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Editor's Notes

Europe's Digital Future Has Arrived. Are You Ready?

Author: Jesús Guerrero Chacón, HQ's Deputy Editor

Europe is laying the foundations of its digital future. A wave of new legislation is reshaping how technology is designed, deployed and regulated across the continent. From artificial intelligence to data governance, digital accessibility and platform accountability, the regulatory landscape is entering a decisive phase. Between 2024 and 2026, several EU-wide laws are taking effect, creating new compliance requirements for organisations operating in the region. The **Digital Services Act** has applied in full since February 2024. The first provisions of the **EU Artificial Intelligence Act** came into effect in February 2025. The **European Accessibility Act** came into force on 28 June 2025, mandating inclusive design for a wide range of products and services. Further changes will come through the **VAT in the Digital Age** package, adopted in March 2025, with real-time cross-border e-invoicing to be introduced by July 2030. Together, these developments mark a significant shift in how we must engage with digital transformation.

For associations and international organisations operating in the region, these shifts mean more than policy developments. In fact, these changes represent a new set of operational challenges. The cost of inaction could be high, with penalties for non-compliance under the AI Act alone reaching up to €35 million or 7% of global turnover. However, there is still time to adapt responsibly and lead with confidence.

In this issue, we explore these regulatory changes from multiple perspectives. Our interview with **Maryrose Lyons** from the **AI Institute** outlines the practical and ethical dimensions of AI adoption. Our conversation with **Cvent's Nick Tinker** highlights how AI tools can help organisations streamline workflows while remaining compliant.

We examine how digital regulation intersects with inclusion, ethics and innovation. From accessible design standards to AI governance and smart tax frameworks, this edition brings together voices from across the digital landscape — including tech experts, legal analysts and advocacy groups — to offer guidance on what these changes mean in practice.

Europe may not match the AI investment levels of the United States or China, but it is taking a lead in regulation. The region is shaping global standards for responsible innovation. National measures such as **Spain's Digital Services Tax**, sometimes referred to as the 'Google Tax,' reflect a broader push for fairer taxation and platform accountability.

The message is clear. It is no longer a question of whether organisations should engage with these changes, but how quickly they can prepare. Whether the focus is AI ethics, invoicing, accessibility or data transparency, the tools for adaptation are already available.

This edition of *HQ* aims to give you and your organisation the insight and context to navigate Europe's changing digital environment.



Conspiracy Theories and Stanch Realities

Author: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager



Every year, *HQ* returns to your mailbox with a paper issue entirely dedicated to technological progress and the cryptic new world of AI. Our message is simple and does not stray too far from consensual thinking: data-driven systems and generative AI tools are essential and useful resources for managing events and associations, but they cannot replace human supervision. This operative word, 'supervision', encompasses not only work, but also our perception of reality. Disinformation, for example, poses a significant risk to democracy, distorting public debate, undermining trust in institutions and hampering electoral processes. The ease with which fake news, hoaxes and manipulated content spread widely through digital platforms, makes this fight not only a complex challenge for our constitutional states, but also an urgent one for the constituent members of these democracies. One of those members is, as you may have guessed, associations. How exposed are medical, NGOs, scientific and civil associations to the manipulation of the truth and to malicious allegations from enemies hiding on the Internet?

The **International Fact Checking Network** brings together members worldwide at its **GlobalFact** conference in favour of information integrity and the global fight against disinformation, supporting fact-checkers through networking, training and collaboration for the truth. "Our GlobalFact12 in Rio de Janeiro raises the veil to the reality of Brazilian fact-checkers who have had their own experience of disinformation and political polarisation very similar to that in the United States. The benefits we get from these conferences are quite significant, since during GlobalFact11 in Saravejo, we also learnt a lot about the implications of Russian disinformation in Eastern Europe," says **Angie Holan, the network's Director**. Similarly, the **European Digital Media Observatory** supports the independent community working to combat disinformation at European level. **Paula Gori, Secretary General** of the organisation, draws attention to the risks of AI in this sensitive topic: "It is important to stress that AI is not only used to produce disinformation, but also to distribute and spread it. It is also crucial to remember that facts are facts, while opinions are interpretations of facts. The distinction is important, especially when a particular narrative is debunked."

For older age groups, the perils of a rapid digital transition raise concerns that extend beyond usability, including fraud and manipulation of those lacking digital literacy. **AGE Platform Europe**, the continent's largest network of non-profits of and for older people, has been advocating to the EU for a wider range of options that include digital and offline. "When essential services are 100% digitised, older people and others risk being left behind. This can be especially dangerous in areas such as healthcare and banking, where people can become dependent on others," says the **Policy Manager Julia Wadoux**. Irreversibly, digital technologies are now so deeply embedded in nearly every aspect of life that a group of social scientists came up with a new term to define, study and localise them in time: thus, was born netnography, presented at **NETNOCON** in Marseille. Expert **Robert Kozinets** believes that the netnographic impact is already being felt in the conference sector: "We see people using digital platforms and social networks not just to comment on conferences, but to extend and rework the experience. Netnography helps us observe how these practices unfold over time and how people narrate the meaning of the event, before, during and long after the closing remarks."

