

# The Promise & Perils of Association Globalization

In the pursuit of association growth, going global emerges as a promising avenue. **Dermot Ryan**, Director of Marketing, Communications and Engagement at K.I.T. Group, explores the dynamics of this strategic evolution and the factors driving it.

Just about every association leader wants to grow their association and going global is one clear route to achieving this. If you review regional and national society mission statements, there are rarely geographic restrictions on their fields of activity. With the explosion of digital events during the pandemic, most associations have already gone global, expanded their reach and introduced new audiences to their society.

## WE DO IT BETTER

As many regional and national associations are aware, just because you do not have the word "International" in your society name does not mean you can't attract and engage an international audience. While associations may develop strategies to enhance loyalty, most decisions to attend a meeting or to become a member are purely transactional, based on the product offering. In short: is what you are offering worth buying or can I do better elsewhere?

Knowledge transfer does not respect boundaries and many associations – and not just the large ones – already have a global reach. Take for example the following associations, one regional and

one national that think and act globally. The European Menopause and Andropause Society (EMAS) attracts 40% of their members from outside Europe and is the organizer of the 'World Menopause and Work Day' in September, which was launched after the release of their Global

Consensus Recommendations on Menopause in the Workplace in 2021. The German Immunology Society (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Immunologie* – DGfI) uses English as the official language of their Joint Congress with the Austrian Immunology Society.

So is it really a case of "Go Global or Someone Else Will"? The choice to expand globally is typically not triggered by concerns about other associations entering a global arena that your organization hasn't explored. Instead, it often arises from the organization's organic growth over time—such as a consistent rise in international event registrations—or from member and stakeholder requests. These requests might involve tackling global issues through increased advocacy or fostering international cooperation.

The potential financial rewards of going global are clear. It can open up new markets and revenue streams, drive membership and event registration, expand your sponsor pool and for scientific societies give their Journals enhanced visibility.

## SHINY THINGS

But beware of shiny things! Enthusiastic boards must understand that it is a long-term strategy. They may expect fast results. Volunteer board members are keen to make a difference and leave a legacy during their term-limited leaderships and may want to push ahead too quickly without adequate consideration. There are many examples of failed global initiatives, and you don't want a rushed initiative that has not been properly thought through to deter future leaderships from following a global path. Bad experiences can get embedded in an association's organizational memory and be difficult to shift: "We already tried that and it did not work!"

So, where to start? Rigorous research and review are key. Is there really a gap in the market and will it create a return on investment to justify an investment of resources? Is there a longer-term vision? Where do you expect to be in 2 years, 5 years, 10 years? Will it all be an unwelcome distraction from challenges closer to home that the association is already grappling with? Maybe now is not the right time to embark on a global initiative. How comfortable is the association adapting its membership dues model, services, delivery, ways of communication and even content to facilitate global growth? Culture eats strategy for breakfast. Will you be contributing to the overall growth of your association's speciality and its global impact?

The association world is a crowded one with regional and international societies active in most disciplines; will going global antagonize partner societies active in the region(s) you are moving into and hinder future collaboration that may in the long term undermine your mission? It might be more productive to partner

with other regional/national associations on specific projects rather than striving to be global yourself.

Associations should aim for steady sustainable global growth and scale up over time. Find a trusted and experienced partner who can provide local/regional expertise and has global reach to guide your path – either a professional congress organizer (PCO), an association management company (AMC) who can support you on membership and other association-related activities, or a company that offers both PCO and association management services, depending on the strategy you want to follow. This will also offer the opportunity to scale up at some later point without initial heavy investment, such as recruiting in-house team members.

Choose a PCO and/or AMC who can serve as a strategic consultant and a source of advice to uncover potential challenges that might emerge—ranging from cultural and linguistic differences to regulatory and financial considerations. As many association team members are aware, enlisting an external specialist could effectively convince a hesitant Board that is resistant to altering its course.

Going global is not an end in itself and one size does not fit all. Before you start driving, make sure you have planned out your journey and have the right people on the bus.

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