

Headquarters

SEPTEMBER 2026 #126 BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE MEETINGS INDUSTRY

IWRA

Where Water Shapes Policy

Mayvin Global

Mission and Margins for Global Associations

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Making the Strategic Case for Destinations

visitBerlin

Building a New Model for Convention Cities

RAI Amsterdam

Giving Events a Second Life Beyond the Walls

When Work Never Switches Off
A Conversation with **Stress Matters**



SKILLS THAT TRAVEL

BUILDING TRUSTED CREDENTIALS FOR A GLOBAL WORKFORCE



POLAND'S GREEN TRANSFORMATION OF THE MEETINGS INDUSTRY

In Poland, as across the world, an increasing number of cities are taking action to adapt to the evolving expectations of travellers, event organisers and local communities. Sustainable development is becoming a cornerstone of destination competitiveness. Conference and event organisers are increasingly demanding green certifications, locally sourced products, digital materials instead of printed ones, and energy-efficient infrastructure solutions.

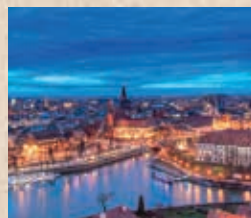
Polish cities are responding to this transformation by actively embracing environmentally and socially responsible practices. They are modernising their tourism strategies, introducing certification systems, investing in sustainable

transport and engaging in the education of local communities. Sustainable development is undoubtedly set to remain a key direction for destinations worldwide in the years ahead, not only within the context of business tourism.

This trend is confirmed, among others, by research conducted by ICCA as part of the Global Association Meetings Protocol, which identifies Sustainability, Equity and Legacy as the leading one of the four main strategic priorities for convention bureaux, according to association clients.

Many conference, congress and hotel facilities place strong emphasis on quality and hold certifications such as Green Key, BREEAM, LEED and WELL.

POLISH GREEN CHAMPIONS



KRAKÓW, GDAŃSK, WROCŁAW AND SZCZECIN are among the so-called Polish Green Champions – cities actively developing a sustainable offer for the meetings industry. Their presence in the international Global Destination Sustainability Index (GDS-Index) confirms Poland's growing importance on the map of responsible MICE destinations. Each of these cities implements its own strategy, combining environmental, social and business objectives.

KRAKÓW – A LEADER IN TRANSFORMATION

Kraków was the first Polish city to join the GDS-Index in 2022, initiating a systematic approach to measuring and managing the impact of the tourism and events sector. The city continues to improve its performance – in the 2025 edition it was recognised among the "Most Improved Destinations". Its activities include the development of urban policies, close cooperation with the industry, and the implementation of reporting tools. The ICCA Congress held in Kraków in 2022 was also organised in line with the principles of a sustainable event.

GDAŃSK – URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

The Baltic city joined the GDS-Movement in 2023 and focuses on strategic management and the integration of sustainability policies with the MICE sector. A key element is cross-sector collaboration and the implementation of ESG standards in tourism and events. One of the city's major challenges is the transformation of former shipyard areas into a new urban district, featuring venues such as ECS, Montownia and 100cznia. Gdańsk made a significant leap forward in sus-

tainable tourism development, advancing by 15 positions in the Global Destination Sustainability Index 2025. In the same year, the city hosted the workshop "Regenerating Polish Destinations: Sustainable Tourism in Action" with GDS-Movement experts Marta Mills and Janie Neumann.

WROCŁAW – INTEGRATION AND ACCELERATION

Wrocław joined the GDS-Movement in March 2025, treating its membership as a catalyst for further professionalisation of sustainability efforts. The city focuses on integrating the local MICE community (for example through the publication of the "Green Events in Wrocław" catalogue) and implementing international ESG standards. Participation in GDS-Index enables Wrocław to benefit from benchmarking tools and to further develop its event offering in line with global trends.

SZCZECIN – THE "FLOATING GARDEN" STRATEGY IN PRACTICE

Szczecin joined the GDS-Index on 20 March 2025, becoming the fourth Polish city to participate in the global sustainability benchmarking programme. A major milestone followed in June 2026, when Szczecin hosted the GDS-Forum & Impact Day on 16-18 June, bringing international destination leaders and sustainability experts to the city.



Editor's Notes



The **Personal Time** behind the **Credentials**

Author: Jesús Guerrero Chacón, HQ's Deputy Editor

Talent attraction and talent retention have become familiar themes across the meetings industry. Professionals are asked to become more qualified, more visible, more connected, more technologically literate and more internationally mobile, while managing travel, networking and the operational demands of events that move across cities, time zones and weekends.

Education programmes, certifications and leadership initiatives have become part of the professional landscape, reflecting a sector that wants to raise standards and respond to demands around technology, sustainability, accessibility and client expectations. The pressure begins when certification sessions and in-person learning are added to a profession that already spends a significant part of its time in airports, hotels and event venues.

Industry calendars increasingly include work outside official event dates, with long-haul journeys often adding governance meetings, strategy sessions or certification before a congress or trade show. Professional development is also scheduled around major events or weekends, making participation easier while using time once reserved for recovery. Over a year, these commitments form a second layer of work that affects visibility, networks and career progression, especially for younger professionals, freelancers and small business owners.

Organisations including **Stress Matters**, **EventWell**, **ICCA**, **PCMA**, **MPI**, **SITE** and the **Event Industry Council (EIC)** have helped bring wellbeing into the mainstream conversation. Recent initiatives range from ICCA's *Event Mental Wellbeing Toolkit for Associations* and the EIC's *Futures Landscape Report* to PCMA's content exploring the impact of long hours and constant travel on younger professionals. Research continues to highlight concerns around stress, workload and burnout, while talent shortages remain a recurring topic at conferences, board meetings and industry forums.

Recovery time receives less attention than credentials and career advancement, yet it affects how people learn, negotiate and make decisions. Early arrivals, hosted experiences, retreats and education may offer real value, but they also consume weekends, travel days and personal time rarely counted in workload or wellbeing. Sleep, family life and time away from work remain invisible inputs.

The industry measures economic impact, legacy and sustainability with growing sophistication, but rarely the cumulative effect of its working practices on those delivering them. Skills development often depends on professionals finding extra time while organisational calendars continue to absorb evenings, weekends and travel days.

This edition explores education, credentials and career development through the question of how learning is built into professional life. New technologies, changing business models and evolving client expectations leave little space for standing still. How learning is delivered, where it takes place and whose time it occupies may become just as important as the credentials themselves.

Control of time is central: travel, weekends, family, recovery, learning and personal time. Professional development, wellbeing and talent retention are often treated separately, but event professionals' experiences show how closely they are connected.



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INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS



The destination economy, place leadership and the catalytic role of business events



What If the **Meeting** Is Becoming a **Place-Making Tool**?

Author: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager

I have spent much of this year reading, listening and writing about what destinations want from business events. The most interesting finding is that attendance no longer reigns supreme. The new *UIA International Meetings Statistics Report* (which I break down in this issue) provides the scale. In 2025, Europe accounted for 54% of international association meetings, across 1,445 cities and 173 countries. The longer view is equally instructive: 49.8% of meetings with known attendance between 2006 and 2025 had between 101 and 500 participants, while another 27.4% had 100 or fewer.

Those figures matter because they challenge the industry's fixation with size. A few years ago, during one of my press trips, I asked the host why there were no large convention centres in that city. The reply was telling: "Our strategy within the sector does not focus on mega-events, but rather on smaller meetings where working groups can move forward their agenda. That is the direction our industry is taking!" Tallin was right about that. Today, the association meeting market is largely composed of gatherings small enough to fit comfortably within a specialist community, yet potentially significant enough to influence research, policy, and professional careers.

This is where **IMEX's** new *Place Leadership and the Business Events Sector* white paper comes in particularly handy. Its central thesis is that business events should strive to shape places, not simply selling them. The paper calls for closer alignment between event portfolios and economic and innovation strategies, co-designed legacy, stronger cross-sector partnerships, better intelligence-sharing with governments and a more credible role in public policy. A convincing argument with just one caveat: we should be careful not to turn place leadership into another lip service exercise. The test is whether a congress aligns to something a city is trying to achieve.

Truth be told, that is where some of the work we have covered in this issue proves useful. **visitBerlin** is weaving government,

science, business and civil society into a wider ecosystem, drawing on its **Impact Programme** to give congresses greater social, environmental and educational value. **RAI Amsterdam** has explored how a major scientific congress can engage with the city through experiences designed around ageing and public screening. **Tokyo CVB** showcases a city employing technology to remove barriers, while tapping into its past, culture and human networks to craft encounters that no algorithm can yet emulate. **IAPCO's** work with emerging professionals, on the other hand, reminds us that associations are communities through which knowledge, networks and careers are built.

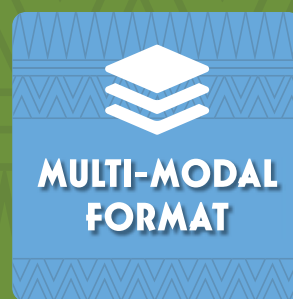
The **IMEX** paper argues for legacy programmes involving research partnerships, student participation, skills development, community engagement and innovation. That implies a broader definition of impact, in which a framework is not confined to charitable projects or carbon figures. For associations, this could become one of the primary factors in destination selection: a congress that connects a young researcher with a laboratory, a professional with a future employer, or a specialist with a new international collaborator will never appear in a hotel-night calculation. Something that runs through my talks with **JMIC's** new director, **Dorian Kronenwerth**, and **jwc Partner, Kai Hattendorf**.

The sector has long asked governments to recognise its economic contribution. The stronger advocacy argument may be that business events facilitate access to global networks, specialised knowledge, talent and investment intelligence. The white paper explicitly calls for this intelligence to become part of public decision-making. If we want a seat at the table, we need the capabilities to move beyond the conference centre. The **UIA** numbers tell us how large the association meeting ecosystem is; the **IMEX** paper asks what that ecosystem could actually do!





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Bridging **Science** and **Policy**

Inside IWRA's Global Water Mission

As climate change, food security and economic development become ever more closely linked to water, scientific expertise alone is no longer enough. For the **International Water Resources Association (IWRA)**, creating lasting impact means ensuring research informs policy, partnerships and practical action long after a congress has concluded.

Water has become central to debates on climate resilience, public health, energy, agriculture and economic development, making effective water governance one of the defining challenges of the 21st century. Addressing issues of such complexity demands more than scientific excellence. It requires organisations capable of connecting research with policy, bringing together institutions that rarely operate within the same space and creating opportunities for evidence to guide real-world decisions. For more than five decades, IWRA has sought to fulfil exactly that role. The association has grown into an independent international network bringing together more than 5,500 members and a wider subscriber community of over 12,000 professionals across around 160 countries. Its membership spans academia, governments, river basin organisations, utilities, multilateral institutions, the private sector and civil society, reflecting the interconnected nature of global water challenges.

For **Ignacio Deregibus, Executive Director of IWRA**, that breadth is precisely what distinguishes the organisation. “IWRA’s unique value lies in its ability to bridge science, policy and practice through a truly global, independent and interdisciplinary network.” IWRA does not promote specific political positions. It provides a neutral platform where scientific expertise, practical experience and policy priorities meet. Its objective is to support informed discussion and practical solutions while preserving the independence on which its reputation depends. As water issues become increasingly linked to climate change, biodiversity, food systems and economic resilience, Deregibus believes the need for independent, evidence-based dialogue will continue to grow. “Our ambition is not to become the largest organisation in the water sector, but to remain one of the most trusted global platforms where people come together to strengthen the future of water through informed dialogue, collaboration and action.”

Maintaining credibility requires a careful balance between relevance and independence. As scientific associations take a more visible role in international policy discussions, IWRA avoids acting as an advocacy organisation. Its role is to create the conditions for sound research to inform policy choices. “We do not seek to shape policy through advocacy alone;

we have created a global forum where science, policy and practice meet, enabling informed decisions that can lead to tangible improvements in water governance and sustainable development.”

The **World Water Congress** is the association’s flagship event and, according to Deregibus, its main vehicle for creating long-term impact. It brings together researchers, ministers, United Nations agencies, utilities, financial institutions, civil society organisations and young professionals to exchange perspectives rarely represented in the same forum.

For IWRA, the success of a congress is measured less by attendance figures than by the collaborations and initiatives that emerge afterwards. “We see our role not simply as organising congresses, but as creating lasting impact by connecting scientific excellence with policy dialogue and practical implementation.” Researchers and policymakers often work on different timescales and communicate in different ways. Science must account for complexity and uncertainty, while decision-makers need timely, practical evidence to inform policy. IWRA acts as an intermediary, making rigorous research more accessible without compromising its integrity. “Ultimately, our ambition is to ensure that scientific excellence does not remain within academic circles but contributes to real-world decisions.”

Communication is central to the association’s strategy. For Deregibus, credibility depends on producing robust science and ensuring reliable information reaches those able to turn it into action. “Communication is no longer simply about sharing information; it is about creating understanding, building trust and enabling action.” Through publications, webinars, specialist reports and digital engagement, IWRA extends the discussions initiated at its congresses, allowing learning to continue after delegates leave. Membership reflects the same principle. At a time when information is readily available, Deregibus argues that the value of a professional association lies less in accessing knowledge than in helping to shape it. “The value of membership today is no longer defined by access to information alone. Knowledge is available almost everywhere. What cannot be replicated online is meaningful engagement, trusted relationships and the opportunity to help shape the global water agenda.”





XIX WORLD WATER CONGRESS

International Water Resources Association (IWRA)
Marrakech, Morocco | 1-3 December 2025



IWRA encourages this engagement through its Geographical Chapters, Task Forces, **World Water Envoys Programme**, mentoring initiatives and specialist publications. Members contribute to scientific committees, collaborative projects and congress programmes, helping advance the discussions that influence the sector. “Membership today is about belonging to a global professional community rather than simply accessing information.” Managing a diverse international network requires balancing regional priorities with shared global concerns. Water issues vary significantly across regions, but many stem from common pressures. Deregibus sees IWRA’s ability to recognise these differences while encouraging shared learning as one of its strengths. “We recognise that water challenges are always local, but they are increasingly shaped by global trends such as climate change, population growth, urbanisation and geopolitical uncertainty. Our role is to create the space where local experience, scientific evidence and policy perspectives can come together to generate better solutions.”

The World Water Congress reflects this philosophy most clearly, reinforcing IWRA’s role as a bridge between science, policy and practice. The event provides a platform for presenting research and an environment where scientific evidence can inform policy discussions, practical implementation and international collaboration. Researchers,

ministers, multilateral organisations, utilities, businesses and young professionals meet to establish partnerships that continue after the congress. According to Deregibus, some of the event’s most valuable outcomes emerge outside the formal programme, where conversations often lead to research collaborations, institutional partnerships and policy initiatives: “One of the key lessons IWRA has learned over decades of organising the congresses is that lasting impact comes from sustained dialogue rather than one-off events.”



The Istanbul bid demonstrated a clear commitment to collaboration between science, governance and society while establishing the congress as a platform capable of delivering benefits well beyond the event itself.

Long-term impact also informs host selection. IWRA considers venue capacity and logistics, as well as whether cities and institutions are prepared to use the congress to advance academic cooperation, institutional development and policy innovation. “We are not simply looking for a place to organise a successful international congress; we are looking for partners who want to create lasting impact.” Istanbul will host the **XX World Water Congress** from 4 to 8 October 2027. Its location between Europe and Asia strengthened the bid, but Deregibus says the decision also reflected the destination’s alignment with IWRA’s long-term objectives. “Associations have a unique responsibility to ensure those two worlds continue to meet.”



JMIC: “One size fits all does not work anymore”

When the **Joint Meetings Industry Council (JMIC)** unveiled its new leadership at **IMEX Frankfurt** earlier this year, the announcement marked more than a change at the top. Alongside the appointment of **Dorian Kronenwerth** as **Executive Director**, the Council introduced its updated **Global Manifesto**, advanced the **Net Zero Carbon Events (NZCE)** initiative, and strengthened its evidence-based advocacy. In this interview, Kronenwerth discusses JMIC's priorities for the years ahead and explains why the future of business events depends on speaking with a stronger, more united voice.



Author: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager

JMIC's updated Global Manifesto looks beyond economic impact. What prompted this shift, and how should the industry communicate its value to policymakers?

The renewed version came from watching what moves governments versus what we assumed would. Framing business events as engines of growth and innovation got us listened to; abstract papers rarely got us funded. What works for London or Paris is not necessarily right for Sydney or Johannesburg. The third edition of the Global Manifesto is therefore less a declaration than an operating toolkit, combining 15 actionable pathways with real-world case studies from **The Iceberg** database. The aim is to equip regional associations with locally relevant evidence they can take to policymakers, rather than relying on broad, aspirational messages. The risks are not abstract. **VisitBritain** is scaling back its business events unit, whilst punitive event taxes are surfacing in several markets. The industry needs to communicate more specifically, connecting its US\$759 billion (approx. €666 billion) in direct spending and US\$1.8 trillion (approx. €1.58 trillion) in total economic impact to current policy decisions. One size fits all does not work anymore.