Association conferences are one of the few areas that interact with every other sector in the world. The changes and flows of social issues directly impact our sector, making it crucial to maintain adaptability and continuous learning. Therefore, technology, online communication and the integration of AI must be placed at the service of the delegate and not as an indiscreet window into a murky world of propaganda and disinformation. Especially when it has never been so difficult to separate a lie from the truth.


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"Any Response to **Disinformation** Needs to Respect **Freedom of Expression**"



Today, many associations working in the science, health or education sectors are especially vulnerable to widespread disinformation, public distrust and the specific vulnerabilities of digital media. Their projects and task forces support the verification of sectoral studies, quality information and liaison between multidisciplinary expert communities. However, as in civil society, associations are also subject to the impact of misleading content, fabricated data and unreliable sources.

The **European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)**, the EU's largest interdisciplinary network on this subject, brings together fact-checkers and academic researchers with experience in the field of online disinformation, social media platforms, journalism and media education professionals. **Paula Gori, EDMO Secretary General and Coordinator**, explains how transparency and media literacy can serve as benchmarks not only for journalism, but also for policy-makers and for new guidelines of science communication.

With AI tools shaping how people access news, how can we protect general and less tech-savvy users from biased content, clickbait, or reality-altering narratives?

It is important to highlight that AI is not only used to produce disinformation, but also to distribute and spread it. On the users' side, media literacy plays a key role. As with education in general, it needs to be inserted into a specific strategy. What the EU can do is work on support and guidelines with experts to combat disinformation and promote digital literacy through education and training. At Member State level, debates vary, although the general observation is that media literacy should be a curricular activity in schools in all countries. EDMO is doing a lot of work on media literacy.

Let me mention just two examples. The first is aimed directly at citizens. In particular, we ran the **#beelectionsmart** online campaign ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, and another one, both offline and online, called **#beonlinesmart**, in all Member States in their respective languages. The second example concerns media literacy initiatives themselves and, in this regard, we have published guidelines for effective media literacy initiatives. The underlying logic is that it is not just a question of organising these initiatives, but also of guaranteeing their quality, effectiveness, impact and sustainability.

How is EDMO tackling fast-spreading polarised narratives there, and how can organisations support fact-checking and media literacy in these spaces?

Because of its role and structure, EDMO can on one side detect and analyse disinformation narratives, trends, actors and techniques and on the other act with media literacy campaigns, as those mentioned above. In general, resilience initiatives shall take place both on the platforms themselves and offline like in schools, libraries, workplaces, clubs, etc. Both initiatives depend however on a number of factors which include funding, political and business willingness, an education strategy, identification of the target audience, and impact evaluation. When it comes to younger generations, but not only, any initiative shall be tailored according to the culture, languages, traditions, education, media diet, and the history of a given country. The difference between urban and rural areas



shall also be taken into consideration. Public-private partnerships in funding these initiatives are fundamental in the interest of citizens, the information integrity and the democratic process.

How can organisations spot early signs that their topics are being targeted by disinformation, especially during elections or high-stakes public debates?

Probably the first sign comes from popularity: the moment a given topic, action, or activity hits the news (or goes viral on social media), and/or stimulates particular interest in society – or a part of it – is also the moment when there is a risk of disinformation. Disinformation, if you will, jeopardises the attention that accurate information is receiving. Elections, for obvious reasons, represent a clear case, but they are by no means the only attractors. Think, for example, of climate change, health (Covid-19 clearly showed this), migration, gender, etc.

How can associations strengthen their credibility and resilience against attacks from pseudo-media sources or coordinated campaigns on behalf of hidden interests?

Overall, prevention plays an important role. Being as transparent as possible and building a strong reputation based on trust is already a good deterrent. It is also important to have an emergency team that can immediately detect and react to any attack. Such a team should work also on preparedness, which includes building the right networks and channels which could be activated in case something happens. It also includes detecting the risks before they create harm, testing the algorithms and mapping the information landscape.

Even so, if an attack happens, it is key to avoid as much as possible information voids, as they become the entrance door for disinformation. If, as happens in times of crisis, organisations do not immediately have precise responses or data, then it is key to be transparent on the uncertainty. This means clearly stating what is known, what was done, what is in place to get the missing knowledge and if relevant what can be done to get protected/act.

What can associations learn from EDMO's standards around source verification and transparency?

