporting human rights defenders; the **Berlin Commissioner for the Reappraisal of the former East German Dictatorship (Frank Ebert)**; and the **Robert Havemann Society**, custodian of the GDR Opposition Archive. This network ensures that Berlin Freedom Week is an international platform for democratic exchange, connecting dissidents, policymakers, scholars, artists, and Berliners alike. Together we invite other organisations, associations, and companies to contribute with their own events. So far, around 50 events are confirmed citywide. A key highlight is the **Berlin Freedom Conference** at **EUREF Campus**, where voices from politics, activism, academia, and culture gather to address today's challenges and envision a just future.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 became a global symbol of democratic change. How does Berlin Freedom Week build on this legacy, and how does it reflect the values your Convention Bureau promotes in the events industry?

Berlin Freedom Week builds on the city's legacy as a symbol of peaceful revolution and openness. The spirit of 1989 still pulses through the city, and this initiative builds on that momentum by establishing Berlin as a bold voice in today's global events landscape. Here, values-driven events find meaning and relevance. By placing freedom, human rights and participation at the heart of its identity, Berlin is setting new standards for the global events industry. For the visitBerlin – Berlin Convention Office, it is a clear commitment to hosting events that take a stand, not just take place.

Geopolitical instability is affecting association decisions on visas, travel, and insurance. How is Berlin responding to these challenges, and do they pose more of a risk or opportunity for destinations like yours?





Historical image of the fall of the Berlin Wall (©Alamy Stock Foto Norbert Michalke)



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In times of global geopolitical uncertainty, Berlin's status as a politically stable and open meeting destination is a clear advantage. Berlin as the City of Freedom offers accessibility, security and symbolic significance. These factors make the German capital an ideal setting for open dialogue and global cooperation.

Associations are responding to geopolitical instability in different ways. What support does Berlin offer to help foster collaboration, innovation, and policy dialogue in their conferences?

At the visitBerlin – Berlin Convention Office, we see ourselves as connectors within one of Europe's most dynamic innovation ecosystems. Berlin offers association partners direct access to a dense network of universities, research institutions, startups, think tanks, and globally relevant innovation clusters like health, mobility, digital technologies, energy, and the creative industries. We connect organisers with event locations, congress hotels, and service providers, and help integrate political stakeholders – so that every meeting, congress or conference becomes a platform for meaningful ideas and forward-thinking concepts.

DEI is now a test of organisational values, with rising backlash forcing associations to rethink language, venues, and positioning. Where does your city stand, and what message does it offer associations navigating a divided landscape?

We believe that DEI is not an optional extra; it is core to the identity of modern business meetings. In a time of rising anti-DEI sentiment, Berlin stands firm, offering a truly inclusive environment. Through the **Berlin Impact Programme** by visitBerlin, we support event planners in creating meaningful social value – whether through alignment with the UN SDGs, partnerships with local NGOs, or hands-on community engagement. Impacts can range from social days to long-term projects like school programmes or research collaborations. We offer consultation, matchmaking, and support to ensure every event creates a lasting, measurable legacy.

Europe's digital agenda is entering a decisive phase, with new rules on AI, data, and platform liability. How is Berlin adapting, especially in cybersecurity and data protection? And how do you support associations in safeguarding member and speaker identities, particularly across borders or in sensitive regions?

Berlin is actively committed to digital transformation in Europe, with a strong focus on cybersecurity, data protection and digital accessibility. We consider digital rights to be part of our democratic responsibility. Berlin offers a wide range of modern venues that have integrated comprehensive physical and digital security protocols – including secure networks, access systems, trained security personnel on site and close cooperation with local authorities. These venues are ideal for high-profile business events with sensitive participants from politics, diplomacy and civil society.

While today's geopolitical instability brings new challenges, many are drawing lessons from past crises like COVID-19, Brexit, and the financial downturn. What has Berlin learned from these moments, and where are you focusing your resilience efforts now?

Berlin has learned that resilience in the events industry means more than logistics, it is about adaptability, partnership, and purpose. From the pandemic to Brexit, the city has turned crises into progress by expanding hybrid infrastructure, diversifying venues with the **Berlin Meeting Campus**, and boosting collaboration across sectors. Initiatives like the Berlin Impact Programme and the **Congress Fund for Sustainable Meetings** support the lasting event value. In uncertain times, Berlin offers a stable, reliable framework for impactful events.

> *"By placing freedom, human rights and participation at the heart of its identity, Berlin is setting new standards for the global events industry.*

What do **Associations** have to Look out for as **Geopolitical Instability** Becomes Structural?



The **Hague & Partners Convention Bureau (TH&P)**, in collaboration with the **European Society of Association Executives (ESAE)**, presented a comprehensive white paper at **IMEX Frankfurt** in May that explores the resilience of associations: *Exploring the Geopolitical Scenario: Implications for Associations.* We went to talk to the Dutch city to break down some of the telltale signs of an industry groping its way forward.

The joint white paper highlighted the growing concerns in a sector at a strategic crossroads, exploring how global instability is shaping the future of associations and non-profit organisations. Based on qualitative insights and a global survey of 99 association leaders, the report revealed that 85% of organisations have already experienced disruptions due to geopolitical instability and 88% expect new challenges. As the document proves, today's challenge is not a one-off event; it is the scale, speed and interconnectivity of instability itself. The target audience for this survey was executives from European and international associations; other types of organisations represented in the sample included members of professional societies, non-profit organisations, and charities. While the sample was not entirely randomly selected, it was drawn primarily from a relevant and informed segment of the target population: ESAE members, TH&P's client database, and Watterston Associate's database. An estimated 4,500 people participated in this online survey. "The first phase of the research provided a structured framework for the development of the final survey questions. Facilitated discussion among the select group of association executives determined that the main thematic dimensions of the research should be around geopolitical trends and their impact on various aspects of association operations, the impact of technology and, of course, the impact on association events," explains **Bas Schot, TH&P Head of Convention Bureau**. Many of the themes raised – such as concerns about event security, value-driven destination selection and rising anti-DEI sentiment – were echoed in the wider survey responses.

"We see funding shifting away from topics our network cares for, particularly infrastructural funding for associations just to exist in the social fabric, to convene and bring people together and to have the space and safety to forge the future together this way," one of the respondents said.

According to the research, associations stuck in multi-year governance cycles can find it difficult to adapt strategically, economically and ideologically to a constantly changing event environment. "Associations that incorporate agility into their planning can more easily determine whether and how often they need to adjust their conferences. In response, destinations will need to develop their long-term strategic visions and activities to reflect a rapidly changing world," says Schot. This probably means that the most successful destinations will be those able to balance long-term market strategies with short-term tactics, as well as macro-political and economic factors. Past crises have shown that operational improvements – remote working, hybrid formats, contingency plans, etc. – have helped associations (at least 83% of them) to protect themselves. However, as the white paper states, almost half of them admit to persistent gaps in knowledge or preparation. These statistics indicate, for Bas Schot, the depth and unpredictability of the current geopolitical climate. "They emphasise how current issues go beyond logistics and strike at the heart of freedom of expression, inclusion and global alignment. This is an opportunity for destinations to support associations in mitigating risks and aligning their mission statements, which now seem to be part of the destination selection process."

Event planning is moving into a phase subject to travel restrictions, reputational concerns and growing doubts about location, formats and inclusivity. However, just over a quarter of the respondents said that recent geopolitical developments had negatively impacted their ability to hold events in Europe. "We think in terms of opportunity," Schot says. "The fact that 64% of associations reported no impact on their ability to host events in Europe, coupled with a growing emphasis on value-based destination selection, places relatively neutral cities like The Hague in a strong position. Our positioning as a strategic partner, and not just a supplier, gives us a competitive edge in an increasingly cautious market." Another telling statement comes from the role of values in decision-making: "We used to select a venue based on geography and price;



> *An important aspect of our work is to act as connectors for innovation ecosystems, where associations can liaise with local industry peers around content.*

now it is all about signals." Risk planning scenarios and stakeholder influence have become standard practice even for medium-sized congresses. "Destinations today face the challenge of balancing commercial imperatives with values alignment. The white paper observes a shift from decisions based on costs and geography to those based on signals, ethics and identity," Schot adds. While destinations like The Hague can promote neutrality through diplomatic infrastructures, they must now be selective in the types of partnerships they promote. "When the nature of an event conflicts with a destination's identity, remaining neutral may not be possible, especially in areas such as human rights, DEI or cybersecurity. This can mean assessing mutual suitability, supporting risk planning or even withdrawing from the partnership when values are not aligned."

In the tech world, associations regard cybersecurity as an emerging key concern, although most of them have not yet been attacked or threatened. However, there is a general perception of vulnerability in the face of the wealth of member data, sensitive documents and political positions that could fall into the wrong hands. "Many associations are becoming more proactive: 54% have implemented multi-factor authentication, 50% offer staff training and 49% use secure cloud storage. However, 23% still lack formal measures, indicating uneven preparation across the sector." Some respondents report outsourcing cybersecurity or assigning responsibilities to internal staff, but few have fully integrated it into the governance strategy. "Some associations that manage and support volunteers (around 23%) have systems that are susceptible to compromise due to the lack of security in the systems used by the volunteer team," Schot reports. The paper's findings point to a sector that is cautiously optimistic about innovation, but which is still at the beginning of its journey. One trend that has yet to be explored is the growing role of host destinations as innovation partners. As one respondent put it: "We are not just looking for event spaces anymore; we are looking for ecosystems." In The Hague, various innovation ecosystems are categorised by sectoral clusters, where associations can interact with the city's business offerings. "After COVID-19, we embarked heavily on innovation, where we introduced interested partners to the **Event Design Canvas**, a tool that analyses the event's strategy and ensures alignment with the association's mission. Today, our Impact Hubs, such as **Apollo 14**, and Innovation Labs, such as **The Hague Tech**, are ecosystems for this innovative ethos. There is also collaborative funding that considers the impact of the event for the cluster and the city." concludes Schot.

"I Believe that **Tech Savviness** Goes Hand in Hand With **Business Expertise**"





Geopolitical turbulence in the world of association events is no longer episodic, but structural... and there is no end in sight. Today, associations are considering what the host city signals to members, stakeholders and the general public. However, as one of the survey respondents says, "we need to change how we deliver and fund our work, but every quarter there is a new crisis. We are firefighting, not future-proofing."

These were the findings of the previous white paper, which we follow up here with the co-producers – the **European Society of Association Executives (ESAE)**. In this conversation with our **Manuel Fernandes**, **Ioannis Pallas, ESAE Managing Director**, explains why he believes that the association community is reaching the third level in the evolution of meetings and events.

Both your white paper and the IAPCO Impact Survey demonstrate that decisions about destinations are no longer purely operational, but rather reputational. Where do you think the association community stands today?

We are witnessing the third phase in the evolution of association events. During the first phase, associations were often governed like gentlemen's clubs who decided to get together on the basis of pleasant locations to network and have a great time. The next phase emerged when associations began to face financial difficulties and sought practical reasons to organise events based on accessibility and cost criteria at the destination. That is when the destination market we know today came into being. Over the past 15 years, budget has been the main criterion for associations, and we see this reflected in how destinations and venues approach associations based on square footage and costs per delegate.

Only recently have we begun to see associations become more professionalised and sophisticated. Many of them no longer see their conference as an ad hoc opportunity that comes around every two years. They are aligning their mission and vision with the destination where the event takes place in order to promote these values. Whether it is expanding their advocacy efforts, gaining new members, opening new markets, or connecting with stakeholders they could not connect with before. This is the third phase, and I think that with the current political situation, last year's elections in the US and those currently taking place in Europe, the issue of values and political alignment is also beginning to influence associations' decisions.

Do you get the sense from the responses to this survey, that associations are moving from words to deeds when it comes to defending these values? Are they aware of the new world they are running into?

Let us first acknowledge that even providing words for specific topics is something new for associations. Until very recently, associations were considered to have a single advocacy purpose, and that purpose was to represent the interests of their members. Furthermore, for an association to take a stance on a crisis, there needs to be consensus among all its members, which is difficult and time-consuming to achieve. By the time they get there, the discourse has usually moved on to another topic. Having to take a position on specific and important social issues was not something that happened often. In that sense, this is already progress. The next step will be to actually practice what is preached and take action, from targeting or excluding some members who are harming the rest of the community, to promoting and granting free membership to some other categories that may be undervalued. This is something we see happening very slowly, so we can see a major threat. On the one hand, I am optimistic because I see things changing, but pessimistic because things are not changing fast enough according to the beliefs and desires of some people.