How do you build consensus across such a diverse industry without diluting JMIC members' identities and priorities?

Our ambition is to create a stronger, more aligned voice, not tell it what to do. We represent the industry, listen, and develop practical tools around a strong central message that members can adapt to their own markets and destinations. That is what the Manifesto is built to do: to flex global, high-level thinking into local contexts policymakers can understand. Ultimately, what matters is that the industry is heard by decision-makers because we generate impact, revenue, jobs and legacy. We ask

members to agree on where a single voice is worth more than several accurate ones. The sharper question now is internal: what should JMIC's own voice encompass, and where should it deliberately stay quiet to let members lead? We are in the middle of a genuine reflection process, and I would rather let the outcome speak for itself than characterise it prematurely.

How should JMIC redefine its advocacy in this geopolitical context, and what responsibility does it have in promoting the free flow of knowledge through international meetings?

Our mandate is the free movement of knowledge, expertise and people to meetings. That is not a political position, it is the core product we defend. The effect of cross-border business events is enormous: our industry brings together the world's greatest minds in science, politics and economics, and without that, great things simply do not happen. But banging out numbers alone does not work. Our advocacy needs to be believable, with tangible, human elements alongside the economic ones, inspiring, not just quantifying, the impact of business events. What needs to change is not the mandate, it is the method. Moving from reactive statements after each disruption to building the evidence base for mobility before it becomes a crisis.

What will be the biggest sustainability challenge: setting common standards, driving adoption or demonstrating measurable impact?

Standards were the hard part five years ago; now it is adoption and proof. The NZCE is a powerful advocacy platform that shows the industry is serious about climate action. With our financial backers, we are moving towards standardised implementation while accelerating decarbonisation across venues. Two developments give me real confidence: the

appointment of **Johanna Fuhlendorf** as **Programme Director** gives the initiative focused leadership, while **Greenview**, as our technical partner, brings the measurement rigour needed to turn ambition into auditable progress. The launch of the **NZCE Academy**, with its first courses delivered this year in partnership with **GDS-Movement**, is another important milestone. Adoption is already visible in practice: across JMIC's membership, sustainability is becoming a core criterion in RFPs rather than a nice-to-have. Organisations that fail to embrace the journey to net zero will quietly lose business to those that do.

NZCE is an example of JMIC taking a leadership role by curating a tangible product the industry can use. The Board is now considering where else we can provide similar support. While the industry is busy operating, we have the headspace to step back, invite perspectives, listen, and turn that thinking into the next meaningful initiative.

Has the industry done enough to articulate the business case for sustainability and event legacies, or are we still relying too heavily on moral arguments?

Net zero does not have to mean higher costs. We have seen at COP conferences that new technologies often look pricier at first, but as they become mainstream, scale brings costs down. Today, the gap is mostly educational. Cost-neutral products and services already exist; the industry simply needs to know where to find them. That is the role of the NZCE

Academy: providing practical guidance to help organisations turn their pledges into action.

Beyond that, I agree that we have relied too much on the moral argument and not enough on resilience. Sustainability measures (efficient venues, smarter logistics, local sourcing, etc.) are also about risk management, cost structuring and supply chain stability. The organisations getting this right are not out-competing on ethics; they are gaining an edge in efficiency and legacy outcomes, ultimately securing repeat bids and public funding. We need to tell that story in procurement and finance language, not just impact reporting. That is where the Manifesto and its case studies earn their value, providing evidence worldwide.

What is the one conversation the industry urgently needs to have?

I would like to see our industry engaging far more with political houses, not just those responsible for tourism, culture or sports, but economy too. Business events are powerful drivers of innovation, trade, education and economic diplomacy, generating value far beyond their direct footprint. For JMIC, my ambition is to see the industry recognised as the front door for credible data, shared definitions and evidence-based advocacy. But if I am honest, the conversation we are still avoiding is whether the sector needs fewer, better-coordinated organisations rather than more initiatives duplicating the same solutions. That fragmentation weakens the industry's credibility.



Mission and Margin

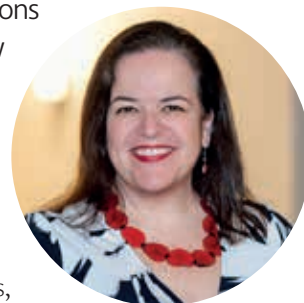
The Courage to Outgrow the Model

Deanna Varga, CEO of Mayvin Global, speaks to *HQ* on what two years of research into associations reveal about financial resilience, risk, governance, innovation and the harder question of how organisations remain relevant when the assumptions underpinning their success begin to change.

For an association, financial sustainability is rarely a matter of finding one more source of income. It is a question of whether the organisation possesses the commercial judgement, governance and institutional confidence to build what it will need next. That is the central thread running through *Mission and Margin*, the three-part white paper series by Mayvin Global, which moves from revenue diversification to risk and, finally, innovation. Its case studies range from the 133-year-old **Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy (AusIMM)** to the **European Society of Association Executives (ESAE)**, illustrating a sector whose greatest constraints are not always financial.

According to Varga, the first obstacle often sits around the Board table. Professional expertise is indispensable, but it does not automatically confer commercial judgement. Financial stewardship, meanwhile, is not the same discipline as generating new income. That distinction becomes particularly important in international associations, where representative, volunteer-led Boards can be large and strategically complex. “Associations are often governed and led by people with exceptional expertise in their profession or sector. That expertise is essential. They understand the members, the profession and the environment in which the association operates. But sector expertise is not necessarily commercial expertise.”

The implication is uncomfortable: associations may have considerable knowledge of their constituencies while lacking some of the capabilities required to build a resilient enterprise. Varga argues for an external commercial lens, whether located at Board, committee or executive level, coupled with a longer horizon than the tenure of individual directors or conventional strategic plans. That horizon also changes the meaning of financial success. *Mission and Margin* is deliberately provocative about a word many organisations still avoid: profit. Varga sees the reluctance as more than semantics. If an association regards financial surplus as somehow incompatible with purpose, it can inadvertently limit its ability to invest in people, technology, services and future capacity. The distinction from a commercial company lies in where the value goes. “I am quite dogged about the role of profit. I do not understand why we should be uncomfortable with an association making a profit. If an organisation generates more income than it spends, it has greater capacity to invest back into its members, its people, its profession or the sector it exists to serve. Surely that is a measure of success.”



[Download the White Paper Series 1-3 here →](#)



The case studies suggest that diversification is consequently less about inventing an entirely new business than about recognising the latent value in what an association already possesses. AusIMM has extended established strengths in events and professional development; the **World Federation for Ultrasound in Medicine and Biology** developed a new open-access publication in response to changes in the publishing market. The underlying lesson is one of commercial interpretation: content, audiences, intellectual property, relationships and expertise are assets whose potential may change as markets do. AusIMM, for instance, now derives around half its revenue from professional development, while 42% of its online course participants and 51% of professional certificate participants are international. Yet, recognising an opportunity and having the organisational capacity to pursue it are separate capabilities. “The organisations that succeed are able to see the opportunity, understand what they are already good at, have the courage to test it, learn from what happens and then adapt or scale accordingly.”

That idea becomes more consequential in the second volume, where risk is recast as a question of readiness. Varga resists the assumption that governance becomes better as risk diminishes. A well-governed association can tolerate uncertainty precisely because the boundaries for decision-making are understood. A risk appetite statement, she argues, can turn an instinctive objection into a structured conversation about investment, uncertainty, time horizon and consequences. The white paper similarly argues that risk mitigation is about readiness, supported by clear frameworks, capability and a culture of experimentation. The **Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists** provides an instructive counterpoint to the idea that complexity necessarily produces paralysis. Its governance structure encompasses more than 150 committees, yet she sees this as evidence that scale and agility need not be mutually exclusive when authority, delegation and accountability are clear.

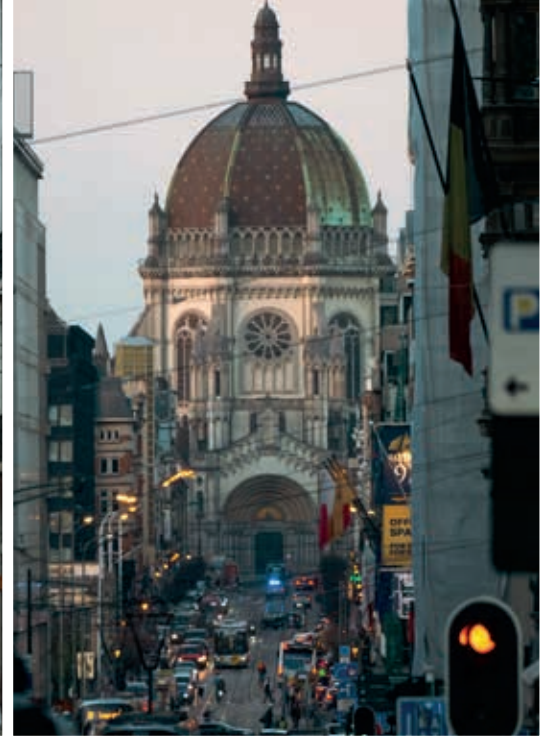
The ESAE case study adds another dimension. Organisational scale can itself shape the quality of strategic decision-making. A smaller association may have fewer layers between an idea and its execution, closer access to members and greater freedom to test an approach before committing significant resources. But agility without structure can become fragility. Lean teams can find themselves carrying disproportionate expectations, while critical knowledge may sit with one or two individuals. The challenge, then, is to retain its advantages as the organisation grows: clear accountability, short lines of decision-making and enough governance to provide direction without smothering initiative. “Being small does not have to mean thinking small.”



The third volume then asks what happens when an organisation becomes successful enough to mistake continuity for security. Varga's answer is striking as she places the problem partly in the quality of the questions Boards ask. Associations can become overly confident that they understand their members when they are, in fact, hearing mainly from their most vocal participants. “The squeaky wheel gets heard. The people who sit on committees, attend the AGM, complete every survey, turn up to events or contact the association with a strong view are often highly visible to Boards and management. Their views matter, but they are not necessarily representative of the majority.” That observation turns member engagement into a governance issue. Strategy built around the most visible constituency can preserve a model long after its wider relevance has begun to erode.

The case of the **Australian Business Events Association (ABEA)** takes the argument to its most consequential point. Varga asks Boards to contemplate a question few organisations would willingly put at the centre of a strategy meeting: “If we wound this organisation up tomorrow, who would care, and what would actually be lost?” It is a brutal test of institutional purpose. The answer points to the fact that protecting an organisation's identity, brand or governance pathway has become confused with protecting the mission itself. The fate of Meetings and Events Australia, which entered voluntary administration in March 2025 after remaining outside the consolidation that created ABEA, gives the question tangible weight.

That is where the three volumes converge. Financial strength creates room to manoeuvre; governance determines how that room is used; innovation tests whether the organisation remains capable of serving its purpose under new conditions. The final responsibility always belongs to the Board: not to predict the future, but to remain capable of seeing it. “The Board does not need a crystal ball. But it does need to be looking,” Varga concludes.



What the **UIA International Meetings Statistics 2026** Reveals about the **Association Meetings Market**

The latest *International Meetings Statistics Report* from the **Union of International Associations (UIA)**, published in June 2026, offers a useful measure of where association meetings are being held worldwide and how that geography is changing. Its 2025 figures do not overturn the established order. They do, however, contain several notable movements when set against the Q4 2025 update, which recorded meetings held in 2024.

Author: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager

Vienna Takes the Lead

The clearest change came at city level as Vienna moved into first place, replacing Brussels. Lisbon also strengthened its position, while London returned to the top ten. At the country level, South Korea climbed from sixth to second, while Austria rose from ninth to third. Behind these movements sits a market whose geographical centre remains remarkably familiar. The UIA recorded 9,281 meetings in the 2025 reporting year, across 173 countries and 1,445 cities. Its database now contains 591,890 meetings and 30,816 active international organisations known to have meetings activity.

The Q4 2025 update placed Brussels first in Europe, with 398 meetings recorded for 2024, followed by Vienna with 241. Lisbon stood fifth with 140, London tenth with 95 and

Berlin fifteenth with 76. The June 2026 report, based on 2025 meetings data, showed a different ranking. Vienna recorded 345 meetings, placing first globally, while Brussels followed with 329. Lisbon rose to 174, London to 128, and Copenhagen entered the global top ten with 124. Barcelona remained high at 151, while Rome recorded 120.

The change is significant, though it should not be mistaken for a wholesale redistribution of association business. Most of the cities appearing near the top have occupied these tables for years. What changes is their relative weight from one reporting year to the next. The UIA's own historical table makes that fluctuation visible: Vienna recorded 309 meetings in 2023, 250 in 2024 and 345 in 2025. Brussels moved from 678 to 422 and then 329 over the same period. Lisbon went from 161 to 144 and then 174.

A Stronger Asian Showing

The country rankings reveal an even more pronounced movement. The United States remained first, although its recorded meetings fell from 799 in 2024 to 665 in 2025. South Korea moved from sixth place, with 396 meetings, to second with 491; furthermore, South Korea's rise is particularly outstanding because it is mirrored at city level. Austria climbed from tenth with 334 to third with 454. Japan remained among the leaders, rising from 442 to 424 – enough to retain fourth place – while Belgium moved from second to fifth. Seoul recorded 216 meetings in 2025, placing third globally, compared with 201 in 2024. Tokyo remained in the top five with 156, while Bangkok recorded 131.

The numbers point to a market in which Asia has consolidated its place as the second major centre of association activity. Europe still dominates, accounting for 54% of meetings in 2025, while Asia accounted for 23%. The Americas represented 16%, Africa 4% and Australasia/Oceania 3%. The difference from the longer-term picture is modest: across the preceding 20 years, Europe accounted for 53% and Asia 24%. The annual figures therefore suggest continuity with a slight change in emphasis, rather than a dramatic geographical realignment.

UIA 2026 | Four Figures to Watch

- **54%** Europe's share of international association meetings in 2025
- **23%** Asia's share in 2025
- **1,445** cities represented in the 2025 reporting year
- **30,816** active international organisations known to have meetings activity

The Market Beneath the Headline Cities

The most revealing statistics may sit outside the rankings. Across the 20-year period covered by the UIA's meeting-size analysis, 49.8% of meetings with known participant numbers fell into the 101–500 delegate category. Another 27.4% had 100 participants or fewer. Meetings of more than 3,000 participants accounted for just 3.6%. That distribution puts the focus on mega-congresses into perspective. Much of the international association market is built around smaller

professional and scientific gatherings, where relationships with specialist communities can matter as much as exhibition space or auditorium capacity. For destinations, the opportunity extends well beyond the largest congresses, to the thousands of smaller meetings circulating through the international association network.

Three-day meetings account for 27.8% of all meetings recorded between 2006 and 2025, making them the most common format. Four-day meetings follow at 19.8%, while two-day meetings account for 18.1%. Taken together, meetings lasting two to four days represent 65.7% of the 20-year total. Only 7.7% lasted more than five days. That pattern suggests a remarkably consistent rhythm in association meetings: enough time to deliver a substantial scientific or professional programme, yet within a timeframe that remains manageable for delegates and organisers. The prevalence of three- and four-day formats also helps explain why the most valuable destination infrastructure is not necessarily designed around the largest possible event. Accessibility, adaptable meeting space, accommodation, transport and the surrounding intellectual and social offer all become part of the meeting experience.

A city bidding for association business is often competing for several days of engagement, not a single peak moment. The opportunity therefore lies in creating an environment that works from arrival to departure and gives organisers reasons to use the city beyond the conference programme itself.

A Dataset Still Taking Shape

The UIA states that the number of meetings recorded for the most recent year increases, on average, by about 11% during the following year as additional information is identified and verified. The 2026 edition therefore provides a substantial record of 2025 activity, but not necessarily its final count. A lower figure does not automatically mean that a destination has lost an equivalent share of its business, as the database continues to develop retrospectively.

The 2026 report nevertheless provides a clear picture of the association meetings market. Europe retains the largest share, while Asia remains firmly established as the second major regional centre. Vienna has taken the latest city lead, South Korea has made the strongest country-level advance among the leading destinations, and several European cities have changed places without disappearing from the upper reaches of the table. The more interesting story is not who occupies number one, but how much movement can occur within a market whose underlying geography remains largely consistent.

Check out and download the report here: uia.org

Developing an **Event Destination Case** with **jwc**

What if the problem is not that business events lack value, but that we have been asking the wrong questions of them? A destination may know how many delegates arrived, how much they spent and how many room nights an event generated, yet still struggle to explain what those events changed; or what they contributed to its wider ambitions. That is the question behind **jwc's Destination Development Model (DDM)**, developed with the **Singapore Tourism Board (STB)**. In this interview, **jwc Managing Partner Kai Hattendorf** discusses why the conversation needs to move from showing activity to prove relevance, and what that means for destinations seeking to make a stronger strategic case for business events.



