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HQ
THE ASSOCIATION MAGAZINE

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Leading the Global Response to Dementia

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Editor's Notes

Giving **AI** a **Purpose** Beyond the **Wow Effect**

Author: Jesús Guerrero Chacón, HQ's Deputy Editor

The *HQ* team attends a wide range of events every year, and one pattern has become impossible to ignore: programmes everywhere include AI sessions. Delegates often tell us that the last conference they attended also featured a keynote speech or AI demonstration. However, when we speak with industry partners, a different sentiment emerges. Many partners say they feel curious but unsure how to apply AI practically or choose from the expanding range of tools available.

This mismatch between industry enthusiasm and delegate experience highlights a deeper issue. Robots greeting passers-by or virtual reality goggles may attract attention, but this alone is not a strategy. On LinkedIn, post-event reflections have become almost obligatory, with many professionals compelled to share recaps to signal attendance, learning, and contribution. However, these posts often read as AI-generated and, while making posting easier, can replace genuine reflection with automated visibility.

The true value of AI lies elsewhere. When applied with purpose, it can help associations, convention bureaux, venues, planners and suppliers to nurture their communities, personalise attendee journeys, streamline registration and scheduling, improve lead capture, support year-round engagement and enable smaller teams to operate more efficiently. Used intentionally, it can strengthen education, advocacy and member value.

Nevertheless, our industry often gives priority to visual impact over meaning. Programmes offer high-level inspiration, but lack the practical guidance and governance frameworks required for the ethical and secure implementation of AI. Delegates hear about innovation, but leave without understanding how to align AI with organisational goals, data responsibilities and daily operations.

The challenges surrounding AI are technological, organisational and environmental. Many organisations are still modernising their systems, updating processes and addressing capacity gaps. The rise of 'shadow AI' shows what happens when staff feel unprepared: they turn to available tools using personal accounts, inadvertently exposing confidential information. Meanwhile, AI-powered cyber threats are increasing rapidly. Event organisers hold large volumes of sensitive data, yet many still lack the policies and training needed for today's risk environment.

Environmental and regulatory pressures are also increasing. International institutions are examining the energy and water use of data centres, and the **United Nations Environment Assembly** has now placed sustainable AI on its agenda. In Europe, parts of the **AI Act** may be delayed due to pressure from the US administration and major technology companies, creating uncertainty for organisations preparing for compliance. These developments will influence how the sector designs systems, manages data, and maintains trust.

AI remains essential. It can empower teams, support decision-making and reduce repetitive tasks, enabling staff to focus on creativity, strategy and relationship-building. The question is not whether AI has a place at events, but how we shape the conversations around it. Different stakeholders require different guidance, from governance models and data protection to staff training, ethical use of AI and workflow optimisation.

For our sector, the real issue is not how much AI we adopt, but how intentionally we use it. Good governance requires clear standards, transparent processes and responsible human oversight. With these elements in place, AI strengthens teams and improves the experiences we design. As we enter a year of rapid change, the key conversation is how to manage these risks with clarity and purpose, and how to define a lasting role for AI that supports organisations rather than creating a wow effect.

HQ #123

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INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS

From Platitudes to **Purpose**:

The Illusion of Consensus for Legacy-driven Events!

Author: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager

Back in 2023, the **European Association Summit** in Brussels, sought to dissect the 'Future of Association Professionals' for a well-composed audience of association executives, covering the fundamentals of advocacy, mentoring and networking in a post-pandemic world. In the closing session, the organisers decided to challenge three young, freshly minted professionals to reflect together on their journey and what they would change for the better within the community. After two fairly generic and 'well-mannered' testimonials, the latter's unfiltered feedback left an awkward mood in the room: "I believe we often use these forums as echo chambers for peer validation with overly rehearsed speeches and little room for disagreement. I feel we are afraid to go against the grain and burst the bubble."

Perhaps I am being too unfair to a large group of players climbing this mountain, but after participating in the last two major events in our sector (the **ICCA Congress** in Porto and **IBTM World** in Barcelona). I found myself dwelling on these words amid a litany of intentions, manifestos and rallying cries suggesting that the meetings and events sector is on the verge of a moral renaissance. As concepts such as advocacy, purpose and legacy pick up steam among associations and destinations, I fear we may be at risk of confusing consensus with substance and structural progress with short-term gains.

We proclaim events as catalysts for change – platforms for social inclusion, environmental responsibility, and community legacy. In fact, as recent analyses on sustainable destination management and various impact roadmaps *(check out some of them in this edition)* argue, events have the potential to promote the ecological transition of urbanscapes and are seen as strategic assets for influencing communities, economies and public perception. That said, I think the sector faces three interrelated weaknesses: limited public visibility, restricted positioning, and insufficient collaboration beyond its own ecosystem. Without the involvement of broader social actors (from local NGOs to grassroots projects), the promise of transformative events remains largely aspirational.

This was clearly evident at the **Association Leadership Quest** during the ICCA Congress, which underscored that uncertainty is no longer temporary but a structural condition requiring a shift in leadership mindset. While geopolitical instability, rising costs and evolving member expectations remain pressing issues, the deeper challenge lies in redefining relevance – how associations create value across generations, uphold neutrality in polarised contexts and stay purpose-driven amid disruption. The session reinforced that innovation extends beyond technology to include trust, intentional design and meaningful collaboration with destinations and venues. Yet ongoing frustrations around transparency and engagement highlight a persistent gap between ambition and delivery, suggesting that progress depends on long-term partnerships aligned around shared values and credibility – *does it ring a bell?*

Recognising these gaps is not an excercise in reproach, but a call to deliberate action *(take a look at our insights from the IBTM Trends Report 2025.)* If the ICCA session framed uncertainty as a structural condition, the **Association Leaders Forum** at **IBTM** grounded that challenge in day-to-day realities. Discussions exposed the growing gap between the rhetoric of partnership and the persistence of transactional practices, particularly around costs, risk sharing and value delivery. While collaboration and co-creation were repeatedly championed, some parties made clear that real progress will require greater accountability, clearer expectations and a shift from short-term exchanges to genuinely strategic relationships – echoing the ICCA's call for a kind of leadership that is both goal-oriented and operationally brave.

In short, legacy and purpose are not inherited through declarations, but rather achieved through responsible execution, circular cooperation, and ethical management. Publicly sharing impact assessments and implementation models strengthens credibility and fosters a culture of continuous development. As that 'new grad' at the summit warned us, consensus without action often leads to a monolith of stagnation, while insular rhetoric offers little more than superficial reassurance. Have a great 2026 with *HQ*!

Unconventional Conventions Highlights Prague's Distinct Meeting Identity

The **Prague Convention Bureau** has unveiled a new brand identity centred on the concept of **Unconventional Conventions**, reflecting the city's vision within the current international meetings landscape. This new positioning encourages international associations, professional congress organisers and meeting planners to re-evaluate a city they already know well. Prague is consistently ranked among the world's top five congress destinations. The city combines architectural heritage, compact accessibility and an academic tradition that continues to shape its meetings. The campaign highlights how Prague's creative spirit, scientific ecosystem, and commitment to sustainability make it a natural home for events that are different in both content and form.

The notion of the unconventional is not just a marketing strategy, but an integral part of Prague's character. Bohemian in spirit and open to experimentation, Prague has always attracted independent thinkers. Its inventive tradition produced milestones from contact lenses and nylon to nanofibres and the word 'robot'. This inventive mindset continues to support major European research initiatives, including the **European Union Agency for the Space Programme,** the **Research and Innovation Centre on Advanced Industrial Production** and the **Extreme Light Infrastructure Beamlines**. This creates an intellectual environment that is well-suited to knowledge-based congresses and content-led meetings. It makes expert participation, technical visits and legacy activities feasible within the congress's regular schedule.

At the same time, Prague's infrastructure provides the reliability needed to realise these ambitions. Congresses of up to 18,000 delegates can be hosted across a network of venues blending historic architecture with state-of-the-art technology. With around 45,000 hotel rooms to choose from, including new properties such as the **Fairmont Golden Prague,** the **W Prague,** the **Cloud One** and the **Sir Prague Hotel**, planners can find the right balance of scale and quality for events ranging from high-level congresses to incentive programmes.

Recent openings further showcase how the campaign's theme is put into practice. For example, the restored Art Nouveau halls in the **Fanta Building** at the **Main Railway Station** have been transformed into a central venue for mid-sized meetings of up to 600 participants. Meanwhile, the renovated **Prague Planetarium** is equipped with a 23.5-metre LED dome and provides one of Europe's most advanced projection spaces for science and education events. **Signal Space**, a permanent gallery for digital and immersive art, and **Station 6**, a repurposed railway building in the Bubeneč district, prove that heritage and innovation can coexist within the meetings industry.

The city's accessibility is a key factor in its appeal, as evidenced by the fact that Václav Havel Airport connects to 165 global destinations through 75 airlines, handling almost 17 million passengers each year. As a member of the European Union and the Schengen Area, Prague offers visa-free entry to citizens of 89 countries. Once on the ground, delegates can quickly move across the compact city centre using a public transport network that was ranked second in the world by *Time Out* in 2024. This makes multi-venue agendas both efficient and sustainable. In fact, sustainability runs through every layer of the city's event policy. The Czech Republic ranks eighth globally in the **UN Sustainable Development Goals Index**, and 53% of Prague's surface area is covered by greenery. Since 2020, the City Council has required supported events to use reusable materials and has offered delegates complimentary or discounted public transport. These measures have transformed sustainability from a talking point into an operational standard that organisers can verify.

Quoting *Time Out* once more, cultural depth adds another dimension to the delegate experience. The publication ranks Prague as the world's second most culturally vibrant metropolis, a reputation reflected in the city's daily life. From Michelin-starred restaurants and cafés once frequented by literary and scientific luminaries such as Kafka and Einstein, to award-winning cocktail bars like the **Hemingway Bar** and **Bugsy's**, Prague offers a social programme that complements, rather than distracts from, the purpose of a meeting.

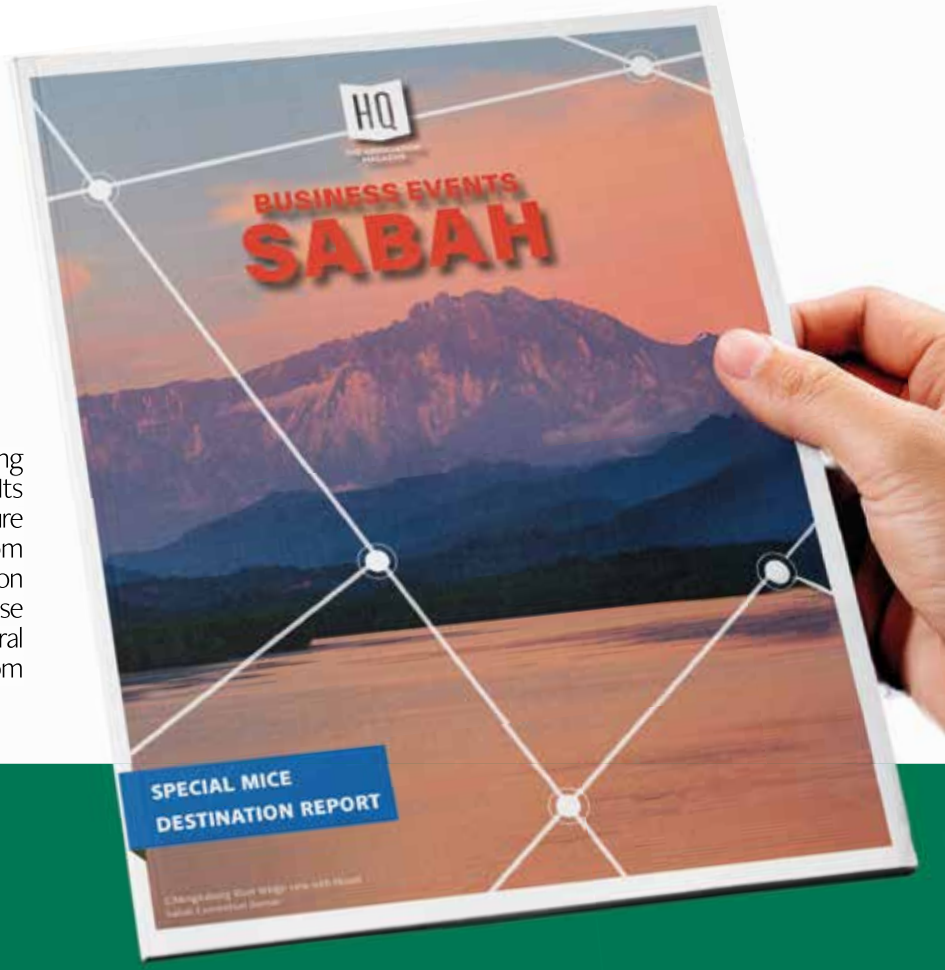
Evidence of the strength of this ecosystem can be seen in the city's upcoming congress calendar. In 2026, the city is playing host to a variety of international conferences and events, including the **World Congress of Psychiatry,** the **World Congress On Osteoporosis, Osteoarthritis And Musculoskeletal Diseases 2026,** the **European Society of Sports Traumatology, Knee Surgery and Arthroscopy (ESSKA) Biennial Congress 2026** and the **Information Security Forum's Annual World Congress**, alongside major scientific gatherings such as the **European Congress of Endocrinology,** the **World Ophthalmology Congress** (up to 15,000 delegates), and the **FDI World Dental Congress** (around 8,000 visitors). Also confirmed are sector-specific events like **Bio€quity Europe**, reflecting the city's capacity to host diverse disciplines across medicine, technology and finance. Together, these congresses demonstrate the scale and versatility that continue to establish Prague as one of Europe's most reliable meeting destinations.

The Prague Convention Bureau supports this activity by acting as a single point of contact for international associations and planners. The Bureau assists with venue selection and connects organisers with municipal support and trusted suppliers. It also maintains an **Ambassador Programme** that links local scientists with international associations, strengthening bids and promoting research excellence.

With its renewed brand identity and the mantra **Unconventional Conventions**, the Prague Convention Bureau is presenting more than just a change of image. It sets out a long-term vision for a destination that continues to evolve through innovation, research, and sustainable practices. For meeting professionals, this means the assurance of a city where creative design and reliable execution go hand in hand. For international associations in search of authenticity and quality, Prague remains one of Europe's most compelling and forward-looking destinations.

Sabah on the Global Business Events Map

Sabah, in Malaysian Borneo, is decisively creating a unique position in the global meetings sector. Its approach combines emerging waterfront infrastructure with a clear focus on knowledge-led sectors, from sustainability and environmental science to innovation and research. What makes Sabah stand out is that these ambitions are firmly rooted in the state's social, cultural and natural context, rather than being imposed from the outside.



Our digital destination report explores how the **Sabah Convention Bureau** translates this positioning into practice. You will find concrete examples, interviews and on-the-ground insights into how business events are being developed with long-term impact in mind.

Scan the QR code to discover Sabah's digital destination report.

HQ ESSENTIAL INTERVIEWS &REPORTS

Governing Risk in a Changing Global Environment

As geopolitical tensions rise, technology accelerates, and financial markets show new signs of fragility, risk has moved from a specialist concern to a central governance issue. For organisations across sectors, the challenge is no longer how to avoid disruption, but how to manage and respond to it effectively.

In this interview, **Dr Evgueni Ivantsov, Chairman of the European Risk Management Council (ERMC)**, reflects on how leaders should navigate sustained volatility. A recognised authority on global risk management, financial stability, and governance, Ivantsov has held senior risk and strategy roles at major international banks, served as a visiting professor at leading universities, and is a regular contributor to the *Financial Times*.

From your perspective at ERMC, which risks are most likely to influence organisational decision-making in 2026 and beyond, and how are leaders adapting to sustained volatility?

The global risk landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by three powerful forces that are reshaping decision-making across the financial services sector: geopolitics, technology, and potential asset bubbles.

The world has entered a new era of geopolitical volatility. The post-WWII order and global security framework, which governed international relations for 80 years, has been dismantled. Unlike the past, the emerging geopolitical framework is defined not by the power of international law, but by the law of power. This shift creates a more unpredictable and dangerous environment, where traditional alliances and norms are being rewritten. Financial institutions must now navigate geopolitical shocks that are more frequent and disruptive, demanding greater agility and foresight in risk assessment.

Digital transformation, AI adoption, automation, and data-driven processes have fundamentally altered the risk landscape. Two critical consequences stand out: interconnectivity and speed. Financial systems are now tightly linked, with technology embedded in nearly every process, increasing interdependence and creating new concentrations of risk. As a result, the pace of transactions and data flows now requires real-time, increasingly proactive risk management. Risks no longer evolve in isolation; they interact and amplify each other, requiring risk managers to keep pace with accelerating processes while understanding how risks cascade across the system.

Finally, abnormal growth in equity, crypto, and private credit markets poses another layer of risk. The rapid rise in AI company valuations represents a dangerous imbalance in the equity market. The crypto sector and private credit market have reached unprecedented scale but operate with looser regulation and less transparency, raising concerns about systemic stability. The combination of high valuations, speculative activity, and limited oversight increases the risk of sudden corrections and contagion effects.

Together, these forces are creating a more volatile, interconnected, and less predictable risk environment. The ability to anticipate and respond to these dynamics will define resilience in the years ahead.