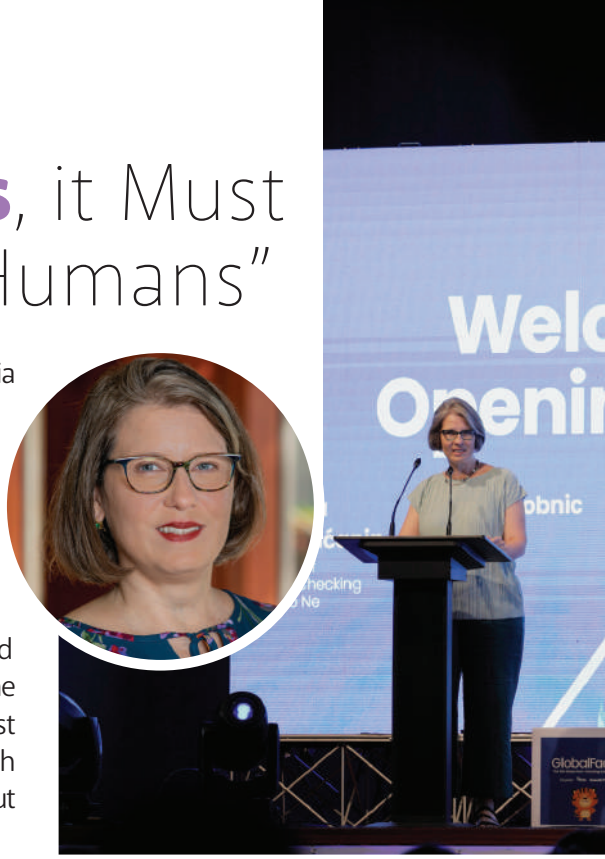
As a rule, transparency is an excellent choice. On the production side, depending on the situation, there may be transparency on the process, on the output, on the evidence, etc. On the structural side, transparency on funding, resources, organigramme (and when relevant, conflicts of interest) is key. Going back to the specific case of disinformation, any analysis of content needs to be transparent both when it comes to the methodology and to the sources, as citizens must be put in the position to trace back how a certain conclusion was reached and potentially share additional sources. Transparency on funding and structure of the organisation behind is also required.

How does EDMO manage different national definitions of truth or legal grey areas when responding to cross-border disinformation and polarised media landscapes?

Disinformation, according to EU policy, is false or misleading content which may cause public harm, that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain. In general, this means starting by detecting content, analysing if it is based on facts and if not looking at the intention(s), the techniques, and the actors behind. In jargon, we often refer to disinformation as awful but lawful content. On the other side, any response to disinformation needs to respect freedom of expression. We cannot have a Ministry of Truth, hence the multistakeholder and multifaceted approach in the EU.

It is also key to remind that facts are facts, while opinions are interpretation of facts. The distinction is important, especially when a given piece of content supportive of a given narrative is debunked. To respond to disinformation it is key to identify it and to understand it. EDMO's key role is building a community of media literacy experts, fact-checking organisations, researchers and policy experts to implement the stakeholder approach. Because we can count on the collaboration with 14 national and regional hubs covering all EU Member States, plus Norway, we have the added value of building possibilities for cross-border dialogue, sharing of best practices, collaboration, cost-efficiency strategies, and complementarity.

"If **AI** is Used by **Humans**, it Must Also be **Supervised** by Humans"



We have gone from a timeline in which the relevance of traditional media gave way to social media and online networks, replacing it in dominance and global dissemination. Nowadays, it is quite difficult to read something first in a physical newspaper than on a website! On the other hand, we are increasingly witnessing a systematic war on reliable and impartial information, with the discrediting of sources, where opinion has prevailed over facts and entertainment over real news.

The Poynter Institute's **International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)** was launched in 2015 to bring together the growing community of fact-checkers around the world. The network defends information integrity in the global fight against disinformation, reaching more than 170 fact-checking organisations through advocacy, training and global events. **Director Angie Holan** spoke to *HQ* about the concepts of infotainment, disinformation, truth and lies.

How do you see the role of the 'editor' or 'proofreader' in this online age? How can the ability to check facts and statements be transferred from paper to online?

It is critical that we transfer what we now consider traditional print competences to the online domain. They may be different in the way people interact with different media, but the same factual standards need to be maintained in both areas. Therefore, the skills that fact-checkers should possess are the same, with an emphasis on primary sources, documentation, expertise, etc. In a way, we need to make these old methods of information processing relevant and dynamic for the online space. For example, today we see fact-checkers who write lengthy reports turning them into short chat videos on TikTok.

We need to ensure that when we present validated, verified and accurate information, it follows the standards of evidence. A big part of my organisation's role is to maintain standards of evidence among fact-checkers. Often, you have to spend a little more time to find out whether your information is really verified or not. Whenever there is a question about the integrity of information, it is necessary to investigate the evidence so that it can be reproduced. This applies to both online and offline. The problem is that the volume and speed of information online is so fast that people often do not slow down to check. That is where fact-checkers come in. We need to slow down to showcase our work in various media, including online platforms.

How do you view these new forms of infotainment and 'community notes' that certain media organisations and technology platforms are pushing?

One of the problems we face with these technologies is that we have not yet developed new signifiers of high-quality information that users can view and understand quickly. In many contexts, people really need to do their homework and check for themselves whether what they consume is verified or not. This can be very time-consuming, cumbersome and inefficient. We have a serious problem with information integrity today, because there are no efficient ways of doing this. However, I believe that, as a society, we will develop systems to deal with this vast amount of information more efficiently and comfortably. It is a very uncomfortable experience these days to go online and know that everything you see may or may not be true. We also have to think about the question of what expertise is. For specialists, there has never been so much information available as there is now, which leads to more in-depth research. But for non-experts, the environment is very challenging.







