

Striking a Balance Between a Digital-First & Customer-First Philosophy

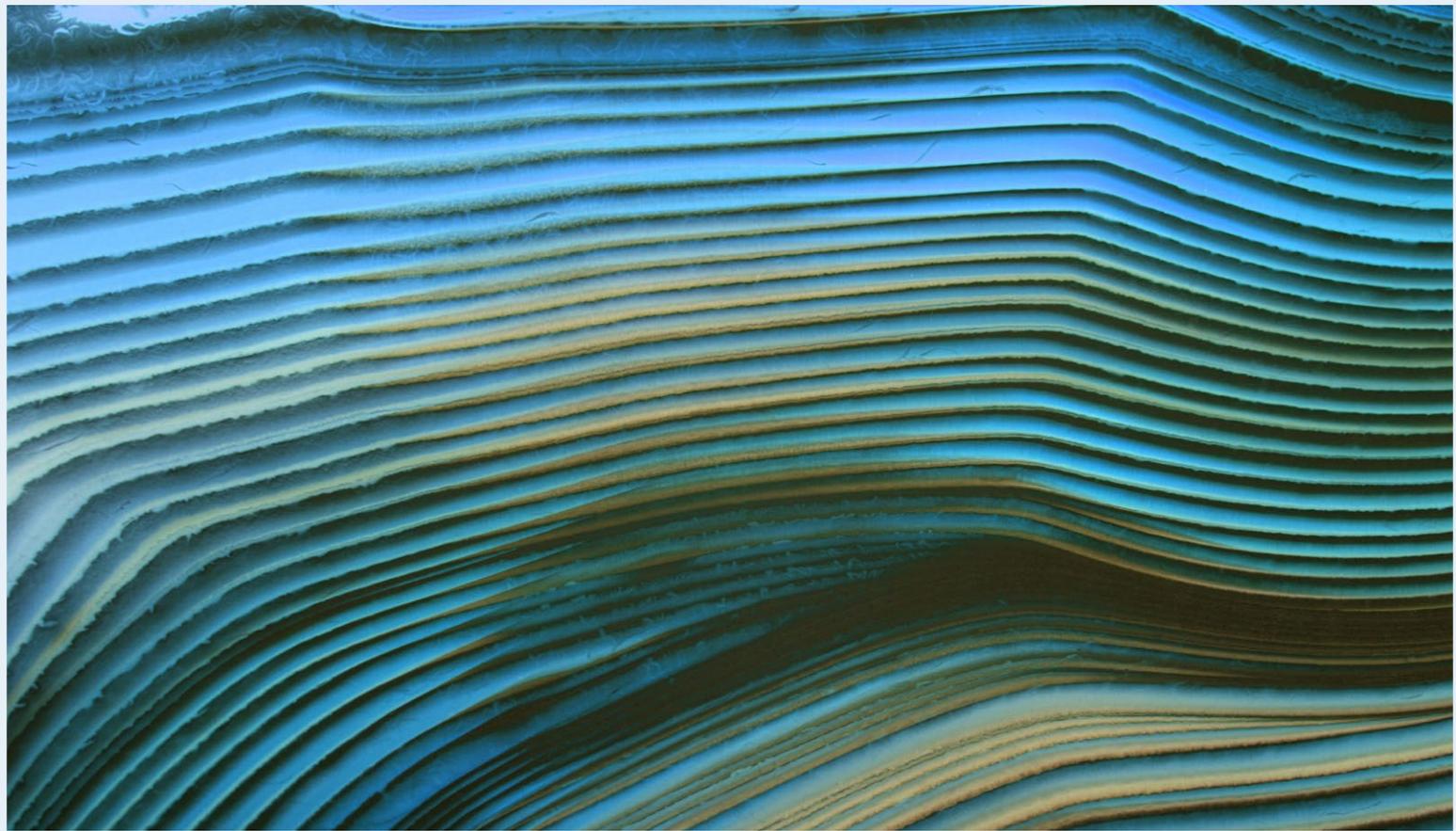
Martin Boyle, CEO of IAPCO, the International Association of Professional Congress Organizers, advocates for a digital-first approach when managing an organization... but only if members are put in the centre of everything.

