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Editor's Notes

Elephants in the Meeting Rooms

Author: Jesús Guerrero Chacón, HQ's Deputy Editor

An escalating conflict around one of the world's main energy and transit corridors is taking lives, displacing families and damaging conditions for people to live safely, work and move freely, while migration and political tensions in other parts of the world show how quickly government decisions impact vulnerable communities.

In February, *HQ* travelled to Mexico for the **BestCities Global Forum** and Australia for **AIME**. In Mexico, after departure, a wave of violence triggered roadblocks, arson and disruption to transport and flights across several states. The return route from Australia to Europe crossed a major Middle Eastern air corridor three days before airstrikes led to airspace closures and airport disruption, placing business events travel within conditions that can change quickly. Rerouting around restricted airspace near the Strait of Hormuz adds time and distance to long-haul flights, increasing fuel burn as prices rise. Data from organisations including the **World Travel & Tourism Council, Oxford Economics** and **Deloitte**, alongside reporting from *Reuters*, *BBC* or *The New York Times*, points to the same pattern: higher fuel costs, disrupted routes, reduced capacity and pressure on fares, with airlines adjusting operations and reallocating capacity as demand shifts away from affected hubs.

In mid-April, the European Commission is urging member states and businesses to cut fuel consumption through teleworking, lower motorway speeds and avoiding non-essential flights, explicitly including business trips, with direct implications for the meetings industry. Estimates from the **International Energy Agency** indicate that reducing business flights by up to 40% could lower jet fuel demand by 7% to 15% in the short term, while governments across parts of the Asia-Pacific region limit official trips and replace overseas travel with online meetings.

Recent conversations between *HQ* and associations and meeting planners indicate tighter travel budgets, increased attention to routing and safety, and growing uncertainty over participation in 2026 events, as long-haul delegates delay registration to assess how global conflicts evolve, then face higher fares due to late booking. This reduces predictability for organisers, with associations and meeting planners pointing to difficulty accessing clear and realistic information from destinations, whose communications remain largely optimistic and offer limited insight into current conditions.

As AIME opened in Australia in February, Bad Bunny's Super Bowl halftime show had just taken place. In conversations with meeting professionals, destination representatives and media, it came up unexpectedly. People who did not speak Spanish or were unfamiliar with who he is still referred to it, pointing to the message it conveyed around injustice, migration and identity across America. In New Zealand, a Māori tribe chief shared over dinner how the performance resonated at a human level, not because of language or cultural proximity, but because the themes reflected experiences and concerns that extend across regions and communities. People connect with realities beyond their own context when communicated clearly and in human terms, particularly when they reflect lived experience such as conflict, migration or inequality, while communication across parts of the meetings industry keeps discussions on cost, access and participation largely within private exchanges.

In May, associations, planners, PCOs, venues and destinations will gather at **IMEX Frankfurt**, where many of these concerns will continue to be discussed in private. What remains open is whether the industry is willing to create spaces for more public and honest exchanges between associations and destinations on cost, risk and participation, instead of relying on optimistic messaging that no longer reflects the constraints now affecting participation.



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The **Politics** of **Sustainability**

Invisible, Until It Disappears!

Author: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager

There is a moment, just before a congress begins, when everything feels deceptively effortless: the lights settle, translation booths hum softly, delegates gather in clusters of recognition and anticipation. Knowledge, for a brief few days, becomes a shared language. What remains unseen is the scaffolding that made it possible, an industry that exists, quite literally, behind the curtain and that, lately, it has been holding its breath. However, the deeper issue is perhaps more uncomfortable. The industry itself has never quite learnt how to talk about its own value.

In the conversation I shared in this issue *(see pages 42-43)*, **Stephen Noble, Chair of the IAPCO Training Academy**, remarked: "One of the challenges we face as PCOs is that we are not naturally positioned to be in the spotlight. Our role has always been to put our clients (associations, speakers, delegates) at the forefront. We operate behind the scenes, and that is where we feel most comfortable. This also means that we are not particularly good at showcasing our own industry (...) There is still no clear narrative, nor a strong storytelling that draws people to the profession." Simply put, where there is no narrative, there is no advocacy, and without advocacy, there is no protection.

Here lies another paradox: the desire to meet in person has never been stronger, yet it has never been more difficult to make it happen. Costs are rising and international attendance is thinning under the weight of geopolitics. According to recent *Meetings Outlook* data from **Meeting Professionals International**, 64% of planners report increased costs, 33% are facing a decline in sponsorship, and as many as 22% report a total loss of funding. At the same time, 52% are seeing a drop in international attendance, with 43% experiencing cancellations altogether. More than a third say these pressures are already eroding the event experience itself. Across Europe, destinations are being asked to justify their existence not in terms of knowledge exchange, but in terms of immediate, visible return. The *2025 DestinationNEXT Futures Study*, run by **Destinations International**, found that 42% of destination organisations anticipate funding risks within the next three years, a signal not just of financial tightening, but of shifting political priorities. In this recalibration, something subtle and dangerous is happening.

The meetings industry is becoming politically unsustainable: not environmentally, not socially... politically. In a world increasingly shaped by a VUCA landscape of shifting alliances, economic strain, and competing national priorities, conferences and congresses have found themselves demoted. Leisure tourism captures imagination and headlines, while mega-events secure reputation. But the steady, intellectual infrastructure of association meetings? It struggles for airtime. It is, in many ways, the 'quiet economy' of cities, making it easy to overlook. What is at stake is not merely an industry, but a knowledge ecosystem. When a congress does not take place, the loss is not immediately visible. As highlighted by platforms such as **The Iceberg**, the true value of association meetings lies in their under-the-radar exchange, professional influence, and scientific advancement. Yet these outcomes remain largely indiscernible to traditional evaluation models, and to political decision-making. Here, **visit.brussels** offers a stark case in point, currently facing a 64% reduction in public support, with events cancelled, budgets frozen, and up to 90 jobs at risk.

In this context, cities do not just lose events, they lose relevance. To speak of sustainability without addressing its political dimension, is to miss the point entirely. Sustainability is not only about reducing 'waste,' but about shaping what is valuable, while letting go of what is not. For the meetings industry, this advocacy work can no longer happen backstage. If this sector is to survive the slow tightening of public budgets and the unpredictable tides of geopolitics, it must learn to do something profoundly uncomfortable: step into the spotlight. Because in the end, the most unsustainable model of all is invisibility.

NZICC Defines Aotearoa New Zealand's Model for International Events

The opening of the **New Zealand International Convention Centre (NZICC)** in Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland, in February 2026 marks a turning point in the way international business events are hosted in Aotearoa New Zealand. After more than a decade in development, this venue brings together scale, cultural identity and urban integration on a single site, enabling the country to host larger and more complex congresses while incorporating New Zealand's unique identity into the design of events and delegate experience. *HQ* was on site for the opening, reporting from within the NZICC as it began operations.

On 11 February 2026, NZICC opened with a ceremony led by **Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei**, the Māori sub-tribe whose ancestral land includes central Auckland, followed by a ribbon-cutting by **Prime Minister Christopher Luxon**. Mana whenua established the guardianship protocol before introducing the venue to government, industry and international stakeholders. NZICC combines cultural grounding with scale and city integration, shaping how organisers design events in New Zealand while aligning business events with economic, social and cultural objectives.

Government and industry leaders used the opening to frame NZICC within New Zealand's economic strategy for business events, with demand secured and public investment tied to long-term returns. "Tourism is Aotearoa New Zealand's second largest export industry, and business events are a key part of that growth. Multi-day conferences contributed $925 million (approx. €510 million) in economic productivity in 2025, and with 120 events already confirmed, the NZICC is expected to bring 33,000 additional international visitors," said **Louise Upston, Minister of Tourism and Hospitality** at the opening celebration. The figures place NZICC within a segment defined by high-yield delegates and multi-day stays, with a projected annual impact of around NZD 90 million (approx. €50 million) in new visitor spend.

That approach is reinforced in how the venue presents itself to clients. "NZICC is distinctly Aotearoa, with a design that reflects the land and its people, expressed through its art, locally sourced food, and the diversity of the team operating the venue," said **Jason Walbridge, Chief Executive Officer of SkyCity Entertainment Group**, the owner and operator of NZICC in partnership with the New Zealand government. The statement frames the venue as a space where design, operations and service express a clear sense of place.

The opening celebration offered an early indication of how this positioning translates into practice. Guests entered through Ariki Hall, passing beneath *Helios*, a six-metre sun installation by British artist **Luke Jerram**, establishing the venue's scale and visual identity from the outset. The programme moved across the building, featuring formal speeches, a kapa haka performance (a traditional Māori art form combining group song, chant and movement), a choral performance by the Auckland Youth Choir, and a live set by Six60, delivering the venue's first concert. The range of formats demonstrated NZICC's ability to support live entertainment, cultural programming and formal content within a single event space.

The following day, during an exclusive site inspection, **Prue Daly, General Manager of NZICC**, highlighted the venue's cultural identity. "I do not want people to walk in and feel they could be in any convention centre in the world. I want them to feel they are in New Zealand," she said.

The venue works in partnership with Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei, whose involvement extends beyond the opening ceremony. They sit on the advisory group and have shaped how the building is presented, including gifting the name Te Tumu, meaning 'the foundation'. For organisers, this provides structured support when incorporating Māori elements into programmes, from language and protocol to storytelling and welcome.

Daly described this as a practical need. Many organisers want to include cultural elements but lack clarity on how to do so appropriately. NZICC positions itself as an intermediary, guiding these decisions while maintaining alignment with local expectations. Cultural integration becomes part of event delivery, not an optional addition.







This could be applied to events of any size. However, Daly framed the venue in terms of usability and flexibility and not just scale. "Ariki Hall can accommodate around 400 exhibition booths or seat more than 3,000 people for dinner, but it can also be divided into smaller, more usable spaces. That allows us to host multiple events at once while maintaining flow through front-of-house and back-of-house areas," she said.

Ariki Hall spans 6,708 square metres and can support large exhibitions or plenary sessions, while the 33 meeting and breakout rooms enable different event formats to run concurrently.



Flexibility and New Zealand's identity are also reflected in the venue's food philosophy. The venue recruited **Executive Chef Rob Cullen** from a restaurant background to raise the baseline for large-scale catering. "We did not want someone who would simply take conventional conference food and try to elevate it. We wanted a chef with more of a restaurant background, and then we would work out how to deliver that quality at scale," Daly said. The result is an approach where local produce and New Zealand wine are integrated into the standard offer.

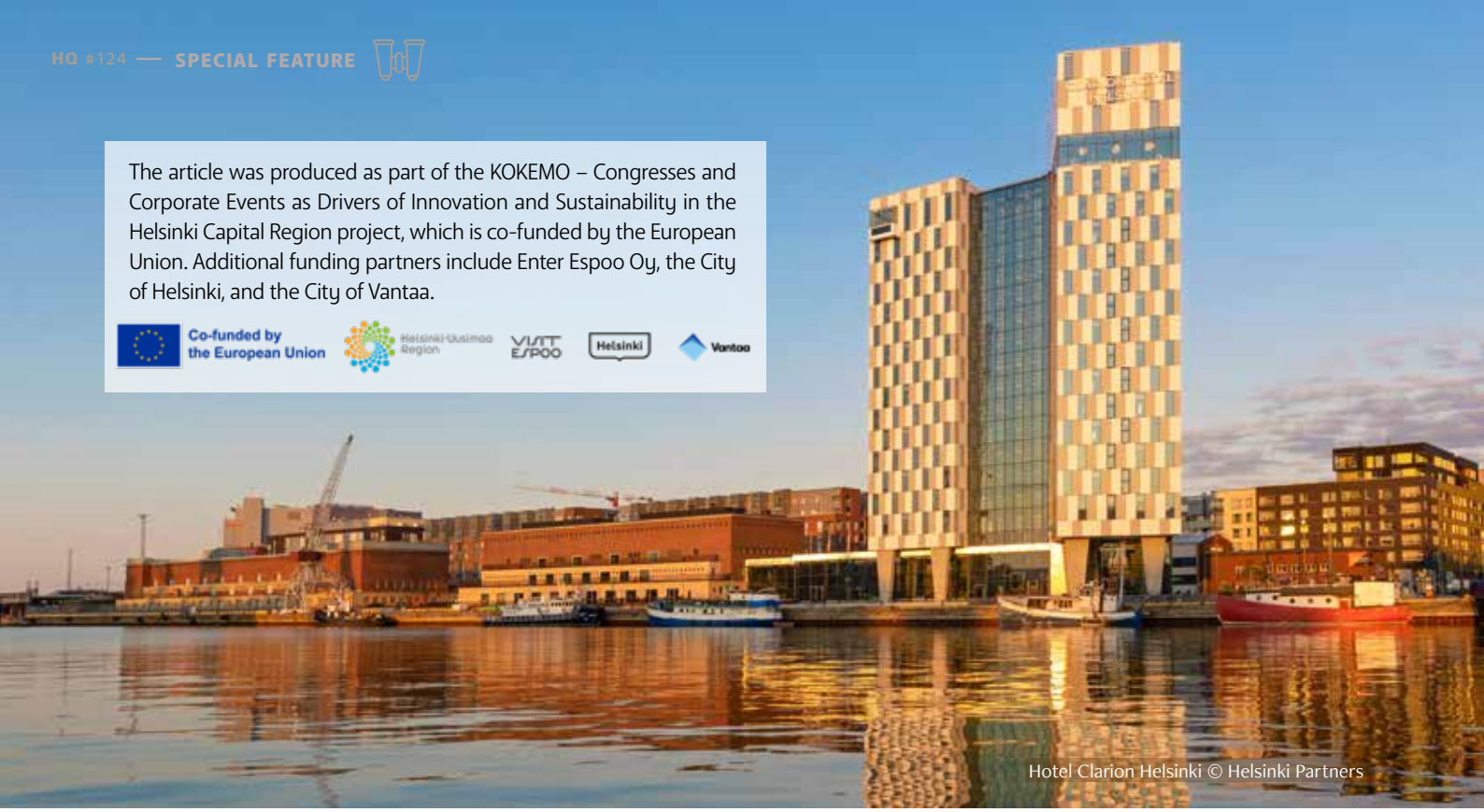
Food waste and sustainability are addressed through operational decisions. NZICC has achieved **Qualmark Gold** certification and is working towards additional benchmarks, including **EarthCheck** and **Green Star**. Daly identified procurement and daily practices as the main drivers, from eliminating single-use plastics to selecting compostable materials and working with local suppliers that support employment within their communities.

From its opening phase, NZICC engaged directly with the international meetings ecosystem. The venue hosted the **AIPC Emerging Leaders Academy**, the first time the event has been held in New Zealand, within its first week of operations, and welcomed **IAPCO EDGE Auckland**, focused on education and leadership. It also brought together **Business Events Industry Aotearoa (BEIA)** and will host **MEETINGS 2026** in June, the country's flagship trade show for business events. These events position NZICC within the global network of convention centres and association planners at an early stage, allowing the venue to be assessed by industry peers while building demand. Daly emphasised the value of peer feedback. "There is real benefit in having peers come through the venue and give feedback at an early stage. If you want to be the best, you have to be open to that," she said. "People return to the places where they have had the best experience. That is the standard we are setting for ourselves."

NZICC enables multi-stream conferences, exhibitions and performances within a single integrated venue, supported by a walkable central city environment. It defines a hosting model linking event delivery with economic impact, cultural identity and long-term sector development. The venue also strengthens the national convention network, enabling larger congresses in Auckland while connecting to programmes and experiences across other regions. This encourages longer stays and broader engagement with Aotearoa New Zealand.

The article was produced as part of the KOKEMO – Congresses and Corporate Events as Drivers of Innovation and Sustainability in the Helsinki Capital Region project, which is co-funded by the European Union. Additional funding partners include Enter Espoo Oy, the City of Helsinki, and the City of Vantaa.

Co-funded by the European Union



Hotel Clarion Helsinki © Helsinki Partners

Inside the **Helsinki Capital Region**

Where Happiness Meets Business

In Finland, happiness is more than a statistic, it shapes the way people and meetings operate. In the Helsinki Capital Region, three cities are building the perfect roadmap where delegates move effortlessly between urban centres, research campuses, and event rooms. For international organisers, Finnish hospitality becomes a strategic advantage, turning conferences into reliable and memorable experiences. Discover how **Helsinki**, **Espoo**, and **Vantaa** are creating one of Europe's most efficient congress ecosystems.

"We do not really have borders between our cities." This simple remark from **Karoliina Ala-Opas, Head of the Helsinki Convention Bureau**, captures the essence of how the Greater Helsinki Region operates. In many practical ways, **Helsinki Partners, Visit Espoo** and **Visit Vantaa** operate less like separate destination organisations and more like a single metropolitan ecosystem.

Public transport offers the clearest example of the region's seamless connectivity. A single ticket allows delegates to travel easily between Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa, moving within minutes from Helsinki's city centre to Espoo's key research campuses or from Helsinki Airport to congress venues. "We are more than just geographically close, we are tightly integrated," Ala-Opas explains. "This naturally creates a strong foundation for collaboration when it comes to attracting and hosting international conferences." Behind that connectivity lies a broader metropolitan reality: each city maintains its own governance, yet infrastructure systems, from mobility to energy and waste management, are deeply interconnected. According to **Miikka Valo, Director of Conventions & Tourism** at **Visit Espoo**, the region functions naturally as one metropolitan area. "Collaboration happens organically rather than through a fully integrated day-to-day bidding structure."

For the meetings industry, this creates a flexible ecosystem. Helsinki brings experience and scale in hosting international congresses, Espoo contributes a strong academic dimension through institutions such as **Aalto University**, and Vantaa completes the structure with Helsinki Airport and a growing cluster of airport hotels and conference facilities. As **Johanna Grönberg, Senior Advisor for Congresses** at the **Helsinki Convention Bureau**, puts it: "We see ourselves as partners. Each city has its own strengths, and together they create a stronger reputation for the entire region."

The Compact Advantage

If collaboration triggers the strategic framework, proximity delivers the operational advantage. Distances are short by European capital standards: the metro between Helsinki and Espoo takes less than ten minutes in some sections, while commuter trains link the airport to the city centre in around half an hour. "This also means delegates can enjoy both an urban conference experience and immediate access to nature within the same trip," Ala-Opas says. Rather than marketing three separate destinations, convention bureaux present the region as a unified platform.