What tools and resources can public institutions, associations and media apply in their activities to preserve their reputation and image?

As a foundation, I believe we need strong education systems. That is where young people learn to read, write, do maths, science, think critically and analyse arguments. A strong education system, preferably with a media literacy component. We also need news organisations that maintain high standards of evidence and fact-based reporting.

On the other hand, we would like to see more fact-checking on social media in the most automated way possible. Our experience has shown us that fully automated fact-checking is not yet feasible. I am not even sure it is advisable because, despite all the clamour around AI, I still think it fails in terms of accuracy in fundamental aspects. We see this in the hallucinations and fabricated sources that AI provides us with to generate reports and studies – which is nowhere near the level of human intelligence in evaluating high-quality evidence. Finally, fact-checkers are not against technology – many of them use AI in their own work. That is why I say that if AI is used by humans, it must also be supervised by humans. It cannot simply be left free online.

How can ordinary people cope with so many conspiracy theories and unverified news stories, especially when the sources are as many as they are now?

We live in an oversaturated online information ecosystem, and there is no peaceful way out of this. If society works together, we can improve the situation, but at the moment, levels of social trust are very low. I do not believe that technology platforms are doing their utmost to make online information better for the average user. They are just prioritising their corporate goals of maximising profit on a large scale. We have several years ahead of us, trying to keep the knowledge systems that humanity has developed over hundreds of years in good shape and bring them into the online space. Nevertheless, there are some bright spots such as university libraries that have done a fantastic job of making archives available online. Research communities have also shared studies and findings online across international borders. Also, Europe is taking a strong regulatory approach. We want to see what Europe will do with the implementation of the **Digital Services Act**.

Do you think the traditional media are falling behind on these issues by trying to outpace social media in their own lane?

It is a mixed picture. We can see that many global networks have maintained their standards and the quality of their news screening. However, we see plenty of other media outlets that have gone completely partisan and have abandoned the ethical standards they used to have. There are also these new phenomena that often look like journalism, but without any fact-based information values, such as online influencers. These new digital actors are extremely idiosyncratic. Some of them spread rumours and conspiracy theories; others actually broadcast high-quality information; and others seem to be very heterogeneous. There is nothing at first glance that allows the casual user to evaluate and make a decision so quickly. You have to delve into the content, analyse it carefully and do your own research.

How can an AI collaborative approach increase productivity and save time, without tarnishing the ethics and transparency of fact-checkers?

I think AI agents are very good at synthesising languages. If you need to produce a report based on content you are familiar with, generative AI tools are very good at putting it into different formats and compressing large amounts of data. Now, you cannot rely on AI for factual accuracy because it often produces misleading outcomes. We hear stories in the press all the time about professionals relying on AI to generate raw content, and it always backfires. Humans need to police AI to ensure the quality of data and information. You can take a long article and put it into an AI assistant, to break down and create all kinds of content and findings for social platforms. Some professionals are experimenting with it in different formats, turning stories into podcasts for example. Once again, when the author is sufficiently familiar with the content, these are tools that streamline and refine the quality of our various tasks.

There was a time when we thought that if we ignored bad information, it would disappear, but this is no longer the case.

"**Digitalisation** must be **human-centred**, based on trust, communication and shared goals"



For many older people, digital transitions raise concerns that go beyond usability - such as trust, privacy and loss of human connection - as well as dealing with scams, misinformation and online manipulation. **AGE Platform Europe**, Europe's largest network of non-profit organisations of and for older people, has long defended the right to choose between digital and non-digital options. Through a human rights lens, the organisation has been raising awareness among EU policymakers about how ageism still influences the way digital services are developed and/or delivered. We spoke to **Julia Wadoux, Policy Manager on Healthy Ageing & Accessibility** *(pictured above)*, and **Project Officer, Vera Hörmann** *(pictured below)*, on how to raise the voices of older people in the fight for equality at all ages.

As digital technologies transform everyday life, what are the most pressing digital rights challenges facing older European citizens today?

Julia Wadoux: I will quote our President at a recent event we co-organised on Ageism in AI: "Older people are not against digitalisation." This is important to highlight, as our work in this topic is not about resisting digital progress but about advocating for fairness, inclusion for those lacking digital skills, and the protection of consumer rights. We are calling on the EU to provide an offline option as a complementary tool to ensure that essential services such as banking, healthcare, and public administration remain accessible to people of all ages.

At present, digitalisation without an offline option poses many challenges and excludes people across various age groups, not only older persons. For example: extra charges for in-person services such as bank transfers, deposits, withdrawals, Internet availability and digital-only invoices. The lack of offline options affects those who do not wish to use a smartphone or tablet, or cannot for different reasons such as location, disability, income, or social circumstances. Tackling ageism and breaking down stereotypes are essential for a digital transition that is inclusive and barrier-free for all ages. Human rights must guide digitalisation, putting people before technology and involving older people as true partners in the design of digital products and policies.

After the digital acceleration resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, why is flexibility between digital and non-digital still essential? How do you respond to the view that paper-based services slow down innovation?