What do traditional measures such as delegate spend and room nights fail to capture, and what prompted jwc to rethink how destinations evaluate success?

The challenge is that such metrics focus on activity rather than outcomes. Delegate numbers, room nights and visitor spend tell you how busy a destination was; not whether events are helping it become what it wants to be. Economic impact, when calculated properly, provides valuable insight, but only into economic outcomes.

That gap matters because governments do not fund activity, but outcomes such as talent, innovation, resilience, sustainability, economic positioning and community value. For decades, the industry has been fluent in outputs while largely silent in that 'second language'. As public funding tightens and scrutiny increases, 'we delivered X room nights' is no longer an answer to 'What did this do for the city?'

The Destination Development Model (DDM) is designed to close that gap. It sits above impact studies, connecting policy ambitions to what an event portfolio contributes across fifteen dimensions, grouped into four clusters: People & Community, Skills & Knowledge, Economic Impact, and Reputation & Legacy.

How can the DDM help destinations align event strategies with wider policy priorities while maintaining commercial viability?

Every project we undertake with the DDM begins with an analysis of the destination's own priorities. We score its policy ambitions across all fifteen dimensions, then assess

how its existing business events portfolio, from trade shows to government events, contributes to those goals, identifying both strengths and potential to advance specific priorities.

Commercial reality is part of that picture. The formats that drive commercial value, such as exhibitions and corporate events, are often the same ones delivering policy outcomes by bringing talent and capital together or activating multiple economic sectors. Alignment means recognising that the commercial engine can also deliver the public goal.

In practice, this enables better portfolio decisions. A bureau can make a more grounded case when bidding for events, while a destination can make more informed choices about infrastructure. The DDM insights allows policymakers and destination marketing organisation (DMO) marketers to weigh policy priorities and commercial return together, rather than treating them as separate cases.

Why was Singapore the right environment in which to test the model, and what did the pilot reveal?

Singapore was the right first partner because it offered three things the model needed: strong policy alignment, a mature business events market and advanced data availability. Its explicit policy ambitions and depth of data provided an environment in which to genuinely stress-test the framework. The pilot also included an academic component with the **Singapore Institute of Technology**, where students scanned potential data sources for each dimension, providing an early, independent indication that the model is actually measurable.

The findings remain with Singapore, as DDM results are confidential to each client. However, **Ong Huey Hong, STB Assistant Chief Executive**, said that: “The DDM pilot offers a structured way to consider how business events can drive meaningful outcomes to the destination beyond the event itself. (...) We want to ensure that growth is underpinned by lasting value for our destination, industries and communities, and the DDM gives us an evidence-based framework to demonstrate that.”

How does the DDM approach outcomes that are difficult to quantify?

We do not pretend to make the intangible perfectly tangible. Our model gives those outcomes a structured, comparable place in the assessment and it will only improve over time. It works in two layers. Drawing on industry data, case studies, jwc’s proprietary database and qualitative insights, we have developed a universal impact score that provides a destination-neutral baseline for assessing how different event types create impact. This is then adapted to each destination using its event mix and industry data. As a result, ‘knowledge exchange’ or ‘community impact’ becomes a dimension with a score, a policy target and a stated delta between the two.

Community legacy illustrates this logic. Its impact depends on whether the temporary expertise an event brings to a city is absorbed into permanent local structures. Factors such as event formats, programmes and attendee profiles can be assessed to produce a score. Across all fifteen dimensions, a consistent scale allows destinations to act on the findings rather than simply assert them.

Could the DDM change how destinations make the case for business events to policymakers?

The framework is built exactly for that conversation, and to express what events deliver in the language policymakers use (priorities, resource allocation and outcomes), allowing DMOs and convention and visitors bureaux to rewrite the script. Instead of defending a budget for a particular bid, a bureau can show where its event portfolio already advances policy goals, where the gaps are, and where the next bid, funding or portfolio choice could move the needle. This reframes events from a cost to be defended into an asset, or, more accurately, a toolbox to drive policy objectives before a finance ministry.

However, destinations still have to demonstrate the impact and value they bring, using the language and metrics



policymakers value. That is the potential of the model: a decision and alignment tool, rather than another lobbying metric. It also shows where business events are not the right lever for a particular ambition. That transparency gives the argument greater weight when it matters. For each destination, the DDM can therefore identify a unique set of priorities for the future.

Can the DDM work for destinations at different stages of development, and where should they start?

The universal base is the same for everyone, which makes destinations comparable. What varies is the destination-specific layer, and the depth of the analysis can be scaled with the data available. The more detailed the event and industry data, the more granular the analysis; where data is thinner, the model still works at a higher level.

That makes it viable for smaller and emerging destinations as well as mature ones. A destination just needs clearly defined policy priorities and access to an existing event data to get started. The first step is deliberately small: a guided self-assessment of policy targets, dimension by dimension, followed by an analysis of the local event mix. From there, the destination gets its own scorecard and identifies its gaps. At jwc, we are now working with a small founding group of destinations to co-develop the next phase of the model.

Curious to find out more? Visit jwc.eu.com

The Future of Hospitality is Human!

Ahead of the **Hotel Leadership Conference 2027**, presented by the **Master Innholders, Conference Chair Tej Walia MI** discusses next year's theme, **Unbreakable: The Human Advantage**, and explains why investing in people is the key to building stronger teams, stronger leaders and stronger businesses.

The 2027 conference theme places the human experience at centre stage. What does it mean in the context of developing hotel leaders?

For me, this theme comes down to what is happening in hotels right now. We are operating in an environment that is more demanding than most of us have seen. Teams are stretched, expectations are higher, and change is constant. It is very easy for leadership to become solely about keeping things moving.

But developing teams, and importantly, our future hotel leaders, cannot happen if we focus only on the day-to-day. When we talk about being 'unbreakable', we are not just talking about resilience. It is about leaders who do not lose their sense of people when everything else is pulling them towards process and pressure.

That is the real difference between great hotel leaders. Even when things are difficult, they give their teams something to hold onto: clarity, trust, and a sense that someone has their back.

It is also where this 'human advantage' emerges, something we are focusing on throughout this conference. You can fix systems and invest in technology. But you cannot automate how someone makes a team feel on a hard day. That human element is as important as the skills and knowledge future leaders need.

As Chair of the Hotel Leadership Conference, why was it important to put people at the heart of next year's agenda?

Culture, performance, guest experience, retention. All of this is built on people and the quality of leadership behind them. When we get that right, everything else strengthens, which is why it is at the heart of this year's conference agenda. We have pulled together a lineup of speakers that embody this focus on people. From the likes of **Jaz Ampaw-Farr, Co-Founder of Be Human First Ltd** to **Major Scotty Mills, Former Head of Performance** for all 6,500 of Britain's **Commando Green Berets**, our speakers are all about putting people first.

Things are moving quickly in the hotel industry. Advances in AI and technology help us improve efficiency, support decision-making and enhance how we operate. But they cannot replace the judgement, empathy and leadership that shape how teams feel and perform every day.

There is a responsibility on us, as leaders, to make sure that in adopting new tools, we do not lose sight of what holds the industry together, and it is why people have to sit at the centre of it all.

Technical skills can be taught, but the 'human advantage' suggests something deeper. Which personal qualities will always set great hospitality professionals apart?

Technical skills will always matter. We need people who understand the commercial side of the business, can run great operations and deliver consistently high standards. But those are the foundations. The qualities that define great hotel leaders go far beyond what can be taught in a training manual.

Curiosity is one of them. The best people I have worked with never stop asking questions or looking for better ways to do things. They are always learning because they know our industry never stands still.

I would say emotional intelligence is increasingly important. Great leaders understand that every team member is motivated differently. They know when to challenge, support and listen. That ability to bring out the best in people creates stronger teams and, ultimately, better guest experiences.

Above all, it is authenticity. People do not expect leaders to have all the answers, but they expect them to be genuine. Teams can tell when a leader truly cares, is prepared to roll up their sleeves, and will be there during difficult moments as well as successful ones. That kind of leadership builds trust, the foundation of every high-performing team.





Many young people still do not see hospitality as a first-choice career. What can employers and educators do to change this?

There have been some great initiatives in recent years to bring young people into hospitality. However, the unfortunate truth is that our industry is still often seen as a stopgap career or a stepping stone to something else.

I truly believe hospitality offers one of the most varied, rewarding and fast-moving careers. Few industries give you the opportunity to develop leadership skills, work with people from all walks of life and progress as quickly as hospitality.

But we cannot just tell young people that. We have to show them. That means giving them meaningful work experience, creating clearer career pathways and introducing them to the incredible people already building successful careers in our industry. Representation matters. When young people see leaders who have grown through hospitality, it becomes easier to picture themselves doing the same.

Retention remains a challenge in hospitality. What can businesses do to ensure talented young people not only join the industry but build long-term careers in it?

There are lots of factors that affect retention, but I have come to appreciate that much of it comes down to trust. The trust required to give people responsibility early, encourage them to contribute ideas and let them make mistakes. Some of the best leaders in our industry are where they are because someone believed in them before they believed in themselves.

We also have to recognise expectations have changed. Career progression still matters, but so does wellbeing, flexibility, purpose and feeling part of something bigger than your job title. They are fundamental to what today's workforce values, and employers need to respond.

Ultimately, people build careers where they can see themselves growing. The world of hotels is rarely linear, but if we invest in our people with the same commitment as we invest in our hotels, they will reward us with their loyalty, ambition and, in many cases, become the leaders who shape our industry's future.

What gives you the greatest optimism about the future of hospitality and the people who will shape it?

Those coming into our industry give me the greatest optimism about its future. I meet so many young professionals who are curious, ambitious and willing to challenge the status quo. They bring fresh ideas, new perspectives and a desire to make a difference, which is exactly what our industry needs.

I am equally encouraged by leaders committed to developing that talent. They understand that investing in people is how we build stronger businesses and a stronger industry.

Hospitality has always adapted to change, and I have no doubt it will continue to do so. If we keep putting people first, creating cultures where talent can thrive and giving future leaders the confidence to grow, I believe our best days are still ahead of us.

Stress Matters in an Events Industry That Never Switches Off

Laura Capell-Abra, Founder of Stress Matters, turned her own experience of burnout in the events industry into a workplace wellbeing consultancy focused on prevention. In a sector where long hours and constant availability are often normalised, she reflects on the progress made around mental health while examining the pressures that remain around workload, professional development and recovery, and why wellbeing starts with how work is structured.



Stress Matters came from your own burnout. What prompted you to turn that into an organisation, and what signs do people overlook?

My burnout was not one dramatic moment. It was a gradual accumulation of stress I had normalised because I worked in events. At the time, long hours, constant availability, travel, adrenaline and pushing through exhaustion were almost badges of honour. If you were coping, you kept going. If you were not, you often kept going anyway.

I started Stress Matters because I realised how little practical support there was for people working in industries like ours. Over time, the focus shifted further upstream. We do not just want to help people once they are struggling. We want organisations to understand and reduce what is causing unnecessary stress in the first place.

The signs people miss are often quite ordinary: changes in sleep, becoming more irritable, losing enthusiasm for things you normally enjoy, struggling to concentrate, withdrawing from people, feeling permanently tired, or finding it almost impossible to switch off. One of the biggest warning signs is when those things start to feel normal. “I am just busy” can cover an awful lot. Burnout rarely arrives with a flashing warning light. More often, the warning signs become your new normal.

Has awareness actually led to meaningful change?

Yes, there has been genuine progress. Ten years ago, many of the conversations we are having now simply were not happening. People are more comfortable talking about mental health, and organisations are investing in Mental Health First Aid, employee assistance programmes, wellbeing initiatives and training. That matters.

But awareness has absolutely moved faster than action. The next phase has to be less about adding another wellbeing initiative and more about looking at workload, job design, management capability, psychological safety, communication, working hours and expectations.

That is why Stress Matters increasingly focuses on diagnostics and strategy as well as training. Organisations need to know what is actually affecting their people rather than assuming what they need. The test is not whether we have a wellbeing programme. It is whether working here is becoming healthier because of what we are doing. We have become much better at talking about stress. Now we need to get better at removing the things that cause it.



When does commitment become a warning sign for burnout?

There is not a magic number of hours after which someone is heading towards burnout. Events will always have intense periods. An occasional 12-hour day is not automatically a wellbeing problem. The problem is intensity without recovery.

Look at whether someone can switch off, whether the intense period ends, whether there is genuine recovery afterwards and whether 'always available' has quietly become the expectation. Choice matters too. There is a big difference between choosing to stay late because you are excited about something and feeling that your career depends on being permanently contactable.

Managers also need to be conscious of what they inadvertently reward. If those who respond at midnight, never say no and sacrifice weekends are praised and promoted, everyone else learns what 'commitment' apparently looks like. We need to stop confusing visibility and availability with value.

Professional development often happens in people's own time. What does that say about how we value their time?

I love that the events industry is full of people who want to learn, connect and develop. But if development is genuinely important to an organisation, some of it needs to be treated as part of the job rather than homework. We should not call professional development essential and then expect people to squeeze it into evenings and weekends around an already demanding role.

That particularly disadvantages people with caring responsibilities, health considerations or simply less capacity outside work. It can create a culture where progression favours those able to give the industry the greatest proportion of their lives.

Employers do not necessarily have to fund or provide everything, but there should be an honest conversation about what development is expected and where the time for it comes from. Time is a wellbeing issue as much as a productivity issue.

Are quiet rooms/wellbeing activities symbolic if event professionals can't use them?

Quiet rooms, wellbeing spaces and activities can be useful, but they are an intervention, not a strategy. If you have created a quiet room but your team does not feel able to leave the show floor for 10 minutes, you have not solved the underlying problem.

The same applies to wellbeing apps, yoga sessions, fruit and webinars. They cannot compensate for unsustainable working practices. Ask the practical questions: Can people take breaks? Who covers them? Is food actually available when the crew needs it? What happens after a late finish? Are schedules realistic? Does someone feel safe saying, "I need 10 minutes"?

We should design wellbeing into the way an event is staffed and delivered rather than bolt it on afterwards. This should not only apply to permanent employees. Freelancers, suppliers and crew are part of the picture too.

Should retention, development and wellbeing be part of the same conversation? Where should organisations begin?

Absolutely. They are different outcomes of the same employee experience. People are unlikely to stay somewhere where they are permanently exhausted, and they will not develop effectively if they have no capacity to learn. Development can also support wellbeing when people feel valued, capable and able to progress.

I would encourage organisations not to begin with another initiative. Begin by listening and gathering evidence. What is actually creating stress for your people? What helps them thrive? Does that vary by team, role, seniority or working pattern? Look at the data you already have alongside what people tell you: absence, turnover, engagement, workload, working patterns and use of existing support.

Then prioritise. You do not need to fix everything at once. Keep measuring. Workplace wellbeing is not a campaign with a launch date. It is an ongoing part of how an organisation operates. That is the direction we have taken at Stress Matters, helping organisations move from reactive support towards preventative, evidence-led workplace wellbeing.



HQ DESTINATIONS & EVENTS



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MONTRÉAL
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EVENTS



Crafting **Connections** to Drive **Impact**

Berlin's New Convention Model

The age of counting congresses is giving way to a time where their consequences are understood. As the world's expectations of international meetings change, Berlin is responding by reshaping the ecosystem around them, from the **Berlin Event Board** and its science networks to its impact programme and future venues, creating a model where collaboration becomes the architecture for a new generation of congress destinations.

For a quarter of a century, the **Berlin Convention Office** has evolved alongside the meetings industry itself. From one of Germany's first dedicated convention bureau models, it has grown into an organisation that connects government, academia, business and civil society, helping societies and associations engage with the city's intellectual and institutional fabric. Its twenty-fifth anniversary therefore provides a timely opportunity to examine how the purpose of a convention bureau is being redefined. Under the joint leadership of **CEOs Sabine Wendt** (pictured above) and **Dr. Jürgen Amann** (pictured below), **visitBerlin** enters this new chapter at a time when convention bureaux face tighter budgets, more demanding clients and growing business competition. Berlin's response has been to strengthen coordination rather than simply expand investment. "The Berlin brand remains exceptionally strong. It combines excellent infrastructure and a strong international reputation with the city's identity as a place of freedom, openness and new ideas. Our task is to translate these strengths into reliable services, strong partnerships and a better experience for organisers and guests," says Amann.