The survey reveals a sector that 'is cautious at best and exposed at worst.' When it comes to preparing for geopolitical instability, only 13% of respondents believe their organisations are well equipped to deal with change. How can associations develop greater delivery capacity, operational agility, and new governance policies to deal with these threats?



> *Crises are engines of change and progress. If it had not been for COVID-19, we would not have been able to work as quickly and as agilely as we do now.*

Today, associations need to be prepared for constant change. We saw this at the **European Summit of Associations** in March 2020, coinciding with the outbreak of COVID-19. This was a landmark event on permanent crises and how associations need to be agile to navigate them. The world is changing at a rapid pace, and associations need that agility to deal with it. This means having employees who can change roles and take on responsibilities according to circumstances; adopting leadership capable of moving activities and strategic focus; adapting to new revenue streams and reducing the association's exposure, etc. In a way, allowing governance structures to be neither too rigid nor too complex, so as to give the secretariat some leeway to accommodate these potential changes. The human factor is closely linked to governance, since this structure is the brain behind the operation of an association. If governance is not flexible enough, the association becomes too slow to react and ends up failing to its purpose.

From cancelled events and strained partnerships to rising populism and digital threats, associations are being called upon to respond more constantly and comprehensively to a new reality. How are associations managing these external pressures, not only in the pursuit of their events but also in the protection of their members?

When it comes to risk management, I believe that sharing risks with different stakeholders is a good strategy. Associations need to be more transparent and open to dialogue with the different stakeholders they work with when organising events. Starting with partners and sponsors, but also including exhibitors and suppliers, such as venues, caterers, hotels, etc. They need to be more transparent about their finances, what would help them break even and what would be unfeasible for them. This way, everyone can agree on the premises and meet expectations so that, if cancellation is necessary, there are alternatives that do not mean that one party (usually theirs) bears all the risk.

When it comes to members, I believe that associations have a unique opportunity to be the pillars of their community in times of crisis. When people lose faith, especially in institutions, the economy and politicians, associations can be a safe haven for members to open up freely. Associations should be a place where people are not afraid of being condemned for their positions, a place where they can find alliances and also bring different opinions. We live in a world that is becoming very isolationist, with many rigid positions. Countries are becoming more intolerant than before, so associations still have the opportunity to create a sense of community among their members and engage with different stakeholders.

When it comes to DEI policies, global associations with culturally and politically diverse membership bases have been faced with different interpretations and nuances of these frameworks. Is this not an additional challenge for associations, given the disparity in their delegates' visions and beliefs?

Indeed, associations are quite diverse, but again, they are linked to very specific topics. For example, a member of



a Bar Association is there because they want to establish a connection with colleagues and promote their role in the profession and the development of skills. In other words, not everything in an association is linked to social representation. DEI should govern the association's mission and operations, but we cannot impose compliance on all members. We need to remember that associations have a mission that needs to be fulfilled even when they expand into different markets. Let's say an American or European association wants to expand into Southeast Asia. DEI is important to help them be a compass for their integration actions, but the objectives are based primarily on the criteria and priorities that the professional association has defined. If they can do so while protecting and promoting their internal values, so much the better; but we must not forget that it is impossible to have compliance in everything we do. I would say that at this point, it is more of a North Star than a cornerstone.

Why are associations still on a tightrope when it comes to applying digital formats as a one-off or focussed solution for their congresses?

Because we have not yet reached the level where the online experience matches the experience of in-person participation. Most of all, we have not yet managed to bring these two groups together. No matter how hard we try, it is impossible to replicate the networking and serendipity of in-person events and reconcile this with remote access. We have seen different hybrid formats: events where we only have in-person delegates and online speakers; in-person participants and speakers, but only with the possibility of asking questions online; a total fusion of the two, etc. There are very awkward situations when trying to apply the hybrid format, which is why many people are still afraid of it.

The other aspect is cost. Whenever you apply the hybrid model to your event, the cost is almost double. Associations are still sceptical and seeking a balance between bringing people together in person and reducing their travel burden. I think it is a work in progress, but there is no one-size-fits-all formula for all association events. Some small or regional events may be more beneficial if they take place in person, while other more practical sessions are easily conducted as webinars. As I said earlier, the main reason for an association's existence is to create a community of individuals who seek consensus. That is why these communities cannot simply be replicated online. The face-to-face aspects of relationship building cannot be overlooked, not least because they are as important as the meeting itself.

According to this study, do you get the feeling that structural reforms and new funding models are slowing down digital transformation and the adoption of AI systems?

No, I believe that tech savviness goes hand in hand with business expertise. As associations become more professionalised, they will have more opportunities to convince their members that they need to diversify their sources of income and services and become more resilient. Otherwise, the only solution is for the members themselves to pay more. They already have a ceiling on how much they pay, and even that ceiling needs to be negotiated repeatedly. Therefore, for associations to achieve their purpose, be agile and less dependent on membership fees, they need to become more experienced in business and technology. This will give them more opportunities to expand their services and, ultimately, better serve their members. Furthermore, remember that after all this talk about associations being in danger or increasingly dependent, most of them have not closed down in the last five years. On the contrary, I see many new associations springing up every year and existing associations expanding their teams and activities. I would not be so pessimistic about the future of associations in a permacrisis mode.

> *"Associations have a multiplier effect because they are not just a shell organisation, but a networked platform that represents other organisations.*

Science, Safety and Sustainability in **Reykjavík's Events Strategy**

Reykjavík is positioning itself as a stable platform for international knowledge exchange. Proximity to both Europe and North America, a strong safety record, and modern infrastructure support its role as a practical hub for association meetings. In 2025, research-focused gatherings on clean energy and Arctic resilience will bring scientists, policymakers and industry together to shape future strategies. **Hildur Björg Bæringsdóttir, Account Manager MICE** at **Meet in Reykjavík** *(pictured in next page)*, discusses how these strengths translate into bids and legacy.

Medium-sized destinations often compete with major cities on value, sustainability and delivery. How do you describe Reykjavík's role in the meetings market, and which advantages do you highlight as a medium-sized city?

Reykjavík offers a distinctive proposition for meetings, combining professional capability with an unforgettable setting. It blends high-quality infrastructure with extraordinary natural experiences, all within a modern, walkable capital. As the world's northernmost capital, Reykjavík is better connected to North America than many other secondary destinations, making it an ideal meeting point for delegates from Europe and North America.

Its compactness and accessibility are major strengths. With little traffic and most venues, hotels, and cultural sites within walking distance, the delegate experience is efficient and enjoyable. The city also provides world-class infrastructure and skilled professionals across venues ranging from conference centres to boutique spaces.

What makes Reykjavík unique is its setting. Just outside the city, attendees can explore glaciers, geothermal spas, and black sand beaches, with whale-watching boats leaving directly from the harbour. These natural elements allow planners to build authentic experiences that enhance meetings. Reykjavík's reputation for safety, progressive values and a thriving cultural scene further strengthen its appeal, while its status as one of the world's safest cities gives organisers and participants peace of mind. The city's progressive values and leadership provide a powerful backdrop for events. Meet in Reykjavík also works closely with a strong network of partners – from airlines like Icelandair and major venues such as **Harpa Concert Hall & Conference Centre**, to business hotels, DMCs, and activity providers. The team collaborates with local universities to raise awareness and connect with academics, helping identify hosts for future conferences.

How do business events contribute to Reykjavík's social development and link with its wider ecosystem, given Iceland's leadership in equality, sustainability and innovation?

In Reykjavík, business events are more than economic drivers, they are platforms for dialogue, knowledge exchange and social progress. Iceland's leadership in equality, sustainability, human rights and innovation shapes how we position the industry within our broader ecosystem.

Iceland has topped the *World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report* for 16 consecutive years, closing more than 90% of its gap. Reykjavík hosts events such as the **Wellbeing Economy Forum** and the **Reykjavik Global Forum for Women Leaders**, which bring together global decision-makers to advance equality, well-being and inclusive governance.

Conferences in Reykjavík also focus on forward-looking issues such as diversity, digital innovation, sustainability and global collaboration. The **17th International Green Energy Conference & Arctic Energy Forum (IGEC)** and the **Arctic Circle Assembly** in 2025 are strong examples of how local strengths align with global agendas.

In addition to gender equality, Iceland ranks highly in global measures of wellbeing and inclusion. We are regularly among the top countries in the World Happiness Report and were ranked first in the *2025 Spartacus Travel Index for LGBTI acceptance*. These factors make Reykjavík an ideal host for events rooted in shared values, mutual respect, and inclusive participation. Iceland has also consistently ranked number one on the *Global Peace Index* since 2018, maintaining its position as the world's most peaceful country for over 17 consecutive years.

Since 2014, your Ambassador Programme has grown to more than 300 members. How has it influenced your business events and connections with international associations?

Our Ambassadors are professionals from diverse fields – academics, scientists, artists, business leaders and politicians

– who actively promote Iceland as a world-class destination. Each year, one is recognised for their contribution to bringing events to Reykjavík. Past ambassadors have included **former President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson**, linked to the Arctic Circle Assembly, and **Prof. Jón Atli Benediksson, former rector of the University of Iceland**, whose support has strengthened ties with academic institutions and helped secure major conferences such as the **International Geoscience and Remote Sensing Symposium 2027.**

The programme honours individual achievements and connects local expertise with international organisers, ensuring Reykjavík's specialised knowledge and networks play a central role in winning and hosting events.

Do you take a targeted approach to priority sectors, and how have Reykjavik's knowledge ecosystems and key industries influenced business events activity?

Meet in Reykjavík targets events that align with the city's strategic strengths and knowledge ecosystems. Our strongest sectors include green energy, life sciences, digital industries, marine innovation and tourism, all supported by leading research institutions, progressive policies and a collaborative local culture. This focus not only attracts relevant international conferences but also strengthens Reykjavík's own innovation capacity by bringing new ideas and partnerships into the city. The aforementioned events are clear examples of how these knowledge areas shape our business events activity.

Reykjavík aims to be climate neutral by 2040 with a holistic sustainability strategy. What key projects stand out, and how do sustainability and innovation support your bids?

Sustainability is central to Reykjavík's long-term planning and to how we approach business events. Our strategy takes a holistic view, integrating environmental stewardship, economic responsibility and social equity.

Environmentally, Reykjavík leads by example. The city is powered entirely by geothermal and hydroelectric energy and has set the goal of becoming climate neutral by 2040. Policies support waste reduction, clean mobility and nature conservation. Through our **Reuse, Recycle, Rethink** initiative we encourage organisers to adopt low-impact practices, while our *Green Event Guidelines* provide practical tools to plan and measure sustainable conferences. Partnerships with certified providers help ensure follow-through.

Economically, sustainability means building a resilient year-round events industry that supports the local economy and innovation ecosystem. Strengths in green-tech, blue-tech and clean energy are central to our bidding strategy, attracting events that benefit from real collaboration with local institutions and researchers.

Socially, Iceland is recognised for progressive policies such as equal pay legislation, LGBTQ+ rights and gender-balanced governance. These ensure that events hosted in Reykjavík reflect and support diverse and equitable participation.

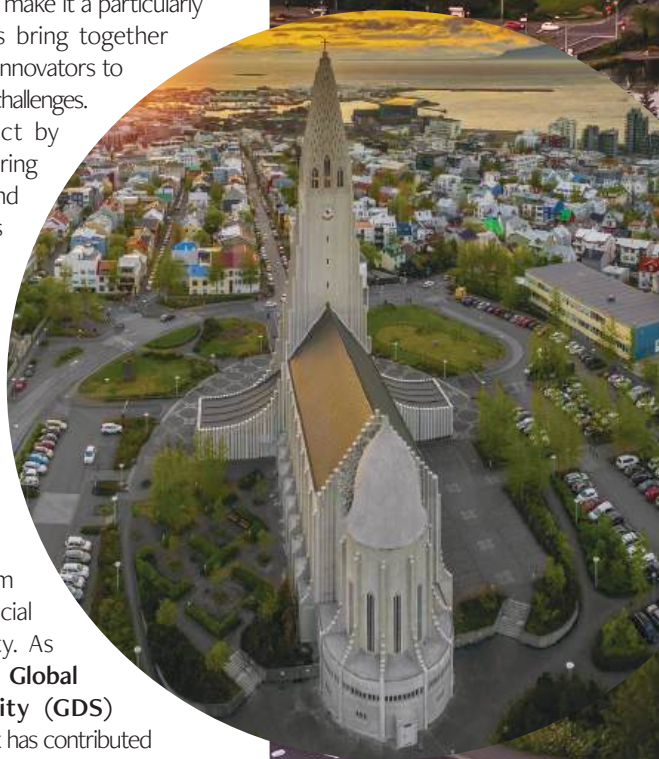
How do Reykjavík's upcoming sustainability gatherings reflect Iceland's priorities and contribute to local impact?