Accommodation is a good example. Helsinki hosts the largest hotel inventory, while Espoo and Vantaa provide complementary capacity, creating roughly 22,000 rooms across the metropolitan area. "Some delegates may prefer to stay close to the venue in Espoo, while others choose hotels in Helsinki's downtown and commute easily by metro," Valo notes. "From an economic perspective, conferences benefit the entire metropolitan area." For its part, areas such as the Design District are intentionally shaped to be walkable and easy to explore, with lively hubs like Kamppi and highly connected neighbourhoods such as Pasila.

Three Cities, One Destination

Orderly and stress-free, Helsinki combines modern architecture with waterfront landscapes, green spaces, and a compact city centre ideal for walking. Consistently ranked among Europe's top congress destinations, Helsinki placed within the top 20 in Europe according to **UIA** and **ICCA** rankings. In 2024, the city hosted 203 international association meetings, noted for its sustainability, accessibility, and high delegate satisfaction across hotels, restaurants, and cultural venues. Key facilities include **Messukeskus Helsinki Expo and Convention Centre**, with over 58,000 m² of flexible space and a new Arena for up to 7,500 delegates, **Finlandia Hall**, and the historic **Helsinki Congress Paasitorni**.

Espoo brings a complementary dimension. Known for its research institutions, international companies such as **Kone** and **Neste**, and vast natural areas, the city is anchored by Aalto University's **Otaniemi campus**, a hub of start-ups and research organisations. "Because universities and research fields differ significantly, we rarely find ourselves bidding for the same conferences," explains Grönberg. While Helsinki hosts larger-scale congresses, Espoo often welcomes more specialised or research-focused events. Its venues, including **Dipoli Conference Centre** (up to 1,000 delegates), **Otakaari 1** auditoriums (70–600 delegates) and **Espoo Metro Areena**, provide flexible spaces for meetings, workshops and social programmes.

Vantaa plays a distinct but equally strategic role as the region's international gateway. Beyond its logistical importance, the city offers rich cultural and natural experiences, from interactive exhibits at the **Heureka Science Centre** to lakeside saunas and **Sipoonkorpi National Park**, as well as cultural spaces such as the **Finnish Aviation Museum**. Its smaller venue ecosystem, including **Clarion Hotel Helsinki Airport, Hotel Tikkurila**, and **Håkansböle Manor**, complements the metropolitan area by providing settings for receptions, airport meetings, and social programmes, ensuring delegates can access both city life and Finland's nature within the same journey.



Open Innovation 2.0 Conference 2015 © Visit Espoo

A Congress Destination Built On Knowledge

Beyond venues and logistics, the Greater Helsinki Region's meetings industry is deeply connected to its research ecosystem. Helsinki is internationally recognised for expertise in fields such as healthcare, clean energy, quantum technologies and smart city solutions. The city is also part of UNESCO's Creative Cities Network as a City of Design. In Espoo, the Otaniemi campus has become one of Northern Europe's most dynamic research clusters. As the home of Aalto University, start-ups and multinational large corporations, it provides fertile ground for conferences focused on emerging scientific fields. That academic environment increasingly shapes the types of events hosted in the region.

In 2024, the **Sustainability Research and Innovation Congress** brought together global experts through a collaboration between the University of Helsinki and Aalto University. "At a broader level, Finnish cities, including our three, have ambitious climate targets and are investing heavily in sustainable urban development and new technologies. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to host a congress like this," Valo says. Another example is the **World Planning Schools Congress 2026**, which will bring around 1,200 delegates to Finland. The programme will take place across several cities, with multiple sessions hosted in both Helsinki and Espoo. Such collaborations highlight an important feature of the region's meetings landscape: conferences are not only hosted in the city, they are embedded in its research community.

Sustainability And Legacies As Systemic Features

Sustainability is another defining element of the country's meetings strategy. Unlike many destinations where sustainability is presented as an optional feature, here it is integrated into urban infrastructure, transportation, carbon neutrality and daily life. "Sustainability begins with mobility," Ala-Opas explains. "Because the region has an extensive and well-integrated public transport network, delegates can move around easily while keeping their environmental footprint low."

The region's efforts have received recent international recognition. Helsinki has ranked first in the **Global Destination Sustainability Index** for two consecutive years and is the first city with more than 500,000 residents to receive the **Green Destinations GSTC certification**. At a policy level, the city aims to become carbon-neutral by 2040. For organisers, the convention bureaux provide practical tools to support sustainable events. According to Grönberg, planners receive guidelines covering the entire event lifecycle. "We provide organisers with **Sustainable Meeting Guidelines**, which offer a step-by-step framework from early planning stages to post-event evaluation," she says. A carbon-footprint calculator is also available to help associations assess the environmental impact of their conferences.

Interest from organisers has grown noticeably in recent years. "Helsinki has developed a **Legacy Toolkit**, which we are updating through a joint project with Espoo and Vantaa. We even have dedicated staff who work directly with congress



Espoo Museum of Modern Art © Visit Espoo







Finlandia Hall © Helsinki Partners



Tori Quarters © Jussi Hellsten for Helsinki Partners

organisers to help them design sustainability and legacy initiatives that benefit the host city," Grönberg says. "Today we see a stronger commitment from clients."

The commitment to sustainable events is supported by each city's own roadmap: **Helsinki's Regenerative Tourism Action Plan 2025–2027** guides sustainable event practices, Visit Espoo's **Sustainable Tourism Roadmap** provides tools and strategies for green meetings, and Vantaa's sustainability framework integrates environmental, social, and operational best practices across venues and services. Together, these initiatives ensure that sustainability is not an optional add-on, but an intrinsic feature of every event in the region.

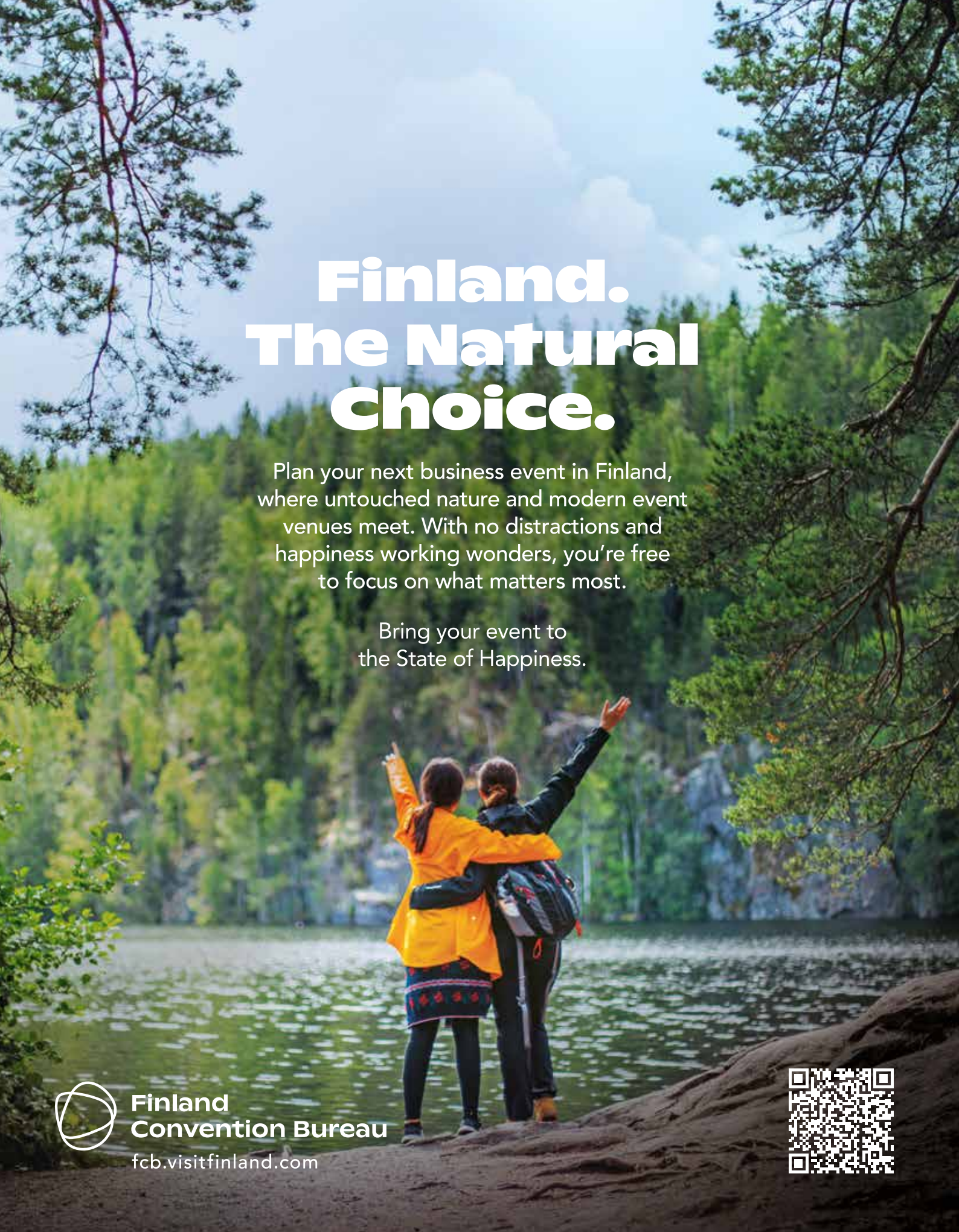
Beyond sustainability, the region is increasingly focusing on the long-term impact of events. "One of the key objectives has been to make legacy initiatives easier for organisers and researchers to implement," Valo explains. "Rather than managing every project ourselves, we aim to act as facilitators who connect associations with local stakeholders." In addition, the **Helsinki Congress and Event Legacy Programme** and CSR initiatives, have helped shape this approach, providing organisers with practical guidance, from planning and sustainability tools to actionable strategies on five key areas: education, environment, equality, wellbeing, and innovation. By incorporating these practices into event planning, the region ensures that conferences deliver both immediate value and long-term social benefits.

Case studies already illustrate the potential. The **European Academy of Neurology congresses 2024** and **2025** hosted in Helsinki included public awareness campaigns and educational programmes focused on brain health. "Together with the Association, we launched the **Brain Health School Challenge** encouraging students at various educational levels to develop brain-related projects and campaigns," explains Grönberg. Meanwhile, the **European Conference on Operational Research 2022** in Espoo, brought nearly 1,900 participants to Aalto University, strengthening international collaboration.

The Human Factor: Finnish Happiness

Infrastructure, research ecosystems and sustainability all contribute to their success as a congress destination, but organisers often highlight something less tangible: the culture of Finnish society itself. For nine consecutive years, Finland has ranked as the world's happiest country according to the **UN World Happiness Report**, a recognition often associated with trust, transparency and social stability. "One reason everything tends to work smoothly here is that Finnish society is built on reliability and trust," Valo says. "When organisers bring a conference to our region, they know that operations will run efficiently and on schedule."

Collaboration also plays a major role. "Because the meetings industry here is relatively small, stakeholders know each other well," Ala-Opas explains. "Even competitors often work together to support large events." Delegates themselves frequently notice these qualities. "One comment we hear consistently in our delegate surveys is how friendly and helpful people are," Grönberg says. "Visitors are often surprised by how approachable and supportive people are when major events take place." Another advantage is that Finland has not experienced the same levels of mass tourism as many European destinations. Visitors often feel genuinely welcomed. "When people choose to organise an event here," Ala-Opas concludes, "we truly want to make sure they have the best possible experience."


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IMEX Frankfurt 2026

Aligning Destination Strategy and Association Leadership

IMEX Frankfurt 2026 is sharpening its focus on the future of the global meetings and events industry, introducing two major initiatives that reflect shifting priorities across destinations and associations alike. From the launch of the **IMEX Place Leaders Forum** to the evolution of **Association Focus**, the programme for this year's trade show, scheduled for 19–21 May, highlights a clear direction: deeper collaboration, stronger strategic alignment and a growing emphasis on long-term impact.

A New Era Of Place Leadership And Destination Strategy

At the heart of this shift is the launch of the IMEX Place Leaders Forum, a reimagined platform designed to bring together senior decision-makers from across the destination ecosystem. Taking place on 19 May, the Forum builds on the legacy of the **IMEX Policy Forum** but expands its scope to reflect the growing importance of integrated place leadership and the destination economy.

The new format responds to a fundamental change in how cities and countries operate. No longer siloed, areas such as economic development, talent attraction, investment, culture and liveability are increasingly interconnected, and business events are now recognised as a key driver across all of them.

As **Natasha Richards, IMEX's Director of Impact & Industry Relations** *(pictured on the right in the image above)*, explains: "We have enhanced the Forum to align with how destinations function and compete today. New governance models are emerging and decision makers need clearer evidence, deeper insight and stronger cross sector partnerships.

"Cities and countries now operate in complex environments where economic development, talent, investment, culture and liveability all overlap. Business events play a critical role in this mix, not just economically, but by delivering multiple positive impacts within research, innovation, health, sustainability and community well-being. The Forum brings together place leaders and event strategists to unlock this shared value."

This repositioning reflects a broader industry trend: destinations are no longer competing solely on infrastructure or capacity, but on their ability to deliver measurable, multi-layered value. In this context, business events are increasingly viewed as strategic tools that contribute to innovation ecosystems, knowledge exchange and community outcomes.

Supporting this ambition is a new white paper developed in partnership with **Professor Greg Clark CBE** and **The Business of Cities**. Titled *The Destination Economy, Place Leadership and the Strategic Role of Business Events*, the report aims to provide a framework for understanding how events can support long-term destination competitiveness.

Clark highlights the urgency of this shift: "Global mobility, knowledge-driven economies, and competition between places have elevated the importance of convening, collaboration and narrative. Business events are uniquely positioned to contribute to these dynamics, provided the sector is willing to evolve its role, invest in new capabilities, and engage seriously with the long-term future of the places it serves."

By inviting destination leaders to contribute real-world case studies, IMEX is also signalling a move towards evidence-based strategy, one where the impact of events can be clearly articulated to policymakers, investors and stakeholders.

Association Focus: Navigating Disruption Through Purpose And AI

Running alongside this destination-led agenda is Association Focus, a dedicated pre-show programme taking place on 18 May at **Kap Europa**. Designed as a full day of learning and strategic exchange, the initiative addresses the evolving challenges facing associations, from member engagement to technological transformation.

With disruption accelerating across sectors, associations are being forced to rethink their role, value proposition and operational models. Association Focus responds directly to these pressures, with a programme centred on purpose-driven leadership, the impact of artificial intelligence and the changing expectations of members and stakeholders.

A key theme is the strategic adoption of AI, not as a threat, but as an enabler of more effective and personalised engagement. As **Michelle Mason, President and CEO of ASAE**, explains: "Associations today face continuous disruption, tighter margins and rising expectations. Resilience means more than managing through change; it means using tools like AI strategically to







extend our reach, improve efficiency and personalise engagement. The real task for association leaders now is to move beyond experimentation and adopt AI intentionally, in ways that strengthen mission, governance and long-term sustainability," she adds. This perspective underscores a broader shift within the association landscape. Rather than focusing solely on operational efficiency, organisations are being challenged to align technology with purpose, ensuring that innovation supports long-term mission and member value.

At the same time, the programme recognises the growing importance of impact-led event design. A dedicated track for planners explores how associations can embed societal impact into their events while securing stakeholder buy-in, reflecting a wider industry move towards more meaningful and measurable outcomes.

As **Martin Sirk**, who curated the planner track, explains: "With the help of our pre-event survey, we will be giving association innovators a chance to showcase what's new and impressive at their events, in only 90 seconds each! Attendees will also be all hands-on-deck during our provocative take on what networking really is all about, led by meeting design guru **Bo Krüger**, and we will be helping associations identify their own unique 'impact-opportunities' in a workshop-style session led by **Meet4Impact's Genevieve Leclerc**."

A Unified Vision For The Future Of Business Events

Taken together, the Place Leaders Forum and Association Focus illustrate a clear evolution in IMEX Frankfurt's positioning. No longer just a platform for business exchange, the show is increasingly acting as a catalyst for strategic thinking across the global events ecosystem.

On one side, destination leaders are being encouraged to integrate business events into broader economic and social strategies. On the other side, associations are being supported in redefining their purpose, embracing technology and delivering greater value to their communities.

What connects both is a shared emphasis on collaboration, evidence and impact. Whether through cross-sector partnerships at the destination level or through more intentional leadership within associations, the message is consistent: the future of the industry depends on its ability to adapt, align and demonstrate relevance in a rapidly changing world.

Find out more at: frankfurt.imexevents.com





Environmental Economics and Climate Decision-Making

As climate commitments tighten across Europe and globally, governments face increasing pressure to translate environmental targets into workable economic measures. Designing instruments that balance environmental goals, economic efficiency and social impacts requires rigorous analysis and credible evidence. Environmental and resource economists play a key role in evaluating trade-offs and helping governments design measures that deliver tangible results.

In this interview, **Linda Nøstbakken, President of the European Association of Environmental and Resource Economists (EAERE)**, discusses how economic research informs climate decision-making and sustainability governance. A research director at **Statistics Norway** and professor at the **Norwegian School of Economics**, Linda reflects on the role environmental economists play in designing economic instruments and evaluating sustainability outcomes. Founded in 1990, EAERE brings together more than 1,200 researchers, public officials and practitioners across 60 countries, working across environmental science, economics and public decision-making, and fostering collaboration between academia, public institutions and the private sector.

How does the EAERE define its role today in advancing environmental, climate and resource economics, particularly at the interface between research and public decision-making?

EAERE is first and foremost a scientific association. Our mission is to advance research in environmental and resource economics and to make that evidence available and usable for decision-makers. We do this through our peer-reviewed outlets (**Environmental & Resource Economics, Review of Environmental Economics and Policy**, and the **EAERE Book Series**), our Annual Conference, support for early-career researchers (through training, financial support and academic excellence awards), and policy outreach activities that bring academics together with European and international policymakers and practitioners.

In a global context marked by environmental challenges and geopolitical tensions, careful economic analysis is more important than ever. EAERE's role is not to advocate specific political positions, but to provide research-based evidence that helps policymakers understand trade-offs, design effective instruments, and anticipate broader consequences. Our role is to strengthen the conditions under which sound evidence informs public debate and policy design.