This philosophy has guided the development of an active convention bureau over the past 25 years. "Key milestones include the development of an integrated convention office model linking business, academia and government, the launch of **Meeting Place Berlin**, our international engagement through **BestCities**, and the *Berlin Paper 2025* as a shared roadmap for the sector. Our team also made sustainability a strategic priority early on, leading to the **Sustainable Meetings Berlin** certification programme. After the

pandemic, the close cooperation with the Berlin Senate and our partners enabled a strong restart and new formats such as **BESTIVAL**. Successful destinations must respond to changing market needs while remaining true to their identity," says Wendt. One of the Berlin Paper's first tangible outcomes was the creation of the **Berlin Event Board**, reflecting a growing recognition that successful bids depend as much on coordinated governance as on compelling marketing. "Cities that succeed are those that align strategy, infrastructure, public administration and industry behind shared priorities. The Berlin Event Board enables us to bring together the perspectives of government, business, science and tourism to shape Berlin's visitor economy in a more integrated way. This allows us to respond to international enquiries faster, more comprehensively and with a stronger joint offer," adds Wendt.

The city's profile continues to shape its institutions and civic culture, while initiatives such as **Berlin Freedom Week** and the establishment of the European headquarters of the **World Liberty Congress** have transformed that legacy into a contemporary platform for dialogue on democracy, human rights and social progress. "Freedom is part of Berlin's DNA. That gives us particular credibility as a venue for conferences on democracy, human rights, social change and international engagement. Berlin offers a setting in which conferences can create lasting value for participants and for society," says Amann.





Science, Impact and the Next Generation of Convention Bureaux

Berlin's ability to convene global associations rests as much on intellectual capital as on meeting facilities. Four universities, **Charité** – Europe's largest university hospital – more than 70 non-university research institutes and organisations including the **Max Planck Society**, the **Fraunhofer Institutes**, the **Robert Koch Institute** and the **Berlin Institute of Health**, yield the German capital one of Europe's most concentrated scientific ecosystems. "International congresses are attracted by strong networks as much as by venues. Berlin benefits from close cooperation between business, science and institutions such as Berlin Partner, as well as internationally recognised events including the **World Health Summit** and the **Capital Congress**. This ecosystem is a particular strength in healthcare, science and technology. As Germany's leading startup hub, Berlin brings research and entrepreneurship together, creating further congress potential in fields such as AI in healthcare, biotechnology and precision medicine," explains Amann. Investment continues to reinforce that ecosystem. With the successful bid for the **EULAR Congress 2027**, the celebration of 20 years as a **UNESCO City of Design**, the upcoming opening of the **Estrel Tower** (check out our story on HQ #124), the development of **dock9** at **Messe Berlin** and a new wave of hotels and event venues, Berlin is entering an exciting new chapter. "The city combines strong infrastructure with expertise in key growth sectors such as the creative industries and healthcare. Our research also shows further potential for medium-sized congresses. The new venues will help close capacity gaps and allow Berlin to accommodate event formats that were previously difficult to host," notes Amann.

The same strategic thinking shapes the **Berlin Impact Programme**, helping associations transform temporary gatherings into game-changing contributions long after delegates leave. "Through the Programme, we help organisers develop projects with local partners that deliver lasting social,



environmental and educational benefits. In the future, this legacy will become as important as attendance figures and hotel nights," states Amann. The next challenge lies in the digital sphere. As Artificial Intelligence reshapes how destinations are perceived, convention bureaux must ensure that their expertise is as visible to algorithms as it is to prospective clients. "AI will fundamentally change how destinations are discovered, evaluated and selected. This is not only a technological challenge, but a strategic one. Our goal is to ensure that Berlin's knowledge, data and expertise remain visible, relevant and accessible across future digital ecosystems. Our **Berlin Convention Finder** and **Data Hub** are already creating the foundations for that transformation," claims Wendt.

Lastly, through the **BestCities Global Alliance**, Berlin exchanges expertise with other fellow members facing many of the same challenges while offering associations access to a coordinated network that extends beyond a single host city. "Beyond strengthening Berlin's international visibility, the BestCities gives us a practical platform for knowledge exchange and collaboration. Through close personal dialogue with 13 destinations across all continents, we gain valuable insights into different markets, cultures and approaches to international congresses," concludes Wendt. Asked what professional associations will expect over the next five years, Amann's answer quietly returns the discussion to its human dimension: "Our mission is to create value for clients, partners, Berlin and its residents. Associations today expect more than a venue: they look for expertise, strong networks, sustainability and lasting impact. These expectations will continue to grow. Yet, our industry will remain a people business, built on personal encounters, trust and human connection."

Editor's note: Since this interview took place, Dr Jürgen Amann and Berlin Tourismus & Kongress GmbH have agreed to end their collaboration by mutual consent. The interview reflects his views and the situation at the time of the conversation.



When **Information** Becomes **Abundant**, **Connection** Becomes the **Advantage**

Hironobu Fujimura, Senior Director of Business Events at Tokyo Convention & Visitors Bureau (TCVB), speaks to *HQ* on the changing role of the convention bureau, Tokyo's knowledge economy and the human purpose of bringing people together.

For a city of Tokyo's scale, the question is no longer simply how many people it can attract, but what their presence leaves behind. Business events offer one answer: they occupy weekdays, spread demand beyond leisure peaks and bring researchers, professionals and investors into the urban fabric. "Business events can certainly play an important role in addressing overtourism. They encourage a shift from visitor volume to visitor value." That distinction sets the tone for a wider change in the meetings landscape. As the mechanics of finding a venue or comparing destinations become easier to automate, the harder currency is becoming access: to people, institutions, expertise and relationships.

What Algorithms Cannot Provide

Fujimura sees Artificial Intelligence as a powerful first filter, capable of compressing hours of research in real-time choices. "As AI continues to evolve, basic information about destinations, venues, accessibility, and accommodations is becoming easier than ever to obtain. In that sense, AI is an extremely valuable tool during the initial research and evaluation stage of the decision-making process." What happens afterwards is more difficult to reproduce through an algorithm. Site inspections, local knowledge and trusted introductions can turn a list of options into a deal. "That is why I believe the role of convention bureaux is becoming even more valuable in the age of AI. TCVB offers connections that cannot be found through a search engine or algorithm."

That network reaches convention centres, hotels, universities, research organisations, government agencies, corporations and local partners. Its significance becomes clearer when the definition of a successful gathering is widened beyond attendance or satisfaction. "Today, many international associations are asking a different question: what lasting impact will this meeting create? Beyond attendance numbers and participant satisfaction,

they are looking for measurable scientific outcomes, social impact, economic value, and meaningful legacy." For Fujimura, that shift changes the organisation behind the destination itself. "The CVB of the future will be more than a destination marketer. It will serve as a platform that connects people, knowledge, and opportunities."

A City Built on Old and New

That proposition draws strength from Tokyo's remarkable concentration of universities, hospitals, laboratories, corporations and startups. It also lends significance to smaller, bespoke gatherings, where a modest headcount can conceal considerable intellectual density. "An important shift is the growing significance of small- and medium-sized meetings. While large international congresses remain important, smaller meetings often bring together highly specialised communities, creating opportunities for deeper discussions, stronger collaboration, and new research partnerships." There is also a cultural idea behind Tokyo's ability to hold different eras in the same frame. "Our business events strategy is built on the belief that tradition and innovation are not competing forces but complementary strengths. In Japan, we have a concept called *Onko Chishin* (温故知新), which means learning from the past to create new value for the future. We believe this philosophy perfectly reflects Tokyo's character."

In Asakusa, **Senso-ji** and **Tokyo Skytree** make that coexistence visible: an ancient temple and a feat of contemporary engineering sharing the same skyline. "This coexistence of heritage and innovation is not something created for visitors; it is simply how Tokyo lives and evolves every day." The implication for associations is practical as well as aesthetic. Japanese culture is being sought within congress programmes, receptions and networking, giving organisers another way to make a gathering inseparable from its setting.



Technology in a Place for Dialogue

Tokyo's City-Tech vision has developed across mobility, accessibility, digital services and sustainability, while **SusHi Tech Tokyo** brings startups, researchers, investors, corporations and policymakers around questions of sustainable urban development. A more revealing illustration came at the **World Physiotherapy Congress 2025**. AI-powered translation and an AI concierge helped participants navigate language and information barriers; sustainable design, water stations and *Radio Taiso* (Japan's traditional morning exercise) brought environmental and human considerations into the same programme. The lesson is less about technological novelty than about proportion. "Technology should be seen as a means to expand human potential, not as the centre of attention itself. Its role is not to replace people, but to remove barriers and help us focus on what matters most: building trust, exchanging ideas, and creating meaningful connections."

That human dimension acquires greater weight as geopolitical tensions complicate international cooperation. Scientific and professional gatherings can preserve channels of contact when other forms of exchange become harder. "Much like international sports, scientific and professional meetings can serve as neutral platforms where people come together beyond national boundaries and political differences. More importantly, I believe they should serve that purpose."

Tokyo sees an opportunity to contribute at regional level, combining its connectivity with a dense research and corporate ecosystem. Fujimura describes the city as both a gateway and a bridge between established international structures and the growing influence of Asia-Pacific communities. "The goal is not simply to benchmark ourselves against existing models, but to serve as a bridge between regions." That outlook also informs Tokyo's participation in **BestCities Global Alliance**. The lesson Fujimura draws from its partners is the importance of bringing convention bureaux, government, academia and industry into longer-term alignment – a model that treats destination management as a shared undertaking.

Evidence, not Aspiration

The same insistence on substance appears in Tokyo's sustainability work. TCVB introduced environmental guidelines for business events in 2019 and launched a carbon footprint calculator in 2023. The Tokyo Metropolitan

Government's **Zero Emission Tokyo** initiative targets net-zero emissions by 2050, alongside 2030 goals for a 50% reduction in greenhouse gases and a 50% renewable electricity share. But the most memorable evidence can be intimate. For instance, through **Sustainability Experience in Tokyo**, delegates can visit rooftop honeybee colonies in **Ginza** and examine the relationship between biodiversity and dense urban development.

"As sustainability claims come under increasing scrutiny, we believe credibility depends on transparency and evidence. It is no longer enough to talk about aspirations; destinations must be able to demonstrate real outcomes." For Tokyo, then, the proposition is shifting. The city can host the congress, but its deeper contribution lies in what becomes possible once the congress is there: a researcher meeting an industry partner, an association finding a local counterpart, a specialist community opening a new conversation. "If the meetings industry is ultimately about bringing people together to address global challenges, then destinations also have a responsibility that goes beyond simply hosting the conversation."



The **Shipyard** That Never Stopped **Building**

Euskalduna's Reinvention as a Congress Venue

For generations, steel defined Bilbao. The shipyards lining the River Nervión powered an economy built on engineering, manufacturing and maritime trade. Today, museums, concert halls and research centres occupy the same waterfront, reflecting a city that has turned the page without losing sight of its industrial roots. **Euskalduna Conference Centre and Concert Hall** is the epicentre of this transformation, where the slipways that once launched ships now give rise to new knowledge, cultural expression and global dialogue.



Standing on the site of the former shipyards, the venue occupies a singular place within Bilbao's modern identity. Its history is inseparable from the city, a relationship that continues to shape how delegates experience both the building and the destination. "Euskalduna was not built on an empty site, but on a place steeped in history. Some of the ships that drove Bilbao's economic development for decades were built here, and that legacy remains a fundamental part of who we are," says **Iñigo Iturrate, General Manager of Euskalduna**. "The venue was also born out of a profound economic and social crisis that transformed the city. Euskalduna became one of the symbols of Bilbao's ability to reinvent itself without turning its back on its past." That industrial past provides the context for a different kind of construction: one centred on ideas, creativity, serendipity and teamwork. "Today, we continue building the future, but through knowledge, culture and human connection," Iturrate explains. "We do not preserve our industrial heritage as a museum piece; we use it as the foundation for the future. Anyone attending an event here quickly understands that Euskalduna could not exist anywhere else. The building, the river and Bilbao's transformation all tell the same story."

That connection between venue and destination has become one of Euskalduna's defining characteristics. Euskalduna has grown into one of the Basque Country's principal institutions, contributing to Bilbao's cultural life while acting as an international meeting place for science, business and the professions. "Our responsibility goes far beyond organising events. We are a strategic asset for both the city and the region. Every international congress attracts knowledge, talent, investment and new relationships. Every cultural production strengthens our creative ecosystem and brings culture closer to thousands of people." During 2025 alone, Euskalduna hosted more than 730 events, welcomed almost 400,000 attendees

and generated over €111 million for the Basque economy. Yet, Iturrate is more interested in what those figures represent than in the numbers themselves. "What really matters is what lies behind those figures: opportunities for local businesses, employment, international visibility and a network of partners that continues long after each event has ended. The true success of a congress does not end when the auditorium lights go down; it begins when the connections created lead to new projects, research or investment."

This broader perspective also explains why Euskalduna occupies an unusual position within the European meetings landscape. Unlike venues where the artistic agenda plays a secondary role, culture sits at the core of its identity, shaping both its operational model and the visitor experience. "We see it as one of our greatest competitive advantages, although it naturally brings significant operational challenges. Culture and conventions share the same purpose: creating memorable experiences. That dual activity requires us to maintain exceptionally high technical standards while relying on an extraordinarily versatile team." Here, delegates attending an international conference can seize the opportunity to see an opera, a show, or check out a new collection at the **Guggenheim Museum Bilbao**, while local audiences encounter a venue that regularly hosts leading researchers, entrepreneurs and association leaders from around the world. "What makes Euskalduna unique is that we are not simply a convention centre that also presents cultural programming. We are a major cultural institution that is also one of Europe's leading convention centres. That combination gives us a distinctive personality that is difficult to replicate."

Bilbao has definitely become part of Euskalduna's proposition. Compact, walkable and culturally rich, the city allows delegates to move effortlessly between congress sessions and the places that have shaped its contemporary identity, whether





along the regenerated waterfront, through its renowned gastronomic scene or among the cultural institutions that have accompanied its urban revival. That expectation has changed the way Euskalduna works with organisers. “Today, delegates are looking for much more than an outstanding scientific or professional programme. They expect the city to play an active role in the congress experience, not simply serve as its backdrop.” For Iturrate, integrating Bilbao into a congress means drawing upon the city’s wider ecosystem, connecting scientific and professional communities with local culture, innovation and expertise. “We design experiences that connect congresses with culture, gastronomy, innovation and the local territory. When the destination becomes part of the strategy, the event creates a much deeper and longer-lasting impact.”

That philosophy has earned international recognition, most recently through success at the **Eventex Awards**. Yet Iturrate regards industry accolades less as milestones than as reminders that excellence is never static. “Every award brings greater responsibility. Excellence is never a final goal; it is a daily commitment built on innovation, active listening and continuous improvement. That is the culture we strive to foster at Euskalduna.” Those principles were tested when Euskalduna welcomed the **AIPC Annual Conference 2026**, bringing together executives from many of the world’s leading convention centres. “Few events place a venue under greater scrutiny than one attended by peers who understand every operational decision behind a successful congress. For a few days, Bilbao became the global capital of the meetings industry, giving us the opportunity to welcome colleagues who share the same challenges and ambitions. More than simply hosting a conference, we hosted a global conversation about the future of our industry. Our mission was not only to showcase a building, but also a city, a region and our way of understanding hospitality.”

The response left Iturrate feeling optimistic about the opportunities that may arise in the coming years. “The feedback we received was overwhelmingly positive. I hope the conference’s lasting legacy will be an even stronger reputation for our destination, with the relationships built during those days leading to new collaborations and future congresses.” And perhaps that is the clearest measure of Euskalduna’s evolution. It is no longer merely a venue arising from the remains of an industrial past, but as a place where a city’s history, culture and international outlook converge. The ships that once departed these slipways carried steel and machinery across the world. Today, the journeys begin with conversations, partnerships and ideas, continuing Bilbao’s tradition of looking outward while remaining firmly anchored in the place that gave it its character.





The Congress Has Left the Building

How two projects gave events a new life at RAI Amsterdam

At **RAI Amsterdam**, square metres are only the starting point. The management of this Dutch powerhouse is building on its role as a 21st-century convention centre by tapping into what matters to its city, its people and the sectors it serves. We discussed this integrated concept with **Maurits van der Sluis**, CEO of RAI Amsterdam.



A congress about ageing offered Amsterdam an unusual encounter with its own future. During the **2026 IAGG World Congress of Gerontology and Geriatrics**, visitors to the RAI could explore the Smarthouse Experience, test technologies designed to support independent living and take part in an ageing simulation that allowed them to experience, quite literally, a version of themselves decades from now. The subject of the scientific meeting was no longer confined to researchers and healthcare professionals. It was placed in front of the people whose lives it concerned. The convention centre sits on Europaplein, but its ambitions progressively reach into the fabric of the Dutch capital: its knowledge institutions, businesses, residents and public organisations. The proposed **RAI Quarter** adds another dimension, bringing events, work, learning, entrepreneurship and residential life into a single urban setting.

For Van der Sluis, the underlying question is what a venue produces beyond the physical space it occupies. “The future business model is not only about square metres. It is about the value those square metres create.” That value, he argues, has to be considered across “a much wider constituency, from organisers and exhibitors to neighbours, suppliers, the municipality and society itself.” Infrastructure remains essential – logistics, access, technology, service and the mechanics of delivering an event – but those attributes ineluctably form the baseline. What happens around the event can be just as consequential. “A venue is no longer only a place where people meet for a few days. It becomes part of the city, part of the local economy and part of the knowledge networks around it.”