Reykjavík's 2025 conference calendar aligns Iceland's national sustainability goals with the global dialogue on climate, energy and resilience. The IGEC, the Arctic Circle Assembly and the upcoming **IDRA Reykjavík Summit on Water and Climate Change** form a sequence of high-level forums that underline Iceland's role as a leader in clean energy and sustainability. Iceland's geothermal expertise and its commitment to climate neutrality by 2040 make it a particularly credible host. Conferences bring together scientists, policymakers and innovators to address urgent environmental challenges. They generate local impact by helping attract talent, fostering international collaboration and raising awareness across sectors in Reykjavík and Iceland.

What role do legacy and local impact play in Reykjavík's strategy, and how are you measuring success beyond turnover?

For Reykjavík, legacy is closely tied to the city's long-term goals for environmental, social and economic sustainability. As a founding member of the **Global Destination Sustainability (GDS) Movement**, Meet in Reykjavík has contributed to shaping international standards for meaningful, measurable impact.







In practice, legacy means ensuring that conferences leave lasting value by advancing knowledge, influencing policy, supporting sustainable practices and building partnerships that continue beyond the event. Where possible, we align conferences with Reykjavík's strategic priorities, such as green energy, innovation, gender equality and community well-being.

Which events in Reykjavík stand out for their legacy and influence on your team's strategy?

One of the most impactful examples was our cooperation with **Riot Games** during the pandemic. In December 2020, Riot approached us to host the **League of Legends Mid-Season Invitational (MSI)** in May 2021. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, this became a no-audience event, something unusual for esports, which typically draws tens of thousands of fans.

With support from **Business Iceland**, the **Icelandic Esports Association**, the City of Reykjavík, the national government and local suppliers, we mobilised quickly to prepare a strong case. As a result, Reykjavík went on to host four major Riot Games events in just 12 months: MSI and Worlds in 2021, and **Valorant Masters** in both 2021 and 2022.

The impact was substantial. These events generated over 25,000 hotel room nights, brought long-term business to local suppliers across hospitality, logistics, broadcast and security, and kept **Laugardalshöll Arena** booked for 18 weeks. From a media perspective, the reach was extraordinary: over 200 million people engaged with related content, and the 2021 Worlds final alone was watched live by more than 74 million viewers.

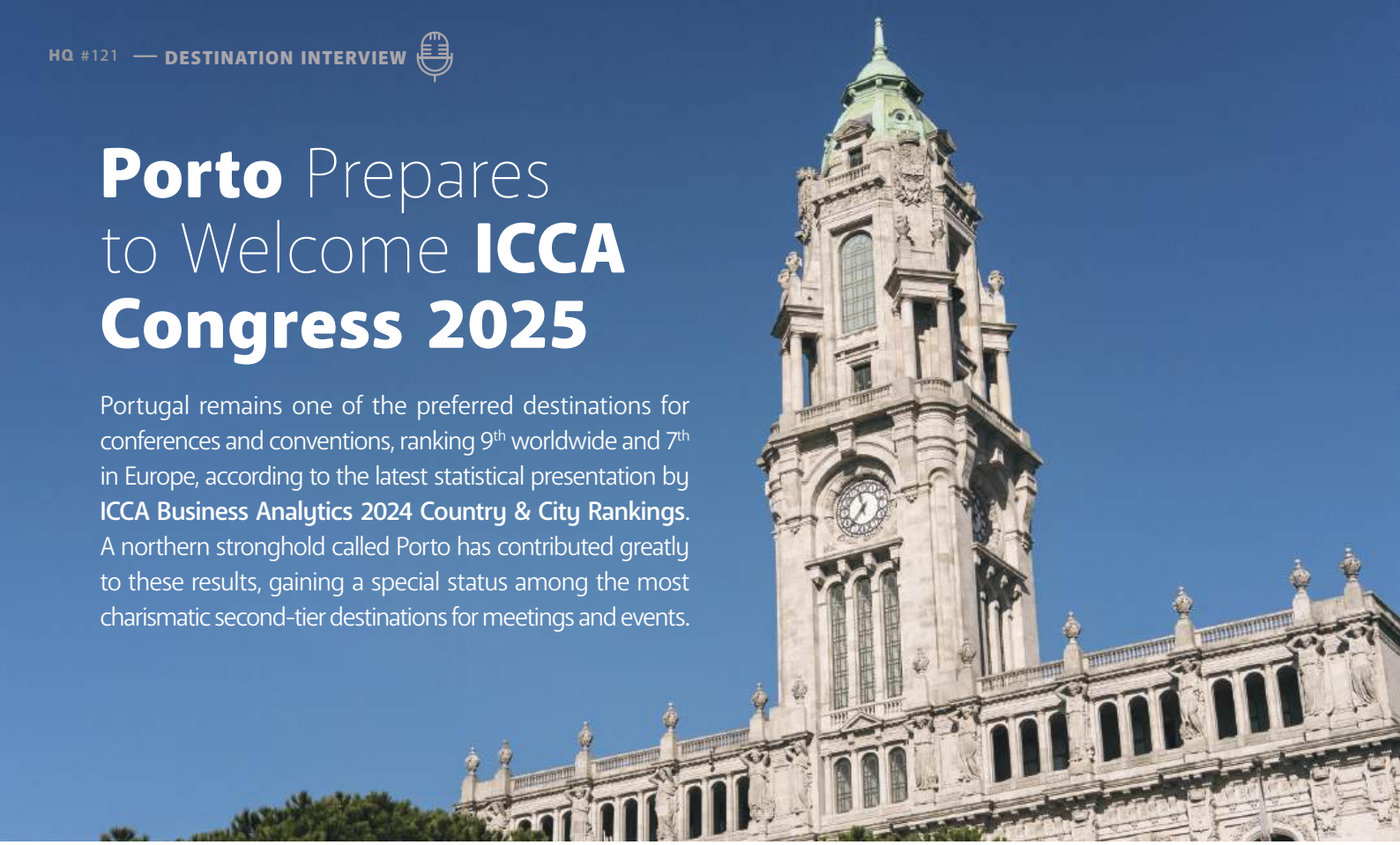
These experiences showed us the potential of esports as a growing segment for Reykjavík. In response, we launched the **Gaming in Iceland** initiative and, in 2024, supported the creation of the **Nordic Esports Federation** to strengthen regional collaboration and establish new championship events.

Do geopolitical instability and Arctic tensions influence Reykjavík's position as a conference destination?

Geopolitical instability is a growing concern for many associations, but Reykjavík continues to stand out as a peaceful, reliable and secure destination. Iceland consistently ranks at the top of the *Global Peace Index*, and this reputation helped attract the **Global Podiatry Summit**, which relocated here this year.

Iceland's safety, democratic stability, robust legal framework, low crime rates and inclusive social values make Reykjavík a reassuring choice for organisers. It is particularly attractive to those who prioritise alignment with sustainable energy, gender equality and human rights.

Porto Prepares to Welcome **ICCA Congress 2025**



Portugal remains one of the preferred destinations for conferences and conventions, ranking 9th worldwide and 7th in Europe, according to the latest statistical presentation by **ICCA Business Analytics 2024 Country & City Rankings**. A northern stronghold called Porto has contributed greatly to these results, gaining a special status among the most charismatic second-tier destinations for meetings and events.

'*A cidade invicta*' (the undefeated city) has strengthened its international presence, ranking 34th in the world and 22nd in Europe; excellent prospects ahead of hosting the **64th ICCA Congress**, the meeting point for the international business events industry, from 9 to 12 November 2025. Porto and the North of Portugal have established themselves as a competitive destination on the European circuit, with a range of advantages working in their favour: a robust and complementary offering, agility in execution and a flexible response to the association needs, combined with growing inclusion and accessibility, an extremely collaborative environment and the ability to customise each and every event. "We have a consolidated cluster of events and scientific communities with global reach, which facilitates the organisation of events with real impact. We are also investing in pioneering projects that aim to position the destination as a benchmark for positive 360º impact. Winning the ICCA World Congress for 2025 is undoubtedly a reflection of international confidence in our ability to deliver," **Luís Pedro Martins, President of Visit Porto and North of Portugal – Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB)**, told us.

As confirmed by *HQ* during an on-site inspection in 2021, Porto offers an extraordinary diversity of venues: **Alfândega do Porto, Super Bock Arena, Leixões Cruise Terminal, Casa da Música, Palácio da Bolsa, Serralves Foundation, FC Porto stadium**, and **World of Wine**, comprising a wide range of spaces in addition to unusual venues in museums and monuments with privileged views of the river, sea, and city. "These locations offer identity and authenticity to the experience. Porto's growth has been accompanied by investments in infrastructure, but there is still potential to be explored in the main cities of the region, with particular emphasis on **Braga**, our major focus in the north, with **Forum Braga** and an expanding scientific and technological hub." The organisation's strategy is clear: a regional, cohesive destination with a distributed and complementary offer. "In addition to conferences, we have a truly unique offering for incentive programmes. From the country's only National Park – **Peneda-Gerês** – to the world-famous **Douro Valley**. All this is complemented by luxury accommodation, excellent cuisine and wines, and a variety of authentic cultural experiences. This diversity allows us to create unique programmes in direct contact with local communities with the best that the spirit of the North has to offer," adds Martins.

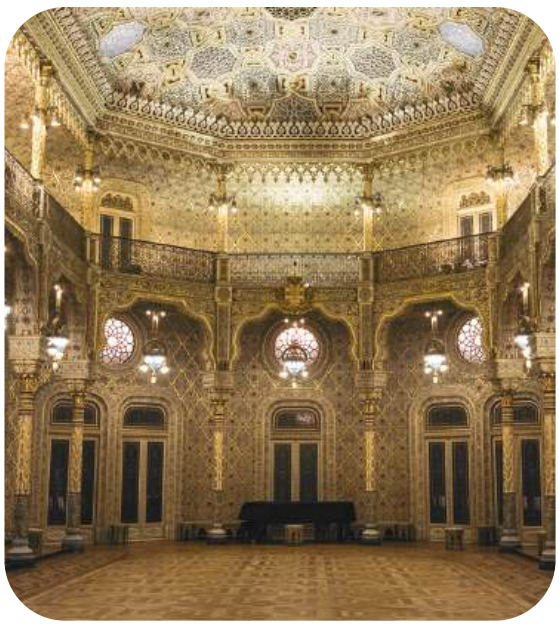
This Summer, **Visit Porto and North CVB** brought together its stakeholders to create a task force to map and develop the meetings industry segment in the region. Developed with technical support from the consulting firm **IPDT Turismo**, this initiative aimed to promote innovation, generate value, and, collaboratively, shape the future of business events in Porto and the North. "The MICE sector is a real driver of urban regeneration and social cohesion. Events held in low-density areas contribute to the revitalisation of new destinations, attract investment and create development opportunities for local communities," says Martins. "They are also highly relevant tools in the context of innovation

and mobility, exponentially increasing interaction between visitors and communities." In early July, teams from Porto and Northern Portugal met with **#MEET4IMPACT** in a workshop that kicked off the **ICCA Congress Impact and Legacy Project**. More than just boosting Porto's international visibility and economic benefits, the Congress host wants to ensure that this event also leaves a positive mark on local communities and the territory. "During the ICCA Congress 2025, we will develop an in-depth project to assess the direct impact of congress participants on the city, which will also result in the creation of a guide to best practices for events. This is the beginning of a transformative work, where Portuguese hospitality will be expressed in caring for people, improving the quality of life of communities and in the way we empower the destination in this sector."

MICE is central to the strategy for Porto and the North, as evidenced in the 2024/2030 Strategy, considering its contribution to reducing seasonality, extending stays and increasing demand in terms of value. In addition to the economic impact, association conferences reinforce the scientific reputation and international positioning of the destination. "Our approach is strongly aligned with the region's knowledge ecosystems and strategic assets. We focus on events in the areas of health, science, technology, the environment, engineering and the blue economy – sectors where we have critical mass, talent and innovation. The proximity to universities, hospitals and R&D centres creates ideal conditions for hosting high-level technical and scientific events," says Martins. In 2024, tourism in Porto and the North performed very well, recording more than seven million guests and 13 million overnight stays, with the gastronomy and wine segments standing out. Luís Pedro admits, however, that there is a demanding context of pressure on local businesses and market disruptions that may later open up new opportunities: "Porto has shown resilience and adaptability. We seek to respond with intelligence and collaboration, without falling into the simplistic narrative of 'safe haven'. Our focus is on diversifying source markets, cultural proximity and the ability to adapt event models to new realities."