Governance and continuity are central to institutional resilience. What role should boards and senior executives play in ensuring strong operational resilience?

To ensure strong operational resilience, boards and senior executives must prioritise institutional adaptability and the ability to respond effectively to disruption. Institutional resilience is no longer just a strategic advantage, but a necessity in today's volatile environment.

This resilience is built on a strong risk culture, where accountability, risk awareness, and responsible decision-making are embedded at every level. Employees must have the skills and mindset to recognise risks early and act decisively, making risk management part of the organisation's DNA rather than a compliance exercise.

Equally important is the need for an adaptive and prudent business strategy, set by the board. Organisations should regularly assess strategy viability and ensure that risk exposure aligns with a defined risk appetite. This enables businesses to pivot quickly in response to changing conditions, minimising disruption.

The third pillar of operational resilience is robust crisis management capability. Organisations require the right tools, such as early warning systems, to detect threats before they escalate. Credible contingency planning, supported by well-trained staff, ensures organisations can respond swiftly and effectively during a crisis. Regular drills and scenario testing reinforce preparedness, ensuring teams are ready to act under pressure.

By embedding strategic adaptability and crisis readiness into governance and operations, boards and senior executives can build organisations that are both resilient and capable of thriving in an unpredictable world.

AI and technology are reshaping how organisations assess and manage risk. What guiding principles should leaders adopt to ensure digital optimisation supports sound judgement, transparency and ethical governance?

AI and digital transformation are fundamentally reshaping risk management processes and decision-making. While AI adoption provides organisations with a competitive edge, recent research by ERMC shows that effective AI governance is a key enabler of successful implementation. Organisations that establish robust governance frameworks and responsible guardrails are emerging as industry leaders. Three core principles guide this approach:

- Leaders must establish a robust data governance framework to ensure data is consistent, complete, relevant, unbiased, and secure. High-quality data underpins reliable AI-driven decision-making, minimising the risk of errors or misjudgements.

- AI deployment governance must be clearly defined, including clear use cases and objectives, understanding available tools, assessing risks and mitigation strategies, and allocating realistic timelines and budgets. Engaging key stakeholders ensures alignment and accountability in the implementation process.

- Ongoing AI monitoring and control are essential, including independent audits and risk assessments to identify biases, errors, or security vulnerabilities. Prompt corrective action must be taken to address issues, ensuring AI remains ethical, secure, and compliant with organisational and regulatory standards.

By prioritising data quality, structured AI deployment, and rigorous monitoring, organisations can harness the potential of AI while upholding high standards of transparency, accountability, and ethical governance.

What qualities will distinguish organisations that adapt successfully to volatility, from financial institutions to international associations and event networks?

The role of risk culture in determining an organisation's success or failure is often underappreciated. Unlike tangible assets or formal processes, it is an intangible yet fundamental element, difficult to measure directly but more influential than formal risk governance or risk appetite statements. It shapes risk decision-making by guiding leadership values, employee behaviour, and responses to risk-related challenges.

Risk culture is not defined by what is declared or documented in policies, mission statements, or risk appetite. Instead, it is revealed in how decisions are made and actions taken under uncertainty. It is cultivated not through declared values or governance structures, but through consistent leadership, with boards and senior executives bearing primary responsibility.

While the 'tone from the top' sets direction, it is the 'actions at the top' that shape risk culture. Employees must see that ethical standards, accountability, risk awareness, and responsible risk taking are reflected in leadership behaviour. When this happens, risk management becomes an intrinsic part of how the organisation operates.

The reward system also plays a pivotal role. Behaviours aligned with a strong risk culture should be recognised and rewarded, while actions that undermine it must be challenged. Reinforcing these values through leadership examples and systemic incentives enables organisations to navigate volatility and unexpected shocks.

Science, Advocacy and Global **Policies** for **Alzheimer** Patients

As global populations age and dementia cases surge, **Alzheimer's Disease International (ADI)** stands at the forefront of a worldwide response, uniting over 100 national associations to drive policy change, strengthen member capacity, and amplify the voices of people living with dementia and their families. From advancing the **Global Action Plan** as a non-state actor in official relations with the **World Health Organization** to pioneering work in prevention, early diagnosis and advocacy, ADI bridges scientific progress with social action. Its aim is not only to improve care and inclusion today but to help build a future in which dementia can be prevented, managed and ultimately cured.

We spoke with **Chief Executive Officer, Paola Barbarino,** to explore ADI's mission, its global impact, the road to the **2026 Global Conference** in Lyon, France, and the organisation's future priorities.

What are ADI's key projects, particularly in prevention, early diagnosis, and capacity building across its member network?

ADI works closely with its members to secure concrete national commitments from governments to strengthen dementia policies, with a strong focus on advancing the WHO Global Action Plan on the **Public Health Response to Dementia** – particularly in low and middle-income countries, where more than two-thirds of people with dementia are expected to live. Through the implementation of comprehensive National Dementia Plans across all seven action areas, including risk reduction and timely diagnosis, ADI encourages governments to place people living with dementia at the centre of their response, supported by a strong and active civil society to ensure effective execution and monitoring.

To achieve this, ADI delivers its **Alzheimer University** and **Twinning programmes**, offering governance training, mentorship and operational support to strengthen the long-term sustainability of member associations. In addition, the 2026 conference in Lyon will provide a key platform for members, researchers and policymakers to exchange best practices. ADI's biennial conference also enables engagement with host country governments, as seen in Kraków, which led to a commitment to develop a **National Dementia Plan**.

How does ADI assess its social role, and what tangible outcomes do you observe for individuals living with dementia and their families?

Every year, ADI organises its annual **World Alzheimer's Month** campaign to raise awareness of dementia and challenge the stigma surrounding a condition that affects over 60 million people worldwide, a figure expected to rise to 139 million by 2050. To achieve this, ADI works closely with its associations to organise events and memory runs, amplify the campaign across social media, and engage traditional media to raise awareness of the needs of people living with dementia.

The involvement of people living with dementia and their carers is indispensable. Their contributions provide depth and highlight the complexity of living with the condition, as well as the vital reassurance that a diagnosis is not an end point but a transition in which individuals can continue to live meaningful and enjoyable lives.

At ADI's global conference, the voices of those with lived experience, sharing their stories or raising awareness in their communities, are consistently among the most poignant and inspiring aspects for attendees. The conference also provides a valuable platform for member associations, policymakers and researchers to showcase awareness activities, highlight local advocacy efforts, and share innovative approaches to address the growing public health burden of dementia.

How does ADI ensure fair representation of its member associations and integrate their diverse realities into global strategic planning?

ADI maintains regular communication with members via e-mail, Zoom, WhatsApp or telephone. This ensures we stay updated on developments in each country and provide timely support when needed. Our two regional directors for Asia-Pacific and the Americas champion our members and promote dementia as a public health priority across their regions.

Importantly, ADI treats every member equally, as set out in our constitution. Each year, members can propose motions and help shape ADI's strategy, with every association having an equal vote in determining priorities and direction. In conference years, such as 2026, this Council meeting takes place in person,

to offer networking, learning, and mutual support, especially for those in low-resourced settings.

Three core objectives form the backbone of ADI's global action:

- **Capacity building**: Strengthening member associations through training, technical support and shared learning to improve national advocacy and services;

- **Research translation**: Generating up-to-date scientific evidence with governments, civil society and frontline professionals to inform policy and practice;

- **Awareness & global convening**: Leading global awareness efforts and hosting the world's longest-running international dementia conference.

From a resilience perspective, how does the association maintain economic independence, whether through sponsorships, paid content, non-due revenues or other sources?

ADI diversifies its income sources to safeguard both economic and operational independence. Alongside membership fees, it receives funding from numerous philanthropic and private donors, but does not accept government funding, to maintain full advocacy independence. To prevent undue influence, ADI also caps the proportion of funding any single donor can contribute, so that no donor holds excessive sway over its work or priorities.

How does ADI balance the medical/scientific dimension of dementia research with its social, human-rights and advocacy missions?

For ADI, the scientific and human-rights dimensions of dementia are mutually reinforcing. Research breakthroughs may lead to easier diagnosis and better post-diagnostic support, but their benefits depend on policymakers preparing health and care systems for effective, equitable implementation. ADI welcomes the pipeline of new treatments for Alzheimer's and other dementias, alongside pioneering work addressing causal and risk factors. These developments will be showcased and discussed at ADI's upcoming conference in Lyon, highlighting the intersection of research, care, and policy.

What are the core objectives of the Global Conference 2026, and what kind of legacy do you hope it will leave for the scientific community, caregivers and people living with dementia?

The Global Conference 2026 in Lyon, from 14 to 16 April, will be an opportunity to reaffirm dementia as a global scientific priority as well as a public health and social concern. The conference will spotlight cutting-edge dementia research, from new treatments and care innovations to efforts to reduce stigma and discrimination.

The legacy we wish to leave is a tangible one. France remains without a standalone national dementia policy, placing it at odds with most other G7 countries and with its commitment to the WHO Global Action Plan in 2017 and 2025; our hope for this conference is to secure firm commitments from the French Government to develop and implement such a plan, ensuring people living with dementia and carers receive the support they deserve.

For other countries, we aim to showcase advances in dementia policy globally, providing a framework, inspiration and support to influence policy across all settings.

Four Decades at the **Vanguard** of **Critical Care Medicine** in **Brussels**

The **International Symposium on Intensive Care and Emergency Medicine (ISICEM)** returns to Brussels in March 2026, continuing its legacy as a global hub for innovation, research and multidisciplinary collaboration in critical care. Over four decades, the symposium has shaped clinical practice, trained thousands of professionals, and fostered international partnerships. *HQ* explores its impact on patient care worldwide.

ISICEM stands as one of the world's most authoritative scientific gatherings devoted to intensive care and emergency medicine. Founded in 1980 in Brussels, the symposium emerged from the vision of **Professor Jean-Louis Vincent** *(pictured right)*, who sought to establish a forum where scientific accuracy could intersect with clinical relevance in a discipline marked by constant innovation and complexity. Over more than four decades, ISICEM has evolved from a relatively small academic meeting into a global benchmark, shaping clinical practice, stimulating critical debate and facilitating the dissemination of high-impact research in the management of critically ill patients.

The 2026 edition of ISICEM will take place from 17 to 20 March at the **Square Brussels Meeting Centre**, where thousands of healthcare professionals from around the globe are expected to attend, including intensivists, emergency physicians, specialist nurses, researchers and academic leaders in critical care medicine. The breadth of participation highlights the distinctly multidisciplinary nature of the symposium and reflects the collaborative, cross-border character of contemporary intensive care, where shared expertise is vital for improving patient outcomes. Attendees of ISICEM 2026 can expect a demanding and intellectually rich scientific programme, featuring keynote lectures, in-depth thematic sessions, interactive discussions and presentations of the latest translational and clinical research.

In this *HQ* interview, Professor Jean-Louis Vincent, **chairman of ISICEM**, reflects on the evolution of critical care medicine, the challenges that lie ahead, and the enduring principles that continue to define a forum for excellence, critical inquiry, and international exchange.

How would you describe the evolution of the symposium and what were the important milestones that shaped its identity as one of the world's leading meetings in intensive care and emergency medicine?

ISICEM has grown remarkably since its first edition in 1980. The first meeting, held at **Erasmus University Hospital** of the **Université Libre de Bruxelles**, attracted around 240 participants. Growth followed an upward trend, reaching more than 6,000 participants in 2019, just before COVID. The meeting has become increasingly international, attracting participants from five continents. It is worth noting that this is the only meeting in the field that attracts such a large number of attendees, particularly from remote regions such as South America, Australia and the Far East. We have been the largest international meeting for these disciplines worldwide.

What are the fundamental principles or values that continue to guide ISICEM's mission today, particularly in terms of education, research, and global collaboration?

Our goal is to have the best programme in the world, which includes the latest developments in these specialities. Since its foundation, ISICEM has been guided by a commitment that goes far beyond the scope of a traditional medical conference. It is a mission-driven platform where science meets compassion, combining the pursuit of clinical excellence

with the collective goal of improving outcomes for critically ill patients worldwide. We have the best experts on our faculty, without political bias, benefiting from many recommendations from our scientific advisors and participants.

Each edition features new themes and formats to reflect the constant evolution of the field. What are the main operational objectives and scientific priorities for the next ISICEM?

There are always new developments, which we try to include in our scientific programme. We expect to present very innovative information, as always, but we cannot reveal anything in advance. We are in contact with the leading medical journals, which have been informing us about relevant articles that are about to be published.

In your opinion, what has been the impact of the symposium on clinical practice and the advancement of intensive care worldwide?

ISICEM has definitely had a major influence on practices in intensive care and emergency medicine. The symposium has trained thousands of professionals, inspired countless collaborations, and its influence has been reflected in the practices it shapes within its community and in standards of care around the world. For this reason, we do not include remote presentations, as we believe that personal attendance is essential. This is also why the industry is so interested in our collaboration.

In your experience, how has the event fostered connections between delegates, and why is this exchange so essential to progress in intensive care medicine?

The most important thing is the support of our community, through word of mouth, either directly or via social media. One of ISICEM's greatest strengths lies in its ability to bring together clinicians, researchers and industry leaders from around the world to forge genuine intellectual bonds. People love our symposium for the quality of the programme, its lectures and presentations, but also for the multiple interactions within a pleasant environment, including the Brussels appeal, of course.

In a field where scientific independence is crucial, how does the organisation ensure that sponsorships contribute to genuine innovation and education without compromising the integrity of the scientific programme?

ISICEM brings together not only doctors and researchers, but also important industry partners, which is why each company feels that its participation is essential. Industry players feel involved not only because they will meet many people, but also because their innovations will be immediately discussed in this forum.

How does ISICEM view the role of its partners in promoting sustainable progress, both in terms of technology adoption, commercial innovation and market access, and in improving patient outcomes globally?

Given the increasing complexity of innovation in healthcare, partnerships now go beyond traditional sponsorship models. We work together very positively, as we believe there should be synergy between industry and our organisation, with the common goal of improving care for patients with acute conditions.

Unraveling The **DNA of Cities**

How Culture, Community, and Leadership Shape the Urban Future

At the heart of 21st-century urban transformation lies the need to understand each city's unique identity. Facing challenges in innovation, sustainability, mobility and tourism, cities must adopt resilient, adaptive strategies. At the **CityDNA Autumn Conference** in the Faroe Islands, **Dr Caitlin Morrissey, co-host of The DNA of Cities** podcast, shared insights on how a city's 'DNA' shapes policy, resilience and innovation. In this *HQ* interview, she highlights the power of community, culture and leadership to co-create city storytelling and visioning.

How does your organisation define and capture the unique 'DNA' of a city, and how does this influence its development strategies?

The DNA of Cities is what makes every city an individual. We think that if we can see, trace and understand how cities become unique, then we can find ways to optimise their traits as they evolve over multiple cycles. We can help cities to be more themselves. The same policies and projects will not work everywhere. Effective long-term development must start from a deep understanding of the city or destination itself.

We suggest that a city's 'genetic code' emerges from the interaction of three types of traits: endowed traits shaped by geography and environment; inherited traits rooted in history and heritage; and acquired traits expressed through social behaviours and shared values. We argue that a city's DNA is formed by three interlinked elements: its origin story, including climate, geology, history, and human energy, a 'genetic code'; the shared experiences, shocks, and traumas that shape collective behaviour, or its 'epigenetics'; and the way each city responds differently to interventions and reforms. Using the genetic code and the epigenetics of the city, we can foster 'customised or regenerative medicine'.

What key factors make cities resilient to social, environmental and economic challenges, and how can these factors be measured or benchmarked?

In many domains, we have become conditioned to understand sectors, places and cities through comparison,

but our work encourages a different set of conversations. We emphasise the specificity and uniqueness of individual cities, including how a city experiences and responds to vulnerabilities. We ask questions like, what are the challenges that this city faces? Where have they emerged from? How has the city been resilient in the past? What is the adaptive capacity of this city?

For example, when we made three podcast episodes to explore *The DNA of Mexico City*, eleven wonderful experts revealed that residents of Mexico City have acquired a strong survival instinct to equip them for the everyday vulnerability of living in this beguiling and fascinating megacity located at high altitude on a sinking lake bed, surrounded by volcanoes and at risk of earthquakes.

How can city leadership and governance models promote sustainable growth while maintaining cultural and social integrity?

A quiet but often recognised risk of 21st century urbanisation is the erosion of distinctiveness, as cities and places increasingly look and feel alike. Sustainable growth aligned with authenticity requires leaders to have a compelling and shared vision based upon an understanding of the carrying capacity, social contracts, governance, and heritage of the city or destination. We advocate this inside-out approach because it helps those leading cities to become more conscious of their own capabilities, which in turn informs their visioning and actions. For example, by hosting **COP26**, Glasgow enlarged its own capacity to host events and initiatives focused climate finance and just transitions. Vienna's **Optimum Tourism** strategy was crafted based on a recognition of Vienna's DNA and a social contract that tourism is good only when it works for the whole city.

How do a city's culture and community involvement shape its identity and capacity for innovation, and what case studies illustrate this relationship?