EAERE brings together academics, policymakers and practitioners. Why is this cross-sector community essential for addressing sustainability and climate challenges in practical terms?

Environmental and climate challenges cut across sectors, levels of governance and time horizons. No single group, academics, policymakers or practitioners, can address them alone. EAERE's activities feature, alongside academic sessions, policy panels, roundtables and science-policy events focused on current challenges such as climate instrument design, biodiversity protection and the social impacts of environmental regulation.

Equally important is EAERE's community-building role. By connecting researchers across career stages and countries, it fosters long-term networks that support innovation and collaboration. This combination of scientific excellence, policy relevance and community engagement makes EAERE's events a central platform in the field.

Your Annual Conference is one of the association's most visible activities. What makes it an important platform for both scientific exchange and policy-relevant debate on sustainability?

The Annual Conference is one of EAERE's most visible activities because it combines frontier research with structured opportunities for policy dialogue. Alongside traditional academic sessions, the programme includes dedicated policy sessions, roundtables and science-policy-business events that focus on current challenges, such as climate policy design, biodiversity protection and the distributional impacts of environmental regulation.

Equally important is the conference's role as a community-building event. By bringing together researchers at all career stages, it fosters long-term networks. This combination of scientific depth, policy relevance and community engagement makes the Annual Conference a valuable platform within the field. Every four years, however, the global community gathers for the **World Congress of Environmental and Resource Economists (WCERE)**, organised by the **World Council of Environmental and Resource Economists Associations** and co-organised by regional associations including the Asian Association of Environmental and Resource Economists (AAERE), the Association of Environmental and Resource Economists (AERE), the African Association of Environmental and Resource Economists (AFAERE), and the Latin American Association of Environmental and Resource Economists (LAERE). The next congress, the 7th WCERE, will take place from 29 June to 3 July 2026 in Carcavelos, Portugal, hosted by **NOVA School of Business and Economics (NOVA SBE)**.

EAERE is present in international policy forums, from initiatives such as the Net Zero Carbon Market Policy Dialogue to its participation at COP30. How do you connect this work to ESG priorities and to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?

EAERE's participation in international policy forums reflects a commitment to linking economic evidence with global sustainability goals. Work on carbon markets, climate finance, the just transition and institutional design speaks directly to ESG priorities and the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

From an economic perspective, these agendas raise fundamental questions about incentives, governance, investment and accountability. EAERE contributes research-based insights on how markets can support decarbonisation, how policies can balance efficiency and equity, and how international cooperation can be strengthened, helping ensure that sustainability commitments are backed by credible economic instruments.

Environmental and climate policies are increasingly politicised in parts of Europe and beyond. How does this context affect EAERE's efforts to bring economic evidence into debates on instruments such as carbon pricing, emissions trading and the just transition?

The growing politicisation of environmental and climate policy makes EAERE's role both more challenging and more important. In polarised debates, evidence can be selectively used or dismissed, and trust in expertise can be fragile.

EAERE's response is to emphasise scientific integrity, transparency and careful communication, including uncertainties and trade-offs. Whether on carbon pricing, emissions trading or the just transition, we aim to clarify rather than simplify, grounding discussions in peer-reviewed research and providing neutral forums where complex issues can be examined constructively.

Looking ahead to 2030 and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, what contribution should environmental and resource economists make, and how is EAERE preparing its community for this role?

Environmental and resource economists will be central towards the transition toward sustainable, resilient economies. Their contributions include designing effective policy instruments, evaluating what works in practice, understanding interactions between climate, biodiversity and social outcomes, and identifying pathways that are economically sound and socially acceptable.

EAERE supports its community through training programmes, international collaboration and sustained engagement with policy institutions. At a time when open science and academic independence face increasing pressures in parts of the world, maintaining a vibrant, inclusive and connected research community is itself a vital contribution, and one EAERE is committed to supporting.



Between **Robots** and **Ethics**

Shaping Tourism's Future with IFITT and its ENTER Conference

More than a sum of destinations, tourism is becoming a playground for technology, from AI-driven recommendations to service robots. The **International Federation for Information Technology and Travel & Tourism (IFITT)** is the leading independent global community for knowledge creation and dissemination in information and communication technologies in tourism and hospitality, and, through its annual **ENTER Conferences**, connects researchers and industry practitioners around a shared vision: that technology is a tool that must serve people, not the other way around. The 2026 conference held in Breda last January sought to connect cutting-edge research with practical, industry-scale solutions, addressing aspects such as human agency, transparency, and data sovereignty.



HQ spoke with **Stanislav Ivanov, IFITT President, Professor of Tourism Economics** at **Varna University of Management** and **Director of Zangador Research Institute**, about the rise of AI agents, the human side of automation, and the ethical challenges around them.

IFITT sits at the intersection of IT and tourism. How has its mission evolved as digital transformation accelerates globally?

Technologies evolved in the 30 plus years of IFITT and with them the scope of papers at our ENTER conferences, from website evaluation, booking and recommender systems, through social media and mobile apps, to artificial intelligence and robotics. However, IFITT's mission has always been to connect industry and academia in the pursuit of creating greater value for tourists, tourism businesses and all other tourism stakeholders through the implementation of digital technologies in the sector.

Academic research often moves slower than industry innovation. How does IFITT bridge the gap between research, tech providers and tourism businesses?

Connecting industry and academia can be challenging, as they often operate with different languages, priorities, and time horizons. IFITT seeks to bridge this gap in several ways. First, tourism and technology professionals are consistently present at ENTER conferences as keynote speakers, panellists, and workshop leaders. This not only stimulates collaboration, but also enhances the practical relevance of tourism technology research.

Second, technology research is approached not only as theoretical output, but as real-life engagement with technologies. ENTER participants can see, use, and interact with robots, AR/VR, and other innovations, often provided by local industry partners. Finally, strong emphasis is placed on the managerial implications of research papers, helping translate findings into actionable recommendations for businesses.

In a context shaped by AI, platform economies and sustainability pressures, what do you see as the most urgent research priorities for the eTourism community?

eTourism research is now a vast domain. However, key areas remain underdeveloped, most notably the economics of digital technologies in tourism and hospitality. From a financial perspective, technologies are assets, and managers need to understand their contribution to company performance. Studies should focus on the automatability of tasks and jobs, as well as the substitution, augmentation, transformation, and job creation effects of technologies in tourism and hospitality.

Although customers may appreciate these technologies, they may not be willing to pay much for technology-delivered services, automated hotels, service robots, or robotic bars, making willingness to pay an important area for further study. Another key area concerns AI agents, as the world moves towards a 'robonomic' system in which they make decisions and perform tasks on behalf of their owners. While they already handle functions such as writing emails, responding to queries, and setting prices, their role is expected to expand significantly as regular economic actors.

There is therefore a need for conceptual and empirical studies to identify which tasks and decisions can be



delegated to AI agents, the most appropriate decision-making approaches (e.g. human in, on, or out of the loop), and the ethical and human dimensions of automation and human–AI collaboration. AI agents will be a key area of research in tourism technology in the near future.

With nearly 190 delegates and a strong body of submissions, including 141 presentations and 54 full Springer papers, how did this year's programme reflect the conference theme?

Hosted by **Breda University of Applied Sciences** in the Netherlands, ENTER26 brought together researchers and industry leaders around the theme of Advancing Tourism Technology for a Better Future. Keynotes explored the AI-driven transformation of travel, from smart tourism in the metaverse era and data governance to AI ethics and research challenges. Academic sessions covered topics shaping the future of tourism, including smart tourism, digital co-creation, robotics in hospitality, the metaverse, blockchain, and social media. Across all tracks, shared concerns emerged around ethical AI deployment, sustainability, equity, human-centred design, and ICT's role in enabling regenerative tourism. Changing digital skills requirements and future job profiles were also highlighted as key to improving the industry's competitiveness and attractiveness to talent.

Sustainability and ethical technology were central to ENTER26. How has IFITT's discussion on responsible, human-centred technology evolved this year?

Both topics are essential and embedded in our research. We believe that digital technologies in tourism should be implemented ethically and responsibly, contributing to sustainable development. It is therefore no surprise that more than ten presentations and two keynotes focused directly on sustainability and ethics in technology implementation, including ethical leadership, responsible AI and automation, data for sustainable tourism, etc. The same applies to research itself, which must also be conducted ethically. For this reason, the **ENTER26 PhD Workshop** included a dedicated keynote on the implications of AI for research ethics in tourism, supporting PhD students and early-career researchers in using AI responsibly.

What key lessons or strategic directions emerging from ENTER26 do you believe will shape ENTER27 and the broader trajectory of IFITT?

ENTER26 showed that the age of AI agents and robots in tourism has arrived. These technologies are becoming increasingly capable and may help address key industry challenges such as labour shortages, low productivity, and poor working conditions. While some perceive them as a threat to hospitality, they also offer significant potential benefits. For this reason, ENTER27, to be hosted by **Universidad Autónoma de Madrid**, will place greater focus on AI agents and robotics, as well as their economic, societal, and sustainability impacts. From a research perspective, ENTER26 also showed how AI provides new tools for research design, data collection, and analysis, leading to greater focus on methodological workshops on the ethical use of AI next year.

The future trajectory of IFITT is encapsulated in my presidential motto: **Vision with ambition – Action with purpose – Value for society**. We will focus on expanding the organisation's global reach by engaging researchers and practitioners from underrepresented regions such as Eastern Europe, South-East Asia, Africa, and Latin America. At the same time, we aim to strengthen the practical dimension of the ENTER conferences and increase the importance of papers' managerial and policy relevance, enhancing IFITT's societal impact. Partnerships with leading tourism research organisations will further support this vision and collaborative action in advancing digital innovation in tourism.



The Recipe for **Greatness**

Serving Excellence and Humanity at The Best Chef Awards

When it comes to celebrating the art behind the plate, **The Best Chef Awards** do not just serve accolades, they dish out a global feast of creativity, innovation, and humanity. From Dubai to Milan, this vibrant culinary network stirs together chefs, critics, and gastronomic visionaries, blending tradition with bold experimentation. With three knives instead of rankings, and a heart for social impact, the Awards cut through the ordinary to honour the people who make food matter.

Since their inception in 2015, The Best Chef Awards have been far more than a prize-giving ceremony: they are a global platform celebrating the people behind the food. Co-founded by Polish neuroscientist **Joanna Slusarczyk** and Italian gastronomist **Cristian Gadau**, the project recognises creativity, innovation, and leadership in gastronomy. Beyond rankings and distinctions, the Awards bring together a vibrant community where chefs, critics, and hospitality professionals exchange ideas, challenge conventions, and inspire the next generation of culinary talent. As Joanna explains, the platform is "a point of reference for all lovers of gastronomy, a place to exchange knowledge and experience, and a forum to debate universal topics within our world." It is this combination of celebration, education, and dialogue that gives the Awards their unique identity.

Milan 2025: A City as a Culinary Identity

After a journey through the flavours of the Middle East in Dubai, the ninth edition returned to Milan in October 2025, combining Italian tradition with global innovation. This edition stood as a manifesto to honour culinary legacies, explore new frontiers, and foster a future rooted in flavour, tradition, and transformation. The city's celebrated gastronomic landscape, from acclaimed chefs such as Diego Rossi, Matias Perdomo and Davide Oldani to historic institutions like Peck, Marchesi 1824, and Camparino, embodied the balance between creativity, flavour, and evolution. Every corner of Milan seemed to pulse with culinary energy, reflecting both centuries of tradition and a forward-looking spirit that resonates with The Best Chef's philosophy.

Alongside the main awards, the team also ran **The Best Pizza Awards** four months earlier, celebrating over 300 renowned pizzaiolos and 500 international guests. Visionaries such as Francesco Martucci, Franco Pepe and Gabriele Bonci were recognised, while special awards highlighted innovation, artistry, and social impact. As Gadau observes: "To witness the passion, dedication, and artistry of so many talented pizzaiolos gathered together



has been profoundly inspiring." This expansion underscores the project's breadth, extending its principles of creativity, integrity, and community across culinary spheres, showing that The Best Chef is as much about fostering human connections as it is about awarding excellence.

Celebrating People, Preserving Culture

At the heart of The Best Chef Awards lies the vision of its founders. Joanna recalls Cristian's 'teenage failed dream', which collided with both his rebellious nature and the almost military discipline of the chef profession. What began as a personal ambition to become one of the world's greatest chefs evolved into a commitment to honouring the people behind the food. "Cristian realised that most industry accreditations focus on restaurants, not on the chefs themselves, and he wanted to create something that celebrated the people behind the food." This commitment to recognising often unseen talent has shaped the Awards into a platform where creativity and humanity meet.

The Awards' community seeks to shine a light on local ecosystems often threatened by a profit-driven corporate food system. Joanna emphasises: "We are convinced that our ambition is to be remembered as a project that defends and preserves the true values of our food culture." In doing so, the Awards champion not only culinary skill but also ethical leadership, cultural preservation, and a sense of responsibility that goes beyond individual recognition, inspiring chefs and audiences alike to think critically about food and its role in society.

The Best of Humanity: Social Impact at the Core

The Best Chef Awards gather a global network of independent experts, including chefs, journalists, and critics, to ensure credibility and cultural diversity. "Chefs are evaluated on their food and all aspects of their work, including creativity, leadership, impact, ethics, and sustainability. New talent is discovered naturally by listening to what happens in kitchens, not just at dining tables," explains Joanna. The three-knife system displays different levels of recognition rather than rigid rankings. "This marks a significant shift towards greater transparency and fairness in the culinary world," she adds, describing a move away from numerical rankings towards an inclusive, ethical, and representative assessment of culinary talent.

Milan 2025 also debuted **The Best of Humanity Award**, presented to the chefs of **World Central Kitchen**, founded by José Andrés, recognising their extraordinary humanitarian work. Since 2010, the organisation has served more than 500 million meals in urgent crises scenarios from Ukraine and Gaza to Pakistan. Joanna reflects, "We honoured the resilience and dedication of chefs who provide food relief, celebrating their commitment to feeding communities in challenging circumstances. Today, it is not enough to cook well; to be the best, a chef needs to show social, environmental, and ethical responsibility." This mindset places humanity at the heart of gastronomy, recognising chefs as cultural stewards, community leaders, and agents of change.

Challenges, Growth, and Legacy

One of the greatest challenges was the widespread scepticism of their peers, leaving Cristian and Joanna nearly alone in their vision. As Cristian recalls: "Although Joanna quickly joined me, I still remember how people initially thought we were crazy. We had a clear vision from the start, we never doubted ourselves, and this unwavering confidence continues to be our strength during the most challenging moments." This determination, rooted in shared passion and a refusal to compromise, laid the foundation for a globally respected platform celebrating culinary talent, one that continues to evolve and inspire.

Joanna highlights the ambition to reach those outside the spotlight through **Food Meets Science Development 2.0**, expanding its educational and cultural impact. "Next steps are to become more global and reach talents away from the awards' glam and glitz. We want to be heard and seen all year long, whether discussing food issues or discovering forgotten villages in Siberia." The Awards aim to leave a lasting legacy in host cities, fostering cultural and gastronomic development beyond the gala. As Joanna concludes, "It is time to break down barriers and unite all key elements under a single city sky. We do not want the event to last 48 hours and be forgotten; we want to leave a legacy. The era of self-celebration is behind us, and the focus has shifted back to viewing food as a way to share within the community."

Why **Sustainability** Still Struggles to Shape **Event Decisions**? A Conversation with **isla**



isla is an independent body working to accelerate sustainability across the global events industry through practical strategies, industry guidance, and measurement tools such as **TRACE** by isla. Founded and led by **Anna Abdelnoor**, a leading expert in event carbon measurement and data-driven sustainability, the organisation focuses on helping the sector move from ambition to evidence-based action. In this conversation, Abdelnoor discusses why sustainability still struggles to influence decision-making, the industry's skills gap and accountability challenges, and why meaningful progress requires better standards, clearer measurement, and a shift from symbolic commitments to systemic change.

Despite growing awareness, some argue the events industry is still moving 'backwards' on sustainability. Where do we stand today, and is sustainability becoming a deciding factor for associations?

Associations increasingly look for destinations and partners able to deliver events with credible impact for delegates and host communities. Sustainability now appears far more consistently in RFPs and procurement frameworks than it did a few years ago. The challenge is that it remains a vague concept, often treated as a standalone theme rather than the outcome of procurement, design and decision-making geared towards environmental, social, or economic resilience.

This is where the perception of 'moving backwards' comes from. Sustainability is rarely the primary driver when associations make trade-offs. Cost pressures, talent shortages, political and market instability tend to dominate decision-making. Because sustainability is positioned as a workstream rather than an organising principle, it is easily deprioritised. Ironically, many of the challenges associations grapple with are symptoms of unsustainable systems. Yet sustainability is rarely framed as a strategy for resilience or risk reduction. Until it becomes embedded in how organisations define value and long-term viability, it will struggle to compete with more immediate pressures

With sustainability becoming increasingly commercialised, how can organisers distinguish credible expertise from opportunism?

The sector still lacks clear standards, certifications and regulation to distinguish genuine expertise from opportunism. Sustainability is not inherently expensive, it is poorly understood. Part of the challenge is that sustainability is an umbrella term covering several disciplines: emissions measurement, circularity, supply-chain management, claims verification, nature impacts and behavioural change. Each requires different skills, methodologies, and safeguards, yet they often collapsed into a single, loosely offer.

A useful comparison is finance, a system of interconnected disciplines (accounting, control, forecasting, etc.) governed by standards and frameworks that create trust and comparability. Sustainability needs similar structures. At present, we expect it to transform an industry built on temporary materials, high-carbon logistics and short-term thinking without equivalent frameworks to ensure consistency or credibility. That lack of structure makes sustainability appear confusing and costly. In reality, some choices may involve higher upfront costs, but they provide long-term returns through reduced risk, resilience and better resource use. What often appears 'expensive' is simply cost that has been externalised to ecosystems, communities or future balance sheets.

> *"Associations may say sustainability matters, but expectations around what that should tangibly deliver are often unclear or poorly defined.*

Does the diversity of the events ecosystem make it harder to align on sustainability goals and standards?