The ICCA Congress 2025 will be the largest international event in the sector to take place in Portugal this decade. It will be held in nine venues across Greater Porto, with immersive experiences, artistic curatorship, diverse leadership and active community participation. "We are celebrating 30 years of Porto CVB, in an edition that will be an example of inclusion, impact and innovation. At the Congress, we will sign a social sustainability protocol, focusing on employability and the active inclusion of people with fewer opportunities. We want each participant to take away an emotional connection with Porto and the North and with the future of events," says Martins. Sustainability is a cross-cutting priority in the North region, which has integrated the Sustainable Development Goals into its client bidding processes – from public transport and local food to the circular economy, inclusion, and community legacy. "We launched a new Sustainability Movement, which calls on all stakeholders in the various sectors of the industry to commit to initiating or accelerating the transformation and innovation of their operations in order to make them more sustainable." Lastly, to strengthen the region's international image, the **EU CVB Network** has been instrumental in sharing knowledge between cities, developing joint projects, creating clusters and anticipating common challenges in a more coordinated way in the European context. "Through this network, we work in partnership with cities with which we sometimes compete. However, this dynamic strengthens our commitment to green, digital and social transitions. We actively participate in collaborative bids, influence European policies and learn from the best practices of destinations that lead the sector," concludes Martins.

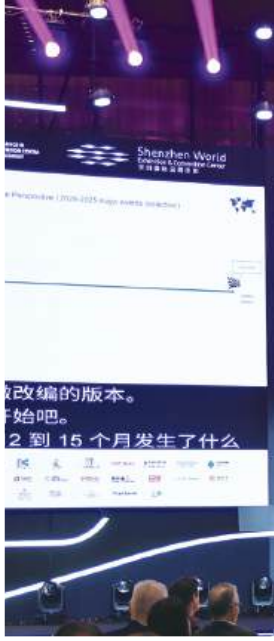
> *"Global instability values destinations with good governance, responsiveness, and authenticity - three pillars that define us*



AIPC ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2025

A Close Look at China's Role in Global Association Meetings

VIVIAN XU REPORTS



The **AIPC Annual Conference 2025** gathered the world's top convention centre leaders in Shenzhen for four days of high-level dialogue, fresh insights, and global connection. Under the theme 'Meet the World. See the Future,' more than 150 senior delegates from over 30 countries came together, representing the industry's most influential decision-makers, from CEOs and General Managers to Heads of Innovation, Strategy, and Customer Experience.

In a landmark move for AIPC's expansion in Asia, the conference also welcomed 50 leading executives from China's top convention centres. Hosted at the state-of-the-art **Shenzhen World Convention & Exhibition Center**, the event reflected the industry's forward-looking vision against one of the world's most advanced venue backdrops.

This historic edition marked the first time AIPC's flagship event was held in mainland China, signalling a new era for the country's role on the international meetings stage. Among the standout moments was a data-rich presentation by **Wu Shaoyuan**, **Executive Vice President of the China Conference Hotel Alliance** and **Member of the China Exhibition Industry Expert Committee** *(pictured left)*, who shed light on China's booming business events sector and the pivotal role of association congresses in national development strategies.

China's meetings sector is increasingly defined by its leadership in scientific association congresses and its ability to integrate these within broader national goals, thanks to coordinated government strategy, a fast-developing knowledge economy, and investment in digital infrastructure.

The insights presented in Shenzhen reinforced what many in the industry have started to observe: the fact that China is no longer in a learning phase. The organisation, size and focus of its meetings sector now put the country in a position to influence regional and global agendas. In my professional experience of working with both Chinese and international association networks, I can see that this growth is driven by deliberate policy support and investment across the entire sector.



Since the early 2020s, China's MICE industry has evolved around three priorities: scientific association congresses, digital platforms, and sustainability benchmarks. The numbers illustrate the transformation. In 2023, the country hosted over 581.6 million meetings, with 604 million participants generating €105.4 billion in direct conference-related spending. The same year, China recorded 9,104 exhibitions, a 16.7% increase on the previous year, with over 151 million m² of floor space used. That activity was not limited to the tier-one cities. In fact, more than 65.3% of meetings now take place in central and southern provinces, signalling a redistribution of capacity and relevance across the country.

The real shift, however, lies in the composition of the events. According to the *2024 Blue Book*, association-led events grew by 11.7% in 2023 with more than 60% focused on science, education, medicine, and engineering. These congresses are typically mid-sized, attracting between 500 and 1,500 delegates, and are often co-hosted by academic institutions and regional governments. Cities such as Beijing, Xi'an, and Suzhou have positioned themselves as natural hosts due to their strong university ecosystems and research agendas. Events like the **Zhongguancun Forum** – a major international conference on science, technology, and innovation that brings together researchers, policymakers, and industry leaders to advance cooperation in emerging technologies – **Big Data Expo**, and the **World VR Industry Conference** reveal how the country is establishing itself as a destination for meetings and as a facilitator of global knowledge-intensive exchanges.

China's increased participation in global events like its debut at **IMEX America** and its ongoing certification of exhibition projects by international bodies such as the **UFI, the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry**, reflects its growing commitment to global standards. By the end of 2024, over 265 Chinese exhibition projects had received UFI certification, marking a 20% year-on-year increase. This expanding recognition underscores the country's pursuit of quality and international benchmarking.

What makes these meetings strategically significant is not just their content, but







their alignment. Many are linked to national innovation policies, whether in artificial intelligence, biotech, or energy transition. A substantial 65.7% of association events in 2023 received some form of government support, ranging from venue subsidies to integration with sectoral development plans. This model blends policy, research, and regional branding into a coherent hosting strategy.

Digitisation is another defining feature. Hybrid events accounted for 7.6% of China's meetings in 2023, with platforms like **Tencent Meetings** and **Alibaba Cloud** shaping an integrated tech ecosystem that includes registration, translation, data analytics, and venue navigation. Projections suggest that 70% of events will adopt a hybrid format by 2029, reflecting both infrastructure readiness and user demand.

The government has also improved access for international attendees by extending transit visa exemptions to 240 hours (ten days) for nationals of 54 countries. This move is expected to support inbound participation at large-scale business events and strengthen international collaboration.

Although still uneven in terms of its application, sustainability is becoming more systematic. Around 11.4% of events in 2023 included environmental or social responsibility goals. Common measures included digital registration, energy-efficient display systems, and carbon offsetting schemes. Industry reports estimate that a standard 1,000-person conference still generates around 20 tonnes of CO_2, but new venue builds and retrofits are helping reduce that baseline through certified green design.

These developments point to a qualitative shift in China's role within the global association space. China is setting an example for how scientific and policy-driven congresses can be integrated into long-term development frameworks. This shift is tangible, as evidenced by the way host destinations, institutions and national strategies are coming together around knowledge-based events. For international associations considering deeper engagement in Asia, China represents both opportunity and complexity. It demands local knowledge, policy awareness, and cultural fluency. But it also offers partnerships with institutions that are well-resourced and strategically motivated.

I would encourage readers of *HQ* to reflect on these indicators. As someone with a strong grounding in the Chinese market and a commitment to building international bridges in the meetings industry, I see this as a moment of strategic relevance. I am available to share further insights for those wishing to understand this topic more deeply, insights which are informed by my experience of international business and local knowledge.

SWISS TOPHY

Showcasing 60 Years of Switzerland's MICE Strategy

JESÚS PARRADO REPORTS



From 19 to 22 June 2025, the **Switzerland Convention & Incentive Bureau (SCIB)** and **Switzerland Tourism** hosted the **19th Switzerland Meeting Trophy**. The multi-day rally gathered 62 international event professionals from across Europe and North America to assess Switzerland's MICE infrastructure through a comprehensive programme filled with diverse activities, including team-based challenges, site exploration and opportunities for informal interaction among participants. *HQ* has long supported the Trophy as a media partner, but this year marked my first attendance and my first visit to Switzerland.



I arrived at Zurich Airport shortly before the official programme began and walked through the city centre to get a feel for the country. I found Zurich to be efficient, easy to navigate and calm. That afternoon, I joined Team Belgium at Zürich Hauptbahnhof, and we travelled on the historic Red Arrow Churchill train to our first destination. After several seamless connections, we reached Grindelwald and checked into the **Sunstar Hotel Grindelwald**. Located against the backdrop of the Eiger Mountain, the hotel offers business groups the opportunity to enjoy the beautiful scenery while making use of its facilities, including seven seminar rooms and a plenary space for up to 260 participants. That evening, we attended a flying dinner at the **Romantik Hotel Schweizerhof**, where we mingled with the other teams and Swiss partners.

The rally format transforms destination familiarisation into a challenging, team-based activity. Over the course of several days, we travelled through Jungfraujoch, Interlaken, Spiez, Emmental and Bern, completing tasks that highlighted local culture, transport links and venue potential. At **Jungfraujoch**, also known as the 'Top of Europe' and home to Europe's highest railway station, we tested our knowledge of the country and our coordination in a curling challenge. This was followed by a chocolate tasting experience at the highest-altitude venue in Europe. Afterwards, we had lunch at **Congress Kursaal Interlaken**, a venue capable of hosting events for between 80 and 1,500 attendees, showcasing how historic character and modern logistics can coexist in one place.

That evening, after crossing Lake Thun by boat, we stayed at the **Deltapark Vitalresort** in **Gwatt bei Thun**, a wellness retreat overlooking the lake. We began the next morning's programme at **Kultur- und Kongresszentrum Thun (KKThun)**, a lakeside venue in the Bernese Oberland offering a mix of versatile spaces suited for different kinds of business events. Its central location and cultural programming also support blended business-leisure formats, making it a practical option for planners seeking local engagement and efficient organisation. Following this, the group visited the **Emmentaler Show Dairy** in Affoltern im Emmental, where we observed a demonstration of traditional cheese-making before proceeding to Bern.

In the capital, a tour of **BERNEXPO** showcased the scale and versatility of Switzerland's event infrastructure. With over 47,000 m² of flexible space, the venue's halls and meeting rooms can accommodate events with 10 to 5,000 attendees. Recent developments, including the **Festhalle and Cube Congress Centre**, have added a further 8,500 m² to the venue, increasing total capacity to 9,000 delegates. Located near the centre of Bern and connected to major transport hubs, the venue is ideal for hybrid congresses, trade shows and large-scale association meetings. In the afternoon, a cultural session at the **Federal Palace** involving traditional flag-throwing wrapped up the day's activities.

We spent our final evening at the **Swissôtel Kursaal Bern**, a venue with 27 meeting spaces, a casino, and a rooftop restaurant offering views of the Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. At the farewell dinner, the North American team claimed victory in the 2025 Trophy, with Belgium close behind. Our last day concluded with brunch at **Casino Bern**, a walking tour of the city and the return journey to Zurich Airport.

The Switzerland Meeting Trophy provides a clear example of how MICE professionals can be introduced to a national offering through immersive engagement. From a planning perspective, this competition offers a live demonstration of how venues, transport









systems, and destination partners can work together seamlessly. It also reveals Switzerland's long-term strategy in this sector, reflecting the country's 60-year commitment to the business events sector and its pioneering role as the birthplace of the world's first national convention bureau in 1964.

The SCIB, created through a collaboration of destinations including Lausanne, Montreux and Interlaken, among others, continues to this day as part of Switzerland Tourism, promoting Swiss destinations across 13 international markets. That legacy was marked at **IBTM World** in Barcelona in November 2024, where SCIB celebrated its 60th anniversary. *HQ* joined the commemoration as a longstanding media partner. However, as a first-time participant, I found the strength of first-hand experience to be the most compelling takeaway, rather than the presentations or promotional messages. Seeing the execution in real time, the coordinated logistics and the professional hospitality of Switzerland's business events community gave me a much deeper understanding of the destination's capabilities than any brochure or sales pitch could.

Switzerland has much more to offer than beautiful scenery and engaging social activities. The country also brings together innovation and expertise across a wide range of sectors. Our coverage of association events in the country reflects our broader editorial focus on the ways in which national strategies support knowledge-driven meetings. A good example is our report from the **European Space Agency**'s 50th anniversary in Lausanne, written by **Manuel Fernandes** and published in *HQ #120*. Readers can also access exclusive online interviews with **Patrick Barbey** (**Managing Director of Vaud's innovation and investment support agency, Innovaud**), **Grégoire Bourban** (**Head of Space Exchange Switzerland – SXS**), and **Emmanuelle David** (**Executive Director of ESC – eSpace**).