In our podcast, we asked 'what are the greatest discoveries or inventions in this city?' to explore how cultures of innovation vary from city to city. I have already described the survival instinct in Mexico City which includes within it an incredible ability to improvise at scale. In Philadelphia, we heard about the invention of public libraries, fire services and several other civic services. In some cities, the strong presence of a university or an industry has provided deep roots for discovery and invention. In every city, there are many, many expressions of everyday innovation that are shaped by, and shapes, the city's identity. This is why some of our guests, for example in Istanbul, describe the city itself as the greatest invention.

How can high-level conferences and business events support both sustainable growth and benefits for local communities?

The social value of business events for local communities should be part of their very fabric. High-level conferences are not just about hosting events that provide a sectoral match in a destination but ensuring that there is positive spatial and social purposes to the event that align with the values of the place. That can range from skills and training to thoughtful urban design tactics to integrate event venues with their surroundings.

The sector has potential to support cities in advancing long-term sustainable growth goals, but this requires collaboration and coherence. Business events can catalyse long-term agendas and strategies based on existing strengths and deepen already established ecosystems. They provide opportunities for direct linkages between small and large companies for procurement and collaboration. They can help position the city visibly within national or international clusters of expertise and can catalyse spillovers in aligned sector strengths. Major conferences may also enable new institutional engagements or provide platforms for dialogue among residents, civic actors, industry, and government stakeholders.

What role do storytelling and governance play in translating a city's unique identity into resilient and authentic urban development?

Storytelling and visioning are ways of convening and motivating at a higher level of partnership, a coordination mechanism for partners within and outside the city. When destinations share the best version of their own story, they are able to attract interest that is more related to who they are. What is most important in these stories is their people, which means that there must be ways for them to contribute and to co-create that story.

One of the key takeaways from my keynote speech at the CityDNA Autumn Conference was the commitment of European DMOs to their residents. In our work, we suggest that once people begin to feel that they understand the character of a city and its evolution, we can begin to 'place' ourselves in the city's story. This is very important for established populations, new residents and visitors to help create a sense of identity anchored in values and behaviours that are real and not based on trends or comparisons.

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Events in Focus

What Surveys of Suppliers, Venues and Planners Reveal about the Industry for 2026

Whether you are a supplier, venue or event planner, 2025 was a year of shifting priorities, rising costs and workforce challenges to name but a few. Findings from industry-wide surveys, compiled here by events and hospitality consultancy **Custard**, paint a mixed picture that is sure to continue impacting everyone in the industry in 2026 and beyond.

While things remain uncertain, a series of surveys of suppliers, venues and event planners from the past 12 months have revealed the trends, challenges and opportunities that have shaped events, highlighting what every event professional should know as we navigate the year ahead. These surveys highlight key information that every event professional should be aware of as they enter the new year. Each survey sheds light on the challenges and opportunities in a specific area of the industry, and collectively, they paint a comprehensive picture of the current state of the events industry and its ongoing evolution.

From supplier sustainability commitments to venue cost pressures and planners' rising focus on purpose and wellbeing, these findings show where the industry is heading and where professionals should be focusing their energy. In a year defined by uncertainty, the data provided by these leaders in our industry offers event professionals the information they need for the year ahead.

Suppliers: An Industry of Two Halves

The UK events supplier and contractor industry is 'an industry of two halves' according to findings from the *Stronger Together Survey*, published by the **Event Supplier and Services Association (ESSA)**.

Almost half of event businesses surveyed (46%) forecasted higher revenue for 2025, yet nearly a third (29%) anticipated a decline. Similarly, confirmed business in January 2025 outpaced the same month in 2024 for 35% of companies, while 31% saw the opposite and had more work in 2024.

When it comes to staffing, over two-thirds (68%) said they were operating at full capacity, highlighting that almost a third (32%) are not operating where they should be. Similar findings were found in sustainability, with 68% of those surveyed saying they have a formal sustainability plan in place, but nearly a third (32%) do not.

Venues: Navigating Rising Costs

For venues, many are balancing optimism with operational pressures. The latest *mia Insights Report* from the **Meetings Industry Association (mia)** revealed that almost half (46%) of venues surveyed said they are down on their revenue forecast for 2025.

Almost nine in ten (89%) said costs have increased in 2025 compared to 2024, with an average increase of 12%. These increases are leading some organisations to reduce their workforce, with just over a quarter (25%) stating they have done so in response to rising costs.

> ***64% of respondents have increased their prices to combat rising costs.***

This has led many venues to also look for new ways to adapt to the changing needs of event planners, a key factor highlighted in *Mindful Mornings, Active Afternoons Survey*, a report by **Foxhills Club & Resort**.

It found that Thursday has now officially taken over Friday as the preferred day for off-site meetings, with mornings also being prime time for them to take place, with just over 70% of respondents saying they preferred to tackle creative tasks early in the day, an increase of 12% from last year.

Venues that can offer team-building opportunities are also at an advantage, with almost 90% of those surveyed viewing team building as a priority.

> *When asked which meetings should be held off-site, respondents placed team engagement (85%), strategy (76%) and brainstorming (61%).*

Event Planners: Purpose, Engagement and Wellbeing

The focus on team-building is also vital for event planners, particularly those organising events for businesses, with employees looking for activities with purpose. **Clean the World Event's** *Team Building in a Changing Workplace Survey* found that over nine in ten (92%) believe purpose-driven team-building strengthens relationships with colleagues more than traditional events, and more than eight in ten (83%) feel businesses have a responsibility to enable team volunteering and giving back.

The benefits of incorporating team-building and volunteering into events are clear, with 85% of those surveyed saying volunteering through work boosts their overall job satisfaction and also increases their loyalty to their employer.

Mindfulness also plays a big role in these types of events, with **The National Gallery**'s latest *Mindfulness and Enrichment Poll* finding that 43% of respondents believe that mindfulness enhances ROI by improving focus and retention.

Industry-Wide Challenges And Opportunities

No matter your role in events, looking after your wellbeing is a priority. While conversations around the topic are improving, with 66% of hospitality employees feeling their workplace supports open discussions around mental health, according to **Hospitality Actions'** latest *Taking the Temperature Survey*, 62% of junior employees view burnout as part of the job, nearly half report poor work-life balance, and 61% said they have experienced a mental health issue in the past year.

> *63% remain concerned that vocalising a mental health challenge could negatively impact their progression.*

Overall, the findings of these surveys reveal an industry that is evolving rather than standing still. Suppliers are looking outward and prioritising sustainability, venues are adapting to rising costs, and planners are leaning into purpose-driven engagement, wellbeing and culture-led programmes. While there are undoubtedly still challenges ahead, there are clear opportunities for those ready to innovate and make the most of 2026.

Purpose Now Sits at the Heart of **Workplace Culture**

In the events industry, expectations are shifting. Beyond delivering well-run programmes, organisations are increasingly judged on the value they create for people, communities and teams over the long term. **CTW Events**, a **Clean the World** Global brand, is an event management company providing CSR and team-building event solutions, specialised in high-impact, tailor-made experiences. Their new research, *Team Building in a Changing Workplace*, reveals that volunteering has become a decisive factor in shaping wellbeing, talent retention, and team culture. To explore these findings, we spoke with **Madison Ayache, Vice-President of CTW Events**.

Purpose has moved decisively from the margins to the centre of workplace culture, and nowhere is this shift more visible than in the business events sector. According to their latest research, this change is not cosmetic but generational. As Madison observes, today's workforce, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, has been shaped by 'once-in-a-lifetime' moments that have redefined how work, identity and meaning intersect. "They want to be part of something bigger than themselves, and they expect their employers to reflect that. Purpose is no longer a nice-to-have; it is part of the social contract of modern employment."

Within business events, purpose is increasingly used as a cultural anchor, helping organisations reconnect fragmented or hybrid teams and create shared momentum. It is becoming a strategic differentiator that influences how long employees stay, how engaged they feel, and how they remember the experience. "When purpose is embedded into team experiences, employees stay engaged longer, feel more connected to their colleagues and walk away with a positive impression that lasts far beyond the event itself," Ayache notes, pointing to the role of purpose in building more resilient corporate cultures.

The data reinforces this perspective. CTW's research shows that 92% of employees are more likely to remain with a company that actively supports team volunteering, while 85% report higher job satisfaction after participating. Ayache emphasises the emotional mechanics at play. "Purpose-led volunteering resonates because it gives people dignity and agency. When companies meet employees where they are and give them a way to support their communities, people want to stay" she explains, highlighting how shared impact can cut across organisational size or sector. Meaningful contribution fosters pride, loyalty and a deeper sense of belonging, benefits that extend internally as much as they do externally.

> ***"The community impact matters, but so does the cultural impact inside the organisation.***

Responding to this shift, CTW Events has been systematically reshaping its portfolio to meet growing demand for experiences that combine social value and environmental impact. The company has expanded into areas such as sustainable hygiene, education kits, disaster response and food-based experiences, while ensuring global scalability. "We have also ensured these experiences can run anywhere, across the US, Europe, Canada and Asia, because large organisations need global consistency with regional flexibility," Ayache says. This volunteering is matched by an emphasis on accessibility, with formats designed to work across corporate offices, manufacturing sites, night shifts and hybrid schedules. "It also means offering a self-service model for smaller activations, large-scale assembly lines for big moments and summit formats for leadership gatherings."

Crucially, this evolution reflects a broader industry movement. Traditional team-building activities are steadily losing ground to experiences that integrate impact, culture and human connection. Purpose is no longer treated as a parallel initiative but as a core design principle. As Ayache puts it, "Purpose is becoming an essential part of how companies design events, not a side activity." This recalibration is forcing event professionals to rethink success not in terms of scale or spectacle, but in terms of meaning and participation.

However, high intent does not always translate into high engagement. While interest in volunteering is strong, 87% of employees say they would participate more readily if the process were simpler. Addressing this friction requires operational clarity rather than lofty ambition. Ayache points to the importance of turnkey solutions, clear frameworks and modular formats that accommodate different levels of involvement. "Simplicity and flexibility go a long way. When volunteering fits naturally into the working day, through onsite options, varied timeframes and scalable group sizes, participation barriers fall and engagement rises."

Measuring the impact of these initiatives has also become more sophisticated. Beyond tracking outputs such as kits assembled or volunteer hours logged, CTW works closely with partners, such as **Save the Children, CARE** or **The WASH Foundation**, to align data with organisational priorities. "We measure what matters to our partners. If a company wants to know unique volunteer participation, we can track it; if they want visibility into which disasters their prepositioned kits supported, we report on that; if they want to understand average cost per volunteer or engagement patterns across offices, we can help evaluate that as well," Ayache details. This data-driven approach positions purpose-led team building not as a feel-good exercise, but as a measurable extension of CSR and employee engagement strategies.

Today's workplace culture is being shaped by a convergence of pressures: hybrid working models, wellbeing fatigue and increased scrutiny around corporate responsibility. Against this backdrop, Ayache sees a clear trend emerging. "Employees are craving simple, meaningful activations that cut through the noise. People want to reconnect with purpose, not just attend another virtual meeting or one-off event," she says, warning that global teams need programmes that are fast, flexible and easy to activate. At the same time, organisations are being held accountable against ESG commitments, creating demand for tangible, results-oriented experiences rather than theoretical goals.

> ***"In 2026, the companies that win will be the ones that build purpose into how they work every day, not just into their tentpole moments.***

Translating purpose into everyday work life remains a challenge for many organisations. Internal teams are often overstretched, navigating tight budget, approval layers and cross-functional expectations. Ayache provides further details: "Our role is to remove as much friction as possible. Reliability and creativity matter, we provide the details leadership wants, the data HR and CSR teams need, and the operational excellence that makes these events easy to deliver." When supported effectively, purpose-led initiatives shift from being perceived as complex to becoming a natural extension of organisational culture.

CTW Events is well positioned to respond to rising demand, supported by a strong track record of large-scale volunteering initiatives delivered globally. The focus now is on expanding reach, refining flexible formats and investing in technology that simplifies delivery and reporting. "Purpose-led team building is only going to grow," Ayache concludes, framing the next phase as one defined by flexibility, impact channels, clearer data and scalable solutions. "The next few years will be about meeting that demand while continuing to innovate around how teams connect through purpose."


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HQ DESTINATIONS &EVENTS

Vancouver's Blueprint for **Technology** Events **Legacy**

Manuel Fernandes reports

Downtown Coal Harbour©Albert Normandin

This report, part of a new editorial partnership between *HQ* and **BestCities Global Alliance** in 2026, explores how Vancouver has become a global example of innovative, inclusive, and progress-oriented business events. Based on insights from recent major technology conferences held in the city, it highlights how Vancouver converts events into measurable social, economic, and environmental impact, treating legacy planning as a foundational requirement.

Visiting Vancouver for the **BestCities Global Forum 2022** offered a first-hand view on how the city is embedding sustainability and impact into its events ecosystem. Beyond traditional hospitality and conference delivery, **Destination Vancouver** shows how intentional planning, strategic partnerships, and world-class venues can create lasting social and economic outcomes. The **Vancouver Convention Centre**, a double LEED® Platinum-certified facility, exemplifies this approach. Its six-acre green roof, advanced water treatment, and marine heating and cooling system showcase environmental leadership, while providing a tangible blueprint for sustainable event design. As such, sustainability extends beyond the physical infrastructure into operational models and event programming.

Measuring Impact: The Conference Legacy Impact Study

A cornerstone of Vancouver's strategic approach is the **Conference Legacy Impact Study**, conducted with **Capilano University**. The study shifted focus from short-term economic returns to long-term, multidimensional legacy planning across economic, environmental, political, sectoral, and social domains. **Michael Drake, Vice President of Meetings, Conventions & Events** *(pictured above)* **at Destination Vancouver**, notes: "The findings reinforce the strategic necessity for our organisation to take the lead in identifying and measuring outcomes or at least proposing actionable steps. Key insights revealed that the type of event significantly influences outcomes."

The research revealed that recurring conferences often drive deeper economic and social engagement, including collaboration with Indigenous communities and investment in local projects. It also informed the creation of the **Naturally Innovative Alliance (NIA)**, a first-of-its-kind public/nonprofit partnership that aligns government and sector development agencies to amplify the impact of a major tech conference – the international emerging-tech investment conference which was hosted in May 2025. "Designed for shared governance and co-developed programming, this collaborative model moves beyond traditional DMO roles by explicitly using a major business event as a platform dedicated to long-term development and broader impact," Drake says.

Legacy Drivers in Innovation and Education

Vancouver places education and mentorship at the heart of its legacy strategy. Initiatives like **IMPACTFest** function as capacity-building platforms, providing leadership development and skill-building opportunities for students, teachers, and emerging entrepreneurs. This process is vital for translating learning into tangible, real world actions, which successfully equips professionals and emerging entrepreneurs with the necessary tools to accelerate sector growth and drive new inventions.

Drake highlights: "For major international events over 10,000 attendees, like the **2024 NeurIPS,** the **2025 International Conference on Machine Learning (ICML)** or the **2025 SIGGRAH**, these efforts are paramount, as they support the


BestCities Global Forum2022


Vancouver Convention Centre

goal to 'Ensure maximum opportunities for youth to see future careers in technology,' thereby shaping the next generation of innovators." Complementing this, tech meetings such as **HTML500** provide free, large-scale coding events to expand access to high-value services, particularly among minority and underrepresented groups. These events, among the 10,000 technology conferences held last year, align with the Capilano study's outcomes of increasing opportunities for youth and adults to acquire relevant job skills.

> *"The next generation of resilient and sustainable urban destinations will be defined by flexibility, innovation, and shared purpose.*

Sustainable, Inclusive and Equitable Tech Ecosystem

Inclusion remains central to Vancouver's legacy planning, addressed through the legacy driver of DEI Initiatives. The city ensures that professional development opportunities, digital skills access, and entrepreneurial pathways reach Indigenous innovators and other underrepresented communities. For accessibility, tools like the AI transcription platform **Wordly** ensured immediate access for diverse, international audiences at events like the 2025 SIGGRAPH and the 2024 NeurIPS. Drake explains: "The strategy for tech events focuses on intentional direction towards underrepresented communities with a main goal of maximising participation opportunities. Partnering global events with organisations such as the **First Nations Technology Council** is a key to this success." By entrenching DEI into major events, Vancouver strengthens local ecosystems while showcasing the city as a global leader in inclusive innovation.

Sustainability in Vancouver is integrated beyond venue certifications into the core design of conferences and events. The **B.C. Pavilion**, for instance, employed reusable booth structures, biodegradable materials, and locally sourced rentals during major events. Drake emphasises: "Sustainability is a critical pillar of Vancouver's brand and legacy strategy as well. The city is scaling sustainability beyond fixed features – such as the Vancouver Convention Centre's LEED Platinum certification or vendor certification, into the event design itself." This approach ensures that eco-friendly practices are rooted into operational and strategic decision-making, setting a standard for global conferences and encouraging social procurement that aligns environmental and societal goals.

Strategic Leverage of Tech and Innovation

Tech conferences are leveraged as platforms for economic and innovation hubs, not just an event. The NIA demonstrates how strategic partnerships between government agencies and sector bodies can amplify the outcomes of international tech conferences. Drake observes: "Crucially, the NIA directly facilitated commercial wins, with international investors attending side events, an outstanding number of business meetings held, and new Venture Capitalists recruited, leading directly to increased trade and investment." Furthermore, Vancouver utilises emerging technologies – AI, XR, data analytics, and smart venue integration – to enhance delegate experiences, accessibility, and visibility of the local ecosystem, ensuring events remain future-ready and globally competitive.