Innovation and digitization or a 'digital-first approach', as it is so often referred to, are terms used by so many in both the corporate and not-for-profit association worlds today. To be 'digital-first' implies to many that an organization, its leadership and teams are 'switched on' at all times, communicate in real-time to their teams, customers and audiences and have the most cutting edge and efficient technologies available at their finger-tips 24/7.

Well, yes, there may be some that embody and practice this philosophy.

When asked his thoughts on the digital-first concept, Prof. Felix Carvalho, PharmD; PhD; ERT; EuCP and President of EUROTOX stated that: *"Our technological transformation will come from organizational core values and not vice versa. There's no doubt that EUROTOX will continue to use the digital tools (webinars, virtual meeting platforms, social media, and AMS) that today feel indispensable to run daily operations, enable greater collaboration between groups, and improve user experience; however, it's important that such efforts do not result in a radical sea change, or substantial change of engagement with our members, stakeholders, industry, and scientific partners."*

I tend to agree and would argue that for most, especially smaller associations with limited resources, using an efficient and appropriate selection of digital tools to empower and enable organizations to be more 'customer-first' is perhaps a more appropriate and realistic viewpoint to adopt. After all, at the heart of all digital interaction is human capital and, although some in the



Artificial Intelligence field may disagree with me, digital engagement opportunities can only be driven by human desire and passion.

INVESTING IN DIGITAL TECH

As I write this article, I am *en route* to Nairobi where I will be volunteering to speak about my industry sector (the global meetings industry) and support the delivery of a Career Day for 550 young students. The theme for this inaugural event is 'Technology and Careers for the Future: The World at your Fingertips!'; rather relevant, I hope you would agree. Joining me on stage will be Sir Brian Souter, Co-Founder of Stagecoach Group, Dr David Sengeh, Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education and Chief Innovation Officer, Sierra Leone and others from the renewable energy, Agri-tech, Fin-tech and music industries, all of whom have invested in significant technological advances to their organizations.

At IAPCO, the association I lead, our members and their clients continue to invest in digital technologies to improve their own operations and the delivery of their meetings and events. We have witnessed an extreme sea change in the development and

adoption of virtual meetings and events technologies in the past two and a half years as a direct result of the recent pandemic.

Transitioning our own IAPCO Annual Meeting in 2021 to a virtual conference, along with implementing a suite of software applications for our internal processes and administration has brought very positive results in regard to efficiencies, data security, and operational practices, especially given that 100% of my team works remotely. In doing so, we connected with our community through our own webinars and online educational programs and, in fact, grew our community base substantially over the period. Technologies enable us to focus our human resource on our members first.

Those members and the rest of our community remain steadfast in what they want from their association with us. Opportunities to engage, network, and share knowledge and experiences with others continue to be of great importance to them. To help facilitate this, IAPCO launched our Members Hub in April 2022. It can best be described as a sort of professional Facebook for members. Initially, engagement was excellent with members joining daily and, like Facebook, it relies on content from its community. Encouraging a membership community to shift from a receiver to a provider of content is challenging at the best of times and ever so much more when professional obligations and responsibilities take priority. Consider how to be innovative in the means by which you request contribution, regardless of the technology used.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Prof Carvalho continued with: *"it's important to identify the intentions and relationships that fulfil the needs of our members and stakeholders by asking questions like "how can this benefit our users?"; and only then, "what technology do we need to make it happen?"*

I return to the Nairobi event for a final thought. The idea that a young person in Nairobi with a passion for, say, engineering can have a professional career and contribute to the success of an organization across the other side of the world via technology at their fingertips is perhaps the best example of 'digital-first' in action. Importantly, however, ensuring they feel part of that global community whilst they do so in silo is what I would call 'customer-first' which will be fundamental to their long-term sense of belonging and mutual success.

IAPCO is a not-for-profit membership association, registered in Switzerland. IAPCO Members are Professional Congress Organizers (companies, not individuals) that have qualified for Membership under the detailed application process by demonstrating that they consistently deliver PCO services to their clients and partners at high quality standards. They retain their membership through annual quality checks and reviews by the IAPCO Quality Committee.