JW: Digitalisation excludes people of all ages, more than many people realise. Even if someone owns digital devices and feels comfortable using them, they may still avoid them due to privacy issues or not be able to use them due to a poor internet connection in certain areas. When essential services are 100% digitalised without an offline alternative, older people and others risk being left behind. This can be especially dangerous in areas such as healthcare and banking, where people can become dependent on other people.

Offering an offline option does not slow down innovation, quite the opposite. A truly innovative product must take everyone's needs into account from the outset. Even for commercial services, if you are a company that does not consider older people in the design process, that means losing potential customers. A truly inclusive product must involve older people as real partners. Digital transformation must be safe, inclusive, sustainable; and a human-centric approach that upholds democracy and human rights is key!

As many organisations face leadership transitions, your DIGITOL project highlights the power of intergenerational learning. What lessons can be learnt about bridging digital and social gaps through intergenerational collaboration and engagement?

Vera Hörmann: AGE Platform Europe was one of the EU partners in the DIGITOL project, and the lessons learned were valuable for the impact of digitalisation and disinformation. The initial training by young volunteers was followed by joint intergenerational co-design community actions to promote critical thinking and digital literacy, towards inclusive environments and shared knowledge. This not only improved digital and media literacy among the older people, but also generated empathy, mutual understanding and cooperation between the age groups.

A major takeaway for organisations is that intergenerational collaboration should be seen as a strength, especially during leadership transitions. By combining different experiences, digital knowledge and social perspectives, organisations can build more resilient and inclusive teams. Structured activities such as co-creation workshops and community engagement, like those used at DIGITOL, can help foster long-term intergenerational solidarity. Through mentoring, older workers can share their experiences – for example in prioritising tasks and coping mechanisms with high workloads – benefiting mental health, while younger employees can help older colleagues develop digital skills.

How can health, finance and public administration services address issues such as trust, privacy and human connection from a user perspective?

JW: It is certainly important for society as a whole to reflect on issues like trust, privacy and the loss of human contact. This other dimension of technology was also emphasised by our President, saying that "older people can be sensors of what is going on, reflecting and pointing out concerns."

We live in a fast-paced, digital-driven society where changes happen quickly, often without time to fully consider their impact. Digital tools can make things faster, but what is the cost to our privacy and our information? Bots may answer simple questions, but many of us, regardless of age, have experienced the frustration of being left with no real help. Older people, with their life experiences, may be more inclined to question and raise these issues, but this is important for everyone. Essential services should be designed collectively, offering clear information, responding to concerns and providing an offline option when needed.

Rural and remote areas often lack reliable digital infrastructure, adding another layer of exclusion for older populations. What local policies or initiatives are still needed to fill this void?

VH: The growing digitalisation of services could be an opportunity to age in place, but it often presents significant additional challenges for rural older adults. Initiatives like digital assistance at village points are vital, and broader policy efforts are required to improve digital literacy and ensure equitable access to technology and internet infrastructure. The **Mobile Age** project worked to make digital public services more accessible by co-creating mobile applications with older people. By involving older adults in the design process, the project ensured that the digital tools developed were user-friendly and addressed the specific needs of rural populations.

When studying integrated long-term care initiatives in the **Laurel** project, people living in rural areas often mentioned that technology might not be 'the' solution policymakers and companies want. Shared community spaces, mobility solutions and co-designing initiatives to ensure participation and up-take were given higher importance.

What insights have projects like DIGITOL or your pandemic-era fraud alerts revealed about the most effective ways to develop digital and media literacy?

VH: During the pandemic, many older people faced a wave of misinformation, scams and fraud attempts. DIGITOL tackled this by first discussing sensitive topics (migration, integration and social cohesion, gender issues, minority rights, sustainability, etc.) among older and younger people, with the aim of stimulating open dialogue and understanding, before dealing with online disinformation. This intergenerational exchange made a real difference and empowered older people to feel more confident online and for everyone to question the reliability of what they see and read.



"We need to stop **treating sustainability** as something **separate** from **revenue**"



At the **GDS Forum 2024** in Bruges, *HQ* witnessed a new partnership between **GDS Movement** and a data tech company to help CVBs, DMOs and suppliers gain insights into sustainable accommodation and offers in their regions. **BeCause** is a Danish start-up hailing from Copenhagen with the mission of making sustainable choices flow more easily through measurable data in the tourism and travel industries. This sectoral realisation led them to develop a set of solutions that no other technology provider currently offers, including a Certification Co-pilot, a database of certified suppliers, and RFP automation tools. The ultimate goal is to automate the administrative workload linked to sustainability so that companies can focus their efforts where it really matters: real, impactful improvement.

HQ asked the **COO, Jahanzeeb Ahmed**, how their services can be turned into concrete changes for their clients.

What kind of game-changing approach can BeCause offer destinations to trigger data-driven sustainability actions?

Data is king here. Our job is to support destinations with the necessary data that shows where the sustainability performance of their local providers currently stands. From there, BeCause offers the tools to seamlessly assist those providers in progressing along their sustainability journey. For example, today it still requires a significant amount of manual work for a destination to find out which of their hotels are sustainability-certified. We eliminate that friction – destinations can access that data with just one click. From there, they can nudge uncertified providers to begin the certification process through our **Certification Co-Pilot** and track their progress throughout the journey. This creates a centralised, actionable view that drives real progress.