> *"Technology and digital tools are vital for enhancing resilience, accessibility, sustainability, and legacy outcomes.*

The collaboration with the BestCities Global Alliance allows the city to refine its legacy frameworks, adopt evidence-based strategies, and project Vancouver as a benchmark for sustainable and socially impactful events. Drake concludes: "By actively participating, Destination Vancouver contributes to and benefits from global best practices in legacy delivery, ensuring events meet high international standards, and establishing the city as a recognised contributor to research in this field." In the broader visitor economy, the strategy focuses on encouraging tourism activity by recognising the clear correlation that the more local businesses attendees visit, and the more contacts they make, the higher their intention to revisit Vancouver as second-time visitors.

When **Business** Loosens Its Tie:

The Quiet Structural Shift of Bleisure

The white paper, *It's My Bleisure*, presented at **IBTM World 2025**, shows that bleisure is no longer a peripheral phenomenon. The data collected by **The Hague & Partners** reveals clear intent, strong emotional motivation and a solid generational base. The main challenge now lies in systemic execution: early integration into planning, compatible product design, partnerships and the reorganisation of the MICE ecosystem. As **Tibby van Dijk, Campaign Marketeer B2B** at The Hague & Partners and one of the project coordinators, puts it: "The will is there. Now it is up to destinations, organisers and businesses to create the conditions for this to translate into real behaviour."

The consolidation of bleisure (the combination of business and leisure travel) has moved beyond the status of an emerging trend to become a structural vector of transformation in business trips. The latest study by The Hague & Partners confirms this shift through objective data: 75% of business travellers express the intention to extend their professional trips for leisure purposes, a figure that rises to 95% among the 26–35 age group. However, the conversion of this desire into actual behaviour remains limited. According to research by the **Netherlands Board of Tourism & Conventions**, it is estimated that only around 10% of Dutch business travellers effectively carry out such extensions, revealing a clear intention–action gap.

For Tibby, this gap is largely explained by the timing of decision-making: "The decision to extend a trip has to be made very early in the process. Once tickets are booked and the agenda is closed, there is virtually no room for manoeuvre." The researcher also highlights that factors such as work-life balance, corporate policies and the very design of the event are decisive. "It all depends both on the employer and on how the event is planned, whether by a professional organiser or internally." **Kyra de Hair, The Hague & Partners' Business Researcher**, adds that the strongest motivating factors, the inspiring character of the destination and affordable accommodation, also need to be communicated at an early stage. "The perception that a destination is inspiring can and should be built right from the start by the event organiser."

Micro-Bleisure and Time Management

When a full extension is not possible, the concept of micro-bleisure comes into play: small leisure windows integrated into the professional programme. According to the quantitative data of the study, an extension of just 24 hours appears as the most viable model, particularly among younger participants. Kyra is clear: "An additional night is often enough to create a complete leisure experience, as long as the destination clearly shows what can be done within that time frame."

In this context, the possibility of extending room blocks and offering activities that are accessible on foot or by public transport become key elements. Tibby reinforces the importance of urban design and mobility: "The multi-venue approach allows participants to move around the city during the event itself. That already partially turns them into tourists."

What Makes a Destination 'Energising'?

The study confirms that the main driver for extending stays is not only operational, but emotional. Destinations perceived as 'inspiring' show significantly higher rates of bleisure intention. Kyra details the generational differences: among those aged 26 to 35, gastronomy emerges as the main motivator, followed by culture. In older age groups, culture and gastronomy remain central, but the importance of nature, relaxation and beach experiences increases. A relevant fact is that 'culinary interest decreases progressively with age.'

Tibby translates this data into strategic planning: "The offer must be modular – it can prioritise nature and beach, but also urban gastronomic routes or immersive cultural circuits." She also highlights the **Big Five** campaign, dedicated to the great masters of Dutch painting, as an example of integration between cultural programming and events.

Seasonality and Redistribution of Urban Tourism

One of the most relevant impacts of bleisure lies in its ability to redistribute tourist flows throughout the year, mitigating peaks in demand. In The Hague, major congresses take place mainly in autumn and winter months, traditionally a period of lower tourist demand. "January, February and March are crucial for the city's economic balance. International events bring about 500 to 2,000 delegates during the low season, which generates a direct impact on hotels, restaurants and local businesses," explains Tibby.

Kyra adds the importance of continuous monitoring: "We work with monthly visitor flow data and cross-reference it with the events calendar. This allows us to act in the so-called shoulder months." Coordination between the DMO, hotels and event organisers thus emerges as a strategic pillar, in a destination that does not yet face acute over-tourism pressures.

From the Tourist Experience to the B2B Market

The report also highlights a cross-cutting interest in cultural, nature-based and relaxation experiences. The Hague & Partners' institutional response has been to adapt existing B2C market assets to the events universe. Tibby describes this transition: "Interactive walking routes, originally designed for tourists, are now being repurposed to allow fast movement between venues and points of interest, functioning as natural extensions of the event programme."

The strategy also involves direct engagement with local partners. In January, the DMO convened hotels and venues to present the study's data and develop joint proposals. "Some hotels have already opened up to the idea of testing pilot programmes for extended stays," she adds.

Furthermore, the data confirms clear behavioural differences between generations. Younger travellers prefer to travel alone during bleisure extensions, while older groups tend to integrate partners and family. Kyra summarises: "Personalisation starts with communication. A 24-hour extension can be positioned as a solo retreat for some or as a mini family getaway for others."

Redesigning the MICE Ecosystem

Finally, the report identifies logistical ease as the main enabler driving bleisure: simple processes, integrated bookings and operational clarity. For Tibby, this represents a structural challenge for the entire MICE ecosystem. "Congresses tend to repeat the same formats year after year. If they want to attract new generations, they need to rethink schedules, create leisure windows and allow the extension of stays with concrete city-based propositions." The DMO advocates a 24-hour package model, with pre-built accommodation, bespoke activities, routes and relaxation options.

From the organisers' perspective, the main obstacle is largely cultural. "If there is no openness to talk about bleisure, immersive events or social impact, transformation simply does not happen," Tibby underlines. On the other hand, "if the delegate is already at the destination, extending their stay is more sustainable than returning at another time."

Advocacy as a **Governance** Practice for **Destination** Organisations

Destinations International (DI), the global association representing DMOs and convention and visitors bureaux (CVBs), has placed governance and community value at the heart of its strategy. Its newly launched **Advocacy and Action Initiative** brings together three major research and policy documents outlining how destination organisations must evolve: the *Advocacy and Action Strategic Roadmap,* the *2025 DestinationNEXT Futures Study*, and *The Advocacy Leadership Imperative*. Together, these resources provide a broader understanding of destination leadership and convey the clear message that effective advocacy requires credibility, skills, and long-term accountability. *HQ* spoke with **Sophia Hyder Hock**, DI's **Chief Impact Officer**, to explore how this shift can be implemented in practice, and what support destination organisations will require to deliver meaningful decisions and outcomes.

Bridging the Capacity Gap

Although the roadmap encourages DMOs and CVBs to play a strategic role in promoting community vitality, the latest *DestinationNEXT Futures Study* reveals that many still lack the internal capacity to provide effective advocacy. For Sophia, the first step is acknowledging this gap without judgement. "The *2025 Destinations International DNEXT Futures Study* gives us a realistic picture of the industry's current capacity, and we used that insight to shape a roadmap responding to actual needs rather than aspirational assumptions," she said.

DI's response is deliberately phased. The organisation is guiding members to become confident with foundational tools such as the **Community Shared Value** framework, the **Community Vitality Wheel**, the **Social Impact Framework**, **Tourism Lexicon** and recent sentiment research. These tools will be supported by a learning series, mentorship opportunities, templates and what she describes as a practical hotline for organisations that need rapid guidance. "In essence, we reconcile the gap by designing realistic, accessible and sequenced supports that meet destination organisations exactly where they are today," she said.

As capacity increases, DI plans to introduce more advanced resources, including an interactive advocacy platform, a centralised communication hub and micro-learning pathways that reflect different stages of professional development. In her experience, the most effective accelerators are those that feel immediately actionable, particularly for teams that may be understaffed or operating under pressure. Practicality sits at the core of DI's approach, paired with the reassurance that advocacy does not need to feel isolating inside an organisation.

> *"Advocacy becomes far less vulnerable to organisational or political turnover when it is defined as essential and not discretionary.*

Resident Trust and the Governance Mandate

Across all three DI documents, resident sentiment, belonging and community alignment have emerged as central measures of destination performance. Yet few destination organisations consistently track these indicators. Sophia sees this as a structural gap influenced by decades of investment in visitor-led metrics. "Measuring resident perception or trust requires different systems, different investments and a willingness to ask questions that may not yield flattering answers," she said.

DI is addressing this by aligning the Social Impact Framework, the Community Vitality Wheel and sentiment studies so that members have adaptable tools for measurement and reporting. Importantly, accreditation standards are being updated to include resident-facing criteria, signalling that awareness, inclusion and community benefit are becoming core expectations of future-ready organisations.

Sophia argues that measurement becomes realistic only when leaders recognise that resident trust directly influences the stability of funding and workforce attractiveness. "When social impact is reframed as a core business strategy rather than a moral aspiration, investment in measurement becomes not only realistic, but inevitable," she explained.

The governance implications are significant. Many organisations face internal barriers, including cautious boards and limited experience with social impact evaluation. DI cannot change governance structures, but it can equip professionals with the framing and data that make difficult conversations more objective. "DI cannot compel boards to evolve, but we can equip staff with resources and framing that make these conversations less fraught and more productive," she said. Benchmarks from the Futures Study and other research provide staff with a neutral evidence base that they can use to advocate for change within their own organisations.

Data, Accountability and the Path Ahead

The roadmap promotes data-driven advocacy, yet public trust in institutional communication is declining. DI is addressing this credibility gap by partnering with recognised experts to produce sentiment and performance data and by encouraging common metrics that allow destinations to learn collectively. "Credibility is built through the quality of information, the transparency with which it is shared and the extent to which community members feel represented within it," Sophia said. She supports shared metrics and third-party validation as essential steps for ensuring legitimacy with residents and policymakers.

DI's broader vision is captured in what it calls **The Destination Effect**, which seeks to measure outcomes such as policy alignment, funding stability, resident trust and long-term economic vitality. Sophia is clear that organisations will be recognised not for compelling narratives but for evidence. "Our priority is to reward organisations that demonstrate evidence-based impact rather than just compelling storytelling," she explained. This represents a shift from traditional destination marketing towards governance-oriented accountability.

The initiative also addresses the expanding scope of destination organisations. Although 84% now engage in destination development, few have formal authority in planning or infrastructure decisions. Sophia emphasises that DI is not asking organisations to assume roles they do not legally possess. Instead, she believes their influence comes from their convening power. "The leadership role we envision does not require formal authority, but it does require skill in facilitation, community engagement and nonpartisan communication," she said.

DI is supporting this through training on conflict-sensitive communication, language that allows destination leaders to speak credibly about sensitive issues and the encouragement of advisory structures that include residents and underrepresented groups. The aim is to help organisations strengthen community legitimacy without compromising neutrality or credibility.

Part of ensuring lasting relevance is recognising what failure looks like. Sophia offers a clear view: "Failure is not theoretical. It can result from losing the narrative with residents, losing influence with policymakers and ultimately losing funding because the organisation cannot articulate its true economic and social value to the community." DI is developing early-warning mechanisms through its research, accreditation feedback and advisory activities, alongside a hotline for rapid-response guidance.

The upcoming **Advocacy and Action: Destination Impact Event**, taking place from 20 to 22 October 2026 in Ottawa, Canada, is designed to accelerate adoption. Rather than separating advocacy and impact, the event integrates both through clinics, challenge-based sessions and cross-functional learning pathways. Success will be measured not by satisfaction but by whether participants adopt new metrics, update their advocacy strategies or achieve outcomes linked to tools or relationships developed at the event.

The global relevance of the initiative remains a priority, particularly for destinations operating under different governance systems. Sophia emphasises that DI's frameworks are designed as adaptable scaffolding. Her commitment is grounded in listening and regional collaboration. The ambition is not to export a North American model, but to provide principles of leadership, resilience and community engagement that can be applied across diverse political and cultural contexts.

Porto & North of Portugal

Tourism Growth Driving Global Events

Northern Portugal is heading for a landmark 2025, marked by steady growth in tourism and rising revenue across the region. Business events are a strategic priority, helping extend demand beyond Porto and placing impact at the forefront of the region's ambitions. During the **ICCA Congress, Manuel Fernandes** sat with **Luís Pedro Martins, President of Associação de Turismo do Porto e Norte – Porto Convention & Visitors Bureau (ATP/PCVB)**. Northern Portugal is not just chasing numbers, but challenging the global events circuit to recognise its full potential.

How is the region's current tourism performance, and what are the growth prospects for 2025?

In 2024, we received 7.4 million visitors, which generated nearly 14 million overnight stays and €1 billion in revenue mark. In 2025, according to current figures, everything indicates that we will break records in all three indicators (guests, overnight stays, and revenue) growing above the national average, although not reaching the levels of 2019. At the moment, we are growing by around 5% in the number of guests and even more in revenue, which is great. Compared to the national average, we are seeing growth of about 10% year-on-year. For reference, in 2019 we were close to €600 million, which means we are now almost doubling that figure.

Where do business events, conferences, and exhibitions fit within this broader framework to help rebalance the scales?

As part of our work, we see the meetings industry as a highly valuable asset closely linked to high-spending visitors. To become more competitive in this segment, we needed more visibility, something we still lacked at a global level. Therefore, hosting the ICCA Congress was really crucial in positioning us alongside the main players in this sector. We know we have a very strong offering to attract major events, but we do not want this to be limited to the city of Porto alone.

That is why we embraced ICCA's challenge, becoming the first destination in 64 editions to deliver a fully multi-venue Congress, an idea that drew strong interest from delegates. For this nine-venue event, we wanted to go beyond the municipality of Porto, reaching other cities such as Matosinhos and Vila Nova de Gaia. But our strategy goes further. We aim to create meaningful impact in municipalities such as Braga, Guimarães, and Viana do Castelo through meetings and events.

Do you believe that business events could generate fresh momentum for broader economic development across Porto & North of Portugal?

Absolutely. Our intention is to encourage a more balanced distribution of visitors throughout the entire region. We are fortunate to represent a territory that is rich and diverse, extending far beyond the metropolitan area. Within **Turismo de Portugal** 22 strategic assets, we hold the vast majority. We offer nautical tourism, thermal experiences, wine tourism, the *Camino de Santiago* routes, five natural parks, a national park, two geoparks, and an extraordinary biodiversity landscape.

That said, there is still work ahead. It is unrealistic to expect travellers to use another airport, just as it would be unthinkable to hide monuments like the Clérigos Tower or Porto Cathedral from visitors. What we must show is that the region offers far more than its familiar landmarks. This will also help increase average length of stay, another major key indicator for us. Porto is already the main draw for business travellers, yet it can do more to strengthen territorial and social cohesion across the region.

Is there a coordinated strategy with other municipalities, through their venues and multi-purpose centres, to channel different products and services?

That is exactly what we are working on now. Cities such as Braga and Guimarães are full members of the ATP/PCVB and, according to their size and scale, are already collaborating with us to attract events. Internally, we are conducting a comprehensive assessment of the region's meetings industry, identifying key stakeholders, mapping responsibilities, understanding our full offer and determining where we can best use our strengths.

The reality is that we are not yet in a position to bid for every type of event. Gatherings of 50,000 to 100,000 participants require large-scale facilities we still lack. Within this strategic framework, our proposals may be presented to regional authorities to lay the groundwork for infrastructure that will boost our competitiveness. We may even conclude that it is in our interest to specialise in segments where we can excel and truly stand out.

The Porto & North Forever Pact initiative is grounded on innovation, wellbeing, and inclusion. How is this being applied, and are local partners already involved?

The Pact emerged from a challenge we set ourselves: to look beyond traditional metrics when assessing events. We aim to measure success not only through overnights, delegates or revenue, but also through less visible dimensions we consider equally important. The project highlights social impact by engaging communities and stakeholders in initiatives that contribute to societal improvement. A notable example is **CAIS**, a local non-profit supporting people experiencing homelessness, whose volunteers collaborated on the congress while receiving training and developing skills within this legacy blueprint.

Sustainability, already a priority in previous ICCA congresses, was strengthened further this year. Likewise, values such as innovation, social impact and community engagement, first emphasised in Abu Dhabi, were symbolically handed over through the Forever Pact so they continue with our colleagues in Panama (check out the following report). A key goal of the Council meeting was to establish the Forever Pact as a commitment for the global industry and to encourage local partners to adopt these principles as a guiding framework.

What are the main challenges for Porto and the North to advance towards a truly sustainable transformation?

First and foremost, it is key to take a clear stance against greenwashing and superficial certifications and questionable 'stamps' that undermine genuine efforts. Secondly, it is also important to avoid false promises, as those who promise what they cannot deliver quickly lose credibility. Our call is to make this agenda more transparent and serious, continuing the awareness-raising efforts with all stakeholders.