The scale and diversity of the events ecosystem does make it harder to create a shared language, comparable

measurement and common operating standards. The sector delivers one core service across many formats, geographies and stakeholders, each optimising for different priorities. However, many exposures are shared. Destinations, organisers and venues all face regulatory change, climate impacts and resource pressures, rising operating costs, supply-chain constraints and reputational risk. These pressures may manifest differently, but are not limited to a single group.

The opportunity is therefore not to force uniformity but to align around shared risks. When sustainability is framed through common exposure rather than abstract ambition, it becomes easier to establish shared language and co-operating standards. Collective action then becomes rational rather than ideological, and that is where scalable progress emerges.

Does the events industry currently have the expertise needed to manage sustainability properly?

There is a real skills gap, and sustainability-literate professionals are still undervalued. Part of the problem is that sustainability has been treated as a separate activity rather than an outcome tied to long-term business continuity. Rather than technical or operational fixes, it is primarily about understanding exposure, risk and resilience over time, issues that sit squarely with boards and executive leadership. Many of the pressures the industry faces, like increased competition, tighter margins and shifting demand, are connected to environmental and social risks that remain poorly understood at leadership level.

As a result, sustainability is often delegated to specialist roles without a clear organisational understanding of what good looks like. Companies appoint sustainability managers or directors, but leadership lacks the literacy to assess the work being presented, falling back on goals such as 'net zero emissions' without understanding their meaning. Until sustainability literacy sits with those accountable for long-term performance, the sector will struggle to build the depth of expertise it needs.

Air travel is often the largest source of event emissions. How should the industry address this accountability gap?

It starts, again, with accountability. Organisers may not control aviation directly, but they still influence travel emissions. Destination choice, event scale, portfolio structure and frequency all affect how people travel. Selecting locations with strong rail connectivity, regional event formats or reconsidering travel frequency are all legitimate levers.

The problem arises when travel emissions are treated as out of scope. If responsibility begins only once delegates arrive, the incentive to seek solutions disappears. No single organisation can decarbonise aviation alone. But the business events industry collectively represents a major customer of global travel infrastructure. That gives it a voice in advocating for efficiency improvements, alternative fuels, new technologies and better policy alignment.

Meaningful mitigation begins with transparency and measurement, and extends to demand management, collective pressure portfolio design rather than symbolic gestures. Along with waste and emissions, travel is one of the areas where the industry has the greatest potential impact. Ignoring it is a short-sighted view of the problem.

> *"Acknowledging an issue does not mean an organiser or destination is solely responsible for solving it, but ignoring it guarantees no progress at all.*

Should the industry ask not only how to make events sustainable, but why they should happen at all?

Yes, but that does not mean events should stop happening. Organisers and portfolio owners should regularly review relevance, scale and frequency. Removing duplication, consolidating where value is thin, and being more intentional about why an event exists is simply good governance. Questioning purpose should not be confused with questioning the value of coming together at all. Human connection underpins trust, community and progress, and it cannot be fully replaced by digital substitutes.

The real shift is not about fewer connections, but fewer unnecessary ones: less production, disposability and scale for its own sake. More intentional gatherings that are purposeful, human and proportionate. Sustainability, in that sense, is not about diminishing events but restoring meaning to why and how we convene.

How the **Novya Leadership Lab** Helps **Heads of Associations** Lead with **Purpose** and **Impact**





An executive education programme designed for the realities of EU association leaders has landed in Brussels and its first cohort is already changing how they lead. The **Novya Leadership Lab** tackles a challenge familiar to many in the *Headquarters* community: how do you grow as a secretary general when your role is more complex, exposed and demanding than ever, yet offers limited access to peers, mentors and tailored education?

Why Associations Look for Executive Leadership Training

Today's EU association executives operate amid escalating regulatory complexity, fierce competition for talent, and shifting member expectations. EU affairs have grown in complexity, with dossiers increasingly interconnected across many stakeholders, while global crises shift priorities. At the same time, associations must prove their relevance to increasingly diverse and demanding memberships.

Inside the office, attracting and retaining your team is harder than ever: Brussels is a competitive hub for talent, and most associations cannot compete on salary alone. Association leaders must create environments where people feel safe, valued and able to grow, even as stress and burnout rise.

The secretary general role has many dimensions, requiring leaders to change hats by: One moment, you represent your sector before the EU institutions; the next, you facilitate sensitive board discussions, oversee budgets, or navigate Belgian administration. You are accountable to members, regulators and staff alike, often with very few peers at your side who truly understand the breadth of your responsibilities.

This combination of external volatility, internal pressure and scarce peer support led Novya to create the Leadership Lab, not to solve every challenge, but to give leaders tools and support to face their realities with confidence.

Behind the Lab: The Mission, Vision and Team

The Leadership Lab grew out of Novya's daily work with European associations. While supporting strategy, governance and organisational change, the team kept encountering the same pattern: even the strongest strategies struggled when leaders lacked time, change management experience or support. "It is easy to devise a clever strategy on paper," **Novya CEO, Benita Lipps** *(pictured above)*, explains. "It is harder to implement it sustainably, especially when you lack the tools and resources needed."

In line with Novya's mission to help European nonprofits and associations work smarter for greater impact, the Leadership Lab was designed as a practical, peer-based executive training that truly reflects the governance structures, stakeholder pressures and operational environment of Brussels-based association leaders.

Conscious of people's limited time, the Leadership Lab runs in six coaching-centred sessions for up to twelve secretary generals and CEOs. The group meets over several months, exploring three themes:

- **Self-leadership**: developing one's leadership style, values and goals as a foundation for change;
- **Leading others**: building resilient teams and working effectively with Boards and Members across governance cultures;
- **Leading change**: navigating uncertainty while maintaining engagement and stability.

The approach is intentionally experimental: Instead of listening to lectures, participants test practical frameworks and design their new toolkits. Between sessions, they apply these methods in real workplace situations and bring their results back to the group.

Coaching also lies at the heart of the lab. During intake, **Lab Director, Lisa Kretschmann** *(pictured below)*, offers executive coaching sessions to each participant. "Growth starts with how people see themselves," she notes, emphasising the importance of building trust, openness and confidence from the first session. The lab also introduces coaching tools for

leaders such as active listening, constructive questioning and creating space for co-ownership, useful habits for leaders managing complex association stakeholders.

Participants explore leadership frameworks that convert personal ambitions into clear organisational priorities. "If you are not crystal clear about where you want to go, how could you ever reach your destination?" Benita notes. The aim is to clarify what matters most and align leadership intent with organisational direction.

Because the Lab is cross-sectoral, it focuses on universally relevant association leadership challenges such as leading through complexity, balancing strategic and operational demands, working effectively with Boards and Members, and maintaining engagement during periods of change. Each participant develops a personal 'leadership roadmap' which is revisited mid-programme to ensure tailored progress within a peer-learning setting.



Together, Benita, Lisa and the Novya team see the Leadership Lab as part of a broader commitment: strengthening the association sector by strengthening those who lead it. Not by prescribing a single model of leadership, but by helping each leader understand and use their own profile more deliberately, in service of their organisation and its mission.

Real Experiences, Real Impact

For the February 2026 cohort, joining the Lab often coincided with leadership transition moments. "I enrolled after being appointed Secretary General for the first time," one participant shared. "The Lab gave me tools to become the more confident leader I want to be, especially through sessions that refined communication skills and encouraged leading with clarity and courage."

Another participant joined to "challenge myself and foster peer knowledge sharing." She discovered that "leadership is not about having all the answers, but about paving the way toward pragmatic solutions." The experience also taught her to "trust both what I know and the questions I still have," helping her act "with confidence, especially when challenging existing approaches."

These reflections mirror what the Novya team observed across the cohort. "We entered a room full of perfect professionals," observed Benita. "Very quickly, they became a group of peers openly sharing real experiences, ready to experiment, to learn from one another and to grow."

The peer element proved particularly transformative. Participants found relief in discovering that colleagues from different sectors, transport, medical, food, etc., faced the same challenges with Boards, Members, and teams. Informal moments often turned into deep exchanges of stories, ideas and encouragement.

Novya is clear about the programme's scope: six sessions cannot resolve every challenge, but they can equip leaders with practical tools, space to practice them, and a trusted peer network that endures well beyond the programme itself. Participants leave with a coaching mindset they can apply in daily leadership conversations, frameworks that bring greater strategic clarity, and a circle of peers they can continue to draw on when complex decisions or difficult moments arise.

What's Next... and Could This Be for You?

The first cohort confirmed that there is a strong appetite among Brussels-based association leaders for structured peer coaching that addresses their unique reality. Novya is now refining the model, investing further in executive coaching alongside group sessions while keeping cohorts small.

Applications for the next edition, planned for autumn 2026, are now open. If you are a secretary general or CEO seeking space to reflect with peers, test practical tools and grow your leadership in a supportive environment, the Leadership Lab may be worth a closer look.

How the Leadership Lab works

Novya's Leadership Lab is a coaching-based peer leadership programme for secretary generals and CEOs of European associations. Cohorts of up to 12 focus on self-leadership, leading others, and leading change. The next cohort starts in autumn 2026.

Details and applications: leadership-lab.novya.eu

novya LEADERSHIP LAB

HQ DESTINATIONS &EVENTS





Florence Skyline © Fondazione Destination Florence

Florence Association Centre

A Strategic Base for Global Associations

In an increasingly competitive landscape for international associations, choosing the right destination is no longer just about logistics. It is about finding a place that can offer long-term value, meaningful connections, and an environment where knowledge, research, and collaboration can truly flourish. This is the vision behind the **Florence Association Centre (FAC)**.

Developed by **Destination Florence**, the FAC is the first initiative of its kind in Italy, created to attract and support national and international associations that wish to establish a strategic and lasting presence in the city of Florence, Tuscany, including the opportunity to develop a formal base for their activities in Europe. More than a service platform, the FAC acts as a gateway to Florence's rich ecosystem of institutions, academia, and industry.

Florence has long been recognised as a global cultural capital, but today it is also increasingly positioned as a hub for science, innovation, and international dialogue. With a strong network of universities, research centres, and leading institutions, the city and the region offer associations a fertile ground to develop their activities beyond annual meetings or congresses. The FAC builds on this potential by facilitating connections with key local stakeholders and by supporting associations in creating lasting roots within the destination, with the potential to establish a stable operational presence and long-term institutional ties.

Through a tailored and highly personalised approach, the FAC provides strategic guidance, local insight, and operational support. From scouting opportunities and fostering institutional relationships to identifying partnerships with academic and scientific communities, the FAC enables associations to integrate into the local ecosystem, supporting them in setting up and developing a structured presence in Florence, and maximise their long-term impact.

At the heart of this initiative is the convention bureau of Destination Florence, which plays a pivotal role as a trusted facilitator between the international association community and the destination. With 30 years of experience in the meetings industry, Destination Florence brings together public and private stakeholders, ensuring a coordinated and high-quality approach to hosting and developing association activities in the city.

What makes Florence particularly compelling is its ability to combine heritage with forward-thinking vision. Here, centuries of history coexist with cutting-edge research and innovation, creating a unique environment where ideas can grow and collaborations can thrive. The FAC leverages this distinctive identity, positioning the city not only as a place to meet, but as a place to belong, grow and establish a long-term base for their activities.

For international associations seeking more than a venue, Florence offers a partnership. Through the FAC, the city opens its doors as a living laboratory of knowledge, culture, and exchange – inviting associations to become an active part of its future.

To explore how your association can establish a long-term base in Florence, and benefit from the opportunities offered by the FAC, get in touch at: conventionbureau@destinationflorence.it

Córdoba Uses Event Data to Shape Its Congress Strategy



Córdoba, Argentina, is changing how events are assessed within economic policy. A research programme led by the **Instituto de Economía Política at Insight 21, Universidad Siglo 21**, in collaboration with **Agencia Córdoba Turismo**, the **Córdoba Convention Bureau** and public sector partners, examines how events generate value across spending patterns, fiscal flows and territorial impact.

The research examined a portfolio of events held between 2024 and 2025. It found that, while large-scale events concentrate spending over short periods, international congresses distribute expenditure across multiple sectors and generate a higher share of income from non-residents. A digital twin model now allows institutions to simulate these effects before events take place and measure outcomes afterwards. For **Darío Capitani, President of Agencia Córdoba Turismo**, this approach informs how Córdoba prioritises congresses, allocates public resources and positions itself in international bidding processes.

Today, what role do events and congresses play in Córdoba's development strategy, beyond immediate tourism impact?

Events and congresses are a true state policy in Córdoba. We do not see them simply as generators of visitor flows, but as strategic tools for economic development, knowledge transfer and the international positioning of the province. They also play a key role in reducing seasonality, allowing activity levels to be sustained throughout the year. Each congress held in Córdoba leaves installed capacity, strengthens productive sectors and consolidates links between academia, science and business.

In this sense, the governor assigns a priority role to business events as a driver of economic diversification and global projection.

Your recent study shows that different types of events generate very different impacts. How is this analysis influencing decisions on which events Córdoba wants to attract and prioritise?

The fiscal and economic impact research allowed us to take a qualitative step forward in decision-making. Today, we are not only seeking a higher volume of events, but quality and strategic impact.

We prioritise congresses and meetings that generate greater economic spillover, but also those that align with our productive, scientific and academic capacities. This approach allows us to optimise public resources, strengthen key sectors and consolidate a more intelligent and sustainable attraction policy.

This work is supported by a specialised research team, which enables us to make decisions based on evidence.

What types of congresses best match Córdoba's productive, academic and scientific identity?

Córdoba has an identity closely linked to knowledge, innovation and production. For that reason, the congresses that best fit our profile are those related to health, biotechnology, the food industry, the knowledge economy, engineering and the agro-industrial sector.

Our university network, scientific and technological ecosystem, and productive structure mean that these meetings are not only viable, but highly valuable to the local economy.

Coordination is key. A strong public-private-academic structure operates through the **Provincial MICE Board** and the **Bid Committee**, which include the **Córdoba Convention Bureau, Agencia ProCórdoba, ADEC** (the Agency for

Economic Development of the City of Córdoba), **Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Universidad Provincial de Córdoba, Universidad Siglo 21** and **Universidad Blas Pascal.**

Impact measurement has become a key tool for decision-making. How is this data-driven approach helping dialogue with other levels of government and international partners?

Working with data allows us to speak a common language with other public bodies and international partners. Today, we can demonstrate with concrete evidence the return on investment, the fiscal impact and the strategic value of each event.

This facilitates coordination with different levels of government, strengthens access to institutional support and improves our competitiveness when bidding to host events.

Information becomes a key tool to position business events within the public agenda. In this process, the sustained work of the **Provincial Meetings Industry Observatory** has been fundamental. It was established more than 14 years ago, with pioneering leadership from Universidad Blas Pascal, and collects strategic data that feeds both the national economic observatory and the **ICCA** ranking.

This work contributed to Córdoba being recognised as the leading meetings destination in Argentina outside of Buenos Aires in 2024.

In 2026, Córdoba participates in several international events, including IMEX, IBTM and FIEXPO. What message does the province want to convey in these spaces, and how does it differentiate itself from other destinations in the region?

The message is clear: Córdoba is a well-prepared, professional and strategically sound destination for international events. What sets us apart is our strong combination of infrastructure, connectivity, human capital and close public-private coordination. Most importantly, our vision sets us apart: we view business events as a development resource, not just a tourism activity.

In these spaces, we aim to establish ourselves as a reliable partner with the capacity for effective management and a value proposition based on knowledge and innovation. In addition, we coordinate a high-quality chain of professionals through the Córdoba Convention Bureau, which guarantees excellence throughout the event experience.

We are also very proud that Córdoba will host the **FIEXPO Workshop and Technical Visit** from 10 to 13 August 2026, a key opportunity to demonstrate our organisational and management capacity on the ground to international decision-makers.

In addition, Córdoba's natural environment provides the province with a distinct advantage when it comes to developing pre- and post-event experiences. These allow participants to engage with the local identity through gastronomy and vineyards, as well as through initiatives such as the Camino de Brochero (twinned with the Camino de Santiago de Compostela), the Motorhome Route, Route 100, and a wide variety of nature and adventure activities.

How would you like international associations to describe Córdoba as a destination for events?

We would like Córdoba to be recognised as a leading Latin American destination for international congresses, particularly those related to knowledge and innovation. We want it to be seen as a reliable and competitive destination with strong organisational standards and institutional commitment. We want Córdoba to be a place where events have a lasting impact, generate a legacy, and contribute to local development.

That is the direction we are heading in, backed by a clear political decision to establish meetings industry as one of Córdoba's economic pillars.

How Events Perform in Córdoba

Sample events (2024–2025)

- International Oncology Congress: 1,061 delegates
- Paul McCartney concert: 38,670 attendees
- Boca Juniors vs Vélez Sarsfield: 44,500 spectators
- Motocross World Championship: 55,000+ attendees

Key Differences

Concerts & sports

- Spending concentrated inside venues
- Short stays

Congresses

- Multi-day stays
- Spending across accommodation, dining, transport and services

What Shapes Economic Impact

- Share of non-resident delegates
- Length of stay
- Use of accommodation, dining, transport and local services

Congresses generate broader economic distribution, more predictable activity and stronger links with local sectors.



When **Events** Create **Ripples**

An Autism Congress Shaping an Autism-Friendly City

In recent years, Dublin has been quietly redefining the role international conferences can play within its borders. Rather than viewing them solely through an economic lens, the city and its partners increasingly approach business events as platforms for long-term societal impact, opportunities to advance research, influence policy conversations and drive meaningful change within communities.

Few gatherings illustrate this shift more clearly than the **Autism Europe Congress 2025**, organised by **Autism-Europe** in partnership with Ireland's autism charity **AsIAm** and its founder and conference ambassador, **Adam Harris**. Bringing together almost 2,000 delegates from across Europe and beyond, the congress was designed not only as a forum for research and policy exchange, but also as a catalyst for change in how cities approach inclusive event design and community engagement.

For Dublin, the event aligned with a broader ambition: becoming the world's first autism-friendly capital city. As **Paul Mockler** *(pictured on the right)*, **Head of Business Development at Fáilte Ireland**, explains: "From a destination perspective, our vision of success stretches far beyond the delegates who came to Dublin for the Congress. It was a milestone, an example of a large-scale business event that was genuinely inclusive, where every attendee felt equal, valued and respected."