How can a meeting planner balance sustainability goals with financial objectives within your platform?

We bring several critical capabilities to the table to help planners balance sustainability with financial responsibility. BeCause offers a unified platform for collecting and managing sustainability data, which greatly reduces administrative overhead and the associated costs. Secondly, our platform includes robust tools that automate ESG reporting, minimising the manual effort typically required and reducing the risk of human error. Finally, users will soon be able to benchmark their sustainability performance against industry standards and learn from a database of initiatives implemented by other organisations. This enables planners to identify cost-effective sustainability improvements based on real-world data.

If I am a hotel manager looking for the right certification, how can I use the platform to find the perfect match and streamline my sustainability journey?

This is exactly the kind of challenge our Certification Co-Pilot is designed to address. BeCause provides a guided process that helps hotels identify the most relevant sustainability certifications based on their existing operational practices. The platform maps a hotel's operational data to various certification frameworks to ensure alignment with the standards of interest. Once the journey begins, hotel managers can also track their certification progress in real-time, monitor milestones, and assess their current compliance status, all within the same platform.



You recently launched a new benchmarking and reporting tool to provide destinations with new sustainability insights in real time. How can this empower hotels and tourism businesses to mitigate their environmental burden?

Through our partnership with the **Good Travel Alliance**, we have launched a benchmarking tool that, once populated with enough data, will deliver targeted insights for destinations and providers. The tool leverages universal Key Performance Indicators to create consistent and comparable sustainability metrics across all participating destinations and businesses. Also, with access to real-time data, hotels and tourism businesses can make better-informed decisions about how to reduce their carbon emissions, improve waste management, and optimise energy consumption. Crucially, this tool helps them answer one of the most common and important questions: "How are we doing compared to others?"

> *"Today, many event planners struggle to find verified sustainability data for the providers they want to work with. The data is scattered, fragmented, and often not accessible.*

There is also a need for many companies to adjust their operations to EU regulations – such as the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) – while reducing administrative burdens and red tape. How can these pressures and incentives push SMEs to adopt an autonomous 360-degree strategy?

Sooner or later, every tourism business will be pushed, either by regulations or by their customers, to adopt sustainability into their strategy. What is important is that we highlight the upside potential early and clearly. In the end, these are still businesses, and we need to stop treating sustainability as something separate from revenue.

While compliance requirements such as the CSRD may be the initial motivator, it is crucial that businesses do not view this solely as a reporting burden. Instead, by emphasising the business upside – such as improved reputation, efficiency gains, and competitive advantage – sustainability becomes a long-term success driver that positively affects both the top and bottom line.

What are the key obstacles and most common challenges sustainability planners or travel agents face when integrating new technologies? How can they overcome them?

The primary challenge is access, there is still not enough data or sufficient options. We are still early in the adoption curve. Today, many event planners struggle to find verified sustainability data for the providers they want to work with. The data is scattered, fragmented, and often not accessible.

The key to overcoming this challenge is scaling data availability and aggregation so that planners can make informed, responsible choices with ease. As the industry evolves, professionals should focus on improving their digital literacy, data interpretation skills, and familiarity with sustainability frameworks and tools that support transparent reporting and decision-making.

As a start-up with a laudable mission and an already vast portfolio of clients, what are the most notable partnerships you have embraced?

We have the privilege of working with some of the most respected brands in the travel and hospitality industry. Two standout partnerships include **Radisson** and **Booking.com.** These companies have embraced our technology to elevate their sustainability journeys, and their collaboration with BeCause reflects the kind of impact we aim to have at scale – simplifying sustainability, increasing transparency, and empowering action. Both their cases can be explored on our website.

> *"What sets us apart is our sector-specific approach. We have identified for many years that if you really want to solve sustainability challenges, you need to delve into the specific issues facing each sector.*

Designing for the **Planet**

The **World Design Congress** is set to return to London in September for the first time in 56 years. The 34th edition, which will take place at the **Barbican Centre**, will bring together more than 1,000 delegates from the international design community, as well as thought leaders from business, research and education to debate key issues in sustainable design. *HQ* talked to **Matthew Burgess, Senior Events Manager** at the **Design Council**, co-organiser of the event.



The World Design Organization's Congress, which will be hosted by the UK Design Council, is a multi-day biennial event that will provide lectures, break-out sessions and opportunities for intelligent collisions to collectively tackle the climate crisis. Following previous editions in Tokyo, Mexico City and Seoul, London is preparing to host this prestigious event again on 9 and 10 September. Matthew Burgess explains why: "London is unique in many ways, not least because it has a plethora of unique and traditional brands, a transport system unrivalled in Europe, and access to world-class speakers, companies and businesses who live and work in London as a hub for creative design."