Even before this congress, ATP had launched the **I'm In Sustainability** movement, mobilising companies towards credible certification. We invited these companies to carry out internal audits so that we can achieve sustainable standards according to the **Global Sustainable Tourism Council**. Furthermore, we do not see it solely as an economic issue. Although this factor increasingly shapes supply and many travellers are willing to pay more, the core issue is a moral one: if we do not act now, we will be compromising our future. Today, only by distraction or ignorance can one turn a blind eye to this circular reality.

ICCA Congress 2025 in Porto:

Charting the Course for the Future of Events

Manuel Fernandes reports

The **ICCA Congress 2025** turned Porto into a laboratory for global events, blending tradition, innovation, and social purpose. With nine venues, thought-provoking debates, and timely topics, the flagship association also returned to Europe with a new, more active format. Between start-ups, technology, and a **Forever Pact**, the Portuguese city showed how second-tier cities can lead the industry.

Arriving in Porto brought a mixed, almost uneasy feeling to me. As a brief disclaimer to our readers, I was born there and it has been very close to my heart since it was still a neighbourly, feisty and concealed human canvas in northern Portugal, which made me follow its transformation over the last decade with particular attention. On Saturday night, downtown was crowded and lively, as it tends to be these days: restaurants packed late into the night, small bars lining the streets, multiple languages mingling on the sloping streets. Porto has shifted from a discreet city to a global tourist hub, and while that revitalisation brought investment and visibility, it also deeply reshaped its social and economic fabric.

In this context, hosting the ICCA Congress was more than just another event: it worked as a practical test-bed of how large business events can help counterbalance traditional tourist flows, generating more qualified economic returns and broader societal value. Porto is not a capital, not a financial hub, nor a saturated metropolis and therein probably lies its strength. The growing relevance of so-called second-tier cities, a thesis we explored last year for *HQ* within the **EU CVB Network**, took concrete form here right from the outset.

The ICCA Congress 2025 took place under the motto 'Charting the Course', a formulation broad enough to accommodate both the strategic discourse and the political agenda that currently percolates the events industry. With around 1,500 participants, this was the largest edition ever held on European soil, confirming not only ICCA's vitality, but also the diversity of profiles – among them event destinations, international associations, PCO's, agencies, technology providers and institutional decision-makers. The atmosphere kept the typical ICCA relational vibe, but with a more visible political weight – especially in sessions where public policy, funding, destination impact, and change-making were centre stage.

Porto played an active role in the congress, the programme and the social experience of the delegates. This was evident in the multi-venue distribution of the sessions, which required real mobility between different urban areas; in the commitment to public transport and foot travel; and in the activation of cultural and historical facilities as workspaces.

The congress took place in nine different venues: the afternoon sessions were held at the **Cruise Terminal, Caves Ferreira, CEiiA, WOW – World of Wine** and **Alfândega**, which acted as the event's headquarters; while the social programmes took place at the **Coliseu do Porto, Palácio da Bolsa, Super Bock Arena** and **Arena do Estádio do Dragão**. This model forced delegates to move around, which changed the pace of the congress. Not everything was perfect – there were delays, overlapping routes, and some logistical fatigue. But the overall effect was positive: ICCA left the single building, the carpeted floor, and blended into the surrounding environment. Meanwhile, instead of feeling like a foreign body temporarily installed in its host, the congress stimulated constant reflection on the territory.

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In terms of legacy and social impact, the connection with the local community did not end with formal platitudes. Social responsibility projects involved local institutions, and several initiatives were designed to continue beyond the days of the congress, a clear attempt to avoid the extractive loop of events that come and go. One of the most interesting initiatives launched at the congress was the **Porto & North Forever Pact**, promoted by **Visit Porto & North** and co-created by **#Meet4Impact** with Portuguese consultancy **Vale Consultores**. The pact proposes a framework for action based on three tracks of change: Inclusion, Innovation & Creativity, and Wellbeing. More than a manifesto, the Forever Pact aims to be a working tool for the region – aligning events with long-term goals, involving public decision-makers, operators, and local communities, and measuring impact on an ongoing basis.

The educational programme was extensive and multi-modal. There were some solid moments of critical sector analysis, particularly in sessions that crossed public policy with multilateral involvement in international meetings (the 'Ministers' Panel'); major cultural and sporting events with the sustainable growth of destinations ('Game-Changers or Chaos-Makers?'); and climate change, demographic transitions and the urban impact on the global economy by **Professor Greg Clark**'s keynote speech. Accessibility and inclusion were also addressed through a human-centred lens in **Christian Bason**'s lecture. Still, it was Tuesday's 'Association Leadership Quest' session that most clearly broke with the comfortable tone of institutional discourse. Faced with geopolitical instability, fragile business models and rising member expectations, association leaders admitted they now manage more crises than strategies. Co-creation with destinations was defended over rigid purchasing processes, alongside a shift from associations as knowledge archives to competence builders. Persistent failures in transparency, post-contract support and hidden costs were also openly acknowledged.

On Monday, the Innovation & Technology Track proved pragmatic and hands-on. At **CEiiA – Centre of Engineering and Product Development**, there was much talk of artificial intelligence, but with skeptical enthusiasm. Technology appeared as a tool for associations, with discussions on personalisation, data, automation, but also risks, privacy and dependence. There were solid sessions on hybrid models, digital marketing and a future design showcase on technology serving sustainability. The next day, the Purposeful Business Models & Start-Ups Track sought to shift the debate on innovation and purpose from rhetoric to practicality, questioning which business templates make sense today in a sector pressured by economic uncertainty and public funding. The group discussion in which I took part brought some candour to the table by admitting that many legacy projects fail while trying to square impact with unrealistic cost structures and little Board support. In the Purpose Labs, participants worked on pitches, financing, RFPs with impact criteria, and intersections between real industry needs and emerging solutions.

On the last day, the awards ceremony recognised the best in class: the **Incredible Impacts Award 2025** honoured the **World Organisation of Family Doctors (WONCA)** for the lasting impact of its world conference on rural health in Limerick, Ireland, in promoting equitable access and tangible national reforms; while the **Best Marketing Award** went to **Visit Faroe Islands** for its **Closed for Maintenance – Open for Voluntourism** campaign, a rare case where destination marketing and environmental preservation reached international heights. The congress officially closed with the announcement of the next destination, Panama City, in 2026, where the community of associations and CVBs will meet once again to take centre stage in the discussion of major congresses.

IMS25 in Riyadh Highlights **Saudi Arabia**'s Rising Role in Global Meetings

Jesús Guerrero Chacón reports

Saudi Arabia hosted the second **International MICE Summit (IMS25)** on 26 and 27 November 2025 in Riyadh, bringing together more than 3,000 participants from 76 countries and confirming the country's rising position in global meetings. Organised by the **Saudi Conventions and Exhibitions General Authority (SCEGA)**, the two-day programme saw the presentation of new investment commitments and major announcements regarding market entry, as well as updated venue capacity figures reflecting the sector's rapid expansion under **Vision 2030**. Held at **The Canopy** in Riyadh's Hittin District, the event marked a significant milestone in the Kingdom's development as a destination for international congresses and large-scale exhibitions.

Global Market Entry and Expanding Portfolios

The second edition of the summit marked a clear change in the way the global community engages with Saudi Arabia's meetings sector. Participation increased significantly from the inaugural event in 2024, which attracted 1,700 delegates from 25 countries. IMS25 attracted delegates from 76 countries and featured over 90 speakers and moderators from 21 nations across 22 plenaries and four workshops. The increased international representation signals growing confidence in the market's maturity and the scale of the emerging opportunities across the region.

One of the most notable milestones was the simultaneous entry of six major international organisations into the Saudi market. **Messe Frankfurt, Koelnmesse, MCH Group, Oak View Group, Comexposium** and **Honegger** all announced new offices or initiatives in Riyadh. This aligns with a wider package of 20 commercial agreements and memoranda of understanding, which were unveiled during the summit alongside companies whose combined global revenues exceed USD 9 billion (approx. €8.19 billion).

IMS25 also acted as a launch platform for a series of new events and portfolio expansions that consolidated this shift. **Messe München** introduced **BAUMA Saudi Arabia**, extending one of the world's largest construction exhibitions into the region. **RX Global** confirmed **MIPIM Arabia**, along with **Aluminium Arabia, InterAviation Arabia** and **WTM Spotlight. GL Events, Clarion** and **dmg events** announced further programme developments that reflect long-term intentions to operate across multiple sectors. **Terrapinn** presented new projects including **MOVE, ARABLAB LIVE, Shop Arabia** and **Hyperscale Live**, marking an expansion of science, mobility and technology portfolios. Many global organisers have progressed from the initial exploration stage to clear operational planning in the Kingdom. This shift is driven by the alignment of regulatory, investment and sector-development policies under Vision 2030, alongside the country's rapid infrastructure growth. Vision 2030 aims to diversify the economy, expand tourism and business events, develop human capabilities and establish new industries. Business events are positioned as a means of facilitating knowledge exchange, international collaboration and economic competitiveness.

Throughout the programme, sessions explored the implications of this investment wave in detail. Speakers examined future business models, mergers and acquisitions, sustainable venue design, innovation clusters, technology integration, and the role of human capital in shaping the next decade of international meetings. Themes such as 'Where Uncertainty Sparks Opportunity', 'Digital Meets Design' and "The Destination Dividend" analysed how organisers can navigate geopolitical volatility and risks, assess destination differentiation, and integrate digital tools without compromising the value of in-person meetings. Workforce discussions focused on emerging skills needs and education partnerships supporting sector development. Talent and sustainability were featured across the programme, with sessions examining future skills, responsible event design, ISO 20121, hybrid formats and the use of AI.

The announcements made during the summit were in line with the programme's objectives, as outlined during the event. "The expanded programme is designed to deliver not just a larger event, but larger outcomes, from policy alignment to new partnerships and investment," explained **Mr Alkahily, SCEGA's CEO**, during the summit. They also reflect the broader strategic direction he described in his exclusive interview with *HQ*, where he noted: "Since its launch in 2024, the IMS has grown from a promising industry meetup into a truly global platform." These comments highlight why organisations have increased their commitment to the Kingdom.

Representatives from the government provided further insight into the broader

policy environment shaping the sector. **His Royal Highness Prince Faisal bin Bandar bin Sultan Al Saud, Chairman of the Saudi Esports Federation,** emphasised the increasing impact of esports events and the opportunities they present to venues, suppliers, and creative industries. **Fahd Hamidaddin, CEO of the Saudi Tourism Authority,** and **Noha Kattan, Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Culture**, stressed the connection between tourism, culture, and business events as the Kingdom expands its international appeal. **Mohammed Ahmed Al Robayan, Deputy Minister for Technology**, and **Khalid Alkhattaf, CEO of the Saudi Investment Promotion Agency**, provided additional perspectives, stressing the links between meetings, investment attraction and national development.

Building Capacity for the Next Phase

New data released during the summit provided a clear indication of the pace of expansion. *The Saudi Venue Infrastructure Report* recorded a 32% year-on-year increase in accredited capacity across 923 venues. Exhibition space has expanded by more than 320% since 2018 to reach 300,520 square metres. Capacity is concentrated in Riyadh, Makkah and the Eastern Province, supported by newly established centres in Madinah, AlUla, Asir and Najran. The **Jaydana Waterfront Project** in Jizan, valued at USD 2.9 billion (approx. €2.64 billion), includes a new multipurpose convention centre as part of a wider Red Sea development initiative.

> *"Saudi Arabia has become one of the fastest-growing business events market in the G20, supported by a 320 % increase in exhibition capacity since 2018.*
>
> *Hatim Alkahily, CEO, SCEGA*

For **His Excellency Fahd bin Abdulmohsen Al Rasheed, Chairman of SCEGA**, these developments reflect a wider national shift. "The scale and diversity of the announcements show how Saudi Arabia's business events industry has become a powerful driver of economic transformation and global connectivity. The partnerships delivered through the International MICE Summit will strengthen the Kingdom's infrastructure, empower Saudi talent, and reinforce Saudi Arabia's position as a global hub for international collaboration, in support of Vision 2030," he said.

In his interview with *HQ*, Alkahily explained: "**Expo 2030** and the **FIFA World Cup 2034** will act as accelerators for Saudi Arabia's long-term MICE strategy. Both events lock in sustained investment in infrastructure, skills, air connectivity, digital systems and global partnerships. The real legacy is continuity. The ambition is not just to host two mega-events, but to cement Saudi Arabia's role as a global convening nation where industries, ideas and talent converge long after 2034."

International organisers also expressed their belief that the summit offered long-term prospects. **Wolfgang Marzin, CEO of Messe Frankfurt**, said: "Saudi Arabia is shaping the future of mobility, aviation and innovation, and we are proud to support this remarkable journey." His comments reflected the broader perspective of companies that are planning to establish a long-term presence in the Kingdom as the sector solidifies its position within the global meetings industry.

These developments indicate a sector entering a more globally connected phase, supported by new market entries, event launches and growing capacity across venues, institutions and talent systems. These priorities continue to guide SCEGA's work as Saudi Arabia expands its capabilities and international partnerships.

Scan the QR code to access the full interview with Mr Alkahily and gain further insight into SCEGA's plans for the coming years.

Calaveras, Agave, and Stage Lights:

Guadalajara as a Living, Breathing Event!

Manuel Fernandes reports

Heart of Jalisco, Guadalajara moves on its own pace, where murals, tequila fields and digital light shows collide. Each street, plaza and stage becomes a setting for events that feel immediate and engaging. Tradition meets contemporary ideas, technology is used with intention and the city's rhythm gives every experience a sense of presence. In Guadalajara, familiar things have a clear Mexican identity.

I arrived in Guadalajara with high expectations, shaped by early conversations with the bureau's team at **IMEX Frankfurt** and by the city's recent admission to the **BestCities Global Alliance**, a recognition reserved for destinations demonstrating operational excellence, a holistic vision of society, and a commitment to positive impact. Guadalajara's hosting of the **BestCities Global Forum** from 5–8 February 2026 is set to further increase visibility of this momentum. Moreover, Guadalajara's global positioning was strengthened when its convention bureau became an official **IAPCO Destination Partner**, deepening its integration into the main international congress networks.

My anticipation grew further upon learning that the **Guadalajara Convention & Visitors Bureau (GCVB)** is widely regarded as Mexico's most active and influential convention bureau, capable of mobilising the city, coordinating seamlessly across authorities, venues, hotels, and business clusters, and paving the way to major international congresses. The city's energy was evident even before the formal programme, with the electric Chivas vs. Atlas football derby at **Akron Stadium**, a **FIFA World Cup 2026** venue, that showcased the region's capacity for major sports events. Driven by a strategy focused on international expansion, global alliances, stronger MICE infrastructure, diversification and sustainability, the GCVB has secured a solid pipeline: the **World Physiotherapy Congress 2027**, the **UFI Global Congress 2027** and the **International Conference on Robotics and Automation 2028**, just to name a few.

Day 1 – Gateway to Tapatío Lifestyle

Guadalajara during *Día de los Muertos* felt like a film: *cempasúchil* in the streets, colourful skulls on façades, and a lively atmosphere, perfectly matched by the GCVB's well-orchestrated four-day programme. Our temporary home, the **voco Guadalajara Neruda**, shaped our first hotel impression: contemporary, efficient, with spacious rooms and six meeting spaces (plus a theatre-style auditorium) ideal for executive briefings or small meetings. Set in the Financial District, the hotel functions as a strategic and highly practical hub for international teams. In the late afternoon, we travelled to **Tlaquepaque**, a colonial gem where art, gastronomy and local craftsmanship merge into an irresistible setting for social programming. Its pedestrian streets, glowing with *Día de los Muertos* motifs, provided a natural stage for welcome cocktails, walking dinners or cultural incentive activations. Mariachi music echoed through the courtyards as **Casa Luna** treated us to a memorable first group dinner.

Day 2 – From Colonial Grandeur to the World of Tequila

The second day began at **Hacienda del Carmen**, a place where time slows just enough for creativity to breathe in the wide Valles Region. This historic estate, with its arcades, expansive gardens, and four versatile salons for gala dinners, themed evenings or corporate retreats, stands out not only for its colonial charm but also for its own rum production and greenhouses. Large gatherings are welcome in the outdoor spaces, while the indoor rooms offer an elegant setting, both of which are imbued with the spirit of tradition and hospitality.

We then crossed the sweeping agave landscapes, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, to reach the legendary town of Tequila. At **Mundo Cuervo**, particularly the iconic **Fábrica La Rojeña**, we discovered one of the most exhilarating experiential-event settings anywhere: where blue agave becomes the lifeblood of Mexico. Centuries-old cellars for sensory dinners, industrial courtyards for product launches, and gardens that glow beneath unforgettable sunsets, all grounded in rich narratives and a compelling brand identity that shape MICE experiences into lasting memories.