More importantly, the congress was never intended as a one-off moment. "For Dublin, the congress was not the end goal. It was the catalyst. It created a ripple and real success is when that ripple grows stronger and more visible over time," he adds. This approach reflects a wider shift in the global meetings industry, where destinations are increasingly measured not only by infrastructure or visitor numbers but by their ability to generate meaningful legacy.

Aligning Events with National Strategy

Dublin's approach to impact-driven events is closely aligned with Ireland's business events strategy, **Business Events 2030**, which was developed by the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, **Fáilte Ireland**, the National Tourism Development Authority of Ireland, **Tourism Ireland** and industry stakeholders. Through the **Business Events 2030** strategy, Ireland is positioning conferences as tools to contribute to innovation, knowledge exchange and societal progress. The strategy emphasises three interconnected principles: transformation, sustainability and community.

Within the strategy, events are increasingly expected to deliver benefits beyond the conference room, supporting research collaboration, influencing policy discussions and engaging local communities. According to Mockler, the Autism Europe Congress 2025 quickly emerged as an event capable of delivering this broader impact. "At the time, Fáilte Ireland was beginning its journey to understand the wider impact conferences could have beyond tourism. They were actively seeking events capable of leaving a lasting legacy, and the Autism Europe Congress stood out."

The congress also became an opportunity to deepen Ireland's evolving framework around intentional impact, placing value above volume, engaging sectoral, scientific and academic communities, and leveraging business events as instruments of public policy. "Fáilte Ireland deepened this partnership by working with AsIAam on an **intentional impact report** to define, measure and amplify the event's impact. The Congress has left a significant mark on Dublin, Ireland and beyond," says Mockler. Soon after, the congress received the **Incredible Impacts Seed Grant Fund 2025**, awarded by **ICCA** and the **BestCities Global Alliance**, reflecting the growing commitment of all parties involved in the conference to more accessible and inclusive tourism.

Designing the Congress with Legacy in Mind

From the earliest stages of planning, inclusion was embedded into the congress design with the goal of ensuring an accessible experience for all. "A dedicated accessibility and inclusivity team, including representatives with lived experience, worked alongside Keynote PCO, venue and partners to implement a comprehensive suite of measures and solutions," says Mockler. One key resource was a set of **Business Access Checklists** developed by Fáilte Ireland. "The checklists help organisers and venues assess how inclusive and accessible an event is and identify practical changes, from pre-travel information to customer service, that allow delegates to fully participate in the event experience," Mockler describes.

At venue level, several measures were implemented to support delegates. These included pre-event sensory walk-throughs of the venue, visual guides, technology, pre-event videos to reduce uncertainty, and the option of a quiet registration process. A dedicated quiet room and mobile sensory spaces were also available throughout the event. To minimise sensory overload, delegates were encouraged to flappause, waving their hands instead of clapping. "Many autistic staff and volunteers worked at the Congress, ensuring that autistic delegates felt represented and were right at the heart of the process," he adds.

Co-Creation with the Autistic Community

Right from inception, the event embodied a profound commitment to co-creation with the autistic community. AsIAm became the first autistic-led organisation to host the congress, reflecting the lived experiences and expertise of autistic individuals under the theme Quality of Life – Research, Policy and Practice. "The strategy was to place autistic voices at the heart of every stage of planning and delivery, from a majority scientific committee and speaker line-up to clear guidelines for all contributors to ensure autism-affirming content," explains Mockler.

Through a collaborative workshop, stakeholders identified three key impact pathways for the event: inclusive event design, employment and public awareness. The outcomes demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach. Post-event surveys showed that 73% of delegates said pre-event information reduced uncertainty, 71% felt organisers had considered sensory differences, and many reported feeling less pressure to mask autistic traits while attending.

Beyond the Event: Structural Impact

Beyond the congress itself, the initiative helped catalyse broader discussions on policy, employment and workforce training. One key milestone was the launch of the **Inclusive Employment Roadmap** by **IBEC**, Ireland's largest business representative group, complementing an employment advocacy pathway aimed at advancing opportunities for autistic individuals. "The roadmap has become a catalyst for change, inspiring organisations to adopt more inclusive hiring practices and shaping policy conversations across the sector," Mockler says.

In 2023, Dublin City Council announced its partnership with AsIAm to adopt the **Autism-Friendly Town framework**, encouraging collaboration across local authorities, hospitality providers, cultural venues and institutional partners. "The Autism Europe Congress served as a powerful platform to showcase Dublin's vision to an audience of 1800 international delegates," Mockler states. By linking community sectors with shared goals, it creates towns where autistic individuals can thrive, participate, and feel genuinely welcome.

Meanwhile, inclusive planning practices developed for the congress are being shared with future conference organisers. Mockler believes the long-term ambition is clear. "Five years from now, we envision Dublin being recognised internationally as a destination where inclusive event design is the default, not an add-on." Achieving that vision will require continued investment and collaboration across the industry, with more inclusive venues, trained industry partners and accessibility standards. "Success is when Ireland is known globally as a leader, not a learner."

"As we continue to develop this vision, it is these stories of innovation, experimentation and shared responsibility that will define Dublin's future in inclusive business events," Mockler concludes. And if the Autism Europe Congress 2025 proved anything, it is that a single event, when planned with purpose, can set off a ripple effect capable of transforming an entire destination.



Estrel Berlin

The Shift from Venue to Integrated Event Ecosystem

As a new tower rises above Berlin and new large-scale facilities take shape, **Estrel Berlin** is at the forefront of a new, fully integrated and multifunctional model for global business events. *HQ* spoke to the **Heike Mahmoud** *(on the right),* **Estrel's Chief Operating Officer**, about how scale, architecture and experience come together in a single ecosystem





For decades, large-scale international events have been shaped by fragmentation. Accommodation, conference spaces, production facilities and networking environments were often spread across multiple venues, adding layers of logistical complexity and diluting the overall participant experience. Increasingly, however, organisers are seeking a different model, one that reduces friction, integrates functions and allows events to unfold as cohesive, immersive experiences. It is precisely this shift that Estrel Berlin is now addressing. Through a combination of new infrastructure, brand repositioning and technological integration, the venue is evolving into one of Europe's most comprehensive event campuses, and, arguably, a blueprint for the future of the MICE industry.

Estrel Tower: Infrastructure as Statement

At the centre of this transformation stands the **Estrel Tower**. Rising to 176 metres, it is not only a major addition to Berlin's skyline but a deliberate architectural statement about scale, ambition and visibility. The tower was designed by the Berlin-based architecture firm **Barkow Leibinger**, founded by the architects **Frank Barkow** and **Regine Leibinger**, whose work has been widely recognised internationally for its integration of design, function and urban context. As Leibinger explains, "the Estrel Tower sends a signal from almost everywhere in the city and also to guests arriving at Berlin Brandenburg Airport: this is Neukölln, this is Sonnenallee, this is Germany's largest hotel and Berlin's tallest skyscraper with equally high architectural standards."

Beyond its visual impact, the tower introduces a fundamentally new layer of functionality. Designed as a mixed-use environment, it brings together hotel rooms and suites, meeting and conference spaces, co-working areas and public-facing amenities within a single structure. The result is not simply additional capacity, but a more flexible and permeable environment where different uses intersect. This flexibility is central to how events can be conceived. As Heike Mahmoud notes: "With the addition of the Estrel Tower and future event spaces, organisers can host significantly larger and more complex formats without the logistical fragmentation typically associated with multi-venue events. This enables highly efficient planning, reduced transport needs, and a more cohesive participant experience, particularly for global congresses." In this sense, the tower is not just an expansion; it is a structural response to one of the industry's most persistent challenges.

From Architecture to Identity: Everything in one place

The physical evolution of the Estrel complex is matched by a parallel shift in its brand architecture. Rather than operating as a collection of individual assets, the venue is now structured around five clearly defined pillars: hotel, convention centre, tower, shows and art. This reorganisation reflects a broader ambition to move beyond the traditional definition of a venue and towards a more holistic, experience-driven proposition. The guiding principle is encapsulated in a simple but powerful idea: 'Everything in one place.' What is particularly striking is how closely this brand logic aligns with the architectural concept itself. As **Barkow** describes it, the tower and its surrounding structures are conceived as "an interplay of individual elements" forming part of a larger ensemble.

If the Estrel Tower introduces flexibility and vertical integration, the planned multipurpose hall takes scale to another level. With a capacity of up to 10,000 people, the new venue will enable the Estrel complex to host significantly larger formats within a single, unified environment. Once completed, the entire campus is expected to accommodate up to 25,000 participants across more than 50,000 square metres of event space. This expansion directly addresses the growing demand for large-scale, fully integrated events, particularly in the association sector, where congresses increasingly combine plenary sessions, exhibitions, networking and broadcast elements. As Mahmoud highlights: "The scale also supports innovative hybrid formats, where live, digital, and broadcast elements can be fully integrated on-site with state-of-the-art infrastructure. At Estrel Berlin, this creates a unique environment where all elements of an event are seamlessly connected. Ultimately, organisers can think more holistically and deliver immersive, scalable event experiences."











© Estrel Berlin

Technology and Sustainability: From Features to Decision Criteria

Alongside expansion and integration, the Estrel project reflects a broader shift in how venues are evaluated at an international level. Integrated technology, flexible architecture and measurable sustainability are no longer secondary considerations. They are increasingly decisive factors in the selection process for global associations and corporate organisers. The Estrel Tower is being developed with a highly interconnected technological infrastructure, including centralised media control systems and fully networked event spaces. These systems enable seamless transitions between formats and support complex hybrid and broadcast-ready productions.

At the same time, sustainability is embedded at a structural level. The tower is aiming for **LEED Platinum certification**, while the future multipurpose hall will incorporate photovoltaic systems and green roofing solutions. "Integrated technology, flexible architecture, and measurable sustainability are rapidly becoming decisive factors in how international associations and corporations select venues and destinations. At projects like the Estrel Tower, these elements enable more efficient operations, adaptable event formats, and transparent ESG performance, which are increasingly expected by global organisers," Mahmoud explains.

A Campus Model for the Future

Taken together, the Estrel Hotel, Convention Centre, Tower and future multipurpose hall form something closer to a self-contained urban system than a traditional venue. As Barkow notes, the complexity of the project lies precisely in creating "a complex building, which functions almost like a small city." This idea of a "city within a city" captures the essence of the Estrel's transformation. It is no longer just a place where events happen, but an environment designed to host every dimension of an event, from arrival and accommodation to content delivery, networking and production.

This positioning will be brought to the international stage at **IMEX Frankfurt 2026**, where the fully integrated vision of the Estrel complex will be presented to global organisers at a pivotal moment in its development. "At IMEX 2026, we will highlight how the fully integrated ecosystem of Estrel Berlin, the Estrel Tower and the new event hall enables a new generation of large-scale, seamless event experiences. The focus will be on the combination of expanded event spaces, fully connected infrastructure, and the ability to host congresses, accommodation, networking, and production within one campus. We will also showcase flexible event formats and how our experienced teams ensure reliability and adaptability for complex, large-scale events with clear advantages for organisers," Mahmoud concludes.

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Bruges as a **Walkable**, **Sustainable** Conference **Destination**

Sustainability is no longer a 'nice-to-have', but a must in the meeting industry. Bruges is easily accessible by train in just 80 minutes from Brussels Airport. On arrival, all venues are within walking distance. Whether you are visiting the state-of-the art **Bruges Meeting and Convention Centre (BMCC)** or **Concertgebouw Brugge**, an elegant four-star hotel or a historic venue, you do not need to take a shuttle bus to get from one location to another. The car-free area in the city centre has been expanded to make the area even more pleasant to walk. A bike excursion in the green belt is a healthy activity to include in your conference's social programme. A recent survey by **Tourism Flanders**, in which Bruges and six other Flemish conference cities participated shows that conference organisers give Bruges a score of no less than 9.5/10.

Sustainability At Its Best

Bruges, a UNESCO World Heritage City, is the destination par excellence for those looking for heritage, quality, sustainability and innovation:

The **Flanders Heritage Venues 2.0** have successfully passed a thorough quality audit and were assessed on criteria such as sustainability, experience, accessibility, digitisation and well-being. In parallel, **Green Key locations** are recognised for their efforts in the field of sustainable and responsible entrepreneurship, with no fewer than 15 MICE locations holding the label. By choosing such a location, organisers contribute directly to sustainable MICE tourism.

The **Provincial Palace** in Bruges is the first location in Flanders to receive the M++ label, the highest accessibility label for meeting and conference venues awarded by Tourism Flanders. Following its recent restoration and refurbishment, a strong focus was placed on accessibility for everyone, including the installation of a changing place.

Alongside these developments, **BRUSK** is the brand-new cultural hotspot in Bruges, completing the Bruges Museum Quarter, comparable to those in cities such as Berlin, Amsterdam and Vienna, where integrated environmental sustainability also plays a key role. BRUSK will also offer a wealth of opportunities for businesses. Thanks to its large foyer, auditorium, studios and catering facilities, BRUSK is the ideal venue for conferences and receptions.

How can a conference leave a positive mark and give something back to the community?

Kathy Van Wambeke, Sales Manager of Visit Bruges Convention Bureau: "A good example is the **7th World Conference on Marine Biodiversity (WCMB 2026)**, organised by the **Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ)** from 17 to 20 November 2026 at Concertgebouw Brugge. The overall theme of the conference is 'The marine biodiversity insights we need, for the ocean we want' and will contribute to the overall **UN Ocean Decade** vision. To extend the conference's impact beyond the academic community, a public event will feature a documentary on marine biodiversity, introduced by a short expert panel".

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From **Attendance** to **Impact**

Inside the BestCities Global Forum 2026

Manuel Fernandes reports from Mexico



Over three days in Guadalajara, the **BestCities Global Forum 2026** moved beyond the traditional 'attracting events' narrative, focusing instead on how international meetings generate measurable social, economic and scientific value.



Under the theme Innovating with Tradition, for a Sustainable Future, the BestCities Global Forum in Guadalajara focused less on idealised models and more on examining what really works in the sector, what is still difficult, and how much it costs to implement changes. A recurring idea emerged across several sessions: the industry has largely moved beyond a phase defined by growth in numbers alone. The challenge now is relevance. Associations increasingly need to justify face-to-face meetings to boards and members who expect measurable impact and long-term value. "Where the alliance really adds strength is in continuity, strategic support and knowledge transfer. When Guadalajara applied to the **2027 World Congress of Dermatology**, there was significant collaboration with Singapore *(which had hosted the event in 2023)*. In this sense, the success of this bid is a testament to the previous working relationship within the network," stated **Loren Christie**, the Alliance's **Managing Director**.

The format of the Forum reinforced this approach. Within the BestCities portfolio, destinations are increasingly positioning themselves as partners in the association's projects, rather than simply as hosts. Several association executives noted that infrastructure, convention centres, hotel capacity and accessibility, has now become a baseline requirement, while the real priority lies in a destination's ability to connect congresses with universities, research centres, local ambassadors and public authorities, a shift that is also reshaping the bidding process itself. Now, destinations are expected to demonstrate how local expertise and scientific communities can contribute to the programme itself. "When I look at different reports, I realise that community spirit is at the top of event organisers' lists. I think we have created this pressure-free environment because the local impact and personalisation of our forums are fundamental to this connection with the community,' adds Christie.

Guadalajara and the LATAM Context

In Latin America, this model positions Guadalajara essentially as a connecting hub and, consequently, as a strong source market. Some participants emphasised how the city is an interesting place to bring together global scientific communities and stakeholders, in a rapidly growing region with strong potential among vast association memberships. During the Forum, local professionals described the types of collaboration they hope the events will generate, from training initiatives to research partnerships that extend beyond the conference itself. Guadalajara has promoted strategic sectors such as technology, pharmaceuticals, creative industries and logistics, concentrated in a relatively compact metropolitan area; ecosystems that are a hotbed for intellectual engagement between international associations and professional communities.

Association Forum: Planning Cycles and Operational Reality

Workshops invited associations to analyse challenges across six drivers: advocacy, legacy and impact, financial sustainability, member engagement, partnerships and digital transformation. One recurring theme was the gap between board expectations and operational realities. Many organisations still measure success by attendance numbers, while technical teams are increasingly evaluated by academic or professional outcomes. Participants also discussed the typical cycle of large congresses: bidding, scientific preparation, implementation and





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follow-up. Within this process, the face-to-face meeting has become just one stage. Impact is increasingly shaped by data analysis, AI prediction, sponsorship coordination and continuous engagement between congress editions. In this regard, several associations described the maintenance of working groups and collaborative initiatives between events to ensure the continuity of research and professional exchange.

The Real Cost of Sustainability & Sector Transformation

Sustainability became the central theme of the second day, led by two open debates focused on the real cost of its implementation and on building a sustainable and impactful trade fair at **Expo Guadalajara**. The 'Real Cost of Sustainability', held at the **Hospicio Cabañas**, brought together **Alexis Kereluk**, **Director of Sustainability** at **ConnectSeven Group**, **Milda Salciute** of **GDS-Movement**, and **Natalie Lowe**, **Founder** of the **Sustainable Events Forum**. The discussion highlighted event measurement processes and how these environmental reports often exclude material procurement, supplier transport, or food waste. According to Natalie, when these factors are included in the calculation, the environmental balance can change significantly. Alexis, in turn, summarised the transactional nature of this investment: reducing impact means changing the participant's experience, not just negotiating with suppliers. Practical examples of this included shorter menus, eliminating disposable settings, and communicating mobility and consumption options to participants in advance of the event. While these changes may increase costs, they are increasingly necessary for the credibility of associations and their events.

A subsequent session analysed the evolution of **Intermoda**, Latin America's largest fashion show, highlighting the logistical changes introduced at Expo Guadalajara. Eco-friendly stand designs, staff training and an **Exhibitor Support Programme** helped simplify set-up, while speakers emphasised the economic viability of sustainability with operational gains. The venue complemented these initiatives with rainwater harvesting systems (the result of the **Rain Next** programme), solar panels, and the exploration of advanced batteries in pursuit of LEED Gold certification. Intermoda's three-year strategy fostered a collaborative triad between cultural heritage, through the indigenous Wirarica communities, social impact in support of 17 organisations including the **Food Bank** initiative, and youth entrepreneurship, supported by innovation awards and greater visibility. "When Guadalajara joined us, sustainability was not yet central to their strategy, but they used the network to learn from other destinations, and, today,you can see how those ideas are being applied locally," Christie told us.