> *"As much as an event has to be productive and cover its costs, as a charity we are trying to offer a wide range of opportunities to attend. You will see small brands and companies doing some ground-breaking work on a much smaller scale.*

The congress will be held in partnership with the **London Design Festival** and will be supported by regional activations designed to put the UK at the centre of the global design community. To this end, the Barbican Centre will contribute greatly to these outcomes due to its leading status and cooperation with the Design Council for its **Barbican Renewal Programme**. "When you look at the Barbican, it really stands out as an iconic, brutalist masterpiece designed from top to bottom with these concepts in mind. Secondly, it is a world-class arts and cultural centre with an unconventional and inclusive vision. Thirdly, we were already working with Barbican on a design review programme, helping them with their modernisation to be more sustainable and inventive in the future. So, it seemed obvious to us to bring in the world's design leaders to showcase not only the design overhaul we were working on, but also London's huge interest with its businesses, educational spaces and government leadership," says Burgess. The project will deliver a sustainable revitalisation that brings underused spaces into new creative use.

The Design Council is the UK's national champion for design. Founded in 1944 by Winston Churchill's government to help drive their post-war economy, they are now supporting the 1.97 million people working in the UK design sector to tackle the biggest challenge of our time through their **Design for Planet** mission. "Our purpose this time is Design for the Planet. We will support small and large companies in projects aimed at protecting the planet, launching a value structure that helps these businesses implement a regeneration model. We have just launched our **Skills for Planet Blueprint** at this year's **London Design Biennale**, to further help professionals to design sustainably." Over the two days, the congress will explore five topics aimed to inspire, challenge and mobilise for action; these are 'Stories of Hope and Possibility', 'Designing for Circularity', 'Designing for Net Zero', 'Shaping Places for Regeneration', and 'Designing the Future Together.' "When it comes to sustainability or planet-positive topics, there is this tendency to get into a state of pessimism. What could or should we be doing? So, we are going to showcase studies of companies, designers and individuals who really are success stories in the sector, both in fundraising and politically. We have had access to many examples of this through our 240 UK experts who in various design sectors are already delivering fantastic results for the planet," adds Burgess.

On the other hand, strategic partnerships with social planners, consultants and architectural firms also took social impact and sustainability on board. "For example, the global management consultancy firm, **Kearney**, allowed us to really show real-world impact. Similarly, it was very positive to cooperate with **Zaha Hadid Architects**, who are doing fantastic work on sustainability globally. As for social governance, we are working specifically with an organisation called **Stitch** in event





production, which is a leader in ESG for events, along with other sustainable design consultants, to ensure that we achieve our intangible goals," adds Burgess. In addition, Barbican has demonstrated a conscious search for sustainable suppliers, something they intend to continue with this event. "The venue has allowed us to work with quality in-house suppliers such as **Searcys**, who will be creating a circular, fully vegetarian menu at every stage of the event."

The World Design Organization, based in Montreal, has committed itself to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals as a framework for action with the potential to simultaneously offer positive social and environmental impact, as well as financial return and brand value for the global design community. Within that scope, there are various MICE events such as the **World Design City** – which will come to Frankfurt in 2026 – and, of course, this congress. "The congress is more like a showcase – the city's output is very specific to its region – and a global meeting of change makers in the sector. A real catalyst for excellent design that also wants to leave a legacy for the event," continues Burgess. "The Design Council itself is on a mission to upskill a million designers in green skills by 2030. The congress is a step in that direction and we are obviously talking to existing designers, but also to students and new talent to learn more about this new project." The key to achieving this is transparency from the point of view of education, business, government, and carbon offsetting. "An example is what we are doing with the London Design Festival, (which takes place right after the congress) asking participants to stay longer in order to offset their travel footprint. Ultimately, the Design Council aims to produce a case study of their endeavours to support and inspire others on their journey to designing planet-positive events," Burgess concludes.

> *"The Design Council was set up by Winston Churchill's government to take the design sector and the UK public from a wartime economy to a consumer economy, and now we are carrying out our mission to create a circular economy.*







NETNOCON25: Creativity and Locality in Digital Life

Netnography is based on a branch of ethnography developed specifically to address the conditions of digital life. When it was first introduced in the mid-1990s, the internet was already becoming a vital social space, a kind of cultural force. Since then, the transformation has been nothing short of dramatic. In Marseille, netnographers from all over the world gathered at the end of May at **NETNOCON 2025** to experiment and delve into the digital creative expressions that allow them to mix science with art. Their **Conference Chair, Robert Kozinets**, spoke to our **Manuel Fernandes** about this truly disruptive event.



Digital technologies have become deeply intertwined with almost every aspect of human social life: how we learn, buy, love, protest, entertain ourselves and define who we are. Netnography offers social scientists, marketing researchers and others, a way to study this critical entanglement in a serious, ethical and immersive way. NETNOCON kicked off in 2023 at the **University of Salford** with a clear sense of need and opportunity. There were already many academics who wanted to learn netnography and were interested in its potential. However, there were far fewer people who were actively practising it and able to teach it and work together as a methodological community. The teams were dispersed, operating in different disciplines and institutions, often without the networks and forums that help traditional research to thrive. NETNOCON was born to unite this group.