Day 3 – Culture as Stage and Statement

The third (and most intensive) day began with a visit to **Expo Guadalajara**, the powerhouse underpinning the city's MICE appeal. With more than 90,000 m² of modular space, robust technical infrastructure and a range of multifunctional halls, the Expo serves as

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the city's central engine for international meetings, fairs and large-scale conventions surrounded by premium hotels. Its sustainability certifications guarantee quality management, operational excellence and environmental balance aligned with global standards. From there, we proceeded to the remarkable **Instituto Cultural Cabañas**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where architecture and cultural impact converge. Known historically as the Hospicio Cabañas, it breathes heritage and artistic depth, with José Clemente Orozco's murals lending visual force to exhibitions and educational events. The museum also offers ideal spaces for receptions and ceremonies.

After a brief tour by the historic centre, we stopped at a few luxury hotels. The **JW Marriott Guadalajara** combines contemporary elegance with a serene atmosphere tailored for executive briefings. Its six well-equipped, light-filled meeting rooms encourage focus and creativity, while its rooftop frames the city as a backdrop for exclusive receptions. At the **RIU Plaza Guadalajara**, we hopped up to the SkyBar terrace to meet the hotel's managers as the city glowed beneath us – an ideal setting to imagine events with panoramic impact. The hotel combines urban energy with a modern, functional design geared towards business travellers. Its 16 versatile rooms can be easily converted into theatre, classroom or banquet formats, always with fluid logistics.

Day 4 – Art, Identity and a Brilliant Finale

The final day offered a more relaxed and playful atmosphere, with visits to interactive museums and neighbourhoods ideal for informal delegate activities. The **Hyatt Regency Guadalajara** greeted us with tactful elegance and a finely tuned corporate rhythm, ideal for association programmes. During the site inspection, we covered 2,500 m² of event space across 14 versatile rooms, suited to everything from board meetings to plenaries of over 800 participants. Set-ups transition smoothly between theatre, U-shape or banquet, supported by modern technology and a highly skilled operations team. Next, we moved to the **Conjunto Santander de Artes Escénicas**, one of Mexico's largest university cultural complexes, offering exceptional acoustics, advanced technology, versatile stages and generous foyers, a perfect ecosystem for academic congresses, international forums and hybrid events.

The **JAPI Museo Interactivo** proved delightfully surprising, blending immersive technology with educational storytelling. The highlight was the virtual flight over Jalisco, soaring above volcanoes, valleys and lagoons as though aboard an invisible drone, while the digital journey through the state's fauna and flora revealed a region rich in ecological nuance. The afternoon took us to Downtown Zapopan, where sun-lit squares, galleries, and altars led us to the **MAZ Museum**. At sunset, the grand finale emerged: **Calaverandia**, a thematic park where light, digital art and performance created an immersive celebration of *Día de los Muertos*. Exhilarating, visually striking and emotionally resonant, it was the perfect closing chapter for an incentive programme infused with energy, culture and storytelling.

> In May, we will bring Guadalajara back into our coverage of the 2026 BestCities Global Forum chapter.

Why the **Events Industry** is Stronger Than Ever?

Insights from IBTM Trends Report 2025

The *IBTM Trends Report 2025* reveals an events industry that is expanding and proving resilient despite global pressures, with in-person experiences retaining their strategic value. The study highlights six driving forces (demographics, transformation, AI, investment, sustainability and culture) that are reshaping the sector. The report, authored by **Alistair Turner, Managing Director of Eight PR & Marketing**, also notes rising investment and consolidation, introducing the new Ignite section to explore the industry's evolving financial landscape.

The *IBTM Trends Report 2025* signals optimism for the meetings industry despite global turbulence, from geopolitical tension to inflation. Its resilience reflects structural strength built over years. Event professionals have become adept at demonstrating ROI, ensuring live experiences are no longer viewed as discretionary but as core to marketing and sales. Turner explains: "This is one of the most positive aspects of the report, that this growth is occurring despite some of the greatest challenges the industry has faced since the pandemic. The industry has proven structurally robust and responsible over a long period, moving 'events' up in sales and marketing budgets from 'first to cut' to closer to 'last to cut'."

The report highlights a renewed appreciation for in-person connection, countering digital fatigue. Turner links this to a post-pandemic shift where live engagement is viewed not as a temporary rebound but a long-term differentiator: "I believe that the industry accelerated out of the pandemic based on the renewed value of face-to-face experience. There is no doubt that the event industry's juxtaposition against digital communication is another major reason for this continued growth. In terms of responsibility, authenticity, creativity and purpose, live events are the antidote to social and digital marketing."

Strategically, demographics are now central to event design. The rise of older audiences alongside Gen Z creates multi-generational challenges. The report stresses the need to recalibrate approaches to older delegates, who are increasingly digitally adept, socially engaged and economically active. "The clear opportunity lies within the over-60s demographic, who are growing in volume at an exponential rate. How we treat these audiences says a lot about how businesses look at every demographic and how focused approach has many hidden benefits. It would be wrong to say that events do not recognise these audiences, but there is a tendency for brands to be overly concerned with the enthusiasm of younger generations and the demographic changes they bring with them." The narrative was to reposition older audiences as proactive and participatory members of society, rather than sidelined from it.

This demographic shift is also transforming the core purpose of business events. The report flags a move from events as solely learning or networking platforms to hubs for experiences centred on belonging, identity, and personal impact. Turner emphasises the strategic swing required: "This nods back to the earlier point around value and ROI; the shift from event professionals as 'organisational' to 'strategic'. In the past, we have seen personalisation as the ability to communicate with individuals with more information about them. But the broader shift is to understand that different people – be this generational or not – require different outcomes from events."

> ***By understanding different generations, event professionals can speak across multiple generations without pigeonholing into lazy stereotypes.***

Closely linked to this is the aspiration for transformational events. Imagination and creativity become key differentiators, yet Turner notes that many events claim experiential credentials without scrutinising their experience against a high benchmark. "This challenge of transformationalism is a bold one, and it is fair to say that many events are not on this journey just yet. We need to respect the inherent difficulty in delivering genuine transformational experiences and see it as a high aspiration. That being said, many brands and businesses are reaching this benchmark."

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On the other hand, imagination poverty, lip service and generic concepts remain a challenge, particularly when it comes to maintaining audience engagement. Turner argues that outcomes, rather than rhetoric, are the defining measure: "The reality is that brands and businesses will find out those events and event professionals who lazily apply buzzwords, without the strategic integrity they deserve, or lack the creative quality that is driving so much positive effects in the industry... guests, consumers, and audiences can feel when they are truly being engaged, and act when they are being excited or challenged. Messages resonate and turn into behaviours when they are delivered with purpose and commitment."

The integration of AI presents both promise and caution. AI can enhance accessibility, augment creativity, and streamline operations, but unchecked, it risks homogenising experiences. Our interlocutor emphasises the critical role of human oversight in preserving event distinctiveness: "The mix between large language models, agentic thinking, and digital communication has to be balanced through human thinking and behaviour. Event professionals understand this, and recommend using AI only where it adds most value to the event: accessibility, automation and augmentation. However, the promise of personalisation has not been delivered, and having AI drive it into more homogenous spaces will be detrimental to audience experiences." Equally, AI-led design reduces the value of tactility and individualism that has been one of the great achievements of recent event creation.

Moreover, financial maturity signals growth in value and long-term stability. Increased startup activity, investment, and mergers and acquisitions indicate the sector's growing stability and attractiveness to capital markets. "History shows us that this trend is a bell curve, with investors jumping in while the industry is hot but exiting as soon as the sector shows weakness. Looking at some of the biggest event tech companies, large event agencies and well-funded destinations, we often see the biggest ideas, investment in innovation, and market-leading data and insight," he says.

> *"Brands need to be challenged, and the industry needs to hold clients accountable if they keep hiding away from sustainable event design.*

Sustainability remains a pressing area for industry action. As regulatory frameworks expand, the report stresses that compliance must become a commercial advantage. Turner underscores this imperative: "For too long, events have been seen as an unwilling battlefield to hit ESG targets, and a box-ticking exercise lacking real commitment. This is both wrong and dangerous. A number of forward-thinking organisations have developed training, tracking, and benchmarking tools needed to assess environmental impact. There really should be no excuses for events to own sustainability and be part of the wider conversation."

Finally, DE&I is moving from tokenism toward genuine engagement. Events are increasingly judged on how effectively they reach diverse audiences and create meaningful interaction. Turner warns that the growing focus on culture and community must not become an excuse to sidestep DE&I: "There is a changing societal trend, with DE&I being owned and misused, as well as evolving in its narrative. The main thing for events is to be representative and to take their responsibility seriously to ensure content finds its audience, no matter where or who they are."

HQ INSIGHTS

Tech, Associations & PCOs

Shaping **Skylines** and Shifting **Perceptions**:

When the Events Industry Becomes an Urban Engine

In many European cities, convention centres have long been conceived as civic symbols, expensive, socially valuable public assets rather than profit centres. But as fiscal pressures rise and public budgets tighten, a compelling new paradigm is emerging: privately led, mixed-use, strategically integrated event infrastructure that not only hosts meetings but actively reinvents city districts.

Author: Sven Bossu, CEO, AIPC

Recent discussions with **Kristina Milinčić** of **Sava Centar** (Belgrade) and **Roberto Morelli** of **Generali Convention Centre** (Trieste), both representing new-generation venues developed through private investment, have shed light on how the events industry is becoming a catalyst for urban transformation rather than merely a user of city space. Their examples emphasise a new model: private capital is entering the convention infrastructure space, and reshaping entire urban landscapes in the process. Their experiences illustrate a broader shift: can private capital meaningfully enter the convention infrastructure arena, and should it?

The Private Sector Takes the Helm: Belgrade's Sava Centar Reimagined

Belgrade's story is striking. Sava Centar, 100,000 m² in total, originally built in the late 1970s, has long stood as a landmark of the city's architectural golden age.

In 2020, **Delta Holding** acquired Sava Centar, declaring its intent to revive it not merely as a conference or cultural venue, but as the nucleus of a new mixed-use district. Over the next three years, the building underwent a complete reconstruction, with the total investment growing to €118–120 million. The renovated Blue Hall alone, seating 4,050, absorbed roughly a third of this cost. The technical retrofit was ambitious, energy consumption was halved, green areas expanded by 30%, and the venue aligned with international sustainability certification standards. In addition to the Blue Hall, the refurbished Sava Centar now offers a total of 46 meeting rooms accommodating between 50 and 1,500 participants in flexible, divisible zones, allowing multiple events and a wide range of gatherings to run simultaneously.

More significant than the engineering, however, is the strategic vision. Sava Centar is now embedded at the heart of Delta District, a forthcoming mixed-use development in New Belgrade that integrates residential towers, premium offices, retail, and an upcoming **InterContinental Hotel** set to open in 2027. The centre is directly connected to the **Crowne Plaza Belgrade**, offering 416 rooms and 14 additional meeting rooms, while the existing **Hyatt Regency** and the future InterContinental frame the district as a complete 'conference quarter.' Together, these properties create a cohesive hospitality and events ecosystem.

Strategically, this triangle, between Delta District, the Danube Waterfront development project with the future **Ritz-Carlton**, and the West 65 zone with the newest **AC by Marriott**, defines the spine of New Belgrade's business district. Across the Sava River, in the Old City, the Belgrade Waterfront project mirrors this transformation, with the high-end **Saint Regis** and **Bristol** hotels, recently opened, and the **Radisson Collection Old Mill**, another Delta Holding property, showcasing the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage.

This private-sector momentum aligns with Serbia's preparations for **Expo 2027**, to be held in Belgrade under the theme 'Play for Humanity: Sport and Music for All.' The Expo site, currently under development near Nikola Tesla Airport, will host over 120 countries and an estimated four million visitors. After the Expo, the **Belgrade Fair** will be relocated to this new site, making Expo 2027 both a global stage and an urban legacy project. Meanwhile, the former fairground area in central Belgrade is planned for redevelopment as an extension of the Waterfront, with the city's iconic Hall 1 Dome preserved as an events venue.

Proof of Concept: Global Events Return to Belgrade

Sava Centar's rebirth is already delivering results. In May 2025, the venue hosted **Heart Failure 2025**, the **European Society of Cardiology**'s congress, welcoming more than 5,500 participants from over 100 countries. For four days, Belgrade became the epicentre of cardiovascular science, a clear validation of the centre's scale, flexibility, and global competitiveness.

As Kristina Milinčić emphasises, this model sends a strong signal: convention centres need not be perpetual drains on public finances. When strategically integrated into their urban environment, they can spark multiplier effects, generating value across hospitality, retail, real estate, and city branding, while the corporate sector may also find opportunities to leverage potential business synergies and contribute to the transformation of both the city and society.

Trieste's Porto Vivo: Anchoring Regeneration with Generali Convention Centre

Across the Adriatic, Trieste presents a different but equally compelling model. A historic port city with a deep scientific and multicultural legacy, Trieste is leveraging its knowledge economy and maritime identity to reinvent its waterfront.

The Generali Convention Centre, located within the Porto Vivo redevelopment (formerly Old Port), occupies two rehabilitated warehouses that anchor a broader regeneration of the old port. The convention facility spans about 5,000 m² of meeting/conference space plus a further 5,000 m² of exhibition zones, for a total footprint of approximately 10,000 m². The Generali Auditorium seats 1,920, supplemented by smaller rooms and multifunctional foyers.

Importantly, the entity is governed by a shareholder model, with **Generali Group** holding approximately 48%, **illycaffè** 13%, and multiple local investors the remainder. Through a recently signed naming agreement, Generali reinforces the centre's brand and its role in the Porto Vivo redevelopment. This blend of private equity and civic alignment ensures financial sustainability while maintaining cultural and community engagement.

Trieste's advantage lies in its intellectual density. The city hosts more than 30 research institutions, including the **University of Trieste, SISSA** (the **International School for Advanced Studies**), and the **International Centre for Theoretical Physics**, giving it one of Europe's highest concentrations of researchers per capita. Events such as the **Big Science Business Forum 2024** (**BSBF**), which brought together over 1,000 participants from the European research infrastructure community, underscore this scientific vocation.

From Roberto Morelli's perspective, the centre is not simply a facility, it is a strategic lever in repositioning Trieste's urban frontier. By reinventing a derelict port zone, the convention complex amplifies value: attracting creative, scientific, hospitality, and residential uses into a formerly underutilised area. Its adjacency to innovation zones, start-up hubs, universities, and research institutions gives an interlocking advantage.

Yet the balance is delicate: a financier's mindset must coexist with a civic sensibility. The convention centre must remain open to cultural, academic, and local events, not only revenue-generating bookings. According to Morelli's public remarks, the governance model is built to align commercial viability with urban identity.

Insights & Lessons for Cities and Investors

From these twin case studies, several strategic patterns and considerations emerge. Lessons that may redefine the European convention landscape:

- **The 'Convention Centre as Urban Core' Model**: In both cities, the venue is not an appendage; it is the anchor around which the district is built;
- **Private Capital Demands Vision**: Investors engage when the project is embedded in a credible long-term plan, linked to real estate, hospitality, and infrastructure value chains;
- **Mixed-Use Integration Mitigates Risk**: Revenue from offices, hotels, and residences cushions the cyclical nature of the events business;
- **Strong Stakeholder Alignment & Governance**: Trieste's shareholder model and Belgrade's single-owner district demonstrate two viable governance structures that align commercial and civic interests;
- **Urban Renewal & Place-Making Conditions**: Zoning flexibility, infrastructure upgrades, and sustainable design incentives create the fertile ground such ventures need.

Beyond Belgrade and Trieste: Cities to Watch

Similar conversations are unfolding elsewhere. In Thessaloniki, the redevelopment of the iconic **Helexpo exhibition complex** is being overseen by Greece's **National Growth Fund**. The challenge there, and in many comparable cities, lies in aligning public, private, and civic interests to create a sustainable, transformative project that benefits both the economy and society.

Recommendations: What City Leaders and Investors Should Note

- **Begin with a vision, not with a venue**: Embed the event facility within a broader urban or regeneration plan.
- **Design hybrid funding structures**: Combine anchor private investment with targeted public incentives (infrastructure, tax mechanisms, land-value capture).
- **Ensure flexibility in design**: Modular, future-proof spaces extend long-term viability.
- **Embed sustainability and community legacy**: Energy efficiency, green zones, and community access keep public trust intact.
- **Engage cross-sector partners early**: Universities, developers, and cultural institutions should co-own the vision.
- **Plan for long horizons**: True transformation unfolds over decades, not budget cycles.

Toward a New Convention Paradigm

The European convention model is at an inflection point. The traditional publicly funded, non-profit civic hall is no longer sustainable in many contexts. The cases of Belgrade and Trieste show how private capital, guided by a holistic urban vision, can deliver venues that are profitable, socially valuable, and architecturally transformative.

Rather than viewing convention infrastructure purely as a public good, cities and investors should now see it as a platform for urban transformation, where meetings, real estate, culture, and civic life converge. If designed and governed well, the convention centre of the future will not merely host events, it will shape skylines and shift perceptions of what a city can become.

AIPC

Using **WhatsApp** for **Community Building** at **ISPIM**

WhatsApp became the backbone for the **International Society for Professional Innovation Management (ISPIM)** as part of its engagement strategy in Bergen, Norway, turning 500 innovation professionals into active communities. Seven 'tribes' sparked instant connection, effortless networking, and a lively onsite atmosphere with a Viking-themed campaign, while the approach showed that strong engagement does not require big budgets, only familiar tools.