Impact Beyond the Conference

The final session, 'Unlocking Event Measurement Impact with AI', with **Jonathan Easton** of **Snapsight by Gevme** and **Linda Garzon Rocha** of **Meet4Impact** examined why the industry still struggles to demonstrate results consistently. According to the speakers, the issue is rarely the absence of data but its fragmentation across registration systems, session notes and post-event feedback. Integrating measurement throughout the event cycle, from planning to follow-up, makes it easier to demonstrate outcomes in advocacy, education, community engagement and environmental performance. Artificial intelligence tools may help interpret large volumes of qualitative data, extracting insights from discussions and written feedback that might otherwise remain unused.

While Guadalajara focused on innovation rooted in tradition, Dubai is expected to explore themes such as scale and connectivity at the next edition of the Forum in 2027. "One initiative we also introduced this year is the alumni programme. It allows young professionals, who might not normally attend our forums, to take part, gain insights and bring that knowledge back to their organisations," Christie concludes.



ICCA Iberian Chapter Annual Meeting

Examining How Funding, Data And Research Reshape Event Strategy

Jesús Guerrero Chacón reports from Portugal



The **ICCA Iberian Chapter Annual Meeting** brought together members from Spain and Portugal and association and industry stakeholders in Coimbra, Portugal, marking record attendance for the chapter. Sessions addressed funding criteria, sponsorship models, legacy planning, and data and AI in decision-making, while highlighting the role of Iberian destinations as connectors to Latin America and other Spanish and Portuguese-speaking markets. Discussions focused on prioritising events, allocating resources, and producing evidence that meets the expectations of associations and public institutions. Coimbra framed these exchanges through its university setting, where access to academic spaces and student involvement positioned knowledge institutions within the meeting structure.

Funding, Bids And Revenue Under Pressure

Tighter budgets and higher expectations framed several discussions during the event. Associations face tighter financial conditions and are asked to deliver measurable outcomes for members, partners and public institutions, while calling for defined selection criteria, shorter evaluation timelines and clearer expectations before committing to a candidacy, as convention bureaux prioritise bids aligned with local research sectors, economic priorities and institutional partnerships.

As a concrete example of how these conditions are addressed, **Turismo de Portugal** presented its national funding programme under the **Portugal Events Programme 2026–2028**. Financial support is linked to bed night generation, with defined tiers and additional increases for off-peak periods and lower-density regions.

Portugal's model allows organisers and destinations to calculate expected return using accommodation data before a bid, linking event size, timing and available support in early planning. Examples from other European regions show multiple countries supporting a single candidacy. For Iberia, this creates a different competitive position, with destinations combining resources across borders.

Sustainability, Legacy And Measurement As Operational Layers

Legacy and sustainability were treated as planning questions, introduced early to shape programme design, partnerships and reporting. **Barcelona Convention Bureau** presented legacy as a methodology that defines intended outcomes and connects congress topics with local needs, followed by partner identification and long-term evaluation. The programme includes five congresses, 15 collaborations and more than 650 beneficiaries, showing how impact is designed from the outset.

Sustainability cases focused on material and process control. **Servis Complet**, specialising in the design, construction and technical set-up of event spaces, used its work for the **2025 European Congress of Rheumatology** to show how modular design, reuse strategies and logistics planning reduced material use by more than 80%, with 82% reused and 6% sent to landfill. **Bilbao Exhibition Centre** addressed the same question through the **Food4Future 2025** pilot, where exhibitors declared materials in advance, inputs were measured in kilos and waste streams prepared before opening, recording 77% reuse from 43,900 kg and integrating organic waste processing into venue systems.

Visit Gijón introduced a different dimension by treating human capital and talent as part of destination value. They presented a format built around student engagement and training, connecting meetings with future professionals and events with skills development and long-term sector capacity.

A session examined how events generate social, economic and environmental impact on host destinations before, during and after delivery. Contributions from **Madrid Convention Bureau, 4foreverything, RX Global** (organiser of **ibtm World**) and the **University of Coimbra** focused on timing, continuity and local connection: legacy must be introduced early, carried across the event lifecycle and reinforced through repeat editions or institutional ties beyond a single meeting. Associations remain central, as objectives, content and timing are defined at the start and translated into practice by destinations, organisers and local partners.

ICCA is currently working on a global impact measurement tool that assesses outcomes across education, research and community effects alongside economic indicators.



Strengthening Connections Across Ibero-America

Spain, Portugal and Latin American markets were positioned as part of a connected space where events, knowledge and partnerships can circulate more easily across regions. Differences in association structures remain a defining factor. European organisations tend to operate with formal governance, defined decision processes and longer planning cycles, while many associations in Latin America work with smaller teams and less formal structures, limiting their capacity to bid for international events and deliver large-scale meetings.

In Spain and Portugal, support is directed towards bid development, data preparation and coordination with local partners. Shared language and institutional links facilitate collaboration and position Iberia as a connection point between Iberia and Latin America.

Multi-country bids provide a mechanism to extend that collaboration. Associations can rotate events across destinations while maintaining continuity, reducing the need to restart processes for each edition and expanding access to new markets within the same network.

Corporate events follow a different pattern, with different markets generating consistent demand through multinational companies and operating under distinct timelines and requirements. For destinations and organisers, this requires parallel strategies that distinguish between both types of events.

Talent, AI And The Capacity To Design And Deliver Events

Access to skilled professionals came up repeatedly as organisers, associations and destinations described increasing demands in reporting, programme design and data handling within tighter timelines. Sessions on artificial intelligence focused on how these tasks are handled in practice and integrated into workflows. Structured prompting is used to generate reports, organise information and manage communication, while more advanced use cases include data analysis and multi-step reasoning for sponsorship modelling and research support.

Content generation and research are widely implemented, yet applications relying on participant-level data or tailored outputs remain limited, pointing to a gap between tool adoption and integration into decision-making. Tools are available, but use depends on people able to define inputs, structure data and interpret results within the context of an event or organisation.

This requires professionals to define context and translate outputs into programme design, decision-making and event delivery.

Coimbra And Destination-Led Design Of Delegate Programmes

In Coimbra, the board of the Iberian Chapter engaged with university students before the Annual Meeting, introducing them to the industry and creating direct contact between academic training and professional practice. Sessions extended into university spaces, including evening access to the Biblioteca Joanina at the University of Coimbra, often considered one of the most beautiful libraries in the world. The **Coimbra–Centro de Portugal Convention Bureau** used the meeting to demonstrate programme design across multiple layers of the destination, combining academic spaces, cultural activity and gastronomy within a single structure.

A session showcased a three-year plan from 2026 to 2028, bringing together public authorities, academia and industry to position Coimbra as a place where meetings connect sectors, knowledge and territory. Cultural and gastronomic elements, including the region's culinary offering, are built into that structure as part of its presentation to international associations. Venues, institutions and local actors are built into the meeting structure, shaping how delegates move, interact and engage throughout the programme.

Bilbao, Host Destination in 2027

Bilbao will host the ICCA Iberian Chapter Annual Meeting in 2027. The announcement was made in Coimbra, where **Bilbao Convention Bureau** presented the destination. The announcement placed the Basque destination within the chapter's rotation across Spain and Portugal and linked it to discussions during the meeting, where venue operations, sustainability, legacy and impact measurement formed part of the programme.

IAPCO AM&GA 2026

The Journey Back to Ithaca!

Manuel Fernandes reports from Greece



Just as Odysseus needed ingenuity, wisdom, storytelling, and purpose to find his way back to Ithaca in Homer's epic, PCOs today are increasingly called upon to become strategic storytellers. Under the theme "*The Odyssey Reinvented – A Very Human Journey Toward the Meetings of Tomorrow*," the **International Association of Professional Congress Organisers (IAPCO)** held its **Annual Meeting & General Assembly 2026** in Athens, bringing together more than 200 senior leaders from 36 countries.

Hosted at the **Megaron Athens International Conference Centre** in late February, the congress combined strategic discussions, keynote sessions and governance meetings, reinforcing IAPCO's role as a global platform for the advancement of the meetings industry. The 2026 edition marked the highest attendance in the association's history and a record number of first-time participants. Today, IAPCO represents 95 member organisations worldwide, collectively delivering more than 23,000 meetings each year. Its work continues to be structured around five pillars (quality, innovation, collaboration, education and advocacy) guiding members through a period of rapid transformation.

"We designed the programme as a journey," says **Sissi Lignou, President of IAPCO and CEO of AFEA Congress**. "Day one began with storytelling, setting the narrative context for our discussions. Day two focused on leadership and the business challenges facing our sector. On the final day, we returned to the individual, exploring themes of personal development, balance, trauma, and homecoming."

Day 1: Strategy, Sustainability and Global Growth

The opening day set a clear strategic tone, with sustainability, collaboration and innovation positioned as central priorities for both destinations and organisers. Alongside plenary sessions, the **IAPCO Dialogues** created structured peer exchanges on leadership, legacy, innovation and talent development, reflecting the association's emphasis on knowledge-sharing and collective problem-solving.

Keynotes provided concise perspectives on the evolving purpose of meetings. **Angeliki Kosmopoulou**, a story strategist and archeologist, highlighted the importance of creating spaces for transformation framing events as journeys from uncertainty to confidence, while **Panos Tzivanidis, Corporate Events Director at the International Olympic Committee**, drawing on the **Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics 2026**, reinforced the need to embed sustainability and legacy planning from the earliest stages of event design, including the use of existing infrastructure and renewable energy solutions.

The institutional session *From IAPCO to the World* outlined the organisation's main achievements and priorities. Membership expansion, particularly in Latin America, was highlighted, alongside the continued roll-out of education programmes such as **EDGE** across multiple regions. Advocacy initiatives also gained momentum, notably the **Dear Associations** campaign under the **Unlocking Excellence** framework, aimed at strengthening the visibility and value of professional congress organisers globally.

A major announcement was the launch of a new sustainability toolkit tailored for PCOs and aligned with international standards, reinforcing IAPCO's commitment to practical, measurable environmental action. Recognition through awards underscored excellence across the network. The **Sustainability Award** was presented to **K.I.T. Group** for its work on the **IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025**.

Leadership development also evolved, with the transition from 'Next Gen' to 'Emerging Leaders,' reflecting a more inclusive and collaborative approach. The **Emerging Leader Award** was presented to **Cheryl Choy** of the **International Conference Services**. In parallel, IAPCO launched the **IAPCO & FIEXPO Jorge Castex Scholarship Programme** for Latin America, in partnership with **FIEXPO Exhibitions Group**, further strengthening regional capacity-building.

Day 2: Leadership, Innovation and Structural Challenges

Day two focused on leadership in an increasingly complex and technology-driven environment. A keynote organised with **Fortune Greece** explored the impact of artificial intelligence on organisations. Speakers emphasised AI's potential to enhance efficiency and decision-making, while underlining the importance of human oversight and ethical





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governance. Further updates from IAPCO highlighted new partnerships and growing engagement with destinations such as Rwanda, Türkiye and Vienna, reflecting a stronger integration between global associations and host destinations. "For a city of two million people that already hosts a remarkable number of events, it is essential that our entire ecosystem works together towards a shared global vision. IAPCO will help us chart this path," told us on-site, **Anita Paic, Director B2B Management at Vienna Convention Bureau.**

A high-level industry discussion brought together leaders from **PCMA, AIPC, ICCA and AMC Institute**, addressing structural challenges such as leadership gaps, the need for more agile organisational models and the evolving expectations of global communities. Sustainability remained a central concern, particularly the gap between environmental requirements in event proposals and the resources allocated to deliver them, an issue increasingly recognised across the industry. Additional sessions addressed leadership transitions and organisational strategy, while the closing keynote by futurist **Pascal Morgan** focused on adaptability, critical thinking and the human dimension of leadership in an era of technological acceleration. The answer, according to him, lies in reformulating the VUCA paradigm: Volatility demands Vision, Uncertainty requires a deeper collective Understanding, Complexity demands Courage, and Ambiguity demands Adaptability.

Day 3: Impact, Legacy and Industry Value

The final day combined human-centred themes with a strong focus on industry impact and sustainability frameworks. A key highlight was the thought leadership session led by the **Events Industry Council. CEO Amy Calvert** presented a comprehensive sustainability strategy aligned with the **Sustainable Events Standards** and the **United Nations SDGs**, developed under the guidance of the **Net Zero Carbon Events** initiative. The session also showcased updated data from the global economic impact study conducted with **Oxford Economics**, which values the business events industry at $2.8 trillion (approx. €2.6 trillion), with 1.6 billion participants annually and around 30 million professionals worldwide. A new edition, expected in 2026, will incorporate legacy and impact metrics, a significant step towards better measuring long-term value.

Beyond data and frameworks, the programme also addressed social impact, inclusion and leadership from a psychological perspective. In her keynote, the psychotherapist **Despina Ploussiou** explored resilience and integration, highlighting how personal regulation and a sense of belonging are essential to effective leadership and healthy organisational cultures. A session featuring basketball champion **Dimitris Papanikolaou** and his daughter **Aria** underscored the importance of visibility and community awareness, highlighting how personal experiences can support other families with Asperger's syndrome and foster greater understanding around neurodiversity.

The General Assembly concluded with key governance decisions. The presidency of IAPCO will transfer in 2027 to **Jason Yeh, CEO** of **GIS Group** in Taiwan, and three new Council members were elected. Future host destinations were also confirmed: **Mumbai** will host the 2027 Annual Meeting at the **Jio World Convention Centre**, followed by Cairo in 2028, underlining the association's expanding global footprint. "I hope this meeting conveyed a strong message about the power of our industry to generate meaningful socio-economic impact and lasting legacy," Lignou concluded. As the Athens meeting closed, the PCO direction is crystal clear. The future of business events will be shaped not only by technology, but by the ability of organisations to integrate sustainability, demonstrate measurable impact and strengthen human connection.

From **Delivery** to **Impact**

The PCO Transformation Around Sustainability, Advocacy and Talent





At a time when the global meetings industry is under increasing pressure to deliver more meaningful, measurable, and responsible outcomes, the role of Professional Congress Organisers (PCOs) is undergoing a profound transformation. Across sustainability, talent development, and education, a new model is emerging: one that positions PCOs not just as organisers, but as strategic partners in shaping impact.

During the recent **IAPCO AM&GA** in Athens, our **Magazine Manager**, sat down with representatives from the Sustainability, Next Gen & Advocacy, and Training Academy Committees to portray a clear picture of how that transformation is taking shape.

Sustainability: Moving from Ambition to Implementation

Sustainability is no longer a differentiator, but a business expectation. Increasingly embedded in RFPs and client demands, it has become a baseline requirement across the industry. Yet, the challenge lies not in awareness, but in execution. For **Ajay Bhojwani** *(pictured above)*, **Sustainability Committee Chair at IAPCO**, the gap is clear: "While there is a lot that is being discussed, what is actually being implemented is still quite limited. Many organisations are still operating at a very basic level."

This disconnect is precisely what the new **IAPCO Sustainability Toolkit** aims to address. Designed as a practical, structured resource, it goes beyond environmental checklists and tackles the deeper issue of organisational integration. "There are still gaps in terms of tools, processes and guidelines," Bhojwani warns. "That is often what prevents sustainability from being deployed at the level it should be."

A key shift lies in moving from event-based actions to organisational transformation. "Many PCOs can deliver sustainable events," he notes, "but their organisations are not always designed with sustainability at their core." The toolkit therefore introduces a strong focus on corporate sustainability, embedding principles into governance, operations, and decision-making processes. The ambition is clear: sustainability should not be activated per event, but embedded across the entire organisation.

At the same time, implementation remains constrained by practical realities. Cost continues to be a barrier, particularly in destinations where sustainable solutions carry a premium. "If something costs two or three times more, it quickly becomes a 'nice to have' rather than a priority," admits Bhojwani, **Middle East & Africa Managing Director** at **MCI Group**. This is where ecosystem alignment becomes critical. From venues to suppliers and destinations, collaboration is essential to scaling solutions and making them more accessible. "We need to create guidelines that align the entire PCO community," Bhojwani says, "so that everyone is working towards the same objectives."

While he dismisses the idea that sustainability will regress, he does acknowledge a more subtle risk. "The real concern is stagnation. Without the right support, especially at government and policy level, the pace of progress could slow down."

Emerging Leaders: From Future Promise to Present Reality

If sustainability defines the what, talent defines the who. And according to the **Next Gen Committee Chair, Giulia Sarri**, the industry must urgently rethink how it engages with its next generation. The recent shift from 'Next Gen' to 'Emerging Leaders' is more than a rebrand: it reflects a fundamental change in mindset for the IAPCO community. "We are already here," she states. "The challenges we face are not future challenges, they are the challenges of today."

This disconnect has tangible consequences. Talent retention remains one of the industry's most pressing challenges, and Sarri believes part of the issue lies in how roles are structured. "There is still a divide between operations and strategy," she explains. "Younger professionals are often asked to execute, but not to contribute to the bigger picture." Yet expectations have changed. New generations want purpose, involvement, and the opportunity to co-create. "They want to understand why they are doing something. They want to be part of the decision-making process."



Members of the IAPCO Council at the 2026 Annual Meeting © IAPCO



Giulia Sarri at IAPCO AM&GM 2026 © IAPCO



Without that engagement, organisations risk losing not only talent, but also relevance. "If you are kept in a box, you will never understand the real challenges the industry is facing," she adds. Purpose, therefore, becomes a central driver, not only at event level, but at organisational level. It influences everything from internal culture to destination selection, and ultimately shapes the impact of the events themselves.

This shift towards impact management also reflects a broader redefinition of what PCOs are expected to deliver beyond logistics. Increasingly, the conversation is moving towards outcomes that are measurable not only in operational terms, but in behavioural and societal terms. As the **Head of Service Design** at **AIM Group International**, Sarri, puts it, "we first need to understand the starting point of all stakeholders and participants, and then define where we actually want to take them. What is the end result we are aiming for?" For her, this is where the discipline begins to evolve: "we need to define the behavioural change we are trying to achieve." From that point onwards, the process becomes increasingly structured, requiring new hybrid roles that combine data interpretation, strategic thinking, and narrative design.