Where the City Enters the Congress!

Amsterdam gives the RAI an unusually rich field in which to work. Health, water, mobility, technology and sustainability are supported by dense networks of universities, hospitals, companies and public institutions. The venue can therefore act as a bridge between an international association arriving for several days and expertise that already exists within the city. “We see our role more and more as a connector. It also helps Amsterdam benefit from the knowledge that comes to the city,” says Van der Sluis. RAI Amsterdam asks what subject a congress is bringing to Amsterdam, which local organisations should participate, and how students, residents, entrepreneurs or policymakers might benefit.

The IAGG programme offered a practical demonstration. Research into healthy ageing was connected with Amsterdam residents through an experience designed around independent living. The result was another layer of conference programming through which specialist knowledge could enter public space. The same principle was visible in **Love Your Liver**, developed around the **EASL Congress 2025** (read our interview on HQ #118). Here, the subject moved from hepatology to public health, with screening and communications opening the campaign to people who would never have entered a medical congress (see photo on next page). Van der Sluis is emphatic: “We were not only the location of the congress. We became a partner in making the congress matter outside the professional community.”



RAI Amsterdam does not claim scientific ownership of an association's work. Its contribution lies in knowing the city, assembling the relevant partners and creating the channels through which an organisation's expertise can travel. The figures from Love Your Liver illustrate what that can produce. "Around 900 people were tested in a few days. The campaign reached more than 65 million media impressions and generated around 100 publications. More importantly, it brought liver health to the national agenda and made a medical congress relevant to a much wider public." For associations, the question is becoming simpler: what does the congress achieve beyond its own audience?

“ *Donation Room works through materials and logistics; Love Your Liver through knowledge, health and public communication.* ”

How to Turn Operations into Impact?

The answer does not always require a public campaign. At the **AIPC Innovation Awards**, RAI Amsterdam was shortlisted for both **Donation Room** and Love Your Liver; projects with radically different starting points but a common practical instinct. Donation Room takes materials, food and other surplus from participating events and matches them with the needs of local social organisations, backed by a 150 m² storage and distribution centre which enable capacity for partnerships that can prove useful. The lesson, according to Van der Sluis, is about designing the process intelligently: "We first ask social initiatives what

they really need. Then we match that need with what is left after an event." Waste is not treated as an abstract sustainability metric; its destination is determined before the event has even finished. The next challenge, Van der Sluis acknowledges, is "earlier intervention, through reusable stand materials and better prevention of surplus."

Together, Donation Room and Love Your Liver reveal two different ways in which the machinery of a large event can be redirected towards a local purpose. Awards can help make such work visible, although Van der Sluis resists treating recognition as the objective. Their greater value may be internal, bringing together sales, operations, CSR, marketing, facilities, security, communications, volunteers and external partners around a common result. That collaborative habit matters because RAI Amsterdam does not see innovation as a fixed formula. "Start with the mission of the event. Connect it to a real local need. Bring in the right partners. Make the idea practical for visitors or residents. Measure what happens. And use the lessons for the next event."

A Network that Travels

Through brands such as **Aquatech** and **Intertraffic**, RAI Amsterdam operates simultaneously as venue and organiser, using international partnerships to take established communities into markets where water, mobility, infrastructure and sustainability are pressing concerns. The expansion does not loosen Amsterdam's place at the centre of the network, as the city remains the venue's base and a source of knowledge that circulates internationally. New markets are assessed for their commercial potential, but also for sectoral relevance, suitable partners, stability and the footprint created by international activity. That dual perspective – local depth with international reach – is the clearest expression of RAI's current trajectory. Its physical campus remains the foundation, yet the organisation's reach is no longer measured by the boundaries of the site.

The same applies to the future of face-to-face events. Digital platforms and AI may improve preparation, matchmaking and year-round engagement, but Van der Sluis sees the physical gathering's value in its density: suppliers, buyers, researchers, policymakers, investors, media and talent occupying the same space at the same time. The challenge, then, is to make the encounter worth travelling for. "Face-to-face gatherings remain indispensable when people leave with something they could not get elsewhere: a new partnership, a clearer view of the market, a tested product, a shared decision or a moment that changes their thinking."

What Happens **Inside** Matters **Outside**

Lessons from the AIPC Conference 2026

At **Euskalduna Conference Centre**, the **AIPC Annual Conference 2026** turned its attention to a convention-centre industry being asked to carry a heavier brief: smarter use of technology, genuinely accessible spaces, stronger ties with communities, and a clearer contribution to the cities they serve. Our report picks out some of the conference's most thought-provoking sessions alongside the ideas emerging from the Future Shapers programme and the AIPC Innovation Awards.

Manuel A. Fernandes reports

The convention-centre community spent four days in late June, discussing subjects that would once have sat in separate compartments: artificial intelligence alongside accessibility; hospitality alongside workforce strategy; energy and sustainability alongside urban development; destination competitiveness alongside community value. The agenda was broad but not fragmented. Taken together, the discussions pointed towards a different understanding of what a convention centre is expected to do in 2026 despite external contingencies.

That made Bilbao the setting and main character of this script. A city whose own development has been shaped by long-term decisions about infrastructure, culture, investment and civic ambition, provided an appropriate backdrop for a conference asking what convention centres might contribute to the places in which they operate. AIPC's programme was organised around Innovation & Transformation, People & Hospitality, and Legacy & Community Impact, but the most interesting discussions repeatedly crossed those boundaries.

Innovation was the First Test

Claire Hayek, a NeuroLeadership expert, gave a talk on *Innovative Leadership*, examining the ability to maintain clarity, make sound decisions and keep teams on track when the pressure mounts. The following discussion, *Innovation to Become a Convention Destination*, took the question from the individual to the city, with case studies from **Bilbao**,

Belgrade and **Saskatoon**. **Jon Azua Mendiá**'s account of the host city's transformation emphasised governance, economic strategy, infrastructure and stakeholder collaboration. **Kristina Milinčić**, CEO of the **Sava Center (Belgrade)**, suggested that the real test lies in creating the conditions for ideas to withstand competing priorities, institutional interests and the passage of time.

In *How Can Communities Make Convention Centres Thrive?*, CEOs **Joyce Leveston** of the **Javits Center (New York)** and **Taubie Motlhabane** of the **Cape Town International Convention Centre** (pictured on the following page) explored venues as civic assets, looking at local engagement, talent development, stakeholder partnerships and concrete legacies. It also raised the question of who benefits from the value created by a large convention centre. If the answer is solely the operator, the equation is narrow. The most ambitious model is one in which these relationships are deliberately nurtured and tailored to community needs.

Can the Venue Set the Standard for the City?

That tension surfaced again in *Friends, Frenemies or Future Co-Creators?*, moderated by **AIPC President, Julianne Jammers** (pictured above). Hotels and venues have plenty of reasons to work together, but also plenty of commercial reasons to guard their territory. The panel brought together perspectives from **Kursaal Bern**, **bnetwork**, **Accor** and **Austria Center Vienna** to drill down into service integration, commercial



alignment, sustainability and destination-wide cooperation. Jammers set the tone: "The most successful convention centres have always recognised that hospitality, delivered through people, is the foundation of their value proposition. The organisations that will lead the market are those that invest in their people, strengthen their service culture, and place both employees and customers at the centre of their operations."

The point was given a practical dimension by **John Sage's Accessibility as a Strategic Advantage for Convention Centres**. **Founder of Accessible Travel Solutions**, he has experienced these obstacles first-hand and asked delegates to consider accessibility as a complete journey, not a compliance exercise. The guided tour around Euskalduna made this aspect exceptionally tangible. What might have remained an abstract discussion about inclusion became a physical inspection of how to accommodate people with different mobility and cognitive needs. It also exposed how accessibility is often discussed as a feature of a building when, in reality, it is a test of how a destination works as a whole. This is where the centre starts to look less like a container for events and more like an intermediary between different priorities of a city. Jammers expressed that vision with clarity: "The building itself is only one part of the equation. Equal, if not greater, attention should be given to identifying and mobilising the partnerships within the community that will contribute to its economic, social, intellectual, and environmental future."

The Next Gem May Already Be Inside

Whilst top executives debated how existing centres should adapt, up-and-coming professionals took to the stage to address the challenges they will inherit. The regular **AIPC Future Shapers** programme brought ten emerging leaders to pitch two concepts developed in response to real-world challenges facing convention centres. Team Future Ready proposed **Venue IQ**, a platform designed to turn operational and client feedback into usable intelligence for venue teams. Team Growth Lab, meanwhile, responded with the **Convention Center Hospitality Excellence Certification**, conceived to raise service standards, improve the customer experience and optimise hospitality innovation across all their operations. “I would hope that, by 2035, people will say the greatest achievement of today’s leaders was transforming convention centres from venue operators into strategic partners in community and destination development,” says Jammers

The **Innovation Awards** offered a more grounded view of what change looks like inside a convention centre. The eight finalists brought together projects spanning circularity and waste recovery, immersive technology, sustainability



and health, alongside inventive approaches to making better use of existing venue space (*find out the two projects by RAI Amsterdam in this issue*). Winner of both the **Jury Prize** and the **Delegates’ Choice Award**, the **Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre (KLCC)** showcased the project **Agile by Design, Sustainable by Choice**, which took underused parts of an existing building, including the former press centre, to convert them into contemporary meeting rooms and flexible event spaces. The venue expanded its offering without increasing its footprint, turning an existing constraint into a commercial and environmental opportunity. At a conference where innovation was repeatedly

linked to pressure, resourcefulness and long-term value, the KLCC’s solution drew on a refreshingly simple proposition that the next piece of capacity may already be sitting inside the building.

The next **AIPC Annual Conference** will take that conversation further west. From 27 to 30 June 2027, the association will meet at the **St. John’s Convention Centre** in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. After Bilbao, the geography changes but the ambition travels with it: convention centres becoming active contributors to the places they serve.



AIPC CEO Sven Bossu outlining the association’s vision, priorities and next steps through to 2029

Switzerland Meeting Trophy Turns Fam Trips into Planning Intelligence

The **Switzerland Meeting Trophy** marked its 20th edition in 2026 by turning destination familiarisation into a live exercise for meeting planners. Created by **Switzerland Tourism** and the **Switzerland Convention and Incentive Bureau (SCIB)**, the Trophy brings international MICE buyers into national teams for a competitive rally with Swiss partners.

HQ followed Team Belgium through Lausanne, Crans-Montana, Montreux-Riviera and Geneva. Sustainability and Swiss mobility framed a route focused on four connected destinations around Lake Geneva and the canton of Valais, each with a distinct case for association events, meetings and incentives.

Jesús Guerrero Chacón reports

Lausanne: Sport, Science and Cultural Event Spaces

Team Belgium reached Lausanne by train from Geneva Airport before the Trophy's official kick-off in Crans-Montana. **Lausanne Tourism** hosted lunch at **Brasserie de Montbenon**, a group-friendly venue in a 1908 building overlooking Lake Geneva, before the onward transfer showed how rail access can fit into a multi-destination meetings programme.

Lausanne is the Olympic Capital, home to the **International Olympic Committee**, the **Olympic Museum** and several sports federations. Meetings on sport governance, ethics, health, law and social impact can use that setting, with venues and partners linking congress content to the city's sports-policy role.

A few minutes from the railway station, **Plateforme 10** brings culture into the same compact event geography. The art district brings together the **Cantonal Museum of Fine Arts, mudac** (Museum of Contemporary Design and Applied Arts), and **Photo Elysée**, dedicated to photography. Its indoor venues and outdoor spaces give meeting planners options for private events, receptions and cultural programming within the same visit.

Western Switzerland's Health Valley adds a life sciences layer, stretching from Geneva towards Bern through biotech, medtech,

pharma, digital health and research institutions. The corridor includes the **University Hospital of Lausanne**, the **Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL)**, **Biopôle life sciences campus** and innovation sites with depth in oncology, neurosciences, immunology and medtech. Through the **Space Cities Network**, an international alliance using space-sector research, industry and education to attract related business events, the city connects EPFL, the **SwissTech Convention Center** and local space expertise with congresses in aeronautics, astronomy and space technology.

Crans-Montana: Alpine Retreats with Congress Infrastructure

From Sierre, the funicular climbed from the Rhône Valley, a glacier-fed alpine valley known for terraced vineyards, to Crans-Montana at around 1,500 metres. The official Trophy programme opened that evening with SCIB and **Crans-Montana Tourism & Congress**, before moving to Cry d'Er by gondola the next morning.

Crans-Montana's meeting offer is strongest where nature, wellness and luxury hospitality shape the programme. **Le Régent Congress Centre** provides the main infrastructure, with modular rooms for conferences, seminars, exhibitions and gala formats.



Crans Ambassador, Guarda Golf Hotel and Residences and **Six Senses Crans-Montana** add alpine stays for executive sessions, spa-led retreats and incentives.

Cry d'Er brought altitude into the rally through team challenges and lunch, before a self-drive stage to Montreux-Riviera with electric **Europcar** vehicles. Crans-Montana gives meeting planners a compact alpine base, with golf, wine, wellness, lakes, restaurants and outdoor activities close to hotels and congress facilities. The descent placed the resort within a wider Swiss programme, linking a mountain retreat with lakefront and urban destinations in the same day.

Montreux-Riviera: Music, Heritage and Congress Renewal

Montreux-Vevey Tourism introduced the Riviera through two readings of lakefront hospitality. **Fairmont Le Montreux Palace** brought participants into a Belle Époque setting, with Lake Geneva views, heritage salons and a long-standing role in conferences and incentives. **Mona Montreux** offered a contemporary waterfront stop, adding a newer hospitality reference to the destination's meetings landscape.

The wider congress story centres on the **2m2c Montreux Music and Convention**

All photos © Mattias Nutt, www.mattiasnutt.ch

Centre, which reopened in summer 2026 for the 60th anniversary of the **Montreux Jazz Festival**. Its return brings a major convention asset back to the market, with flexible spaces, improved circulation and a closer link between congress use, music heritage and the town's cultural calendar.

The five-star Fairmont has also completed its renovation. One of the Riviera's best-known meetings addresses, it offers spaces for board-level meetings and larger functions, with lakefront receptions and offsite experiences close by. Within the same Lake Geneva corridor, Montreux gains relevance for life sciences retreats,

health-sector leadership meetings and association events that need proximity to Western Switzerland's medical and scientific expertise. The destination adds privacy, culture and hospitality for formats better suited to a quieter Riviera setting.

Geneva: Associations, Science and Diplomacy in One City

Geneva closed the Trophy with international organisations, scientific institutions, airport-linked venues and a diplomatic environment used to high-level meetings. **CERN**, the **European Organization for Nuclear Research**, gave the programme its strongest

science component. Its **Science Gateway**, opened in October 2023, brings exhibitions, events and learning into one of Geneva's major knowledge assets. The site has welcomed hundreds of thousands of visitors and received a **Special Commendation** at the **European Museum of the Year Awards** in June 2026. Teams answered science questions across CERN exhibitions, while the **Science Gateway auditorium** and the **Globe of Science and Innovation** showed capacity for conferences, cocktails, dinners, guided tours, exhibitions and film screenings.

Domaine de Châteauvieux added gastronomy and winemaking heritage to the Geneva programme. Lunch took place at the one-Michelin-starred restaurant, housed in a 16th-century building in one of Switzerland's leading wine-growing regions, with views over the Rhône. The city rally added local expertise through watchmaking at **Initium**, a chocolate workshop and tasting at **La Bonbonnière**, and cultural programming at the **Museum of Art and History**. The final night moved to **Restaurant Hôtel du Parc des Eaux-Vives**, where dinner, the party and the announcement of this year's Trophy winner closed the programme in a heritage setting.

The final stage, developed with **Geneva Tourism & Convention Bureau**, showed the city's central hotel base, with **Hotel President Wilson**, **Hotel Royal**, **Hotel N'yv** and **Hotel Auteuil** placing groups between the lake, station and event venues. Geneva's wider congress infrastructure includes **Palexpo**, Switzerland's second-largest exhibition and convention centre, close to Geneva International Airport and Geneva Airport railway station, as well as the **International Conference Centre Geneva (CICG)**, university spaces and the United Nations Quarter for scientific, medical, legal, humanitarian and policy-led events.

Across 20 editions, the Trophy has refined a familiarisation model with clear professional value. In 2026, Lausanne, Crans-Montana, Montreux-Riviera and Geneva offered four planning cases within one connected programme, using Swiss mobility, Swisstable and partner coordination to help buyers assess each destination in practice.

Poland's Future Starts Now

Aneta Książek takes over as **Director** of the **Poland Convention Bureau** at the **Polish Tourism Organisation** at a defining moment for the organisation. As it approaches its 25th anniversary in 2027, the bureau is implementing the **MICE Strategy Future is Now** to strengthen Poland's position and create long-term value for international associations.