Author: Sina Bünte, Events Strategist, Founder of DigitalMind.events

During the **ISPIM Innovation Conference** in June, we welcomed around 500 innovation professionals from across the globe. As an external consultant supporting ISPIM, my brief was clear: develop an engagement approach that would activate the community before the event and strengthen peer-to-peer interaction onsite.

The official conference app included expected features, including push notifications, but it was not used for real-time communication. To fill that gap, and to create a more dynamic space for participants, I introduced WhatsApp groups as the backbone of our engagement strategy. For events with limited budgets, this approach is powerful – WhatsApp is free, widely used, and requires no technical setup. Its impact became clear quickly.

We opened seven WhatsApp 'tribes' one week before the conference. Each group was named after one of Bergen's seven mountains, giving them a sense of identity. Over 70% of attendees joined, and the momentum built instantly. People began introducing themselves, sharing tips, and discovering common interests. As moderator, I could distribute updates quickly and keep everyone supported. The groups soon became self-sustaining as participants shared advice and answered questions.

Once in Bergen, the value of the tribes became even more visible, with tribe names displayed on their name badge facilitating conversations. Our seven-task networking game added fun, whether asking people to take a selfie with their tribe or share a **LinkedIn** post. The groups were filled with photos, reactions and encouragement.

To guide newer attendees, every tribe included a designated 'tribe leader,' a returning participant who acted as an informal mentor. This structure supported both first-timers and regulars, helping everyone feel part of something bigger.

As **ISPIM's Executive Director, Iain Bitran**, remarked: "It was great seeing members communicating already before the event and the buzz during the event with sharing photos and trying to complete the tasks."

What quickly became apparent is that WhatsApp is more than a communication tool, it is a community space. It allows for dialogue rather than broadcasts, and individuality rather than formality. Unlike an event app, WhatsApp encourages more spontaneous exchanges. The tribes were also designed to resist over time, and many participants chose to stay in them, to maintain connections and share follow-up insights.

WhatsApp was just one part of a broader engagement campaign I developed for ISPIM. The Viking-themed **#BeInBergen** campaign, AI-generated Viking avatars created with **Snapmatic**, weekly social media content, and character videos all helped generate excitement and strengthen the community spirit leading into the event.

What Organisers Can Learn

For event organisers looking to deepen engagement without increasing costs, WhatsApp groups offer a practical and highly effective solution. They require no platform investment, meet attendees where they already are, and prompt interaction that formal tools often miss.

The experience in Bergen showed how a simple social media platform can bring people together, enhance the atmosphere onsite, and extend the community well beyond the closing session. When used thoughtfully, WhatsApp can turn hundreds of individuals into a connected, active network.

Principles of **Association Governance**

Effective governance is essential for strong membership organisations. Unlike corporations owned by shareholders, associations are 'owned' by their members, with a governance dynamic between members, the Board of Directors, and management.

Author: John Peacock AM, Director, United Kingdom and Australia, Governology

Understanding Structure and Law

An association's governance begins with its legal structure and compliance with relevant legislation. As examples, UK associations may be incorporated as Companies Limited by Guarantee, Charitable Incorporated Organisations, or through Royal Charter. In Belgium, the main legal structures are the Association Sans But Lucratif (ASBL) for national scope and the Association Internationale Sans But Lucratif (AISBL) for international entities.

National associations are typically incorporated in their home country, while international bodies may choose from several jurisdictions. For international organisations, taxation considerations play a key role.

The scope of an association, whether it represents individuals, organisations, or federated groups, also impacts structure complexity. Federated models, with associations as members, are more complex to manage than single-entity bodies.

Role of Members, Board and CEO

- Members have an optional annual role in governance. Their responsibilities include electing directors, appointing auditors, and approving constitutional changes. AGMs are forums where members hold leadership accountable.

- The Board of Directors governs the association, approves the Strategic Plan and budget, and oversees delivery through a CEO. In an ideal scenario, the association has sufficient resources to employ a capable CEO, with the Board meeting every two to three months.

Directors' Duties

Directors, as fiduciaries, must act in good faith and in the best interests of the association, avoiding conflicts of interest and never allowing personal benefit to override organisational priorities. They must exercise reasonable care, skill and diligence, understand finances, and ask questions when needed.

Constitutions and other Governance Documents

The Constitution forms the core 'mini-law' of the organisation, although local law always prevails. It should be clear, relevant, and reviewed periodically, setting out objects, membership, Board composition, and procedural requirements. It also represents a contractual framework between members and the association.

Changes must be approved by a super-majority vote at a General Meeting (in person or by proxy) once quorum is reached. The required threshold varies by jurisdiction, typically between two-thirds and three-quarters of members present.

Documents such as by-laws, Board charters, strategic plans, budgets, minutes, and audited financial reports support effective governance. By-laws, which may be amended by the Board, typically cover committee structures, nomination processes, financial authority limits, and policy frameworks.

Best Practice Board Composition

Best practice suggests Boards of seven to nine directors, ideally with a majority of member-elected and a small number of Board-appointed members. Term limits and staggered elections help ensure continuity. Clear role definitions for office bearers such as the Chair and Deputy Chair, each with distinct governance responsibilities, support effective board operations. The Chair's role is not merely ceremonial: they provide procedural leadership, shape agendas, support informed decision-making, and foster constructive relationships. The Chair is sometimes referred to as the President.

Effective Board meetings rely on structured agendas, high-quality papers, disciplined discussion, and clear resolution processes. Minutes should record decisions, context, and rationale, not debates or personal remarks. Once a decision is reached, directors are expected to uphold it collectively under the principle of 'cabinet solidarity'.

Maybe it is Time to **'Reverse Engineer'** Our **Governance**

Increasing globalisation and organisational complexity call for a review of long-standing governance models and decision-making structures. With an eye on 2026, it would be more effective to design governance around the outcomes we want to achieve than to continue relying on legacy frameworks designed for an entirely different context.

Author: Mark Levin, CAE, CSP

I am guessing that none of the readers of *Headquarters* got up this morning and said, "I think today would be the perfect day for our organisation to reconstruct our entire governance model."

I know I certainly did not. I am already remarkably busy trying to keep everything up and running in the international trade association I manage on a day-to-day basis.

However, maybe it is time to re-evaluate whether or not our governance structure and, more importantly, our decision-making processes, are best preparing us to deal with the world of 2026. If our membership, and the scope of our programmes, events, and activities, are global in nature, is the governance that our organisation adopted when it was founded still the best model to be using 10, 20, 30, or even (in our case) 65 years later?

This is not a discussion about updating by-laws and policy manuals, although that may be an outcome of the reverse engineering process. Reverse engineering our governance means working backward from our goals to uncover how our decisions are actually being made, and, realising that, determining if that process is aligned with our need to be responsive to our members' needs.

Let's say our goal in 2026 is to have the largest and most successful annual meeting in our organisation's history. That is a wonderful goal, but in order to get to that outcome, we need work backwards by asking ourselves these eight questions:

- **What is that going to take?** How aggressive does our promotional effort need to be? How big of a budget will we need?

- **Who is going to do all that work?** Do we need an *ad hoc* committee? Should we hire a marketing company?

- **What is the role of the staff going to be?** Do we have the marketing and management talent on board to accomplish our goal? Will we need to borrow staff resources from other departments or organisation priority activities?

- **At what points do we evaluate how effective our efforts have been?** At what point do we start discussing (if necessary) the need to regroup and make some changes to our plan/effort?

- **What are the measurement criteria to determine the 'largest' meeting?**

  a. Total attendees?

  b. Total member attendees?

  c. Percentage of members?

  d. Total exhibitors?

  e. Total income?

- **What are the measurement criteria for the 'most successful' meeting?**

  a. Total attendance?

  b. Attendee evaluations?

  c. Net income?

  d. Adoption of new professional standards or policies?

  e. Repeat attendees from 2025?

- **Who will prioritise these items, and what authority they have to make those decisions?**

  a. Should it be the Board or a committee?

  b. Does designating the annual meeting as a priority give it precedence over other programmes or resources?

  c. What is the role of the organisation's staff in making decisions and determining priorities?

- **Do we need to restructure our governance to keep moving forward?**

  a. Are we bound by out-of-date governance documents that limit our ability to 'organise for success'?

  b. Should we consider adding leadership positions to engage a broader representation of our 2026 membership?

This process could go on and on. The key is to identify, quantify, and track the process by which decisions are currently made and priorities are determined. Then you can identify where changes are needed.

Here is where the 'reverse' part of reverse engineering starts paying off. Instead of starting with an organisation chart and assigning programmes and activities to existing individuals or committees, you build an organisation chart to support and accomplish organisational priorities and goals.

Based on the example above, our 2026 governance can now be structured to:

- Identify and engage a broader group of members;

- Give this group greater authority to help prioritise organisational goals;

- Increase attendee satisfaction at our annual meetings;

- Increase the number of active (voting) members in attendance;

- Monitor the progress of the meeting more frequently (monthly);

- Use the information and recommendations of the professional staff;

- Accomplish the goal of producing the largest and most successful annual meeting in our organisation's history.

Ultimately, reverse engineering our governance is about aligning structure with purpose. Rather than relying on legacy models or outdated decision-making habits, it asks us to start with the outcomes we want to achieve and design a governance system capable of delivering them. By working backwards from our goals, clarifying roles, updating processes, and empowering the right people at the right moments, we can build organisations that are agile, accountable, and genuinely prepared for 2026 and beyond.

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.

Innovating How **International Events** Are Designed, Delivered, And Sustained

International events increasingly operate across borders, regulatory environments, cultures, and stakeholder expectations. Success is therefore no longer defined by execution alone, but by the ability to support resilient, inclusive, compliant decision-making designed to endure.

At **planitswiss**, a Swiss global event designer and producer, as well as a member of **IAPCO**, governance is a living operational system that is continuously evolving through technology, ESG commitments, and cross-market intelligence. By combining Swiss governance standards with global operational reach, the organisation has developed models that allow innovation to scale without compromising consistency or accountability.

Author: Arthur Bontemps, Managing Director, Head of Global Operations, planitswiss Group

Reinventing Event Governance Through Technology

As international events operate across multiple regulatory frameworks and governance models, the limits of disconnected digital systems have become increasingly apparent.

Registration, abstract management, accreditation, and reporting could not operate in silos if events were to remain responsive, engaging, compliant, transparent, and strategically valuable.

In response to these challenges, planitswiss developed its integrated event management platform, **AIO (All-in-One Events)**, in 2017.

Designed to support large-scale association and institutional events, AIO integrates abstract submission and peer review, ticketing and participant accreditation, CME credit tracking through session check-in and check-out, and access control with real-time attendance analytics within a single digital environment.

By consolidating these functions, AIO establishes a continuous governance loop in which participation is traceable, compliance auditable, and outcomes measurable. For associations managing congresses with thousands of delegates and stringent accreditation requirements, this digital backbone supports informed governance and decision-making.

Hybrid Governance And Remote Decision-Making

For many global NGOs and international associations, governance no longer happens around a single table. Board members, committees and scientific councils are often spread across continents and time zones, yet decisions still demand rigour and procedural integrity. This reality has reshaped how governance meetings are designed and delivered.

To support this shift, planitswiss, with the support of **imavox**, its production and technology arm powering AIO, has developed solutions that enable governance bodies to meet, deliberate and decide effectively in hybrid and fully remote settings. Secure platforms ensure controlled access and confidentiality, while live interpretation and multilingual scripting allow participants to engage in their working language. Broadcast guidelines aligned with institutional and diplomatic standards further reinforce neutrality and procedural clarity, which is particularly critical for high-level institutional or intergovernmental meetings.

The result is governance continuity. Boards can meet more frequently, committees can respond faster to emerging issues, and decision-making remains inclusive without sacrificing structure or accountability. Hybrid governance becomes an enabler rather than a constraint.

Data also plays a central governance role. Collected before, during and after events, it replaces anecdotal feedback with evidence. Registration and abstract data help assess geographic

reach, representation and thematic relevance, while real-time analytics reveal session engagement and content performance. Diversity and accessibility metrics further support measurable evaluation. Embedded into governance processes, this data enables transparent, informed decisions aligned with long-term organisational missions.

ESG-Driven Decision Models

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles are no longer peripheral. They are embedded early as structural decision criteria.

For large congresses, waste reduction cannot be improvised onsite. Governance frameworks define re-use policies for structures and signage, recycling streams aligned with local infrastructure, and supplier obligations covering materials, local production and sourcing.

Incorporating these requirements into contracts makes sustainability enforceable rather than aspirational.

Sustainable Procurement And Upcycling

The establishment of a production hub in Rwanda reflects a practical ESG commitment. Beyond logistics efficiency, the hub enables local production, upcycling, and reduced dependency on international freight.

As part of this approach, planitswiss has developed initiatives that transform event branding and backdrops into practical items such as school bags and laptop sleeves. Rather than treating materials as waste, they are repurposed into products with tangible social value.

Delivered in collaboration with **DuHope**, a social enterprise supporting vulnerable women through vocational training, the initiative links environmental responsibility with economic inclusion. Event materials gain a second life while contributing to long-term community benefit.

Inclusion And Accessibility By Design

Inclusion and accessibility must be embedded into event governance from the very start, not added as corrective measures later. Globally significant events require deliberate design choices across content, venue, technology, and participant experience to ensure all attendees can engage meaningfully.

Accessibility extends beyond physical access to digital and cognitive participation. Live captioning, multilingual interpretation, AI-supported translation, and hybrid participation options enable broader engagement across geographies, abilities, and circumstances.

Programme design also reflects inclusion through speaker selection, session formats, and moderation that prioritise diversity and representation. At the **Women Deliver Conference 2023**, these principles were applied through accessible venues, inclusive programming, and hybrid delivery supporting participation across languages and abilities. Governance frameworks should capture these lessons to guide future editions and strengthen long-term equity and participation.

Coordinating Global Operations

Delivering global summits, general meetings and multi-hub meetings requires coordination across time zones and markets. This is supported through clearly defined escalation paths, a dedicated help desk with time-zone-aware communication protocols, and centralised project governance combined with local execution authority. This structure enables timely decisions while maintaining accountability.

One Framework, Local Adaptation

A core governance asset lies in transferring knowledge across markets. Insights from corporate, governmental, and NGO events are adapted across regions while maintaining consistent standards. The governance model remains consistent through central standards and methodologies, internal subject-matter expertise, and local adaptation to regulations, culture and infrastructure. This approach balances institutional trust with local realities.

Integrated Event Ecosystems

One of the group's defining strengths is its integrated ecosystem, combining planitswiss (strategic event management), imavox (production, AVL and broadcasting) and AIO (an integrated event management solution). This one-stop-shop approach reduces interface risk, strengthens compliance oversight and improves supplier accountability, while making governance, transparency and ESG alignment easier to enforce.

It also streamlines post-event improvement through structured debriefs, performance reviews and data-driven refinements. By contrast, changing suppliers annually often leads to lost knowledge and increased risk, while long-term partnerships preserve institutional memory and optimise value over time.

Ultimately, innovation in event governance is not about technology alone, but about how decisions are made, shared and sustained. By integrating digital platforms, ESG frameworks and cross-market expertise, governance becomes a driver of long-term impact. In global operations, the strongest events are built on decisions that endure beyond delivery, supporting collaboration long after the final session.

Article kindly provided by IAPCO.

The CityDNA Tórshavn Declaration

A Turning Point for Europe's Visitor Ecosystems

When European city destinations gathered in Tórshavn, the capital of the Faroe Islands, for the **City Destinations Alliance Autumn Conference 2025**, they did so with a clear purpose: to participate in the co-creation of the **Tórshavn Declaration**. What emerged was not a finalised doctrine, but an important step, a shared articulation of priorities that now serves as a bridge between CityDNA's ongoing conversations and the development of its next strategy.

The Declaration reflects a collective moment of alignment, capturing what matters most to members as the organisation prepares for its next strategic cycle. At a time when DMOs face accelerating climate disruption, geopolitical instability, shifting resident expectations, and the profound shake-up of artificial intelligence, the Declaration consolidates member-driven insights into a coherent agenda for the future of European cities. It offers both diagnosis and direction: a shared understanding of the challenges ahead and a commitment to co-create practical solutions that respond to them.

A Collaborative Framework Born from PEST Priorities

The workshop process in Tórshavn used a PEST (Political, Economic, Social and Technological) framework to structure discussions around 20 core challenges identified by CityDNA members before the event. Participants self-selected into four groups and used a structured prioritisation approach to surface the most urgent pressures shaping the visitor economy.

The result was a clear pattern: despite differing contexts, European cities share deeply interconnected challenges. Collaboration, measurement, resident inclusion, digital capability and geopolitical uncertainty emerged as cross-cutting themes.

Maya Janssen, Managing Director Insights & Marketing Strategy of amsterdam&partners, who moderated the Political Workshop, observed: "This moment requires political clarity without political naivety. DMOs cannot solve geopolitical crises, but they can help cities listen, align, and act with purpose."

Political Priorities: Collaboration as Strategy

One theme towered above all others: Collaboration Across Sectors. Participants recognised it not simply as operational coordination but as a political act, reinforcing tourism's legitimacy within the urban system. Geopolitical instability ranked second, prompting calls for shared resilience planning and coordinated crisis communication. Sustainable mobility and infrastructure followed closely, reflecting the long-term challenge of transitioning to low-carbon systems.