These interviews are part of our magazine's collaboration with the **Space Cities Network**, an international alliance founded by Lausanne and other cities to promote innovation and cross-sector engagement in space. The network connects universities, research institutions, industry and public agencies to promote scientific exchange and economic development. This mission closely aligns with Switzerland's broader positioning as a host of high-level, science-oriented business events.

Visit www.switzerland.com/meetings
Photography: Mattias Nutt

FIEXPO Blooms as Costa Rica Strengthens Latin America's Green Strategy

JESÚS GUERRERO CHACÓN REPORTS



This June, **FIEXPO Latin America**, the region's premier event in the meetings industry, debuted in Costa Rica, launching a new three-year chapter for the event. In the context of evolving geopolitical realities and a growing demand for resilient, impact-driven destinations, industry professionals came together in San José, Costa Rica's capital, to address global challenges transforming our industry's present and future. Latin America plays a significant role on the global stage, and Costa Rica proves to be a model for integrated, sustainable destination planning.



Geopolitics at the Political Forum

The **12th Latin American Political Forum on the Meetings Industry**, a key session at FIEXPO, tackled the sector's most pressing concerns in the face of rising global uncertainty. A full room of ministers from across Latin America and international meetings industry leaders discussed the region's strategic direction amid armed conflicts, technological rivalries, growing protectionism, tariffs and regulatory unpredictability.

Arnaldo Nardone, Director of FIEXPO Exhibitions Group, in his opening speech, reflected on the region's broader positioning: "FIEXPO is a tradeshow with a regional heart and international vision. This year's host, Costa Rica, represents the future of our industry. A future where sustainability, inclusiveness, and a shared purpose define how we meet."

Pioneering a national sustainability strategy more than 30 years ago, Costa Rica continues to combine environmental ambition with institutional strategic thinking, guided by a long-term vision to become a digitalised, decarbonised, inclusive and decentralised economy by 2050. **William Rodríguez, Costa Rica's Minister of Tourism**, reinforced the meetings industry' potential in buffering leisure travel volatility. "Environmental performance is just one part. Our aim is inclusion, equal distribution, and impact. The meetings industry offers a way forward in an unpredictable world," he said, urging greater regional cooperation to co-host major events. "If we think creatively, we can build a shared platform that benefits multiple regions, not just capitals or traditional hubs."

Senthil Gopinath, CEO of ICCA, highlighted the importance of association events and the meetings industry as distinct from tourism, given their strength in advancing science and society – a reminder to governments and policymakers about the sector's long-term contribution and impact. "Association meetings span every sector, from healthcare to technology. These are not just events; they are the key drivers of scientific, economic, and social development," he said.

He referred to the current global political unrest and its repercussions for universities, research and innovation hubs. "When academic funding is cut, professors and doctors cannot attend international congresses. That does not just affect the number of attendees at events; it undermines the future of global healthcare and education."

Martin Boyle, CEO of IAPCO, provided figures highlighting the sector's vulnerability to geopolitical instability. He noted that the data was drawn from two separate surveys, one by IAPCO and another by the **European Society of Association Executives**, whose combined results illustrated the industry's financial exposure. "Just under 55% of our members said global conflicts have directly impacted their ability to plan and host international conferences. That is not theoretical; it is happening now. An international association already had to pay US$3 million (approximately €2.75 million) in cancellation fees to move their event from one city to another due to geopolitical disruptions. Nearly 50% of those surveyed reported losses between €50,000 and €150,000 per event. Data helps drive our understanding, but it is only when we sit together, industry, associations, policymakers, that we can act on it," noted Boyle *(check out IAPCO's article on page 40)*.

The Forum also highlighted the generational shifts within the industry. "If we do not invest in the next generation now, we risk associations becoming irrelevant. Young professionals are not waiting; they want purpose, participation, and a seat at the table," said Gopinath.

Loren Christie, Managing Director, BestCities Global Alliance, reinforced the message: "We are not just helping clients







organise meetings; we are making sure business events become a force for positive impact. Today's emerging leaders do not want to be 'next.' They want to be 'now.' Give them agency, or they will go elsewhere."

"We talk a lot about attracting talent, but we also need to ask ourselves why they stay. If we do not offer meaning, mobility, and mentorship, they will not stay," added Boyle.

The Forum closed with cautious optimism and a shared call for long-term collaboration.

AI for Regenerative Strategies

The **Sustainability and AI Workshop** focused on practical solutions over abstract debate, where participants organised by area of expertise (convention bureaux, convention centres, DMCs, meeting planners, hotels, etc.) collaborated in small groups to explore how AI tools could address the real environmental and operational challenges facing destinations. The discussions revolved around waste reduction, water management, predictive energy use and mobility planning, ensuring that innovation is applied in practice.

Gustavo Alvarado, Director of Sustainability at the Costa Rican Tourism Board (ICT), and former Minister of Tourism, framed the **Costa Rica Convention Center (CCCR)** as an extension of its decades-long environmental strategy: "The CCCR is not just a venue. It is a live demonstration of our regenerative ambitions." Built and owned by ICT, the CCCR was conceived to embody the country's sustainable principles in both design and function. *(More details on the next page.)*

AI-enabled tools showcased at the session included systems for anticipating food waste at large events, optimising irrigation for event landscaping, and real-time monitoring of energy flows in venues. These tools are already piloted locally, reinforcing how data-driven systems are becoming embedded in destination management. **Andrés Escandón, ICCA's Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean,** noted that "investing in sustainability does not just align with global expectations, it brings measurable return to destinations that take it seriously."

Redefining Regional and Global Impact

With over 12,000 meetings held and commercial prospects estimated at above US$60 million (approximately €55 million), FIEXPO reinforced its position as the region's leading MICE platform. The event attracted more than 1,800 participants, including over 700 exhibitors, with new delegations from Spain and the Caribbean among 87 destinations. 30 international speakers contributed to an academic programme that included certifications and forums like **SITE CIS, ICCA AI Advantage**, and **MPI's Event Impact Forum: People & Planet**.

Talent, equity and capacity-building were addressed for their strategic and economic relevance. The **Women's Forum** addressed the changing roles of women within the meetings industry, as well as leadership gaps across different sectors. **The Convention Bureau Challenge, the Associations Forum**, and **the Business Owners Conclave** explored new destination management and governance models. **Next Generation Summit** brought together students for a cross-border initiative to engage emerging professionals in designing future-ready event legacies.

As global organisers re-evaluate event destinations due to ongoing political and economic instability, Latin America is well placed, offering infrastructure, connectivity and cultural depth. Some Latin American countries consistently rank among the top destinations for international association meetings, providing high-value, full-service experiences. By strengthening policy coordination and investing in regional collaborations, the region can present itself as a competitive and compelling alternative for associations and meeting planners looking to relocate their events.

With Costa Rica hosting FIEXPO until 2027, the region is ready to demonstrate its commitment to making events more impactful.

COSTA RICA
CENTRO DE CONVENCIONES



Welcome to the
Costa Rica Convention Center
an architectural masterpiece responsible we neutralize 100% of operational emissions from our events.

OUR AREAS

- Halls with a capacity for over 4,000 participants
- Spacious Foyers for exhibitions and networking
- 6 meeting rooms for executive sessions
- Parking lot with a capacity for more than 1,000 vehicles



WE ARE A SUSTAINABLE VENUE

- **Carbono neutrality 2.0:** The CCCR is certified as Carbon Neutral with the neutralization of operational emissions for 100% of its events.
- **LEED Gold:** The CCCR holds a LEED Gold certification, guaranteeing sustainability at every event.
- **Building EQ:** The CCCR operates with maximum energy efficiency thanks to its Building EQ certification.
- **Blue Flag (Climate Change):** The CCCR has been recognized with the Blue Flag award for its environmental commitment.
- **Blue Flag (Sustainable Construction):** The CCCR obtained the Blue Flag award in Sustainable Construction since its development phase.

(+506) 2106-1600 / (+506) 7033-2300
optimizacion@costaricacc.com

by HERÓICA

Costa Rica Convention Centre Turns Sustainability into Practice

Costa Rica's commitment to sustainability is evident from the moment you arrive at San José Airport. Educational signage urges visitors to respect local ecosystems, avoid taking shells as souvenirs, and remain mindful of the country's protected natural heritage. This message resonates throughout the nation. During my visits to Tortuguero and Cahuita National Parks, local guides shared valuable tips on low-impact travel and eco-friendly practices, from respecting wildlife boundaries to supporting community-led tourism initiatives. Costa Rica's commitment to sustainability runs deep, backed by decades of experience, community engagement, and a well-established national strategy.

During **FIEXPO Latin America 2025**, the **Costa Rica Convention Center (CCCR)** hosted a technical tour to demonstrate how sustainability is integrated into the country's event infrastructure. **Luis Diego Alpízar, Head of Sustainability**, led the tour for Latin American peers interested in replicating CCCR's approach.

Author: Jesús Guerrero Chacón, HQ's Deputy Editor

Owned by the **Costa Rican Tourism Board (ICT)** and operated by **Grupo Heroica**, the CCCR was designed to reflect and implement the country's environmental policies. Since its opening in 2018, it has integrated sustainable systems and infrastructure into every layer of operations, from energy consumption to waste management.

Key features include LED lighting with motion sensors and solar panels, acoustic panels made from renewable materials, and air conditioning powered by on-site treated rainwater. The venue is surrounded by lush greenery and features floor-to-ceiling windows that provide a constant visual connection to nature. Even its interiors extend this immersive experience: the decor celebrates Costa Rica's native flora, and rainforest sounds in the restrooms complete the sensory journey. FIEXPO's new branding emphasises the country's iconic wildlife, reinforcing its biodiversity-first approach.

The CCCR's kitchen operations are certified as a *Safe Kitchen* and prioritise local and seasonal ingredients, some of which are grown in its own herb and vegetable garden. This approach not only reduces the operation's environmental footprint but also generates **a positive socio-economic impact on local communities**, by strengthening the economy of small farmers and national producers. By prioritising native and locally sourced products, CCCR actively supports responsible consumption, food sovereignty, and the promotion of more inclusive and sustainable food systems.

Additionally, the center adheres to **Costa Rica's National Plan for Sustainable and Healthy Gastronomy**, a nationwide strategy that promotes low-impact food systems and enhances public health. During FIEXPO, the center also launched a new initiative, "**Mindful Bites by Heroica**", a curated menu focused on attendee wellness, offering options designed to boost energy and mental clarity. This mindful menu was unveiled alongside a new podcasting zone and a Wellness Center. These additions reflect an event design philosophy that supports attendees' intellectual, emotional, and physical well-being by offering spaces for content creation, stress relief, and health-conscious catering.