Poland's international position has been strengthened through investment in infrastructure, regional networks, support programmes and partnerships. Which decisions have had the greatest influence on attracting international congresses?

Poland offers international associations what they value most: stability, predictability and a strategic location between Western, Central and Northern Europe. Combined with a rapidly modernising economy and world-class infrastructure, these strengths make Poland an attractive destination for global association events.

Among the most significant milestones were accession to NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004, which anchored Poland within the Euro-Atlantic community, strengthened its international credibility and accelerated long-term economic development. Today, Poland is the largest economy in Central Europe, with a GDP exceeding USD 1 trillion (approx. €850 billion), giving international associations confidence in Poland as a host destination.

In the eyes of international associations, what are Poland's strongest selling points?

Poland's greatest strengths are its intellectual capital, accessibility and authenticity. Strong academic institutions, recognised researchers, business communities and innovation ecosystems combine with professional services, modern infrastructure and a mature hospitality sector to offer international associations both value and opportunities for lasting impact.

Successful events are about more than attendance numbers. Our MICE 2026-2030

strategy, **Future is Now**, puts people at the centre, with a focus on wellbeing, accessibility, sustainability and meaningful engagement. A good example is the **Low Sensory Show Room (LSSR)**, developed by the Poland Convention Bureau and the **Mamy Podobnie Foundation**. The concept was introduced at **PCMA Convening EMEA 2025** in Rotterdam and premiered at **Connect Aviation 2026** in Lublin. Since then, it has been showcased across Poland and included in bids for future conferences, reflecting growing demand for wellbeing and accessibility. Inclusivity is no longer a trend but a foundation of the modern destination.

International organisers can choose between established metropolitan hubs and regional cities offering distinct identities and specialised expertise.

Poland Convention Bureau will celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2027. How has the organisation evolved to meet the changing expectations of international associations and meeting planners, and what role should it play in supporting Poland's meetings industry?

Over the past 25 years, Poland Convention Bureau has evolved from a destination promotion organisation into a strategic partner for the meetings industry. Today, it brings together convention bureaux, destinations, universities, ambassadors, industry partners and public institutions around shared national goals, helping Poland remain competitive while supporting long-term economic and social development across destinations of every size.

I would like the Poland Convention Bureau to further strengthen its support programmes for international event organisers and destination partners. We already offer initiatives including the **National Support Programme for the Meetings Industry in Poland** and the **Promotional Support Programme for Meetings and Events in Poland**, alongside a network of certified Convention Bureaux, Professional Congress Organisers and Incentive Travel Companies.

Our ambition is to strengthen support for international event organisers and destination





partners while maintaining Poland's position as the leading meetings destination in Central Europe.

As Director, where would you like the Poland Convention Bureau to have the greatest impact?

My ambition is for the Poland Convention Bureau to act as a catalyst for sustainable, knowledge-driven growth, strengthening Poland's position as a destination where international events create lasting value for organisers, participants, communities and research institutions. Developing regional destinations remains central to that goal, with the growing visibility of Gdańsk, Wrocław, Poznań, Katowice and Szczecin reinforcing the diversity and international standing of Poland's meetings industry.

While Poland consistently ranks among the world's leading meetings destinations, 18th in the **ICCA** rankings and 19th in the **UIA** rankings, I believe we still have untapped potential. I would like to see Poland maintaining its strong global position, with Warsaw, Kraków and other Polish cities moving into the very top tier of international meeting destinations.

Although organisers are looking beyond the traditional top 10 destinations, competition for attention remains intense. Poland competes on infrastructure and accessibility, as well as expertise, innovation and hospitality. As Central Europe's largest economy, with cities offering distinct strengths and identities, it has a compelling story to tell, yet many

international planners are only beginning to discover it.

Our slogan, **Poland. More than you expected**, reflects both that progress and the opportunity ahead. Our task is to ensure more international associations and organisers make that discovery.

The meetings landscape in Poland thrives on collaboration between convention bureaux, cities, universities, ambassadors and industry partners. What have you learnt about uniting these stakeholders around a shared ambition?

Successful collaboration begins with a common purpose. Despite different priorities, stakeholders share the ambition to strengthen their destination through meetings and events.

Trust, transparency and long-term relationships are essential. The strongest projects emerge when cities, academic institutions, industry representatives and ambassadors work as one ecosystem.

Together with our long-standing partner, the **Polish Conferences and Congresses Association**, we recently launched the pilot **Young Ambassadors Programme** as an extension of the **Polish Congress Ambassadors Programme**, which has been running since 1998. The initiative supports the next generation of experts and leaders in bringing international meetings and events to Poland.

Listening is just as important as leadership. Poland's success has been built on collaboration, mutual respect and recognising the unique strengths of each destination. Recent examples include **Spotlight on Poland 2026** in Poznań and Szczecin, and the **GDS Forum & Impact Day 2026**. Both were brought together under the umbrella of the Poland Convention Bureau, demonstrating how destinations, industry partners and international thought leaders can work towards more sustainable, impactful and participant-centred events. A shared vision turns collaboration into results.

What gives you the greatest confidence in Poland's future as an international meetings destination?

Poland's future is being built on strong foundations across sectors beyond tourism. Across the country, meetings increasingly reflect investment in innovation, talent and sustainable growth.

The growing confidence and international visibility of regional cities is particularly encouraging. They are developing distinctive identities that resonate with international organisers. Poland is no longer an emerging destination seeking recognition but a mature player in the global meetings industry. With our talent, partnerships and commitment to continuous development, I believe our best chapter is still ahead of us.

Associations in a Changing World

India's Next Membership Chapter

Kolkata has long been a city where trade, education, culture and ideas meet. On 7–8 August, that mix provided the setting for a different kind of conversation, as the **13th India Association Congress (IAC)** brought the country's association community together to consider what happens when the world around its institutions changes faster than their established models.

Article co-produced by CIMGlobal and HQ Magazine Manager, Manuel Fernandes



Held at the **Biswa Bangla Convention Centre** under the theme **Associations in a Changing World Order**, IAC 2026 brought association leaders, policymakers and industry representatives together around questions of relevance, leadership, advocacy and impact. The opening ceremony, attended by **West Bengal ministers Tapas Roy and Agnimitra Paul**, placed the Congress within a wider state ambition to develop business and MICE activity. But the discussion quickly moved from destination potential to a more fundamental question: what should

associations contribute to an economy and society undergoing rapid change?

For **Prasant Saha, Chairman of IAC 2026**, the line of thinking is already well underway. Indian associations, he argues, are moving from organisations primarily focused on representation towards institutions expected to support industry transformation, innovation and competitiveness. “India is no longer just a market for associations,” he told *HQ* before the Congress, “it is becoming a global contributor to association leadership and innovation.”

Rethinking the Membership Proposition

Changing expectations were one of the clearest threads through the two-day programme. Membership numbers, conference attendance and financial performance remain useful measures, but they no longer capture the full relationship between an association and the people it represents. Members increasingly expect professional development, access to markets, international connections and help navigating disruption. The question, Saha argues, should therefore move from



“What services do we provide?” to “What transformation do we enable?”

IAC 2026 explored what that shift means in practice. The challenge is particularly interesting in India, where many associations have traditionally operated through lifetime membership, unlike the annual renewal model common across Europe and North America. That difference has historically reduced the pressure to demonstrate value year after year.

A new generation of leaders is beginning to change that picture through more professional governance, data-led decision-making and strategic planning. The aim is not simply to reproduce established Western models, but to develop approaches that combine India's strong mission-driven association culture with greater professionalisation and agility.

Giving the Next Generation a Seat

Gen Z was another focus of the Congress discussion. Sessions including *Volunteer Burnout & Leadership Gaps – Building the Next-Gen Pipeline* moved beyond the familiar debate of how associations can attract younger members.



The harder issue is how they create meaningful routes into leadership and give the next generation influence over the organisations they are expected to inherit.

Recruitment and governance are equally important. An association can attract young professionals without necessarily giving them a reason to stay. A sustainable leadership pipeline requires participation to lead somewhere.

From Advocacy to Outcomes

Advocacy was another area where the Congress pushed the conversation towards evidence. For associations, having access to policymakers or a seat at the table is only the beginning. The harder task is demonstrating what advocacy has changed in regulation, professional standards, industry practice or the interests of stakeholders.

The launch of the *State of Indian Association Report*, presented as the country's first comprehensive study of its association sector, reinforced the focus on data points. With India's association landscape highly diverse and fragmented, the absence of reliable data has made it difficult to assess its scale, maturity and economic contribution. The new study provides a benchmark from which that conversation can develop. It also gives substance to a wider point raised by Saha: “The real measure of an association is its impact. The challenge for the sector is to make that impact visible.”

Looking Outside the Association Sector

IAC 2026 deliberately widened its field of view. In *The Art of Doing Economic Reforms*, **Sanjeev Sanyal, Member of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister of India**, argued that the large reforms that have reshaped India's economy are only part of the picture. Many obstacles to growth and efficiency sit in smaller processes and administrative frictions. The connection with association management was not explicit, but it was difficult to miss. Organisations also change through the accumulation of decisions about governance, feedback, leadership and delivery. Large ambitions depend on how institutions work day to day.

Mugdha Sinha, Managing Director of the India Tourism Development Corporation, brought another perspective through tourism, hospitality and destination management, highlighting the relationship between cultural heritage, infrastructure and the development of conferences and business events. The discussion reflected the growing overlap between associations, destinations and the wider MICE economy.

An Indian Voice in the Global Association Conversation

The Congress also looked outward. Associations working across renewable energy, healthcare, semiconductors and space technology are pushing the connection between government, industry, academia and civil society around issues that extend well beyond individual membership bases. For Saha, that evolution represents a change in India's international role. The country is moving from “absorbing global practices towards contributing to them, with its association ecosystem beginning to generate ideas and expertise of its own.”

The discussions in Kolkata have had implications that outlast the two-day programme. If associations are becoming strategic institutions within the country's economic and professional landscape, their influence may be measured by the conversations they convene, the knowledge they generate and the changes they help deliver. The **IAC Excellence Awards** offered a practical reminder of that work, recognising five associations for impact, engagement and innovation. More useful than the trophies themselves was the opportunity to place examples of effective practice in front of a wider association community.

IAC 2026 closed without providing any major conceptual answers to the pressures facing India's associations. It left something more useful: a sharper set of questions about membership, leadership, advocacy, governance and impact, and a sector beginning to examine itself with greater confidence. In Kolkata, the changing world order became an invitation to consider what associations might help shape next.

HQ INSIGHTS

Tech, Associations & PCOs





Kenes Group

Building Careers Through Continuous Learning

Qualifications may open the door, but continuous learning is what keeps a career moving. As technology, AI and expectations reshape the workplace, the real competitive edge is no longer what professionals know, but how ready they are to learn what comes next.



Author: Velemira Dzhelepova, Global Learning & Development Lead at Kenes Group

Until recently, career progression followed a relatively predictable path. Education came first, and experience helped professionals move up the ladder. While qualifications remain important, the world is changing too quickly for any degree or certification to last an entire career.

Today, new technologies are reshaping jobs, AI is transforming the way people work, and employees are expected to adapt more quickly and frequently than ever before. As a result, organisations are placing a greater emphasis on continuous learning and career development rather than relying solely on formal qualifications. This shift is also changing how employers think about talent. Rather than focusing only on where someone has studied or what title they currently hold, many organisations are paying closer attention to an individual's ability to adapt. On the other hand, employees are no longer looking only for promotions. They want growth. They want to learn new skills, explore different areas of the business, and feel that they are staying relevant in a market that keeps moving. The events and association management industry is no exception. Like many sectors, it is navigating rapid technological change while managing increasingly complex client and stakeholder expectations. This requires professionals who are willing to continuously develop new capabilities and organisations that actively support that.

At Kenes Group, with more than 250 employees worldwide, we have realised that there is no single definition of career success anymore. Some people want to manage teams. Others want to deepen their expertise. Some discover new interests and move into a completely different area of business. This means having regular conversations where each person wants to grow, making sure development is defined by what employees actually need.

In 2025 alone, Kenes recorded 21 cases of promotions and internal mobility. This highlights an important reality: employees are often capable of much more than their current role suggests when given the right support and development opportunities.

Recently, we have seen this with the adoption of AI tools like Microsoft Copilot. For some employees, it felt exciting from day one. Others were hesitant. What stood out was not the technology itself, but the willingness to learn. The people who made the biggest progress were not necessarily the most technical; they were simply open to experimenting and figuring things out. That lesson applies far beyond AI. The skills that helped us succeed five years ago will not necessarily be enough five years from now. None of us can predict exactly what the future of work will look like. Social learning is a big part of the learning journey – colleagues sharing tips and ideas through informal channels, turning trial and error into knowledge that the rest of the team can use.

As organisations consider the future of education and workforce development, certification will continue to play an important role. However, the real challenge is helping people continue learning long after formal education ends. The organisations that succeed will be those that combine skills development with clear career pathways and create environments where learning is not viewed as an event, but as a natural part of work. In a rapidly changing world, that may be one of the most valuable investments any organisation can make.



Aspirational **Branded Designations** for **Associations of Professionals**

Professions are distinguished from occupations by 'aspirational, branded designations' that transform an association of professionals into a 'must-join' body.

Author: John Peacock, Director, Governology

Many associations validly choose to perform the valuable service of setting professional standards, but standard-setting alone is not always enough to drive high membership numbers. The next factor to consider is commercial advantage: how can membership of this association help my career?

In strong commercially oriented businesses (e.g. stock market trading or sales), what matters is an individual's financial performance, not whether they hold a professional qualification, a degree, or even a high school matriculation. This is understandable as some human skills are innate and cannot be replicated by a professional qualification.

The ideal positioning of an association of professionals is to have its members more sought after than practitioners who are not members of the association. Professionals in private practice often use their association membership as the platform and then build upon this by reputation amongst clients.

Where there are monopolistic employers such as government departments and a shortage of potential employers, associations face a tougher challenge recruiting and retaining members if that membership does not improve employment prospects.

Associations must follow their mission or objects, and many associations choose to exist to represent all people who engage in a profession. This is perfectly valid and may be the right path. However, it is also valid for associations to consider presenting their members (or a portion of their members) as having a superior standing among other members of the profession.

Have an Aspirational Branded Designation

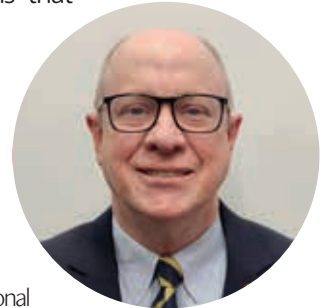
Acronyms that are developed and owned by associations of professionals are impressive. This article suggests we call these 'aspirational branded designations.' Associations become stronger when they offer a post-nominal designation that is sought-after, aspirational and powerful. This is smart marketing as these members carry and proudly promote

the designation. An ideal outcome is for your brand to become a symbol that professionals seek to increase their income.

One of the strongest words of aspirational branded designations are 'Chartered' designations. Originating in British associations that have Royal Charters, they combined the word 'Chartered' with the noun of their profession, hence Chartered Engineers, Chartered Secretaries, Chartered Surveyors, Chartered Accountants and so forth. There are many other very successful aspirational branded designations.

There are also a number of issues related to aspirational branded designations:

- A dynamic, respected adjective (e.g. Chartered or Certified or Accredited or Credentialed) plus noun (the name of the professional) works well.
- The post-nominal is better if abbreviated to two/three initials which can be easily spoken as initials (e.g. "CPA"). Encouragement should be given to putting these on business cards.
- 'Fellow of the Institute of XYZ's' is less catchy than a fluent post-nominal designation, but long-established titles should rarely be changed.
- Pre-nominals also work, but very few professions can use 'Doctor' and other pre-nominals are unlikely to be accepted.
- Aspirational branded designations work when there is an open market and where the designation is recognised by potential employers and clients as bestowing a higher standard of competence.
- Newly established designations are not instantly recognised and sought after; they may take a decade to establish. However, all designations were new once so think medium and long term.





- Have a hard-to-pass exam or interview process.
- If only a small percentage of candidates for the designation pass, publicise this as it is good for the brand to prove that attainment is a challenge.
- Position your association's designation as superior and more relevant than a university Master's qualification.
- Make designated members maintain their accreditation, which does not happen once a university degree (e.g. an MBA) is attained.
- The granting of designations can become a strong income generator for your association. If your association does not get this money, universities or others will be pleased to do so instead.
- Consider more voting rights for designated members, or non-designated members not having a vote.
- The lower the percentage of professionals in a field who belong to your association, the greater the incentive to actively promote your association's 'chartered,' 'accredited,' or 'certified' designation.
- Own your brand: develop, maintain and protect your unique designation through brand name registration and trademarks.
- Brand names of professionals controlled by a government registration board cannot be controlled by associations of professionals.
- Having one internationally consistent and tightly controlled brand is ideal.