As Maya Janssen summarised: "The task ahead is to match our ambition with what is truly feasible, and to do so collectively through strong public-private collaboration."

Economic Priorities: Redefining Value Beyond Volume

Discussions revealed a widespread desire to move beyond outdated success metrics. Visitor numbers and room nights, delegates argued, cannot capture the full value of tourism. Increasingly, DMOs seek indicators that demonstrate returns for residents, local businesses, and the wider urban fabric.

Measurement and Success Metrics emerged as the top-ranked concern in both workshop and the post-conference survey. Participants also highlighted financial vulnerability and uneven funding models across Europe. Diversified revenue streams, transparent reinvestment of tourism taxes, and improved access to EU support were all deemed essential.

Economic sustainability, they agreed, must be multidimensional, grounded in accountability and shared benefit rather than growth for its own sake.

Social Priorities: From Promotion to Mediation

The Social Workshop which was the most heavily attended, examined the defining issue for modern DMOs: the balance between resident and visitor needs. Delegates stressed that sentiment surveys must evolve from passive measurement to active co-creation, with visible follow-through.

Authenticity and place-making ranked equally high, amid concerns about cities losing distinctiveness in a homogenised global marketplace. Participants strongly endorsed co-creation: involving communities, artists and cultural practitioners in shaping how destinations evolve and are represented. A successful visitor economy, they agreed, enhances belonging rather than eroding it.

Technological Priorities: AI as Disruption and Opportunity

Far from treating technology as a discrete category, the Technological Workshop viewed AI and digital transformation as structural forces shaping every other domain. **David Peacock, Senior Advisor for the Future Tourism Group at Simpleview**, a **Granicus Company**, who moderated the session, described technology as "the connective tissue of modern destinations: invisible, but decisive."

AI dominated the discussion, seen as a shift even more disruptive than the arrival of the internet. Participants called for coordinated European frameworks addressing ethics, governance, data sovereignty and capacity building, ensuring smaller DMOs are not left behind. Concerns surfaced around digital dependency, authenticity in online storytelling, and widening digital skills gaps across Europe.

A European Blueprint with Global Relevance

Although grounded in European realities, the Tórshavn Declaration resonates globally. Urban destinations everywhere are grappling with resident pressure, climate urgency, digital acceleration, governance complexity and evolving business models.

Its distinguishing feature is its method: a co-created, consensus-driven process, not top-down instruction. It is collective intelligence in practice, a model other regions may increasingly follow. As **Barbara Jamison-Woods, President of CityDNA** and moderator of the Social Workshop, reflected: "This Declaration is a compass. It does not prescribe every step, but it sets the direction we will walk together."

What Comes Next: Toward the 2027-2029 Strategy

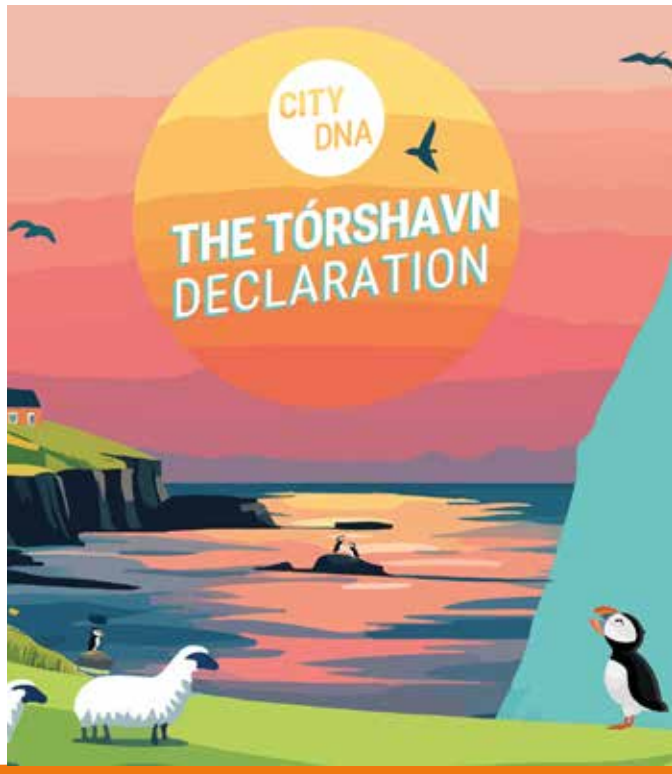
CityDNA will integrate insights from Tórshavn into upcoming programmes, including the **2026 International Conference & General Assembly** in Helsinki. The Declaration also lays the groundwork for the organisation's next strategic plan (2027–2029).

Short-term actions include case studies on crisis management, cross-sector governance, advanced measurement frameworks and continued digital upskilling. Mid-term efforts will focus on EU funding advocacy, new community platforms and shared digital resilience strategies. Long-term, CityDNA aims to build a living system of monitoring and mutual learning.

A Call to Action for DMOs Worldwide

The Tórshavn Declaration is not an ending but an invitation: to rethink, reframe and rebuild. It signals a future shaped not by promotional strength, but by collaborative intelligence, social legitimacy, ethical technology and economic transparency.

From Tórshavn's windswept coastline, CityDNA members voiced a shared truth: cities thrive when tourism strengthens communities, protects identity, and invests in long-term resilience. And as the organisation now shapes its next strategy, one message echoes across every workshop: the Declaration is the starting point (not the finish line) for the visitor ecosystems Europe must build next.



Governance at the Helm

Steering Global Events Through a New Era of Risk

In today's association world, running a global event feels a bit like standing in the middle of a fast-moving intersection. Geopolitics shift without warning. Destinations rise and fall in feasibility. Weather patterns throw curveballs that no forecast captured. Insurance policies read more like exclusions than assurances. And members, who are increasingly global, diverse, digital, and demanding, expect flawless delivery, regardless of what is happening behind the scenes.

In this environment, events no longer succeed solely because the programme is compelling or the venue is world-class. They succeed because the organisation behind them has a clear vision for the future, a strategy to execute it, and the governance strength to steer that vision through volatility. Associations that are thriving are the ones treating governance as an active, strategic capability and equipping their boards not just to manage today, but to anticipate tomorrow.

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

The New Reality of Global Risk

Across continents, event organisers are encountering a world where uncertainty is the norm. Some of this volatility is geopolitical: elections, trade shifts, diplomatic tensions, and regional instability directly influence where, and whether, an event can take place.

Even the macroeconomic backdrop is softening. The latest *World Economic Outlook* projects global growth to slow in the coming years, with risks 'firmly tilted to the downside.' A backdrop like this adds pressure to global event planning and forces boards to operate with greater foresight and scenario awareness. This is where experienced PCOs with profound local knowledge add real value to associations, showing their capability to mitigate risk.

A destination that seemed ideal can change overnight, demanding rapid, high-stakes decisions. Environmental risk has become equally central: extreme heat, flooding, wildfires, and other climate-related events directly affect site selection and contract terms. Sustainability is now as much an operational requirement as it is an ethical stance.

Policy-Driven Stability: A Quick Example from Sweden

Some destinations are also using national policy to strengthen event reliability. Sweden's 'prescription' approach shows how alignment between public frameworks and the meetings industry reduces uncertainty for boards. Transparency laws, a legally binding climate act, nationwide cybersecurity strategy, and coordinated crisis preparedness create a predictable environment for PCOs to operate in. For associations, this means fewer surprises, stronger ESG alignment, and a destination where risk mitigation is part of the national DNA. It shows how policy, PCO capability, and governance reinforce each other to create more resilient events.

Financial Resilience Becomes a Leadership Imperative

Financial planning has entered a new era. Rising costs, currency fluctuations, and increasingly complex insurance landscapes mean that traditional one-year budgets are no longer enough. Associations with strong governance frameworks are moving toward multi-year planning, trend monitoring, and multi-scenario financial modelling.

Boards that lean into foresight, understand economic signals, anticipate cost pressures, and recognise shifting attendee behaviour are better equipped to identify opportunities, not just risks. Whether that means diversifying revenue, strengthening reserves, rethinking sponsorship, or pursuing multi-year partnerships, foresight turns turbulence into a strategic advantage.

Leadership That Does Not Leave Events Exposed

Governance failures often reveal themselves most painfully during event season. When boards lack renewal, succession plans are unclear, and the decision-making hierarchy is ambiguous, it becomes apparent. Events expose governance gaps faster than any audit or retreat.

Conversely, when leadership structures are strong and transparent, events benefit. New board members arrive prepared for the global realities in which associations now operate. Succession becomes continuity, not crisis. Delegated authority enables straightforward and quick decisions. Volunteers work with confidence because they understand not just the what, but the why. That is why strategic plans

with a long-term vision and objectives are so essential although they need constant revision in order to adapt and react to constant change we are facing globally.

And critically, boards that practise foresight can look beyond the immediate agenda to identify emerging trends affecting their members, profession, and global environment, and turn those insights into opportunities for their events and organisation.

Business Models Under Pressure

Inflation, supply chain challenges, rising travel costs, and venue rate increases have placed significant strain on event economics. Members and exhibitors are facing pressure too, making value articulation more important than ever.

Some associations are shifting toward adaptive pricing, while others are redesigning programmes to be leaner yet more impactful. Many are rediscovering the resilience of year-round partnerships and diversified revenue streams. These decisions depend on clear vision, clear strategy, and a governance model that understands both current pressures and future possibilities.

Digital Dependence and Cyber Vulnerability

As events become increasingly digital, cyber risk is now a core governance issue. Registration systems, mobile apps, cashless operations, and third-party integrations all create friction points, especially during peak event usage.

Organisations setting the pace are investing in cyber protocols, vendor vetting, staff and volunteer training, and rapid-response planning. Boards with strong foresight recognise that digital vulnerability is a matter of organisational resilience, not just IT.

When Crisis Hits, Communication Defines Reputation

A crisis is where governance either shines or cracks. In the first hour of a crisis, whether it is a climate emergency, cyber breach, or geopolitical disruption, clarity matters more than perfection. Associations that excel are the ones that have:

- a single authorised spokesperson;
- clear verification steps;
- pre-designed first-hour response playbooks;
- mechanisms to keep messaging aligned with mission and member needs;
- strong and experienced PCO partner, often covering much of the risk management and crisis response.
- In a crisis, the clearest voice defines credibility.

A Global Footprint Demands Global Structures

As associations grow internationally, they are learning that global operations require purpose-built governance: legal, tax, data, compliance, employment, and representation structures that respect local realities while maintaining global alignment. The most successful organisations do not simply copy and paste their domestic model. They build frameworks with global architecture and long-term opportunity in mind.

The Bottom Line: Governance Is What Makes Events Deliver

When you step back, a pattern emerges. Every challenge facing global events, geopolitical, environmental, financial, digital, and structural, ultimately returns to the same foundation: strong governance paired with clear vision and strategic foresight. Governance provides:

- the clarity to define where the organisation and its events are going;
- the strategy to execute with discipline;
- the foresight to anticipate trends and seize opportunities;
- the confidence to act decisively;
- the continuity to withstand disruption;
- the credibility members expect when something goes wrong.

Events have always been where associations show their worth. But today, events also reveal the strength of governance. Decisions that stand lead to events that deliver, and the organisations investing in governance and foresight today are the ones positioned to shape global impact tomorrow.

The Shifts Reshaping **Event Sourcing** in **Cvent**'s Latest Report

As the global meetings and events industry continues its steady recovery, planners' priorities are shifting, and so too are their expectations of venues and suppliers. **Cvent**'s *2026 Global Planner Sourcing Report*, produced in partnership with **Censuswide**, surveyed 1,650 event planners across North America, Latin America, Europe (including the UK), Asia, Australia, and the Middle East & Africa. The findings point to a sourcing environment that is faster, more data-driven and increasingly centred on creating engaging, memorable experiences rather than simply managing cost.

Engagement Outranks Cost

For the first time, attendee engagement and satisfaction have overtaken cost management as planners' top priority. Planners are placing greater emphasis on experiences that encourage connection and participation. Venues with flexible layouts, integrated food and beverage options and spaces that support networking alongside presentations are particularly attractive. Successful events are no longer measured solely by attendance numbers, but by the quality of the experience delivered.

Non-Hotel Venues on the Rise

Almost half of planners are now sourcing non-hotel venues such as restaurants, galleries, wineries and cultural spaces. Since 2023, interest in these alternative locations has increased by more than 30%.

This surge reflects a growing desire for distinctive, immersive environments that feel less traditional and more memorable. Flexibility, creativity and the ability to deliver a sense of place are driving these choices, signalling that venues must offer more than a standard meeting room.

Technology and AI Transform Sourcing

Technology has become central to modern event sourcing, with artificial intelligence playing an increasingly visible role. 75% of planners now use AI tools to draft RFPs, analyse attendee data or compare bids.

Speed and Clarity

Speed remains a critical factor in venue selection. Most planners expect RFP responses within four business days, with slow replies, incomplete information and unclear specifications cited as common frustrations. High-quality photos, detailed floor plans and clear room specifications can determine whether a venue is shortlisted at all. In a crowded marketplace, accessible and comprehensive digital assets are essential to winning business.

Rising Costs

72% of planners expect event costs to rise by up to 20% in 2026, while 69% anticipate similar increases in their overall budgets. Despite these pressures, planners are not willing to compromise on attendee experience. Instead, they are negotiating more strategically, exploring alternative venues and seeking packages that maximise impact without sacrificing quality. Creativity, transparency and flexibility are becoming key differentiators as planners look to do more with constrained resources.

Structured Processes and Strong Partnerships

Defined sourcing processes and strong vendor partnerships save both time and money. Currently, 22% of planners use a formal process for every event, and 38% for most events, yet around a third of organisations lack standard procedures. Using structured RFPs and digital tools helps venues respond faster and more accurately, making them a preferred partner for planners. With staffing shortages and rising operational costs, planners rely on trusted partners for AV, technology support and entertainment. Clear communication, consistency and reliability are now as valuable as price.

Venues that combine speed, clarity and creativity with memorable experiences will stand out in 2026. Those competing on price alone risk being overlooked. By adapting to evolving expectations, venues can strengthen relationships and position themselves at the centre of planners' decision-making.

Download the full report from the Cvent website.

cvent

ExpoPlatform: Where Smart **Technology** Meets Meaningful **Connection**

Meetings are the beating heart of any event. Formats may differ, from high-speed networking to curated board sessions, but their success depends on one thing: a meaningful human connection, enhanced by smart technology.

Author: Conor Riordan, Digital Content Editor, ExpoPlatform

See how meeting formats are evolving into a more rewarding experience for organisers, exhibitors and attendees.

Self-Requested Meetings

Self-requested meetings empower participants while relieving organisers of administrative headaches. Now armed with an event app, they can send meeting requests directly to relevant prospects, no wasted time. What used to be guesswork becomes precision matchmaking. Meanwhile, organisers gain analytics that reveal who is connecting, what topics trend and how engagement translates to ROI.

Speed Networking

Your participants have limited budgets and even less time. Organisers set parameters in an AI matchmaking engine that pairs attendees by goals, interests and compatibility. Each timed conversation is precise: a few minutes, one table, one opportunity. Participants leave with qualified leads, while organisers review ratings and feedback to refine future sessions and improve outcomes.

Exhibitor Events

Technology means exhibitors can organise branded sessions that feel more like community gatherings than product demos. Exhibitors can use different customisations to tweak their offerings while the overall experience is curated and controlled by the organiser. Exhibitors get leads, attendees get insights, organisers get a richer programme without lifting a finger.

Hosted Buyer Programmes

Matching buyers and suppliers requires spreadsheets thicker than a phonebook and endless email chains. Now, technology allows you to map out a seamless onboarding journey to qualify your hosted buyers with a data-driven dashboard efficiently. Organisers see new levels of efficiency: meetings flow on time, buyers leave satisfied and suppliers secure deals before the event ends.

Concierge Meetings

High-profile executives expect white-glove service and meaningful introductions without admin. Concierge meetings, powered by semi-automated scheduling, let organisers curate matches. AI shortlists options and the concierge team refines them. Top-tier buyers leave with schedules full of quality meetings, boosting satisfaction and reinforcing the event's premium reputation.

Board Meetings

Scheduling tools allow one-to-many meetings where an exhibitor presents to a curated group of buyers. The system ensures balance across session types and tracks engagement. What emerges are strategic growth sessions, focused, data-backed and outcome-driven. The exhibitor gets qualified feedback and targeted exposure. Buyers gain insights, not sales pitches.

Round Tables

Data now helps organisers balance groups and ensure diversity of thought when scheduling participants to tables based on shared interests or complementary expertise. This creates sessions that feel spontaneous yet intelligently orchestrated. Organisers can capture insights that might otherwise evaporate.

Every meeting format shares a common challenge: time. Organisers have too little of it, attendees want to maximise it, and exhibitors must prove it was worth it. That is where technology comes in. Intelligent systems (from AI automation to speed networking algorithms) reduce friction and amplify connection. They turn profile data into compatibility insights, transform intent into booked meetings, and convert conversations into actionable summaries. In an era of fleeting attention, AI ensures every meeting has meaning.

The reason behind innovation is simple: to give organisers the power to create experiences where technology fades into the background and human connection shines through. Meetings may evolve, but their goal remains timeless: connection.

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