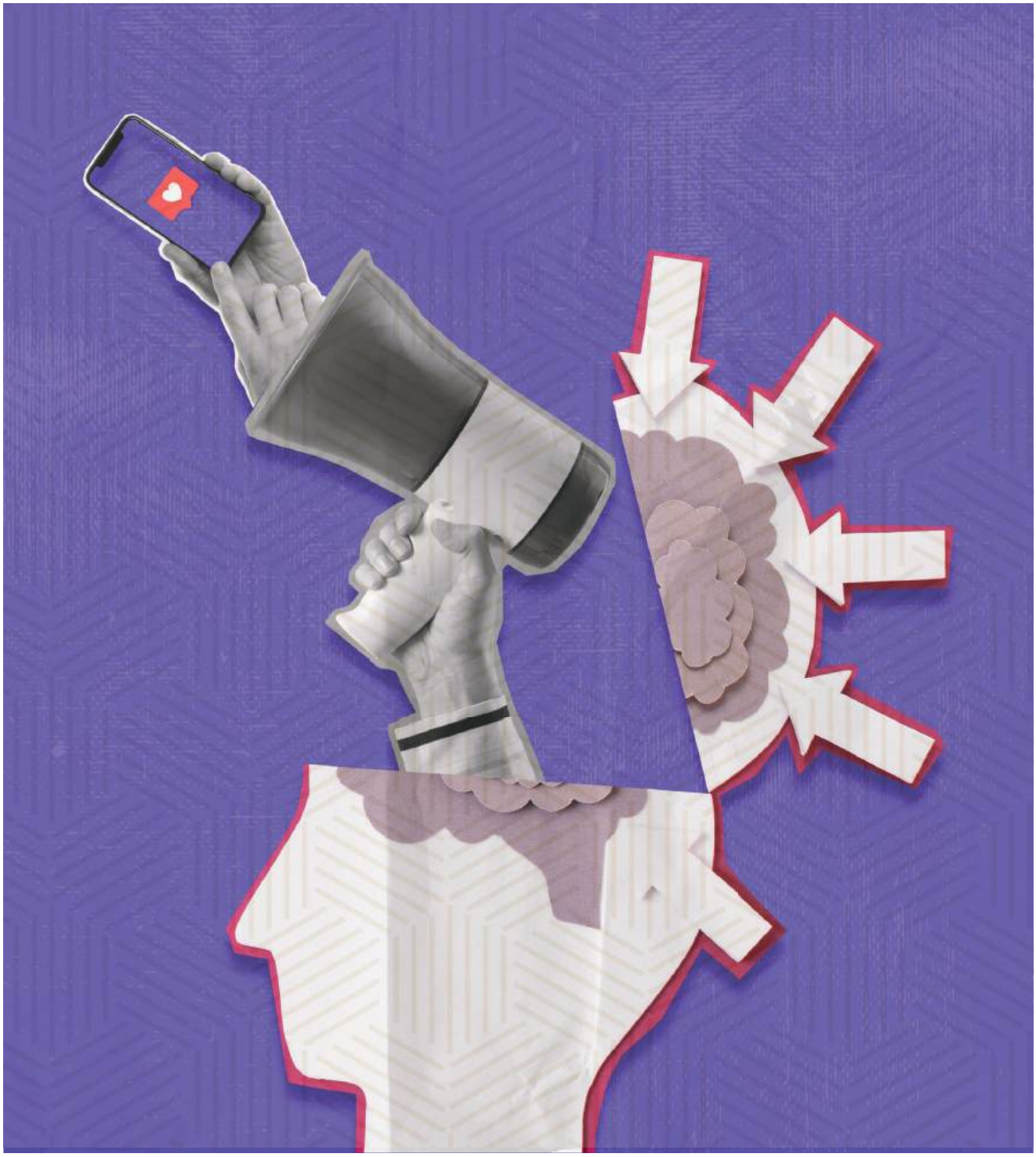
The venue's energy and waste management systems are equally robust: on-site glass shredders, cardboard and metal compactors, emission tracking tools, and a composting process allow the CCCR to sustainably manage **between 50% and 70% of its total waste**.

The **Legacy Link** programme expands this impact by inviting students to attend expert-led sessions during events, building a practical bridge between education and professional opportunities in the meetings industry.

The CCCR holds numerous certifications recognising its sustainability leadership. In 2024, it became one of only three venues worldwide selected as early adopters of the **Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) MICE Criteria**, alongside venues in Singapore. The **Blue Flag Ecological Certification** awarded to FIEXPO 2025 further validated the venue's approach, recognising responsible practices throughout planning, execution, and teardown. The event also engaged more than 60 local businesses, 60% of which were small or medium-sized enterprises, in services such as catering, transportation, and audiovisual production. This not only reinforced CCCR's environmental performance but also highlighted its role in strengthening Costa Rica's national MICE network.

The CCCR empowers event organisers to elevate the sustainability and impact of their events by aligning infrastructure, education, and community inclusion within a measurable framework for the global meetings industry.

HQ INSIGHTS



Disruptions: A New **Reality**



Chaos is the term a lot of people use when it comes to the current geopolitical landscape. I think they are absolutely right, but only if they refer to the original Greek meaning of the word: a primordial void from which everything emerged. The real challenge is not the change itself, but the positioning based on analytics.

Author: Sven Bossu, AIPC CEO

These are interesting times in many ways. The number of state-inflected conflicts continues to rise, technology (including AI) is becoming omnipresent, global supply chains are being disrupted and we seem to be unable to address our biggest challenge, climate change. There are still those who believe that we will return to 'normal' times. However, the current level of disruption will simply not allow us to do so and therefore we need to face the fact that we are entering a new reality. As one of Belgium's top diplomats, Frans van Daele, said in a recent interview: "We need to explain to people that the last 80 years of our history have been truly exceptional when it comes to peace and development." And that exceptional period has come to an end.

For organisations worldwide, including associations, this means that they need to assess the situation and basically do a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis, based on available data, and make sure that their organisation and processes in place are agile enough to change quickly in function of changing data. This is not an easy thing to do, but fortunately, there is a growing number of tools and best practices becoming publicly available allowing us to initiate the process. An example is an article published by McKinsey explaining how tariffs impact a company's relative competitive advantage and customer demand, a framework that can be easily tweaked to be relevant for associations.

The great thing about this type of tools is that they allow for strategic posture AND actions. There is not that much difference between corporations and associations. Both need to define the impact of ongoing changes at two levels: the value they offer to their customers/members in terms of services and the impact at the level of the customers/members. For example: if the core product of an association is global face-to-face education (meaning bringing participants from across the globe to one place), then that value will be impacted by an increase of travel restrictions and foreign exchange fluctuations, which might lead to a change in service offering. In the end, this might turn into something positive. Taking the same example, opt for local or digital education, which expands the addressable market and is more fair, as it will allow parts of the association community, otherwise excluded for financial reasons, to participate. And on top, it is also more sustainable, as it reduces the footprint related to travel.

The example above is of course a simplification of the sometimes complex reality associations face, whereby the focus is not that much on the (economic) output, but rather on the outcome (or fulfilling the mission of the association). Nevertheless, I do believe that approaching this new reality as an opportunity is the only way forward.

To close, an example from the space of our global community of convention centres. A key risk is the disruption of food supply chains, as a result of price increases related to tariffs, climate change, or other events beyond the control of convention centres. Obviously, such disruption has an impact on the venue and its customers, either financially or in terms of service delivery. One way of dealing with this is going both local and seasonal, which reduces the risk for disruption, is more sustainable, and is likely to be in line with the value framework of a growing number of event organisers.

Such choices require data, commitment – and courage. But they will result in a bright new future.



What **Global Unrest** Means for **Associations** and the Future of **Meetings**

In today's volatile climate, associations are confronting a new reality: international events are no longer immune to global disruption. They are central to it.

Geopolitical unrest, shifting policy landscapes, and rising polarisation are redefining how, where, and even why, associations meet. That is the clear message from the *2025 Global Socio-Political Impact Survey*, conducted by **IAPCO** in collaboration with **IFES, AIPC**, and the **AMC Institute**. The research provides a snapshot of how international meetings are being impacted by today's socio-political climate, and what it means for associations as they plan for the future.

Nearly 60% of respondents said global conflicts have moderately or significantly disrupted their ability to plan or deliver international meetings. From visa delays and travel disruptions to venue cancellations and declining delegate confidence, the consequences are already affecting association missions, member engagement, and advocacy efforts.

As **IAPCO President, Sissi Lignou** *(pictured above)*, explains: "This is about more than logistics. These challenges strike at the heart of why associations gather." For many organisations, meetings are not just operational touchpoints, they are crucial to advancing knowledge, building community, and driving impact.

The financial toll is mounting too. Over one-quarter of respondents reported losses up to €50,000 per event; nearly 15% cited losses over €150,000. Almost half of all respondents noted they are re-evaluating their preferred destinations, shifting away from cities affected by instability, and instead prioritising political neutrality, inclusivity, and alignment with their organisational values.

IAPCO CEO, Martin Boyle *(pictured below)*, says, "We are seeing long-held strategies being re-evaluated. Associations are asking: does this destination reflect our

mission? Will our members feel safe and welcome? Will our message resonate in this environment?"

The survey also revealed growing concern around changes to government policy. In the United States, sweeping reforms, including the cancellation of research funding and international travel restrictions, are directly affecting scientific and academic participation in global events. Almost half of respondents said these developments have already disrupted their events, with others bracing for further impact.

The risk is clear: if association meetings cannot bring together the full diversity of their communities, especially experts, researchers, and thought leaders, then their ability to foster innovation and influence policy is compromised. Fields such as global health, climate action, and democracy promotion rely on robust, cross-border collaboration. Restrictions that limit participation, ultimately limit progress.

Despite these challenges, the survey also highlights the resilience and adaptability of the professional meetings community. IAPCO-accredited PCOs are equipping associations with tools and strategies to meet this moment, and maintain momentum: scenario planning, stakeholder engagement, risk mitigation, values-based destination selection, and data-informed decision making.

"In uncertain times, events must be designed with clarity of purpose and trusted partnerships," says Lignou. That is how associations continue to lead." She emphasises that PCOs are not just logistics providers, they are strategic partners, helping associations navigate complexity with confidence.

This need for deeper alignment echoes the findings of **The Hague & ESAE**'s *Geopolitical Instability White Papers*, which also cited IAPCO's research. As both studies show, destination decisions are no longer purely operational, they are reputational. Today, associations must consider not just venue capacity or cost, but what a host city signals to members, stakeholders, and the broader public.

For association leaders, the implications are clear. Embedding geopolitical awareness into early-stage event planning is now best practice. Selecting destinations based on values as well as infrastructure can reduce exposure to political risk and support more inclusive, accessible, and safe participation. Partnering with experienced, accredited PCOs ensures not just quality delivery, but mission-aligned execution.

PCOs are also playing a critical role in restoring delegate confidence by communicating safety protocols, advising on travel assurance policies, and developing tailored incentives to support attendance.

Amid ongoing global uncertainty, IAPCO is not standing still. The association is leading proactive efforts to strengthen the industry's collective resilience, from publishing white papers and policy briefs, to advocating with national tourism bodies, to cultivating strategic alliances with fellow global associations. These efforts ensure that the insights uncovered through research are not only shared, they are acted upon.

With foresight, flexibility, and the right partners, associations can continue to convene safely, inclusively, and with purpose. Even in an uncertain world, meetings remain one of the most powerful tools for advancing your mission.

The full *IAPCO Global Socio-Political Impact Survey 2025 report* is available at www.iapco.org

"The risk is clear: if association meetings cannot bring together the full diversity of their communities, especially experts, researchers, and thought leaders, then their ability to foster innovation and influence policy is compromised.



Regenerating the Visitor Economy from the Edge of Europe

Delegates convene 4° south of the Arctic Circle, for the CityDNA Autumn Conference in Tórshavn 2025.

In September 2025, the **City Destinations Alliance (CityDNA)** Autumn Conference heads somewhere unexpected, and entirely intentional. Tórshavn, capital of the Faroe Islands, may be perched on the edge of Europe, but it is fast positioning itself at the centre of one of the most urgent conversations in tourism today: how to reshape the visitor economy in ways that are inclusive, place-based, and future-fit.

Remote yet remarkably accessible, Tórshavn invites delegates to slow down, think deeply, and reconnect with purpose. Under the theme '**Refreshed City Perspectives: Reshaping, Rebalancing, Reigniting the Visitor Economy**', the 2025 edition of the CityDNA Autumn Conference is set to break the mould, just as its host city has done.

From September 30 to October 2, 2025, the conference will not only transform its setting but its structure. Gone are the rigid plenary formats and linear keynote agendas. In their place: immersive sessions, flexible formats, and a strong focus on members-shared purpose. The programme begins on Tuesday with **The Tórshavn Sessions**: a curated afternoon of immersion, interactive conversations and knowledge sharing designed to focus on the issues that are front of mind.

From Place to Process

In Tórshavn, the destination is not just the backdrop — it is the blueprint. "Being 'remote' is not just geography. It is a mindset," explains **Tórdis K. á Rógvi Biskopstø, Managing Director of Visit Tórshavn**. "It is the space to think differently, to disconnect from routines and reconnect with meaning. That became our core message: remoteness as creative space."

That mindset is embedded throughout the event. The main programme will take place at **SILO**, a repurposed salt silo on the city's western harbour that reflects the city's balance of raw authenticity and adaptive reuse. "We did not want a conventional format. We wanted a festival feel – something informal, local, and alive," adds Tórdis. "That is why we chose The Silo as the venue, where our annual tech and arts festival **TONIK** also takes place. The venue is industrial, modern, full of character, has a great view and is very 'Tórshavn'."

Throughout the event, delegates can expect walkshops in the city, campfire conversations, and peer-led labs, all designed to provoke dialogue and shift perspective.

What's on the Agenda?

The conference tracks – **Reshape, Rebalance, Reignite** – invite city leaders, DMOs, and changemakers to reflect honestly on what has and has not worked, what must evolve, and how we can redesign systems that centre community well-being, environmental integrity, and shared responsibility. The programme spans a wide spectrum of future-facing themes: from internationalisation, good growth, AI integration and inclusive tourism, to climate resilience, resident sentiment, data governance, and regenerative business models. Sessions will highlight global trends, the experience economy, community-building, urban identity, and cross-sector collaboration – including the presentation of two new white papers: *The Score is Not the Story* and *Climate Change and the Future of Tourism*.