Encouragingly, there are signs of progress. Initiatives such as **IAPCO's Sustainability Awards** demonstrate a broader understanding of impact, integrating environmental, social, and legacy dimensions. "For 2026, the focus will be much more quantitative and evidence-based. The goal is to strengthen engagement with governments and ensure that political decision-makers are fully aligned and supportive of the value that the industry creates," Sarri concludes.

Training & Education: Building Capacity for a Changing Industry

Whilst talent is the engine, education is the infrastructure that enables it. And in a rapidly evolving landscape, capacity building has become a strategic imperative. For **Stephen Noble** *(pictured above)*, **Chair of the IAPCO Training Academy**, the challenge is not a lack of knowledge, but the pace at which it evolves. "Our industry is changing so quickly that many PCOs are asking how they can keep up," he explains. "The fundamentals remain the same, but there are now many more layers on top."

These layers, sustainability, regional complexity, AI and technology, are redefining the competencies required from professionals. Yet they also introduce a fundamental tension. "AI is improving productivity," Noble notes, "but it is not necessarily improving profitability." This gap between efficiency and commercial performance is becoming a critical area of focus. "A project manager might now handle four projects instead of three," he says. "But the question is whether that actually improves the financial outcome of the business."

In response, the Training Academy is shifting its approach. Rather than focusing solely on static knowledge, it is prioritising frameworks and tools, particularly around assessment, implementation, and measurement. At the same time, the fundamentals remain non-negotiable. Financial management, risk assessment, and operational excellence continue to underpin the profession. The challenge lies in balancing these core competencies with emerging skills.

Education is also becoming more accessible and more structured. Through initiatives such as the webEDGE platform and the introduction of individual accreditation pathways, IAPCO is creating clearer entry points into the profession. "We are now providing a tangible outcome," explains Noble, **Asia Pacific Manager** at **The Conference Company**. "If someone invests their time, they gain a recognised credential that validates their skills." This is particularly important in addressing one of the industry's most persistent challenges: visibility. "We are not naturally good at showcasing what we do," he admits. "We operate behind the scenes, and that makes it harder to attract new talent."

By strengthening advocacy, improving access to education, and formalising career pathways, the industry is beginning to reposition itself, not only as a service provider, but as a professional discipline in its own right.

HQ INSIGHTS

Tech, Associations & PCOs



Modernising **Constitutions**

Strengthening Governance for Associations



The articles of association form the legal backbone of any association, defining its purpose, governance structure, and how decisions are made. When well designed, they provide a clear framework that supports effective governance and long-term organisational stability.

Author: John Peacock AM, Director, Governology

The articles of association, constitution or statutes form the rules of any association, setting out how the organisation operates. As a legally binding document between the association and its members, the articles define purpose, membership, governance structures, and decision-making processes. Importantly, they can only be amended by a special resolution, typically requiring a 66% or 75% super-majority vote at a general meeting or general assembly.

A modern approach emphasises clarity, relevance, and flexibility. Rather than becoming bogged down in operational detail, articles should act as a high-level framework, enabling effective governance. Overly detailed provisions, such as membership fees or day-to-day procedures, are better placed in by-laws or policies that can be updated by the Board.

At the core of the articles lies the organisation's purpose, often referred to as its 'objects'. These define the legal reason the association exists and guide the Board's strategic direction. Best practice suggests keeping objects concise, sometimes as brief as 20 words, while aligning with the organisation's mission. Activities that support these objects should instead be outlined in strategic plans, preserving the articles as a stable document.

Membership provisions are another critical component. The articles must clearly define who can be a member, voting rights, and processes for admission, discipline, or expulsion. Transparency here is essential, as members ultimately hold significant power, particularly in electing directors and approving changes. Poorly defined membership rules can expose associations to risks such as 'branch stacking' or governance disputes.

Equally important are the rules governing general meetings, where the Board is accountable to members. These provisions should outline quorum requirements, voting methods (including proxies or virtual participation), and motions. Notably, only general meetings have the authority to amend the articles, reinforcing their role in governance.

The relationship between members, the Board, and management must also be clearly articulated. In most modern governance models, members have a limited but important role, primarily electing directors and approving major structural changes, while the Board holds responsibility for strategic oversight. The CEO or executive team, in turn, manages day-to-day operations. Blurring these roles can lead to inefficiency or conflict, particularly in organisations with complex structures like councils and executive committees.

Board composition and operation are also addressed within the articles. Best practice suggests a Board of seven to nine directors, with staggered terms to ensure continuity. Clear rules around elections, term limits, and filling vacancies help maintain stability and accountability. Additionally, modern governance discourages practices such as proxy voting at Board level and overly complex leadership structures.

Regular review of the articles is essential to ensure they remain fit for purpose. However, change should not be rushed. Successful modernisation often begins with a governance review to identify issues, followed by consultation with stakeholders. Building consensus, through communication, persuasion, and transparency, is key to achieving the required member approval.

Ultimately, well-drafted articles of association provide a strong foundation for effective governance. By focusing on clarity, adaptability, and alignment with organisational purpose, associations can ensure their governing documents support their long-term success.

Governology is an associations consultancy and event and training provider. Operating in the UK, EU and Australia, it specialises in association governance and writing clear and modern articles of association, constitutions and statutes.



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Sustainable **Sustainability**



While artificial intelligence seems to have replaced sustainability as THE topic on the agenda of industry events, sustainability has not disappeared like a mirage. A lot of 'commitments' have been translated into reality. Especially when it comes to energy, these efforts are paying off on several fronts. But there are also other strong cases, like preserving the Scottish Peatlands.

Author: Sven Bossu, CEO, AIPC

When we had the first energy crisis in 2022, oil, gas and electricity prices skyrocketed, providing both families and companies with the necessary motivation to switch to renewable energy and to save on energy consumption. This was also true for convention centres, which invested heavily in both energy creation, such as solar and wind, and energy savings, including LED lighting, automated lighting sensors, and more efficient energy use.

A great example of this is the **Javits Center** in New York. The convention centre is one of the busiest in the country, hosting more than 175 events, with 40,000 exhibitors and two million visitors annually. With nearly 19 acres of exhibit space, the Javits Center is a major power consumer. **Alan Steel**, the previous CEO, whom I had the pleasure of meeting several times, was a strong advocate for making the venue more sustainable, and the current CEO, **Joyce Leveston**, continues to lead the way.

When it came to energy, the Javits Center went for an integrated solution: generation and storage of energy. They developed an innovative microgrid featuring the largest rooftop solar array and battery storage system in Manhattan to date. Just to make it tangible: this involved over 2,000 solar panels put on 34 canopy-style solar arrays on its 7-acre green roof and the farm provides 906.3 kW megawatts of solar energy.

There are many other great examples, like the **Bella Center** in Copenhagen, which has managed to reduce energy consumption substantially and provides, at the level of individual events, detailed reports on energy consumption, which allows organisers to compare and optimise the energy consumption of their event.

This is of course great for the convention centres in question, as they move away from carbon which has a very positive climate impact AND regain control of a cost which at times can be very volatile. But it is also good news for organisers, as they know that these venues are better protected against price shocks, which can be re-invoiced to them.

However, translating commitment into reality is not limited to energy. The **Edinburgh International Convention Centre (EICC)** is an example of a convention centre that took many steps on many fronts and made significant progress in sustainability. When **Rob Turnbull, Sustainability Officer** at the **EICC**, gave a presentation on all the actions they had taken over the three last years at the **AIPC Operational Excellence Summit**, everybody was impressed, to say the least.

Their sustainability programme, called **Step Change**, focuses on three equally significant and interconnected areas of impact: **Desk to Door, Know Your Impact** and **Give Something Back**. Within the Desk to Door programme, **You. Smart. Thing**. is a travel demand management platform, which allows clients and delegates to find the most sustainable method from getting to and from the EICC by providing details on various travel paths and includes the relative CO2 emissions of each method. I personally found the **Climate Action Contribution**, part of the Give Something Back, even more impressive, because of the strong link with the local non-human community. This is a unique and innovative scheme to restore Scotland's most underappreciated but valuable biomes, the Peatlands. There are many reasons to restore peatlands, including carbon storage, water supply and preservation of rare species. How does it work? The EICC asks for £1 per delegate per day, or 50 pence per dinner guest from clients, earmarked exclusively for **Peatland Restoration** in the north of Scotland. The EICC hopes that the initiative could contribute in the region of £300,000 during its first five years.

So, while there could be a perception that sustainability has become less important, as a result of what is happening across the globe, many stakeholders in the event industry, and most certainly the convention centres, have moved from 'blablabla' to actual implementation, with strong results on different fronts, including financial ones. The cases above, and there are many more, demonstrate the power of sustainability, if done in a sustainable way.

Turning **Hotel Sustainability** into **Real Impact**

Hotels are collecting more sustainability data than ever, yet measurement alone does not create impact. In this piece, **Shawn Seipler, CEO** at **Clean the World**, explains how simple initiatives, tracked, shared and, with storytelling in mind, can create real results for staff, guests and communities.



The phrase 'If you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it,' is often thrown around in the world of sustainability. Yet, I think it is a slight oversimplification when it comes to sustainability in the world of hotels.

In the past decade, hotels have become highly effective at tracking sustainability metrics. When it comes to energy, water and waste, we have more data than ever before. However, tracking the numbers alone does not make a difference.

Too often, hotels either do not know what to measure or they are simply measuring the wrong things. Then there is also this idea floating around that it is all super complicated; that you need perfect data before you start. Honestly, that is not true.

The challenge is not awareness. Most hotel operators understand the importance of sustainability and the need to measure their impact. The challenge is turning those measurements into meaningful action.

Misconceptions about Measuring Sustainability

When it comes to measuring sustainability, I feel there are a lot of misconceptions: not just that it is difficult, but also that there is a great deal of fear of getting things wrong.

I think hotels sometimes forget that sustainability is a journey, not a destination. You do not have to have everything perfect from day one. Measuring something tangible, even if it is simple, is enough to get staff and teams involved and motivated.

When I started Clean the World, we were not crunching carbon numbers or doing complex energy modelling. We just measured how much soap we were collecting. Nothing more. As a result, staff started paying attention. They compared numbers, tried to do better, and it created momentum. Suddenly, sustainability was not just some abstract goal, it became something everyone cared about and could actually influence.

So rather than trying to measure everything perfectly from the start, hotels should start by setting out clear priorities that align with their internal sustainability goals and then define clear objectives to achieve them. Each hotel will be different. It is about identifying what truly matters to your property and beginning to measure progress against those priorities.

Seeing Progress

Once hotels start measuring, something interesting happens: the numbers almost always go up. I see it with our programmes at Clean the World. Hotels we work with do not typically add more rooms or staff, yet, year after year, they collect more soap and plastic amenities, and ultimately divert more waste from landfill.

Part of that is simple human nature. When staff can see the results, they want to do better. They compare numbers, challenge each other and get genuinely engaged. Measurement becomes a motivator.

Guests notice it too. Be it on digital displays in the hotel, small touchpoints in the rooms themselves, or online, such as on social media, it reinforces to guests that sustainability is embedded in the day-to-day of the hotel.

Even a 20% reduction in single-use plastics or a small increase in recycled soap is a real, measurable improvement. Over time, those small gains compound into significant impact, giving you and your teams the confidence to then tackle bigger initiatives.

Where Hotels Should Start

For hotels just getting into sustainability, a good place to begin is with the products and services you are already using. Ask your suppliers: What sustainability data can you provide? What impact does your product have?



Two suppliers might offer the same item, but one may have far better sustainability credentials. Choosing that supplier is an easy win and a way to start collecting meaningful data right away.

Beyond suppliers, there are plenty of operational changes that do not require massive investment. Energy-efficient lighting, water-saving systems, eliminating single-use plastic items such as plastic straws, and replacing them with more responsible alternatives – these are all measurable and practical, and staff can easily get behind them.

With that said, do not try and do everything at once. Pick a couple of things that matter most to your hotel or hotel guests. For example, what outward facing message does it convey if a hotel is still seen to be using plastic straws for example?

And once you have those programmes in place, track them. Keep it simple, but consistent. Once you know how much plastic you have recycled or how much soap you have collected, you can show progress, celebrate wins with your team, and start telling a story to your guests. That is what makes sustainability real.

Telling Your Story

The numbers are important, but they are not the best way to showcase your efforts to your current and future guests.

At Clean the World, we have found that translating metrics into relatable outcomes is key. Carbon saved becomes trees planted, water saved becomes the equivalent of swimming pools filled, recycled soap becomes hygiene kits for communities in need. These are stories people can connect with because they can really picture the impact.

It can help to also drill down and be able to tell your sustainability story in just a sentence or two. For example, for Clean the World, we know our sustainability efforts have helped distribute more than 96 million bars of soap globally to those in need, more than any other company in history, saving lives, reducing preventable illnesses whilst also diverting over 14 million kilograms of hotel waste from landfill.

The trick is to focus on what you do best, what is most tangible, and make that your story. Pick your wins, show the real-world impact and let the story grow from there.

At the end of the day, sustainability for hotels is about turning numbers into action, action into impact, and impact into a story everyone, staff and guests alike, can feel proud of.

So, hotels, what are your stories?

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From **Service Providers** to Game **Changers**



As this column is being prepared, the world is once again in a period of conflict and turmoil. Yet, many still believe that what is going on in the Middle East, Latin America, or Asia will not affect their day-to-day work as association managers. They are likely to be in for a shock in the coming months and years.

Author: Mark Levin, CAE, CSP

Whenever there is turmoil in the world, our jobs get a little harder until things settle down and we can get back to 'normal'. Unfortunately for us, the old normal and the new normal are not the same. The new normal is calling for a fundamental change in what associations do and how they do it. Oh, and also by how well they do it!

For many years, trade and professional associations have focused on enhancing members' internal environment, providing the tools for success on a daily basis. We watched membership grow because of our ability to bring our members together, to encourage collegiality, to exchange ideas, and to achieve organisational goals. We did this through our meetings, our publications, and our member-engagement efforts.

The challenge of today's membership environment is that those activities no longer provide a strong reason to join or remain a member. Interaction with peers is now as close as their computer screen or even their smart phone. Market share growth depends as much on data and social media as on sales and marketing, while professional recognition is as much a matter of podcasting and YouTube posting as it is attending far-away conferences.

Why would they go through the hassle and expense of supporting one association when all the resources necessary to be successful have become accessible to individual companies and professionals? If we cannot impact their internal environment, we have only one choice: we must provide and demonstrate value by doing things they cannot do on their own. We must effectively impact the external environment, and the world outside our members' daily workday

This means moving to the next level by not only being recognised as 'subject matter experts' but also as policy advocates. Not just government relations specialists but strategic partners in our industry or profession.

In many associations, our members are worried. Not about their ability to compete, or about their professional training or experience. They are worried about their markets shifting or even disappearing. They are worried about their jobs being wiped out, or their relevance being diminished in some way. They are worried about whether or not anyone is out there not just representing them, or even lobbying for them, but for actually fighting for them. And making a difference when they do.

Today's members expect their associations to be part of the coalitions that determine the structure and standards that will change the business and regulatory environments in which they work. We need to show our ability to be recognised as trusted partners by other impactful organisations and governmental/standards-making entities; have access to key decision-makers in our members' professions and industries; and exert leadership by providing information and data to support our association's views and input.

All associations and, especially international organisations, need to reorganise their priorities. We can, collectively, initiate meaningful changes not just internally, but externally as well. Those changes can enhance the success of our own constituencies and the work towards a greater good on a global level.

There is an old saying in the association management profession: "If you do not have a seat at the table, you are probably on the menu."

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.



The 40th Edition of the **CityDNA Summer School**

Why Talent Has Become the Industry's Strategic Priority

The meetings industry is facing a structural challenge it can no longer ignore: talent. As destinations navigate sustainability pressures, stakeholder complexity and rapid technological change, the question is shifting. It is no longer only about attracting events, but about having the people capable of managing them in a more demanding environment.

Across Europe, the need for professionals who can operate across disciplines, build partnerships and translate strategy into action is growing. Yet the pathways to develop these profiles remain uneven.

For nearly four decades, the CityDNA Summer School has quietly addressed this gap. Since its first edition in 1987, the programme has provided newcomers to the meetings industry with something increasingly rare, a space to understand the system, connect with peers and build the foundations of a long-term career.

In August 2026, the Summer School will mark its 40th edition in Dijon, less as a celebration of longevity than as a reminder of an essential function within the sector: preparing people for complexity.

Learning the System, Not Just the Job

The meetings industry is not a linear environment. It is an ecosystem that brings together destinations, venues, associations, corporate clients and service providers, all operating with different objectives. Understanding how this system works is not intuitive. For many newcomers, it is the missing link. This is where initiatives like the CityDNA Summer School play a distinct role.

Rather than focusing solely on technical skills, the programme exposes participants to the broader mechanics of the industry: how bids are built, how stakeholders align, how destinations position themselves and how decisions are made.

Under the leadership of Course Director **Dennis Speet, Managing Director of the Amsterdam Convention Bureau**, the approach is deliberately practical. Learning happens through exchange, discussion and real-world scenarios, not just theory.

This is reinforced by a strong culture of mentorship. Faculty members contribute their time on a voluntary basis, reflecting a sector where knowledge is still largely transmitted through people rather than formal structures.

As Speet puts it: "The meetings industry is fundamentally collaborative. Success depends on understanding different stakeholders and building trusted relationships. The CityDNA Summer School reflects that reality. Participants do not just learn about the industry; they experience how it works."

The Alumni Effect: A Network That Outlives the Programme

The real impact of the Summer School is not measured during the week itself, but over time.

Across 39 editions, more than 2,200 professionals have passed through the programme. Many now occupy key roles across European destinations and organisations. But its deeper value lies elsewhere: in the network it creates.

These are not just contacts. They are relationships built early in careers that continue to shape collaboration across cities, institutions and markets.