- If no internationally controlled brand exists, work with colleague associations overseas to use the same designation.
- Ultimately, develop your brand into a separate profession.

Rename your Association to Fit the Brand Designation

A final consideration is where an association holds an aspirational, branded designation, the name of the association and the name of the designation should be very similar. If your designation becomes more powerful than the name of your association, change your association's name.

The USA-based **Association for Investment Management and Research (AIMR)** did such a good job in establishing and promoting its **Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA)** tag, that the designation became better known than the association. As a result, AIMR renamed itself CFA Institute in 2004.

Potential members need to be given compelling reasons to join their association of professionals. A few associations have been fortunate enough to position themselves so that people are willing to undergo tough examinations or peer review to join. Other associations of professionals should consider going down this path... the outcome may be worthwhile for many years ahead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Peacock is **Director of Governology Limited** and has been in the associations profession for 37 years.

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Why **Events** Need a **Front Door**

Ask most people how they ended up working in business meetings and events, and you will rarely hear a straight answer. It is a sector people can often fall into rather than plan for. That has always been part of what makes it so dynamic. But today, it is becoming one of its biggest vulnerabilities, and we can no longer rely on people unintentionally discovering it once the access routes start to narrow, says **Shonali Devereaux, Chief Executive of The Meetings Industry Association (MIA)**.

Article kindly provided by the Meetings Industry Association via Custard Communications



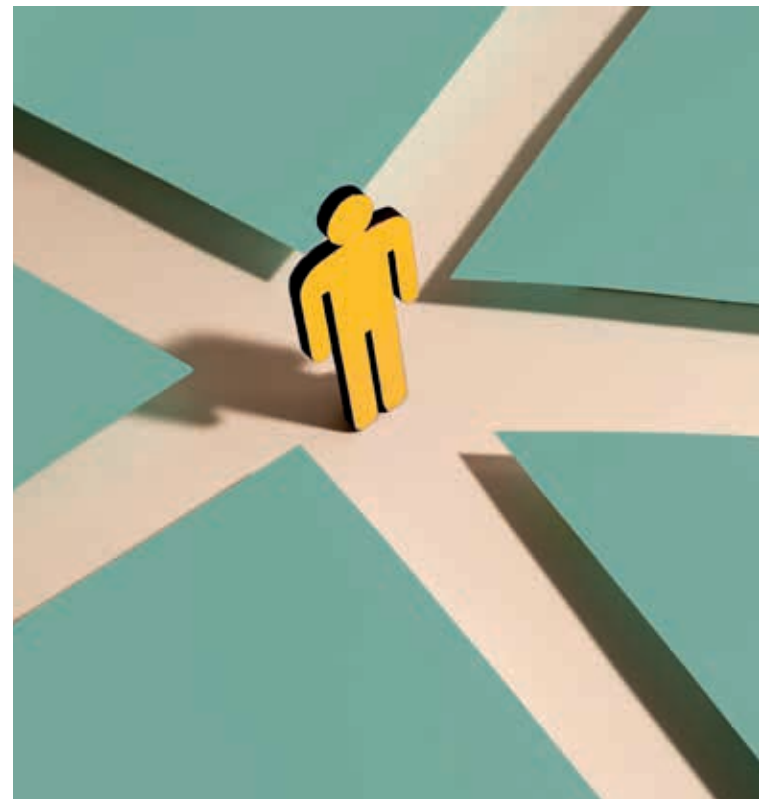
That narrowing is exactly what the recent **MIA Insights research**, published in June, set out to understand. What we found was an industry under pressure to recruit, retain and develop its people, while confidence in its ability to do so is equally decreasing. 90% of organisations told us that rising employment costs have reduced their ability to recruit younger and entry-level talent, while more than half expressed a lack of confidence that the industry can attract the workforce it needs for the future. These findings confirm what many of us have been sensing anecdotally. That the talent pipeline is narrowing at exactly the point it needs to widen.

At the same time, the education routes that should be feeding that pipeline are themselves under strain. Those providing further and higher education event courses describe an increasingly divided landscape. Some providers are thriving, largely those who have pivoted towards broader event management provision, while others are closing their doors entirely. The commercial training market tells a similar story. General hospitality training is widely available, but dedicated event education is harder to come by, with specialist provision delivered by only a small number of organisations. That gap is an opportunity as much as a challenge, and one the sector should be investing in closing together.

Part of the problem is structural. Further education and higher education courses are typically only revalidated every six years. In a sector that evolves its capabilities, technology, formats and client expectations on a far shorter cycle than that, a curriculum can be out of date almost as soon as it is approved. That is not a criticism of the institutions delivering these courses, many of whom are working hard within a system not designed for an industry that moves this quickly. It is a signal that we need a different model, one built around partnership between

education providers and employers, so that what is taught keeps pace with what the industry actually needs.

This is where credentials and proof of skill become so important. If formal qualifications cannot always keep up, employers and associations have a role to play in providing more agile, recognised ways for people to demonstrate their capability. Our research found that AI and automation, leadership and people management, and creativity and innovation were rated the most important skills for the next three to five years. These are not always things a traditional syllabus can teach in a classroom. They are built through mentoring, exposure and hands-on experience, which makes career pathways into the industry just as important as the qualifications that sit alongside them.





That is why initiatives such as **The Power of Events' Experience of Work** programme matter so much. The programme creates structured, visible routes in, giving students direct exposure to what a career in events looks like. The MIA is proud to be supporting this work, including funding pathways for twenty work experience students into the sector. It is a positive deliberate step towards making entry into our industry something people choose, not something they happen upon.

Programmes like this matter because the alternative is stark. **Alan Milburn's** recent review on young people and work warned of a 'lost generation', with a rising number of young people not in education, employment or training, and a marked decline in entry level opportunities in sectors such as hospitality that have traditionally offered accessible routes into work. Our own findings echo that warning closely. Rising employers National Insurance and National Minimum Wage costs are already delaying recruitment and increasing workloads for existing staff rather than bringing in new recruits. If we allow the first step of the career ladder to disappear, we should not be surprised when the pipeline further up runs dry.

None of this is a reason for pessimism, however. Nearly three quarters of organisations we spoke to are actively developing early career employees for future leadership roles, and over a third have increased their investment in training and development in the past year. The intent is there. What is needed now is coordination between employers, education providers, membership bodies and government, so that skills development and career pathways reinforce each other rather than operating in isolation.

The MIA will keep pushing on this, sharing our findings with policymakers, backing practical programmes like The Power of Events' Experience of Work programme, and working with our members to build guidance that reflects how the industry works today. Our people are what make this sector distinctive. Making sure the next generation can find their way in, and prove what they can do once they arrive, must be one of our shared priorities.

From **Experience** to **Evidence**

Building Recognised Career Pathways for Event Professionals

The business events profession has never stood still. Today, the pace of change is challenging professionals and employers to reconsider not only what people need to know, but how their capabilities can be demonstrated, recognised and developed throughout their careers.

Author: Stephen Noble, IAPCO Council Member and Chair of the IAPCO Training Academy



Artificial intelligence, changing delegate expectations, sustainability requirements, geopolitical uncertainty, new commercial models and complex stakeholder environments are reshaping the work of conference and event professionals. Technical knowledge remains important, but it must now be combined with adaptability, strategic thinking, financial capability, leadership, digital confidence and meaningful outcomes for clients and communities.

In this environment, experience alone is no longer always sufficient. Professionals need a credible way to translate what they have learned, through formal education, workplace experience and continuing professional development, into evidence that can be understood by employers, clients and industry peers. This is the thinking behind **IAPCO's Accredited Conference Expert (ACE) programme**, that was championed by **Mathias Posch, President of International Conference Services and former Chair of IAPCO's Training Academy**.

Turning Professional Development into Professional Recognition

The meetings industry has traditionally offered many valuable educational programmes, yet career development can sometimes feel fragmented. A professional may attend conferences, complete online courses, learn through mentoring and accumulate years of practical experience without those achievements forming a clearly recognised pathway.

ACE creates a progressive accreditation journey through which professionals can validate their knowledge, demonstrate their experience and receive recognition from an international industry body. ACE I is the first of three planned levels, allowing the credential to develop alongside an individual's career and increasing responsibilities. A credential should not represent the end of learning. It should provide a visible milestone within a much longer professional journey.

For individuals, accreditation can provide confidence and differentiation. For employers, it offers an additional indication that a candidate has achieved an independently

defined level of knowledge and professional commitment. For the wider industry, it contributes to greater consistency in how capability is understood and communicated.

More than Attendance

The value of any professional credential depends on its integrity. Effective accreditation therefore requires defined eligibility criteria, structured learning, meaningful assessment and evidence of professional experience.

To achieve ACE I, applicants must complete the **IAPCO webEDGE** training programme and earn at least 20 Certified Meeting Professional credits. Each module includes a 12-question assessment requiring a minimum pass mark of 75%. It is recommended for professionals with four years of industry experience, or three years within an IAPCO member organisation, and submit a letter explaining their motivation for seeking accreditation.

Knowledge is assessed, but it is considered alongside practical experience and professional intent. It recognises that event professionals develop through several interconnected channels: structured education, experience gained in complex live environments, reflection, peer learning and exposure to different markets and perspectives which will be part of ACE II and III launching in the future.

A Pathway, not a Badge

A progressive accreditation model can help professionals identify where they are now, what capabilities they need next and how they might prepare for future roles. It can support conversations between employees and managers about development priorities, stretch assignments, mentoring and promotion pathways.

This is particularly valuable in an industry where career progression is not always linear. Professionals may move between operations, programme management, sponsorship,

marketing, technology, association management, business development and leadership. Skills are often transferable, but the pathway connecting one role to another may not be immediately visible.

ACE provides a framework through which those capabilities can be recognised as part of a broader professional identity. Its role is to complement organisational training, university qualifications or other industry credentials by recognising knowledge and experience specifically within the context of professional conference and meeting organisation.

International Recognition in a Global Profession

A conference professional may manage clients in one country, suppliers in another and participants drawn from dozens of markets. Credentials therefore need to travel. An internationally recognised designation can help professionals communicate their capabilities beyond their immediate workplace or local market. This becomes important as employers recruit internationally, teams work across borders and professionals pursue opportunities in different regions.

IAPCO is the only international accreditation organisation specifically for PCOs, while its educational programmes are available across the wider meetings industry. Its **Training Academy** brings together industry experts from different regions and provides specialist education for PCOs, meeting planners and other business events professionals. That global perspective is fundamental to ACE. The aim is to recognise professional standards and capabilities that remain relevant across different operating environments.

Employers Have a Role to Play

Credentials create the greatest value when employers actively recognise and support them. Organisations can help by giving team members access to education, allocating time for professional development and connecting learning with practical workplace opportunities. They can also incorporate recognised credentials into development reviews, succession planning and recruitment frameworks.

If the industry wants capable professionals who are prepared for increasingly complex roles, employers must help create the conditions in which learning can be applied. Supporting accreditation also sends an important message: professional event management is a discipline requiring judgement, expertise and continuing development, not simply a collection of tasks learned through repetition.

Access and the Future of Professional Development

The future of industry education will be more flexible, modular and continuous. Professionals expect learning that can be completed alongside work, accessed across regions and applied immediately. Digital delivery can make education more accessible, but flexibility must not come at the expense of assessment integrity or meaningful engagement.

IAPCO's webEDGE programme enables participants to work through specialist learning at their own pace, while ACE connects that learning with industry experience and formal recognition. ACE I is designed for established conference and meetings professionals who are ready to take the next step in their professional development.

As the programme develops through its progressive levels, there is an opportunity to create a clearer career pathway, from established practitioner through to advanced professional and industry leader. A credential does not capture every quality required to succeed, as curiosity, judgement, resilience and leadership cannot be reduced to a piece of paper. A well-designed credential can, however, make capability more visible. It can give professionals a reason to reflect on what they know, provide employers with a stronger basis for development conversations and reinforce industry standards.

In a profession built on platforms for knowledge exchange, we must apply the same commitment to the development of our own people. The future of professional education is not simply about delivering more content; it is about creating connected pathways that turn learning into capability, capability into evidence, and evidence into opportunity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Noble is Chair of the **IAPCO Training Academy**, an IAPCO Council Member and **General Manager of The Conference Company**. Based in Sydney, he works across Australia and the Asia-Pacific region and contributes to IAPCO's international education and professional development programmes.



CityDNA From Individual Learning to Organisational Change

Destination organisations are being asked to master more, faster. Artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping discovery and decision-making. Mobility systems are changing how people experience cities. Accessibility is moving from a compliance requirement to a design principle. At the same time, DMOs are expected to play a broader role in governance, community engagement and the long-term stewardship of a place.

These challenges are often described as skills gaps. But that description is incomplete. The issue is not simply whether individual professionals possess the right knowledge. It is whether organisations can learn, interpret change and act collectively.

Traditional professional development remains essential, but the most urgent destination challenges do not sit neatly within one department. AI affects marketing, research, operations and governance. Accessibility involves digital platforms, transport, public space, visitor services and procurement. Mobility influences the visitor journey, resident sentiment, climate goals and economic development. When issues are this interconnected, learning cannot remain siloed.

This is why peer networks increasingly matter. They allow professionals to compare lived experience, test assumptions and see how other cities have translated an idea into practice. They also reduce the risk of every destination starting from a blank page.

A practical example illustrates the point. After hearing Helsinki present its visitor volunteer programme at a previous CityDNA conference, another city adapted the model and established its own programme cost-effectively. The value did not lie in the presentation alone. It lay in the transfer: one city's experience became another city's starting point.

The next step is to move from individual learning to organisational learning. Sending one person to a conference may generate useful notes. Sending a cross-functional team can generate a shared interpretation of what matters, which questions require action and where responsibilities sit once everyone returns home.

Barbara Jamison-Woods, President of City Destinations Alliance, puts it this way: “The challenges facing destination organisations no longer sit within individual departments. Mobility, accessibility, artificial intelligence and public legitimacy are interconnected, which means our teams need opportunities to learn and respond together. The real value of professional

exchange is not simply what one person hears in the room, but what an organisation is able to change afterwards.”

That principle is shaping the **CityDNA Autumn Conference** in Verona (19–21 October 2026), built around the theme *Moving Together*. The phrase refers both to the physical and digital movement of people through destinations and to the ability of city organisations to move collectively towards shared positions and decisions.

The programme treats learning as something active. Walkshops take participants into Verona's streets to examine accessibility, the connected visitor journey, tourism's wider purpose and climate resilience. The city becomes part of the curriculum: participants are not only discussing systems, but observing how movement, public space and visitor experience interact in practice.

This matters because many professional capabilities are developed through exposure, reflection and comparison rather than through abstract instruction alone. Seeing an accessibility barrier in context can reveal more than a checklist. Mapping a visitor journey street by street can expose gaps that are invisible in a dashboard. Discussing climate adaptation while moving through a city can connect strategic ambition with the realities of place.

Verona is a particularly relevant setting. The **Destination Verona & Garda Foundation** operates across a UNESCO heritage city and one of Europe's largest leisure lake destinations. It must connect different territories, visitor flows, stakeholders and economic priorities while continuing to evolve from a promotional body towards a broader governance role.

Luca Caputo, General Manager of Destination Verona & Garda Foundation, says: “Verona is not simply hosting a conversation about movement and destination management; it lives many of these questions every day. Our challenge is to connect a historic city, the Garda territory, residents, visitors and businesses through a destination model that is increasingly based on coordination and governance.”

The conference's member-led workshops extend this approach. Rather than positioning participants as a passive audience, the sessions draw on the experience of the room to explore three strategic areas: accessibility, mobility and the growing intelligence layer created by AI. Their outcomes will feed directly into CityDNA's 2027–2030 strategy.

This is an important shift in the role of professional gatherings. They are not only places where knowledge is transmitted; they can also become spaces where a profession develops shared language, identifies emerging competencies and decides where collective action is needed.

For destination organisations, the implications go beyond conferences. The most resilient organisations will be those that build learning into how they work: bringing different functions together, creating space for reflection, testing ideas quickly and maintaining relationships with peers who can challenge or accelerate their thinking.

For individuals, this broader form of learning also changes career pathways. A marketer needs enough data literacy to question an AI output; a researcher needs to understand public policy; a business events professional needs to think about accessibility, mobility and legacy. The most valuable careers may increasingly be built across functions rather than within a single specialism.

The future of professional development in the visitor economy will therefore be less about accumulating information and more about building organisational capacity. Credentials and technical expertise will continue to matter, but so will the ability to interpret complexity together and turn insight into action.

In a period of rapid change, one of the most valuable skills a destination organisation can develop may be the ability to learn as a team.



CITY DNA AUTUMN CONFERENCE

Moving Together

CITIES IN MOTION. DESTINATIONS IN ALIGNMENT.