Importantly, delegates will co-create the *CityDNA Tórshavn Declaration*, a participatory manifesto that captures the

sector's evolving values and charts a regenerative path forward. It will be built live through facilitated workshops, interactive polling, and collaborative idea walls — reflecting not just expert opinion, but the collective intelligence of the CityDNA community. This Declaration will shape the alliance's work in line with its strategy.

From Content to Conscience

Keynote sessions will deepen this reflection. One will be delivered by **Dima Samarin, Head of Marketing & Communication** and **Jesse May Palmer, Creative Director of HoBB (The House of Beautiful Business)**, known for their transformative approach to leadership, systems thinking, and community design. Their presence at the conference is set to open minds and expand horizons. Expect a bold challenge to traditional assumptions and a compelling invitation to rethink how destinations cultivate meaning, belonging, and shared futures. It will be an opportunity to imagine a different kind of growth, grounded in empathy, creativity, and collective purpose.

Complementing this shift in perspective, **Caitlin Morrissey**, host of **The DNA of Cities** podcast, will lead a session exploring how the unique identities of Europe's small and medium-sized cities form the backbone of its urban future, and why embracing uniqueness over scale is critical for resilience. Her talk will invite city leaders to dig deep into their urban DNA, to move beyond policy templates and design destination strategies rooted in authenticity and local character.

These inputs are not meant to provide easy answers, but to spark better questions.

Rethinking Sustainability: From Score to Story

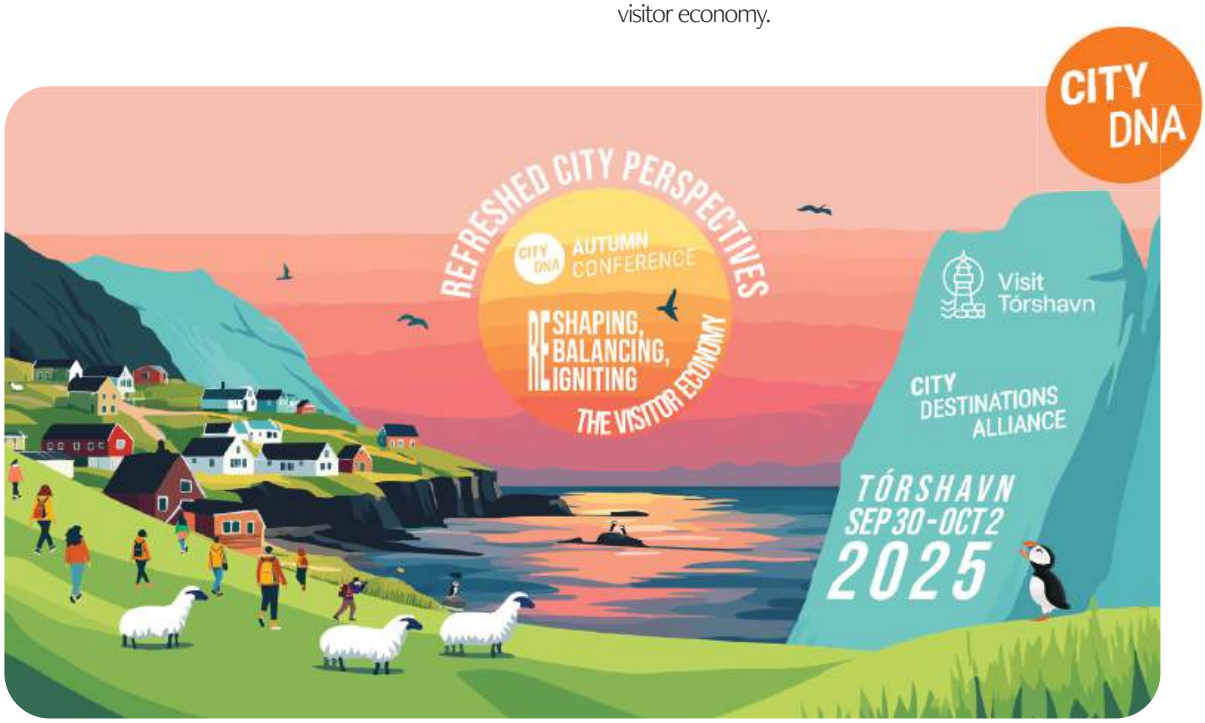
CityDNA and **Simpleview** will also present a thought leadership piece: The VivaCITY White Paper *The Score is Not the Story*. It adds depth and momentum to the broader dialogue taking place in Tórshavn.

The white paper critically examines the growing dependence on sustainability indexes and certifications, arguing that while they offer structure, they often fail to capture what truly matters: resident well-being, systemic change, and place-based integrity. "This white paper is a call to action," says **Barbara Jamison-Woods, President of City Destinations Alliance**. "It reminds us that sustainability is not a badge, it is a transformation. We need to move beyond scorekeeping and start telling more honest, locally grounded stories of impact."

Drawing from expert interviews, city case studies, and lessons from the ongoing VivaCITY project, the white paper supports the same shift Tórshavn embodies: away from compliance and toward co-creation.

A Platform for Strategic Co-Creation and Future Collaboration

The emphasis will be on asking better questions, not just finding quick answers. Through open dialogue and participatory formats, the conference creates space for shared reflection and knowledge sharing. Together, the participants will co-create the Torshavn Declaration, CityDNA's invitation to city leaders and changemakers to contribute to a more adaptive, inclusive, and future-oriented visitor economy.



Utilising **Microcredentials** for Macro **Impact** in the **Events Industry**



Training remains an essential part of developing and growing teams in the events industry, yet it can be challenging to dedicate the necessary time and resources to do so in our busy industry. The key is finding the right training for the right people, while also taking advantage of microcredentials to boost learning and reaffirm knowledge, explains **Andrew Harrison, Director at the Event Supplier & Services Association (ESSA)** in this article for *HQ*.

The events industry thrives on its flexibility and adaptability, yet training is something we have all historically struggled to keep pace with. Limited time, stretched teams and ever-changing regulations have left it a challenge for businesses to effectively keep their teams up-to-date with the latest training.

Taking someone out of the business for three days, especially during busy periods, just is not practical anymore, meaning the traditional model of multi-day in-person courses is losing ground.

While in-person training does still have its place, the growing trend for our industry is that of microcredentials – short, targeted bursts of learning that give teams the crucial up to date information they need to perform their jobs not just well, but safely too.

Understanding Microcredentials

While in-person training remains one of our core offerings here at ESSA, our focus on microcredentials in recent years has allowed us to build a portfolio of micro training modules that are fully accessible for all of our members.

Available in short, often only 10-15 minute bursts, they have been designed to teach and reinforce knowledge and competency across key areas of our industry, including health and safety law, working at height, electrical safety and much more.

The beauty of them, and of microcredentials in general, is that they can be done anytime and anywhere. Plus, they encourage continuous reinforcement due to their flexibility of being referred back to easily when needed.

Broadening Access

When it comes to microcredentials though, there is a stereotype that they are only for junior staff or as an onboarding tool for new team members. If the knowledge is needed, or if new rules and regulations come to light, then that information is important for all members of the business, not just those more junior.

I have had members who have been in the business for decades say how useful the ESSA microcredentials have been in keeping them abreast of what they need to know in their field. This approach to micro learning is especially useful for those more senior members of staff who are time poor, giving them the flexibility they need to fit in training for themselves and ensuring they too can continue to learn and develop.

Striking the Balance

As useful as microcredentials can be though, they are not the complete solution to training and development in our industry.

Some subject matter demands more than just screen time, and the power of coming together in person with other event professionals is not to be underestimated. Our in-person sustainability training for example is exclusively done in person at various venues across the UK throughout the year.

Having these sessions in person is not only more suited for the type of content being delivered, but the community aspect and being able to share what your business is doing with other members and talk it through is often fed back as one of the biggest benefits of having the training face-to-face.

Digital vs In-Person Training

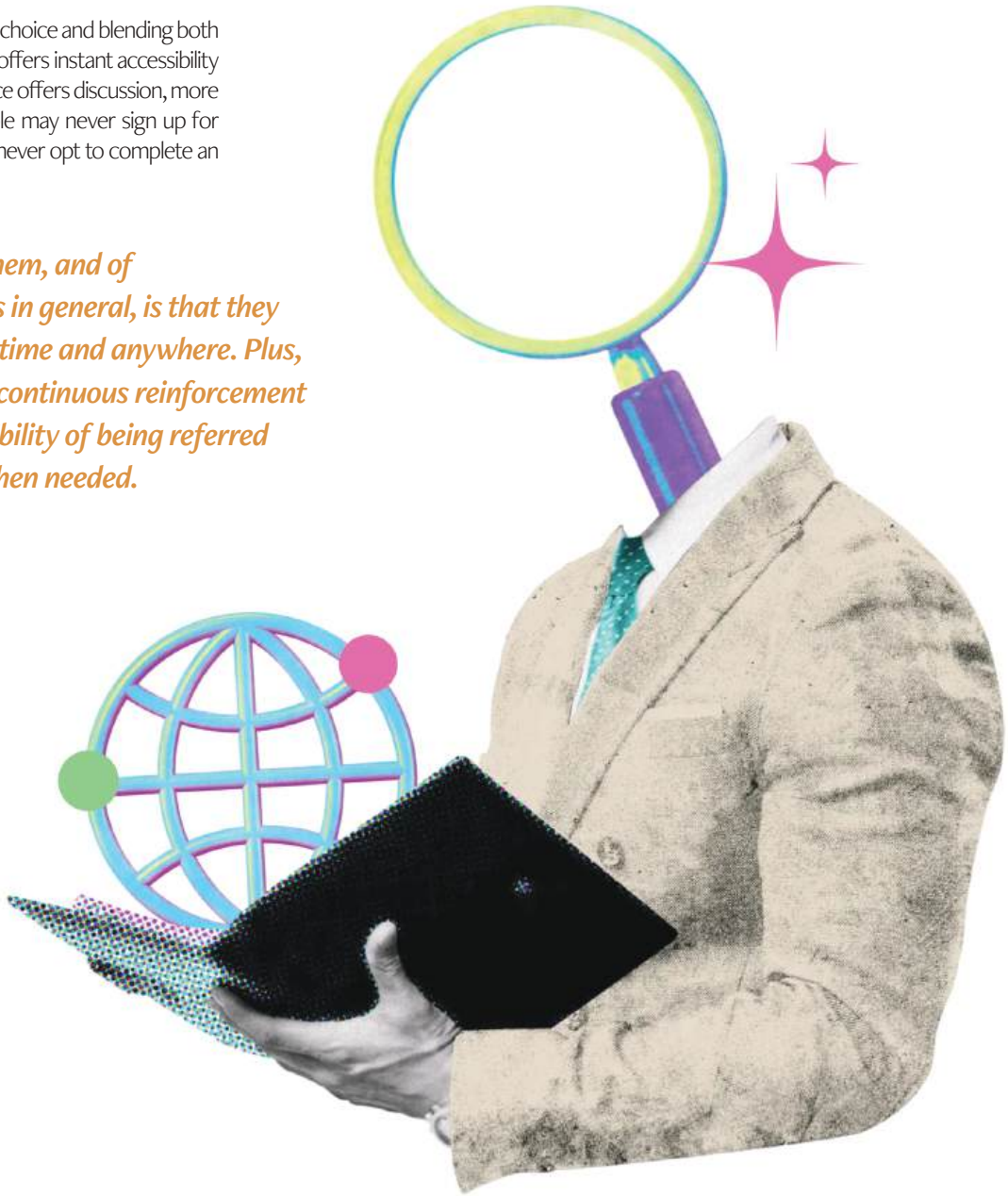
Larger training undertakings, such as our accreditation, are also vital for building strong foundations and showcasing competency in our field, and I think it is important that as microcredentials grow in popularity we are not devaluing accreditation.

There is a big difference between an online module and something that shows a company is operating at or above industry standard. Accreditation should mean something more, while microcredentials are to be used to reinforce knowledge and keep people up to date.

Ultimately, it is about giving people a choice and blending both digital and in-person training. Digital offers instant accessibility and reinforcement, while face-to-face offers discussion, more depth and connection. Some people may never sign up for in-person training, while some may never opt to complete an online module. It is why choice is essential and why we strive to offer both to our members.

In an industry defined by deadlines and delivery, microcredentials offer a flexible training tool to meet the growing demand for training and development. Yet we must ensure they are complementary, not replacements for coming together as we continue to learn and develop as an industry.

