

# Seismic Shifts

## for Associations: the Acceleration of Innovation

Written by Ajay Bhojwani, managing director of MCI Middle East



In a world where technology and social media allow individuals to gather information and network online, professional associations are already evolving their offering to members in order to stay relevant. And now with the current pandemic impacting all of us, it has further accelerated associations to fast track their move in the space of technology to ensure their offering is even more relevant, available and allowing their members to have access to all resources.

Every morning we start our day with getting news headlines, social media updates and emails through the smartphones, which pushes organisations to ensure that whatever they offer - learning programs, publications and more - are all compatible at the touch of the proverbial button.

Associations need to ensure that technology is integrated internally and externally so that the experience is seamless, and their staff are ready to put this offering forward to their members. You cannot offer something in the best possible manner when you are not adapting or using it. So what does this internal and external mean? It basically brings the ecosystem of the association together - talents that work for the association, members and customers, its products and services, the stakeholders that comprise volunteers and supporting organisations and the government institutions. Before COVID-19 changed the world we live in, associations continued to focus on innovation, working around the globe through a mobile workforce and recognising the

importance of data privacy, ensuring they had the right policies and infrastructure to make this happen. However, now we have a seismic shift in the way associations operate; with the changing dynamics, these trends have further evolved, and the next 12 to 18 months will bring forward the following:

- 1. Digital transformation** - which will mean not only having associations run their programs digitally but ensuring everything they do is seamless and connected digitally in a holistic manner. Staff will need to be Re or Upskilled; tools and applications will need to be in place to make their work effective. Integration, convergence and seamlessness will be the mantra.
- 2. Remote workforce** - The 'work from home' ideology brings in a new definition to a mobile workforce which will have a long lasting impact even beyond the pandemic. Organisations have found a new working experience, and this will replace large offices and infrastructure for many organisations in the future.
- 3. AI and BI** - With so many programs and events being run virtually, two key focus areas will be the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Business Intelligence (BI). Whilst AI will help customise the offering and cater to individual needs, BI will assist associations to collect and analyse the data to be more effective in connecting with their members.

- 4. Mobile first offering** - Everything being offered from training to events to publications as well as meetings will need to be mobile compatible as audiences connect remotely from their phones even more than ever before.
- 5. Employee wellbeing** - The pandemic has increased the trend of employers playing an expanded role in their employees' financial, physical and mental well-being. Personal factors rather than external factors will take precedence over what matters for organisations and employees alike.

As we talk through the future, the majority of associations today depend on meetings and events as their primary source of revenue or, in some cases, the sole driver to keep them afloat. And with these activities being the first to get impacted, associations will need to re-think, re-strategise and put a whole new context to make this work for them and their communities. So whilst in the past the number one reason for audiences to be at events was networking, the current world of digital meetings not only impacts the experience but even affect the priorities as they will change for everyone.

More so, when life starts coming back to normal, meetings and events will surely jump back to face-to-face interactions but with a long-lasting impact of audiences wanting to still be connected digitally. Whilst hybrid events have been in existence for some years, it is now more than ever that they will be tested and

become a key ingredient in the planning of future events.

So, what does this mean for us as event organisers? Well, on one side there will be some impact on physical attendance but then it also opens a whole new audience outreach in different parts of the world. In the last three months, we have seen many associations comment on virtual events being larger than expected and that they are attracting audiences they never connected with in the past. There are a whole lot of new members who demand quality, content and the ability to connect without the hassle of moving from the comfort of their offices.

Associations will, however, need to think harder on engagement as to how they can keep audiences active in front of screens for longer hours as well as condensing their content to ensure they remain connected and relevant to their community. The reality is that change is now, the future is here and you have very few options, but to adapt to the new paradigm.

The key areas of focus for associations will include:

- 1. Globalised content** - associations can look to produce content relevant to more than one region or country, resulting in more audiences drawn from all around the globe.
- 2. Marketing on a global scale** - associations will need to get more

aggressive with their marketing campaigns and use digital tools and social media to get the best outreach.

- 3. Business models** - It will be easier to push digital products but on the other hand the charges will need to be less for audiences, especially to those in low income countries.
- 4. Engagement** - Relying on bite size information, interviews with speakers, key highlights of content and other small pieces of information prior to the event and a whole new set of engagement actions such as interactions through polls, quizzes and other social media activations during the event.

As we saw with post 9/11, the impact of COVID-19 will come with both short and long term changes, in how we interact and offer products to our members. Associations will need to remain agile to quickly adapt and deal with uncertainty, since changes in demand will be influenced by economic fluctuations.



✉ [INFO@IAPCO.ORG](mailto:INFO@IAPCO.ORG)



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