DESTINATION VERONA GARDA

VERONA OCTOBER 19-21 2026

#CityDNAVerona2026 #MovingTogether



Being a **Subject Matter Expert** is just the Tip of the Iceberg for **Associations**

Being recognised as a Subject Matter Expert (SME) is a powerful form of authority. But maintaining that position requires more than owning expertise: it means finding new ways to turn knowledge, credibility and industry insight into tangible value for members. **Mark Levin, CAE, CSP**, explores how his association is extending its SME role beyond technical guidance to address one of manufacturing's most pressing challenges: developing and retaining the skilled workforce on which the industry depends.



In several of my previous columns, I have referred to the fact that the association for which I serve as the **Executive Vice President**, the **Chain Link Fence Manufacturers Institute (CLFMI)**, has spent considerable time and money over the years trying to create credibility by branding itself as the SME for our niche in the construction industry. We have been very effective in our efforts by partnering with important influencers and stakeholders in our industry, and by reaching out to the user community for our members' products. Our goal has been to convince them that the guidelines and best practices promulgated by our organisation are the standards for quality, safety, and durability. We have been able to measure our success by tracking inquiries to our association offices, keyword searches on the internet, and click-through data on our website.

For a while (several years, in fact), we were somewhat complacent in the important SME position we had staked out for ourselves in the industry. Even government agencies were referring companies bidding on government construction projects to our website to get the correct information on chain link fencing requirements for their projects.

Those days are pretty much over now. There is a lot of competition for the attention of the decision-makers in our field coming from private companies, other non-profits, and the ever-growing artificial intelligence community. To maintain our leadership SME status, we are now looking to expand our brand to not only serve the needs of our member companies and their customers, but to begin serving the needs of the employees of our member companies.

We are embarking on an effort to find ways to help our member manufacturers attack one of their most pressing non-technical challenges: attracting and keeping a highly skilled and highly trained workforce. We are not going to try to do that through a mass recruitment push or a career-oriented mass marketing campaign (although those may be in our future). We are going to try to do this the same way we attained our SME status, through education, research, and innovation.

Here are some of the key aspects of our efforts:

- **Helping our members focus on career development instead of job placement** – Manufacturing offers a full range of career opportunities. The challenge to our industry has been attracting younger workers who still see the physical work involved running and maintaining heavy machinery as a dead-end job. We have been working with our member companies, affiliated industry partners, and industry media to highlight the stories of the many industry leaders who started off in an entry-level operator position and are now in senior management (and even ownership) positions in those same companies.
- **Emphasising knowledge transfer and skill development as employment enhancements** – We are encouraging member companies to highlight the technical knowledge that workers in our field must gain to be productive at each level of their career. Because of CLFMI's status as a SME, we can help turn this accumulated knowledge and experience into recognition through credentialling, educational credit courses, and a pathway to degree programmes.



At the same time, we are supplementing the aspect of acquiring additional technical knowledge with the development of the interpersonal skills that are part of career advancement in manufacturing. These are transferable skills that allow employees to move into supervisory positions and prepare them for the next steps in their careers. They can also take these interpersonal skills with them into their volunteer work, their community involvement, and their participation in leadership roles in technical and trade associations.

- **Encouraging involvement in our association** – We would be remiss if we did not also promote the opportunities that exist within CLFMI for providing an employment benefit to company employees at every level. While not every committee in our organisation would be an appropriate spot for some newer industry workers, there are some committees (for example, our Technical Committee, or our Safety Committee) where the input of these workers might add some needed perspective to the discussions. Our member companies can use these opportunities to attend industry/association meetings, as both a reward for good job performance and as a learning experience for the employees.

In summary, our goal is to not only enhance the brand of our organisation as the SME in our field, but to also enhance our value to our members through that brand. The term 'guilty by association' does not have to have a negative connotation. In our industry, being identified as a member of CLFMI means your customers know that you support the standards of the recognised leaders in the industry.

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.



Associations Should Define What **AI Literacy** Means for Their **Profession**

Association members are already ahead of the organisations that serve them. In a recent **Momentive Software** survey of more than 1,000 association members, nearly half reported using generative AI weekly. Among association professionals, fewer than one in five said the same, and only 13% worked in an organisation with an AI policy. Among Generation Z members, weekly or daily use is simply the norm.

Author: Vamshi Velmajala, CEO & Co-founder of Snapsight



The same survey surfaced a second, older gap. Members rank career advancement, meaning training, certifications, mentoring and access to opportunity, among their most valued benefits, and professionals consistently underrate it.

Put the two findings together, and a picture emerges. Members are adopting a technology that will reshape their careers; they want their association's help navigating exactly that kind of change, and many associations are not yet equipped to give it. The people we exist to guide are, on this particular transition, moving faster than we are.

The Authority Nobody Else Holds

Generic AI commentary is everywhere. Media organisations have scale, pace and distribution, and they are producing it in volume. But the question a member actually needs answered is this: What does AI mean for my career as an auditor, a radiographer, a quantity surveyor? It cannot be answered from outside the profession.

Associations hold something no publisher can buy: domain authority, built over decades through members, standards, evidence, credentials and practice. Their challenge has never been a lack of knowledge. It has been the difficulty of bringing that knowledge to members with the relevance, speed and continuity a digital environment demands. Research sat in documents. Conference discussions ended when delegates left the room. Member insight was collected but rarely connected.

AI changes that capacity equation. The technology remains complex, but its interface has become remarkably simple: language. A professional can describe an outcome in ordinary words and ask a system to draft, analyse, translate, organise or compare. The work that associations have long known as valuable, but which they were forced to postpone, becomes practical.

I spend my working life inside the content of association conferences, and the pattern is remarkably consistent: the knowledge is there. The capacity to activate it has not been.

Consider a familiar case. An association with a staff of twelve runs a three-day annual congress with eighty sessions. For years, the recordings went into an archive that few members ever opened. Today, that same team can turn those sessions into a searchable, year-round learning resource: summaries for members who could not attend, materials adapted for early-career and senior audiences, themes mapped against the association's own competency framework, key sessions translated for chapters abroad. Nothing about the association's expertise changed. What changed is that a small team can now act on it.

What AI Literacy Actually Means

None of this happens through tools alone; it requires a skill. AI literacy means understanding what a capability makes possible, where it is useful, what information it depends on and what consequences follow from using it. It includes the ability to ask better questions, review an output against professional knowledge, recognise when a system has missed context and decide where human responsibility must remain central. It also includes the confidence to look past the immediate task and ask what a new capability will change in a profession, a labour market or a learning pathway.

Association professionals need this literacy in two directions. The first is internal capability: knowing where AI can strengthen the association's own capacity, so that repetitive work shrinks and more attention flows to the relationships, judgement and convening that members value most. Literacy is what separates meaningful applications from a drawer full of isolated tools. The second reaches outward, and it is where the September theme of this magazine comes into focus: professional interpretation.

A Credential Waiting to Be Written

Every profession is asking its own version of the same questions. Which parts of the work will change? Which skills gain importance? How do entry-level roles evolve when the tasks juniors learned on are the first to be automated? What does responsible practice look like when knowledge is easier to produce but harder to assess?

These are education, credential and career-pathway questions to which associations were built to answer. And they suggest a concrete opportunity: AI literacy in each field is a definable competency, and associations are the natural bodies to define it.

That means embedding it in CPD frameworks, so members earn recognised credit for learning to use AI responsibly within their discipline. It means updating certification standards to reflect what competent practice now includes. It means giving explicit guidance to early-career members whose pathway into the profession is changing shape. And it also means equipping boards, volunteers and staff first, because an association cannot credential a competence its own people have not built.

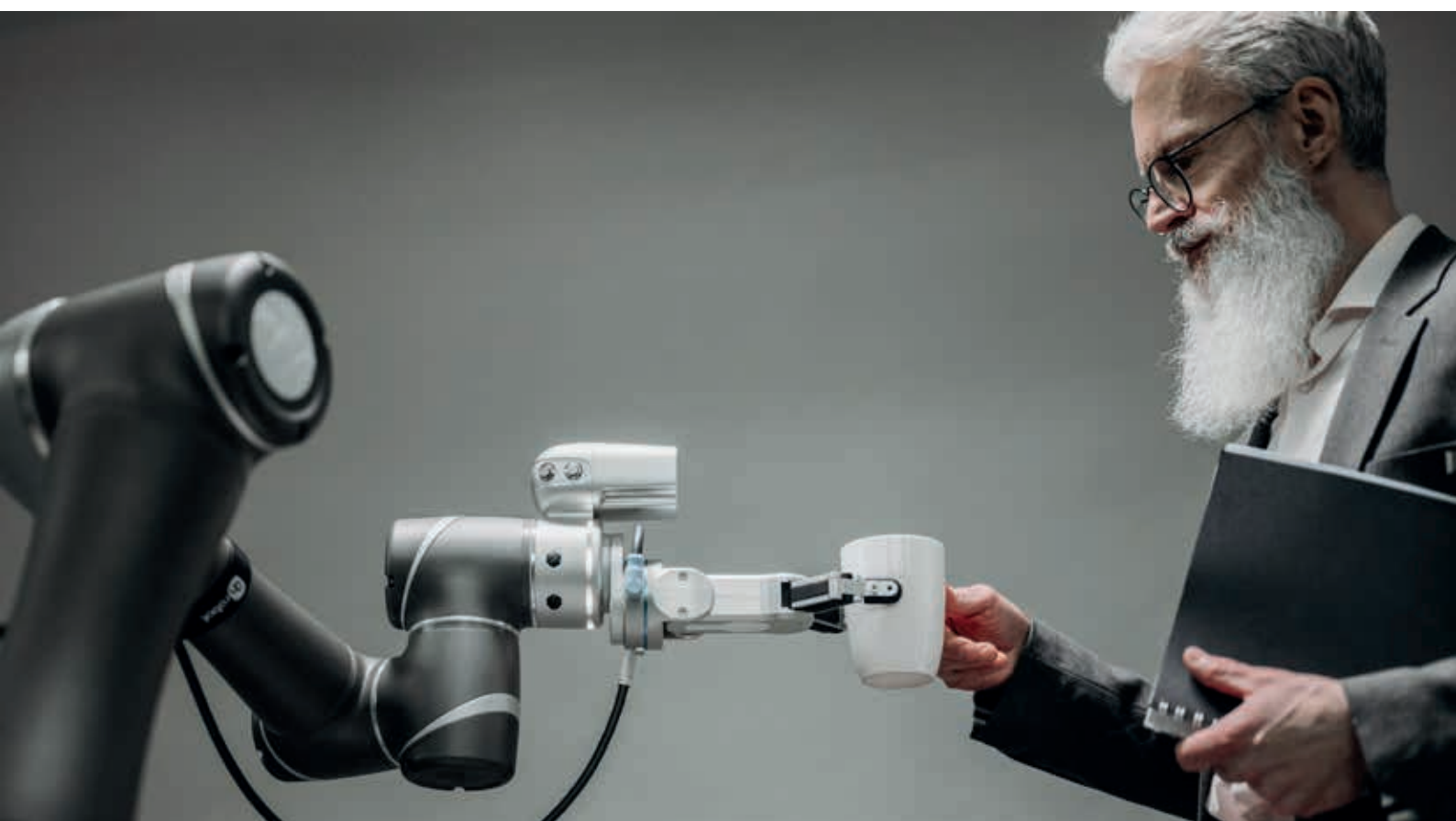
The commercial logic points the same way. The Momentive research found that members who see their association

as an early adopter of technology report markedly higher satisfaction (81% in the latest survey; up from 72% in 2022), a correlation the researchers link to stronger connection and likelihood to renew. Interpreting AI for a profession is not a side project. It is a member value of the most fundamental kind.

Start With the Work in Front of You

Practical learning is the strongest entry point. Begin with what is already on the desk: a member survey, a conference recording, a policy paper, a training programme. Test what AI improves, identify the checks required, share the learning across the organisation. Small experiments build institutional confidence and reveal where governance, investment or new skills are needed. The same method extends to members: convene experts, collect emerging practice, publish practical guidance, create spaces where members examine how AI is changing their own work. This is how professional communities have always absorbed major change: through shared interpretation, standards and learning.

AI will increase the volume, speed and accessibility of knowledge. It will also increase the value of context, judgement and trusted institutions. The associations that build AI literacy, and then credential it for their professions, will define what competence means next.

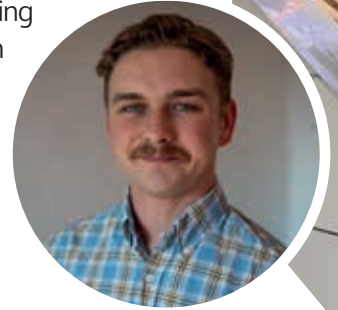




Tradeshows Have a **Proof Problem** Better **Matchmaking** Can Fix it

As skills-based hiring gains momentum, trade shows face an uncomfortable contradiction: they bring together the people best placed to demonstrate expertise, yet still measure engagement through badges, leads and brief stand conversations. **ExpoPlatform** suggests that smarter matchmaking could turn exhibitions into places where skills are not simply claimed, but demonstrated, tested and connected to meaningful professional opportunities.

Author: **Conor Riordan**, Digital Content Editor at ExpoPlatform



A trade show gathers exactly the audience skills-based hiring is supposed to serve: specifiers, engineers, buyers, technicians and the early-career staff exhibitors send to represent them. Too many shows still treat that audience the way they always have; as a floor to walk and a stand to staff, thirty seconds of eye contact per lead.

If skills are supposed to decide who gets hired and who gets promoted, the format built to demonstrate them needs to change too, not just the marketing copy around it. Attendees have noticed the mismatch. The junior engineers and analysts exhibitors send to work a stand increasingly arrive fluent in the language of portfolios, verified certificates and demonstrable skill, not just a badge scan and a business card exchange.

The Trend Behind it

The direction of travel is consistent across a raft of surveys on the subject. Research across the HR industry keeps landing on the same conclusion: a demonstrated skill predicts job performance far better than a paper qualification ever did.

Set against that is a much less flattering finding. Only a minority of employers who have announced the shift have actually changed who they hire. Most have changed the job description and left the shortlist untouched. A meaningful number have quietly gone back to hiring on qualifications within a year.

The intent is real. The infrastructure to act on it is not.

Proof Needs a Place to Happen

Part of the problem is that 'skills-based' still tends to mean a keyword on a CV or a badge on a LinkedIn profile, not something anyone has actually watched a candidate do. Digital credentialing has matured fast, badges and micro-certificates that can now be verified rather than taken on trust, but a badge only proves someone passed a course. It says nothing about how a stranger with a live problem, a real client or a specific team gap would find working with them.

Trade shows are one of the few formats left where that can happen in person, at scale, in a single day. That is the opportunity most organisers are still leaving on the table.

The toolkit to act on it already exists, refined over a decade of buyer-seller matchmaking rather than built for hiring at all. ExpoPlatform's meeting suite alone runs to seven formats: self-requested meetings guided by AI recommendations, speed networking, concierge sessions where a human fine-tunes the AI's shortlist, round tables built around a shared topic instead of a shared employer, and hosted-buyer programmes that pre-qualify who is in the room before anyone arrives.

None of that logic is exclusive to procurement. A round table works just as well built around a skills gap as a sourcing category. Speed networking works just as well pairing a junior analyst with a senior specialist who is agreed to run an insightful fifteen-minute conversation instead of a pitch.



The Mentorship Gap Nobody's Pricing in

The most underused version of this is expert-to-newcomer matching rather than buyer-to-seller matching. Junior professionals sent to work at an exhibition stand rarely lack ambition; they lack structured access to someone senior enough to tell them whether they are actually good at something.

Mentoring research consistently links structured early-career mentorship to better retention and faster promotion. But most B2B shows still treat mentorship (where they offer it at all) as an optional add-on session rather than a matched, scheduled interaction with the same rigour as a sales meeting.

There is no structural reason a hosted-buyer format cannot be transformed into a hosted-mentor format: a small number of vetted experts from the same industry, pre-matched against declared skills and goals rather than job titles, given structured one-to-one time instead of a drop-in queue. The technology to run is identical. The only thing that changes is who counts as the buyer.

The Proof Is in the Pairing

AI matching is only as good as what it is matching on and a system trained on job titles and self-reported interests will keep reproducing the same shallow signals it is meant to replace. The organisers getting this right keep a human in the loop when needed, AI builds the shortlist, a person fine-tunes it, rather than letting an algorithm always make the final call on who is worth fifteen minutes of an expert's time.

That is also an opportunity. An organiser who can prove its matches actually worked (not just that they happened) has something sponsors, industry bodies and exhibitors will pay a premium for: a credible, verifiable middle step between “we say we hire on skills” and “we actually do.” It also gives organisers a new metric to sell against; not footfall or badge scans, but matches that led somewhere, tracked and reportable the same way a hosted-buyer programme already tracks deal value.

It is still an open question whether the industry moves fast enough to close that gap before the skills-based hiring rhetoric outpaces it for good.

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