For some, the impact is immediate. **Miranda Geerlings**, now **Manager** of the **Leiden Convention Bureau**, describes the Summer School as a turning point. A moment that gave her both the confidence and industry understanding needed to build a career across several organisations before returning to lead a destination herself. For others, the relationship evolves. **Leena Lassila** of **Helsinki Partners** first attended as a participant and now contributes as a faculty member, illustrating how knowledge and experience circulate across generations within the industry.

This continuity is not incidental. It reflects how the meetings industry functions: through trust, shared experience and long-term relationships.

For **Barbara Jamison-Woods, President of City Destinations Alliance**, this is precisely where the programme creates value: "Over the past 39 editions, the CityDNA Summer School has become the place where many careers in our industry truly begin. It offers newcomers a rare combination of knowledge, openness and community. What makes it special is not only what participants learn during the week, but the professional relationships and confidence they carry with them long afterwards."

From Knowledge to Capability

If the industry is evolving, so too are the expectations placed on its professionals. Today's destination managers must operate at the intersection of multiple agendas: economic development, sustainability, resident impact, reputation and innovation. They are expected not only to attract events, but to shape their value.

This requires a different skill set, one that goes beyond technical expertise. The shift is visible in how learning itself is evolving. The focus is moving from knowledge acquisition to capability building: the ability to apply, adapt and respond in complex environments.

The Summer School reflects this transition. Through interactive formats, participants engage with real-world challenges, from sustainability and accessibility to crisis management and destination positioning, exploring how to translate principles into action.

Dijon: From Commitment to Action

The choice of Dijon as host destination for the 40th edition is no coincidence. It reflects a broader shift taking place across European cities: moving from sustainability commitments to measurable action.

Earlier this year, **Dijon Bourgogne Tourisme & Congrès** completed its first comprehensive carbon footprint assessment, establishing a baseline for long-term environmental strategy. It is a reminder that destinations are now expected to demonstrate impact, not just intent.

The Summer School will take place at the **Mercure Dijon Centre Clémenceau**, a venue awarded the international **Green Key** environmental certification, embedding these considerations into the event itself. In this context, the destination becomes part of the learning experience.

A Sector That Must Invest in Its People

The meetings industry has long invested in infrastructure, marketing and innovation. Increasingly, it must also invest in people. Talent development is no longer a supporting function, it is becoming a strategic priority. Initiatives such as the CityDNA Summer School demonstrate what this investment can look like: not a one-off training, but a continuous process of learning, exchange and connection.

As the programme reaches its 40th edition, it highlights a broader reality for the sector: the ability of the meetings industry to adapt will depend on how effectively it develops, connects and retains its people.



From **Transactional** to **Strategic**

Transforming the RFP Process in the Meetings Industry

Across the global meetings industry, there is one topic that is gaining momentum: the need to rethink the traditional Request for Proposal (RFP) process for association conferences. As associations seek more strategic, outcome-driven events, industry leaders argue that the current model, often rigid, transactional, and unclear, no longer serves the needs of associations or their partners.

Article kindly provided by World PCO Alliance based on their Members' Insights

The issue gained momentum at the **2025 ICCA Congress** in Porto, Portugal, where stakeholders across markets recognised the same frustrations with regards to the traditional RFP process, which directly impacts the quality of delivery and long-term outcomes. The congress provided an opportunity to confirm that these concerns were shared worldwide. From there, a white paper emerged as a way to move from conversation to action, capturing best practices, structuring the dialogue, and offering practical recommendations. The white paper, *Reimagining RFP Processes for International Association Meetings: A Blueprint*, is the result of a collaboration between the **World PCO Alliance** and **ICCA**. The Alliance had several of its partners involved in the drafting of the article, namely, **Juan José García, María Mariscal Escalera (Bco Congresos), Ksenija Polla (Talley Management Group), Gregg Talley (Talley Management Group) Liu Ping (China Star),** and **Patranuch Sudasna (CDM-Conference & Destination Management)**.

The white paper proposes a fresh perspective on the RFP process, so that the process can adapt to an industry that is constantly shifting. In this article, the Alliance partners involved in the white paper offer their insight on the current challenges with the traditional RFP process and how the industry can move toward a more effective, collaborative approach.

Why the RFP Process Needs to Change

The core challenge is simple: this is not a static issue. The way we plan, procure, and deliver congresses keeps evolving, but the RFP process has not kept pace. As Ksenija Polla notes, "the world around meetings has changed, but many of our RFP frameworks have not."

What may once have been fit for purpose is now often too disconnected from the real goals associations and partners are trying to achieve. Associations increasingly prioritise impact, sustainability, legacy, and community alignment, yet these values are not always reflected in their RFPs. This disconnect leads to confusion, misaligned proposals, and wasted effort on all sides. For destinations, venues, and PCOs, unclear RFPs create significant challenges, and it is impossible to effectively respond to an RFP without a clear definition of expectations or evaluation criteria. If associations want to identify the best partners for their objectives, then they need to be clear about these objectives. That means greater transparency around priorities, clearer evaluation criteria, and clearer distinction between what is essential and what is simply a nice-to-have.

Patranuch Sudasna echoes this from a local PCO perspective, emphasising that expectations and event design have evolved, and the RFP process must evolve with them. "By allowing a bit more flexibility and earlier dialogue, it enables PCOs to contribute with more meaningful ideas, bring in local insights, and tailor solutions more effectively."

Why This Must Remain an Ongoing Conversation

Every meeting brings different dynamics: new stakeholder expectations, changing budgets, sustainability priorities, and increasingly complex local coordination.

The RFP process is shaped by governance, culture, risk, and long-standing habits. Real change requires ongoing dialogue, continuous refinement, and shared learning across the ecosystem. If the conversation stops, the danger is that the industry reverts to outdated practices that no longer reflect current needs.

What Practical Changes Does the Industry Need?

On a practical level, the Alliance partners involved in the white paper hope to see:

- clearer articulation of priorities and evaluation criteria;
- more transparency around what truly matters to associations;
- a more proportionate, staged approach to bidding;
- earlier dialogue to test alignment before full proposals are required.



The importance of reducing wasted time and effort cannot be stressed enough. Preparing a personalised and tailored proposal is a huge effort. The more precise the RFPs are, the better the chances to get higher quality submissions that accurately reflect an association's expectations.

On a mindset level, the shift is even more significant. The industry needs to move away from viewing the RFP as a procurement formality and towards seeing it as the beginning of a strategic partnership, one grounded in trust, clarity, and shared purpose.

This sense of partnership is critical to the revision of the RFP process, because associations are not simply selecting their PCO, destination or venue, but a partner that can bring the value the association needs to ensure that the event is of the highest quality. Yet, associations do not necessarily view their partners, particularly PCOs, in this strategic context. As a result, often PCOs are being selected too late, expected to navigate rigid structures, and struggle to be recognised as strategic partners rather than logistical executors.

Why This Matters for PCOs

Challenges around the RFP process strike at the heart of how PCOs demonstrate their value. "PCOs serve as the central link between associations and local partners," says Juan Jose Garcia, "making their insight essential to improving the RFP process." In the end, the call to rethink the RFP process is not about adding complexity, it is about stripping away what no longer serves us. PCOs do not need a more complicated RFP process. They need a clearer and more transparent one.

Reframing the RFP as the beginning of a partnership rather than a transactional checkpoint is central to that evolution. When associations lead with intention, clearly articulating what they value, how decisions will be made, and what success truly looks like, everyone benefits. If associations lead this change, the rest of the ecosystem will follow.

At the heart of this transformation are PCOs. More than just delivery teams, PCOs are uniquely positioned to bridge perspectives and illuminate the gaps that often go unseen. PCOs can help drive this shift because they see the disconnect from every side. Their insight, combined with a more open and collaborative approach from associations and partners, can reshape the RFP process into a tool that strengthens relationships, elevates outcomes, and reflects the realities of today's meetings landscape.

The opportunity is clear: by rethinking how we begin the conversation that should lie at the heart of the RFP process, industry members can fundamentally improve how they work with each other and with associations... and ultimately, how meetings can deliver the impact they want.

Beyond **Good Intentions**

Navigating from Measurement to Power Shifters in Sustainability



Speaking about sustainability, transparency, and meaningful adaptation requires courage. As an industry built on connection, we now connect people for a purpose that goes beyond the event itself, strengthening knowledge, creating long-term value, and delivering measurable outcomes. When we operate this way, our impact becomes a legacy that lasts.

Author: Elena Fis, Sustainability Manager at Kenes Group, (who has seen it all or almost all… including the recycling bins no one used.)

Sustainability Claims in the Events Industry

If you have worked in the meetings industry long enough, you know there are at least two types of sustainability claims: The first is aspirational, often expressed as "we care deeply about the planet and our community;" the second is evidence-based, grounded in measurable outcomes such as, "we reduced waste by 42%, diverted 1.2 tons of materials, and planted 2,445 trees in Tanzania."

For years, our industry has lived in the comfortable space of good intentions. We meant to be sustainable, we aspired to be responsible, and we hoped our events were greener than the buffet salad. But hope is not a strategy, and aspiration is not impact. Today, sustainability, ESG, and social responsibility are the real currency of credibility and trust. At **Kenes Group**, we are actively navigating sustainability initiatives and strategies, training for our teams and clients, DEI frameworks, carbon footprint calculation, accessibility issues and many more. Because we all clearly see that the world has changed.

This is the Era of 'Show me how you do it'

We know well enough, these days, that clients and other stakeholders want proof and alignment, attendees want transparency and honesty, and regulators want everything and even more. At Kenes, this transformation did not happen overnight, it emerged through a well-planned three-year journey of building the right foundations, embedding consistent practices, and integrating the principles of ESG into our strategy. Most importantly, it came from learning how to measure what we once only talked about, turning intention into evidence, and evidence into progress.

Measurement: The Moment Sustainability Grows Up

Measuring sustainability in events can sometimes feel like trying to estimate how many delegates actually recycled their coffee cups, instead of tossing them into the nearest bin while rushing to the next session. We think we know, but do we really?

Yet, measurement is where credibility and transparency start: In 2023, we measured our first full carbon footprint for a congress; in 2024, we scaled it to three events, earned ISO 20121:2024 certification, and integrated sustainability into 90% of our congresses; and In 2025, we doubled that measurement again with the launch of the **Kenes Forest**, in partnership with **Treebytree**. We are restoring degraded landscapes in Tanzania through **Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration**, working directly with local farmers to regenerate trees that provide food, medicine, and shelter, whilst improving soil health and water cycles. To date, 2,445 trees planted have offset 66,800+ kg of CO_2 from employee business travel. This initiative restores ecosystems, empowers communities, and demonstrates that sustainability requires both environmental and social accountability.

Sustainability has also become a spreadsheet, a dashboard, even a set of KPIs that could be audited, challenged, and improved. Sometimes these KPIs showed us things we probably did not want to hear, like the fact that the 'eco-friendly' bags were not as eco-friendly as we thought. The lanyards and badges that were made from more sustainable materials, cannot be recycled as local infrastructure does not support it. But that is the beauty of data, it keeps us honest!

> *ESG provides the structure, legacy delivers the proof.*

ESG and Legacy: From Framework to Lasting Impact

ESG is becoming a structured, measurable way of working that shapes how we plan, operate, and leave impact behind. It strengthens decision-making, elevates accountability, and turns every event into an opportunity to model responsible practices. We are all being asked uncomfortable questions: "Are our suppliers ethical?" "Are our teams diverse?" "Are our emissions decreasing or just being offset?"

These questions force us to look beyond recycling bins and into the systems that shape our organisations. When done right, ESG becomes a superpower, building trust, reducing risk, attracting partners who want more than box-ticking, and creating conditions for long-term impact. ESG 'is' the framework, while legacy is what happens when that framework comes to life.

In 2025, our events evolved into regenerative drivers, bringing ideas, relationships, and commitments to life that continued growing long after closing ceremonies. Legacy becomes undeniable when an event stops being a date on a calendar and starts reshaping the world around it: community projects that outlive the ceremony, partnerships that strengthen social responsibility, reforestation initiatives, scholarship funds, shifts in public health awareness, new benchmarks for accessibility, etc.

Legacy has evolved from 'nice to have' into strategic expectation. It reflects a deeper transformation in how events are conceived and delivered: ESG provides the structure, legacy delivers the proof.

Why This Matters

Sustainability has long become about doing better, intentionally, measurably, and together. But we all should admit this: No congress organiser can solve climate change; no event can fix global inequality; no sustainability manager can single-handedly transform the whole industry. What we can do is shift systems, one event at a time.

At the **European Society for Paediatric Infectious Diseases 2025**, we did not just serve a meatless lunch option and hope someone would notice. We turned lunch into an opportunity for behavioural change. Attendees received real-time app notifications inviting them to choose the plant-based meal, not with guilt, but with a friendly reminder that their plate could be a climate action tool. Small nudges, repeated consistently, changed habits.

We influence systems and biases within them. We turn claims into outcomes, and outcomes into measurable impact. When we speak about the future, it means that we look into a verified, transparent, and at the same time ambitious strategising. At Kenes, the next chapter is about the continuous improvement of what we already do and constant growth:

- Continuing education, awareness and engagement;
- ESG integration and governance;
- Regenerative Impact and Legacy;
- Sustainable Event operations;
- DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion);
- Suppliers' accountability;
- Stakeholders' engagement;
- Transparent reporting;
- Sustainable Event Goals (SEGs).

Most importantly, we need a lot of courage to speak about sustainability, measurement, disclosure and, essentially, adaptation that drives positive change. Our industry is built on bringing people together, and we bring them together for something bigger and more impactful. Not just to exchange knowledge, but to empower it sustainably. Not just to host events, but to leave legacies. Not just to make claims, but to demonstrate positive outcomes. If we do this right, the impact of our events will last far longer than we ever can imagine.

Meetings as a Practical Approach to **Event Pollution**

The global events industry has never pretended to be light on its feet. It thrives on bringing people together in physical spaces that demand energy, logistics and a certain degree of excess. Sustainability, in that context, has often felt like an awkward add-on rather than a defining principle.



Author: Conor Riordan, Content Editor at ExpoPlatform

That is changing, but not through idealism alone. A more pragmatic model is taking shape, one that accepts the structural realities of events and focuses on balancing impact rather than eliminating it entirely.

One of the clearest expressions of this shift is the growing use of structured carbon offsetting. **ExpoPlatform** has long been pushing this approach forward through initiatives like the **Meetings Make Trees** programme. The concept is direct. Confirmed meetings between attendees and exhibitors contribute to a commitment of trees being planted. It means activity that already defines an event's success becomes the mechanism for environmental action.

This model introduces a level of precision that sustainability efforts often lack. Meetings are already tracked as a core performance metric. Linking them to tree planting means organisers can estimate impact in real terms. The more engagement an event generates, the greater its contribution. It embeds sustainability into the commercial engine of the industry rather than positioning it as a secondary concern.

There is also a strategic advantage. Structured programmes create a narrative that is both measurable and marketable. Organisers can demonstrate environmental responsibility without diluting the experience. Exhibitors are incentivised to participate more actively. Attendees gain a clearer sense that their presence has a positive effect. It is not a complete solution, but it is a practical one that can be implemented now.

That pragmatism matters because the industry's underlying dynamics are difficult to change. The event sector is not designed with environmental efficiency in mind by its very nature. Major exhibitions and conferences draw thousands of attendees across borders. They arrive by plane, train, car and bus. Each journey carries a carbon cost that cannot be ignored. The demands only increase once inside the venue. Heating, cooling, lighting and digital infrastructure operate at full capacity for days at a time.

Exhibitors add another layer of complexity. They compete for attention in crowded halls. They deploy large screens, immersive installations and high-intensity lighting. They offer hospitality in the form of coffee bars, snacks and branded experiences. These elements are central to the commercial logic of events. Removing them risks weakening the value proposition.

The same tension appears in catering and materials. Visitors spend long hours on site. Organisers must provide diverse food options that meet expectations. That means volume and variety, often accompanied by waste. Packaging, promotional materials and stand construction all contribute to the environmental footprint.

Sustainability can feel like an impossible brief against this backdrop. Yet it is rising on the priority list for event professionals. Not as an overriding principle, but as a constraint that must be managed intelligently.

There is a risk in pushing too far, too fast. If sustainability measures undermine the experience or commercial viability of an event, they will not endure. Organisers, venues and exhibitors operate in a competitive landscape. They are under constant pressure to deliver more engaging and differentiated experiences. Digital options have sharpened that pressure. In-person events must justify their ROI.

This reality demands balance. Incremental improvements are being made. Reusable signage, recyclable materials and modular stand designs are becoming more common. Venues are experimenting with energy efficiency and waste management systems. Electric shuttle services are being introduced to reduce local transport emissions.

Partnerships are evolving as well. Environmental organisations are increasingly involved in post-event processes, repurposing materials and redistributing surplus resources. Research into alternative materials continues, with paper-based

adhesives and lower-impact construction elements under development. Some organisers are investing heavily in this space, searching for scalable solutions.

These efforts signal progress, but they do not yet resolve the core issue. The structure of events still generates significant emissions, particularly through travel. That is not easily reduced without limiting attendance and reach. This is why carbon offsetting is gaining traction as a bridging strategy. It addresses emissions that cannot currently be eliminated. It allows the industry to maintain its core functions while taking responsibility for its impact.

Critics are right to question offsetting when it is used superficially. It cannot replace meaningful change. But in the context of events, structured offsetting programmes offer a more credible approach. They are tied to real activity. They are measurable. They can be refined over time. The concept of holding steady is important. Maintaining current levels of impact while offsetting them effectively is not a failure. It is a controlled position that prevents regression while enabling gradual improvement. In a complex system, that is a realistic outcome.

Looking ahead, integration will be key. Sustainability must move from the margins into the core of event design and measurement. Programmes that connect environmental action to business outcomes provide a template for that shift.

The industry will continue to evolve. New materials and technologies will emerge. Venues will become more efficient. Waste streams will be reduced. Travel may become less carbon intensive. These changes will take time. In the meantime, being proactive and realistic is essential. Recognise the constraints. Act within them. Use tools that deliver measurable impact. Communicate transparently with stakeholders.

The event industry will not abandon scale or experience. Its value lies in connection and shared moments that cannot be replicated digitally. The challenge is to sustain that value while managing its environmental cost. Structured offsetting, embedded within the mechanics of events, offers a way forward. It turns participation into contribution. It aligns commercial success with environmental responsibility.



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