> *The beauty of them, and of microcredentials in general, is that they can be done anytime and anywhere. Plus, they encourage continuous reinforcement due to their flexibility of being referred back to easily when needed.*



Leadership Succession: Have a **Programme**, Not A Prayer

Author: Mark Levin, CAE, CSP

In a previous article, we talked about the importance of those of us in leadership roles in the association and hospitality professions being 'bilingual' in today's multi-generational world. One of the values of learning to speak the language of other generations, we noted, was the opportunity to engage a broader range of our members and other stakeholders.

However, the question still remains: once you get them engaged, how do you get them involved? How do you get them to move from being an active member of your organisation to taking that next step and accepting a role as part of the leadership of the organisation? When we speak about leadership, we mean anything from a member of one of your organisation's committees to an officer position in your organisation (or one of its affiliates/chapters).

The key to developing the future leaders of your organisation is to have a leadership succession programme, not a prayer. You need to move past the old-fashioned technique of issuing a 'call for volunteers' (and a prayer someone will respond) to implementing a well-defined programme for attracting future leaders.

Here is an example of what the five basic elements of that leadership succession programme might be.

1. **Proper Recruitment**. Do not expect people to rush forward when you announce that nominations are now open for an officer position or that you are seeking members for your committees. You need to have a person (hopefully a member, not a staff person) talk to a person. The current member needs to be prepared to tell the prospective volunteer exactly what they can expect when they take on their first (or next) leadership role. They will want to know what the time commitment will be; exactly what the position entails; and what the outcome will be (how will it help the organisation).

2. **Effective Orientation/Intake**. Once you get someone to commit to a leadership role, be sure there is some follow-up. Be sure there is a thank you note sent from the organisation's President thanking them for accepting their leadership position. Invite them to watch a short video that gives them an overview of your organisation's leadership structure, defines roles and responsibilities, and talks about the goals of the organisation for the coming year.

3. **Customised Training**. Regardless of what leadership role a member commits to, they wants to be successful in that role. They may have never been on a finance committee, or chaired an event, or been responsible for hosting a guest speaker at a meeting. In addition to providing a job description, make sure your organisation provides some position-specific training for your leaders. This training may very well help to develop one or more

leadership skills that members can transfer to other parts of their personal or professional lives.

4. **Guided Involvement**. Once new leaders have been properly recruited, effectively oriented, and trained to carry out their roles/positions, you need to let them do the job they volunteered for. By giving leaders a specific task and appropriate training, you are setting them up for success, but they still have to follow through with their commitment. Too often we encourage members to take on leadership roles only to have them later feel that they wasted their time, or did not really understand what their role was, etc. That is why we need to be good delegators. If we have recruited properly, oriented carefully, and trained for success, we should have confidence they will do their job well, and get a feeling of achievement and a sense of accomplishment.

5. **Appropriate Recognition**. If your leaders put in the time, and give it their best effort, someone has to 'pay' them. Since they are volunteers, you cannot pay them with money. You can pay them with recognition. Saying thank you is important, and the way you say it is also important. Not everyone deserves a plaque or a trophy, but everyone deserves some level of recognition. Social media gives us unlimited opportunities to recognise our leaders. So, do our organisation's website, newsletters, and events. Forgetting the recognition step may mean losing a key leader who works hard but does not feel appreciated.

A lot of these steps may seem somewhat obvious. The question is, do you have any of these steps identified anywhere in your organisation's programme of work? Is there a staff person assigned to implement a leadership succession plan? Is there any money for leadership development in your organisation's budget or strategic plan? If not, maybe it is something you can consider adding.

If someone in your organisation takes a chance and volunteers, then goes through the steps outlined above, they are likely to have successful experience and be ready to take on other leadership positions in your organisation. In addition, they tell their peers that getting involved in leadership was a benefit, not a burden.

That is a great story to have them tell!



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 non-profit 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.

How **Associations** are Rethinking **Membership**



Authors: Louise Gorringe, AVP Associations Management(below); Iva Popova (above), MarCom Manager, Kenes Group

In today's competitive landscape, professional associations cannot afford to stand still. The question is not just how to attract members, it is how to keep them engaged year after year, and finding ways to channel that engagement into supporting the association's mission.

For the medical and scientific societies **Kenes Group** partners with, from professional organisations to federations, two priorities are driving change: boosting revenue from membership and partnerships, and deepening engagement across their communities.

From Calendar Year to 'Join Any Time'

Not long ago, most associations tied membership to the calendar year, a model shaped by the print era, when journal subscriptions and rosters needed to be finalised months in advance.

Today, with journals online and accessible on demand, that rigid cycle is fading. In its place: flexible, subscription-based memberships that renew on the anniversary of joining. Members, used to Netflix-style convenience, now expect the same from their professional communities, and this is a shift many associations are actively exploring. The model not only smooths revenue into a steady year-round cash flow but also deepens engagement by creating ongoing touchpoints with members, rather than a single burst of contact during the annual dues period.

Kenes Group guides associations through a review of whether to move to a different model, weighing pros and cons, modelling scenarios, and designing change plans that work for leadership and members alike.

Tiers That Speak to Members

Tiered membership is not just about more price points; it is about more choice.

We are seeing more associations analysing the different segments within their membership and tailoring tiers or packages to suit these distinct needs. One example is the 'education package' tier, which bundles access to online learning, event discounts, and targeted professional resources. This model is particularly appealing to early-career professionals eager for mentorship and networking opportunities, while also providing a clear value proposition for associations seeking to engage and retain this audience.

Engagement That Does not End at the Annual Meeting

The most successful associations treat engagement as a year-round effort. Beyond their flagship events, they keep members connected through:

- Benefits and value targeted to segments such as early-career networks and mentorship programmes;
- Education and knowledge sharing such as webinars, podcasts, and journal clubs;
- Networking through online communities, working groups and special interest groups.

For federations, with other societies as members, the challenge is twofold: build strong ties with member societies and reach individual members directly. That means offering opportunities to contribute to mission, strategy, and programming while ensuring the value of content is crystal clear.

The Tools That Make It Happen

Smart technology is enabling these changes. Targeted marketing platforms and social media boost reach, while repurposing content from annual meetings keeps the conversation alive long after the closing session.

Communication has also evolved to be more frequent, multi-channel, and laser-focused on the right audiences. The golden rule? Keep it visual, keep it clear, and make benefits impossible to miss.

Results That Speak for Themselves

Associations adopting these models are seeing stronger retention, higher participation, and more active communities.

One lesson learned: communication is key. We have found that using existing networks, whether these are influential individual members or, in the case of federations, national member societies, is one of the most effective ways to promote new benefits. Members are far more likely to listen to and act on recommendations from their peers. If the offer is not instantly clear and relatable, uptake will be limited.

Looking Ahead

For associations considering similar changes, the advice is clear:

- Plan thoroughly, weighing all pros and cons;
- Model different outcome scenarios;
- Involve members early through consultation and testing.

On the horizon, expect more partnership-based engagement, personalised communications, customised packages, and seamless renewals.

The future is about making membership not just a transaction, but a relationship members cannot imagine letting lapse.

kenes group





Cvent CONNECT Europe 2025
Coming This October

Cvent CONNECT Europe returns to the **InterContinental London – The O2** this October, offering event professionals a dynamic programme of keynotes, education, and networking with both in-person and virtual access.

Cvent CONNECT Europe, the annual customer and industry conference hosted by Cvent, an industry-leading meetings, events, and hospitality technology provider, will return to London this autumn with a stellar line-up of speakers and sessions. Taking place 15–16 October 2025 at the InterContinental London – The O2, the event will welcome acclaimed broadcaster, wellness advocate, and best-selling author **Davina McCall MBE** *(pictured left)* as a keynote speaker, while celebrated television and radio presenter **Dermot O'Leary** *(pictured below)* returns as **Master of Ceremonies** for a second consecutive year.





Designed to offer both in-person and virtual experiences, the programme will feature more than 60 expert-led sessions, exclusive invite-only programming, along with a pre-conference day on 14 October. This additional day will provide attendees with opportunities for product upskilling through **Cvent Academy** training camps. The conference agenda is tailored to deliver actionable insights and practical strategies across the entire meetings and events ecosystem.

Davina McCall, one of the UK's most recognisable broadcasters, rose to fame as the original host of Big Brother and has since fronted hit shows including *The Masked Singer, Long Lost Family,* and *My Mum, Your Dad.* Beyond television, she is a passionate advocate for women's health, leading national conversations around menopause awareness, mental well-being, and fitness. In her keynote, McCall will share candid reflections on personal challenges, successes, and well-being, offering inspiration and practical insights for attendees.

Dermot O'Leary, best known for hosting *This Morning, The X Factor,* and his *BBC Radio 2 show*, will host exclusive interviews, including a keynote conversation with McCall, one of the most anticipated sessions of the event.

Cvent CONNECT Europe has long been regarded as a platform for professional development and industry innovation. According to attendee feedback:

- 79% of attendees agreed they gained new ideas for event-led growth;
- 74% said the education and networking opportunities would advance their career;
- 72% confirmed they learned to better use event technology.

With proven impact, the event continues to attract professionals from across the MICE, hospitality, travel, production, and marketing industries.

Registration

To learn more or register for Cvent CONNECT Europe 2025, visit the event website.



"Davina McCall's dynamic career in television and impactful advocacy will bring compelling and authentic stories of resilience and personal achievement to the Cvent CONNECT Europe stage," said **Felicia Asiedu, Marketing Director for Europe at Cvent**. "We are equally excited to welcome back Dermot O'Leary as Master of Ceremonies, following his standout appearance last year. He is genuinely fascinated by our industry, having built great rapport with many attendees last year, and he is thrilled to be back."

cvent

NetWorks Speed Networking Launched to Deliver AI-powered Connections

Networking at exhibitions and conferences is often constrained by time and the difficulty of meeting the right people. Since the pandemic, demand for face-to-face contact has returned alongside higher expectations for efficiency. Attendees want curated introductions, organisers need measurable engagement, and both value having new contacts stored for later follow-up. AI-driven matchmaking is becoming a practical way to meet these needs, matching participants quickly and keeping the process simple. One recent example is **NetWorks**, a new AI-driven speed networking product launched by **ExpoPlatform** to fuel fast-paced connections that deliver real ROI.

Author: Conor Riordan, Digital Content Editor at ExpoPlatform

NetWorks is designed by the market-leading event tech provider to trigger business opportunities at small-to-large scale exhibitions and conferences.

The simple and easy-to-use format comes with walk-in and pre-matched options so that organisers can best meet the needs of their event and participants.



Tanya Pinchuk, CEO of ExpoPlatform *(pictured left)*, said: "In-person events thrive on meaningful conversations, and NetWorks is designed to spark them instantly. NetWorks empowers organisers to deliver real value through fast, AI-focused networking experiences that scale with ease, whether at a small conference or a global trade show. It is perfect for busy participants, helping them connect with the right people in minutes so that deeper discussions can continue at your wider event and beyond."

This standalone product comes after a successful partnership with **UFI, the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry**, to deliver speed networking sessions at three events. The Americas and European conferences saw meetings gain an average rating of 4.6 out of 5, with 89% of participants saying the matchmaking was highly effective.

Nick Dugdale-Moore, UFI Regional Director Europe, described the result as 'a terrific success' and that ExpoPlatform was the 'exact partner you want'.

NetWorks is powered by an intelligent algorithm to match buyers with exhibitors and sponsors with delegates, so all participants can cut to the chase with a personalised schedule. Organisers specify the timeframe for a number of short, fast-paced meetings to take place over the course of a session. This opens the door for deeper conversations to then take place with new contacts over the course of the event and beyond.

It is designed so organisers and participants all see a boost to their event ROI:

- **Organisers**: Increase NPS and rebooking rates by delivering quantifiable value;
- **Exhibitors and sponsors**: Meet prospects in rapid-fire, face-to-face sessions so that time is not wasted;
- **Buyers and delegates**: Make better connections through AI-powered agendas which fast-tracks discovery and decision-making.

NetWorks has been launched as a standalone product, meaning organisers of all industries and sizes can introduce the format without the need for other features.

AI-driven matchmaking, smart event apps and digital engagement tools are just some of the other solutions the platform offers to empower event professionals. to boost audience participation, increase exhibitor value and streamline event operations.

ExpoPlatform *is an event technology provider which operates globally and is trusted by world-leading organisers for its innovative and reliable solutions, with a strong record of continuous working with some of the world's largest exhibition organisers, including Informa,* ***Dubai World Trade Centre, IMEX*** *and more.*



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