"Our mission from the start has been to promote netnographic research worldwide. This means not only bringing together existing practitioners, but also cultivating a new generation of academics who can take the method further. We are deeply committed to supporting student researchers," says Robert Kozinets, Conference Chair of **NETNOCON – the Global Netnography Conference**. The inaugural conference offered almost 40 full scholarships covering registration, meals and accommodation. The organisation sought sponsorships that could remove financial barriers and allow many young academics to take part in their first academic event. For many of them, this was also their first conference presentation. "This kind of early career encouragement was very important, because many of them came back year after year and several of them are now professors who started their careers teaching and practising netnography."

What distinguishes netnography is its sensitivity to the socio-technical contexts that shape digital participation. It is a method for understanding how people live through and with the media today. "In a world increasingly driven by technologies such as AI, humanity reveals itself before platforms that mediate our relationships, identities, dreams, resistances and our power. In this sense, netnography helps us explain not just the digital world, but the whole world," explains Kozinets. It is also a method that transcends disciplinary boundaries. Interdisciplinarity is not just a buzzword here, but is embedded in the event's DNA. That is why participants came not just from marketing, communication or media studies, but from areas as diverse as tourism and hospitality, medical research, human geography, philosophy and political sciences. "In one session, you can have five different fields represented, but you would not know it; the transitions between them are practically seamless," adds Kozinets. "We also wanted the conference to reflect the global scope of netnographic interest. In 2023, we welcomed academics from six continents and from this we built an organisation with members in 66 countries."

> *"Netnography focuses not just on online content, but on contexts, meanings, discourses and behaviours – how people create and inhabit culture through digital interaction.*

NETNOCON also sought to create a specific type of environment – an event that is collegial, creative and supportive, but where new ideas are also welcome. "We are trying to model a more empathetic approach to academic work and to humanise and sensitise the study of technology and society. This is one of the reasons we have kept the event intentionally small (around 100 people), which allows us to





> *Netnography is a way of understanding the cultural context using humanity itself as a focal point, and not simply a technique for collecting data or measuring trends.*

form strong bonds and maintain a shared sense of purpose." For Kozinets, growth is not the entire goal, but quality is, "Looking ahead to NETNOCON 2026 in Izmir, Turkey, and NETNOCON 2027 in Sydney, our goals are consistent. We want to deepen our existing relationships with academics from Western Europe, bring in more students and early career academics from Asia, the Middle East and Oceania, so that we can build a space where netnographers from around the world feel seen, supported and inspired."

'La Phocéenne' and its Cultural Heritage

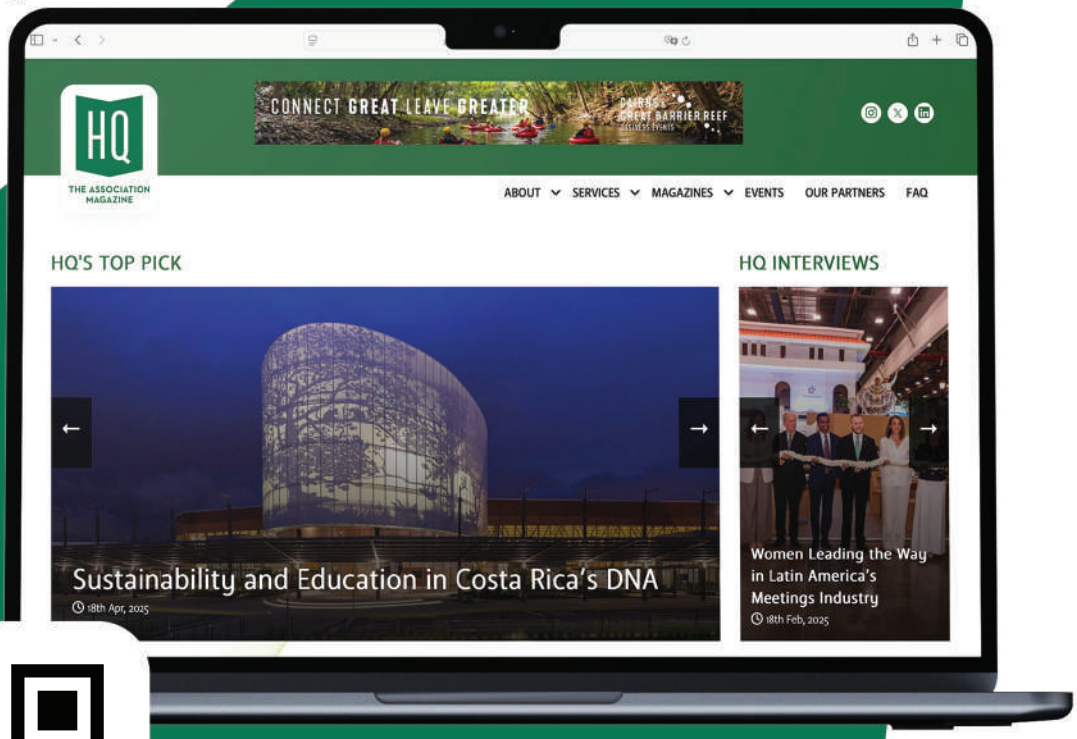
Marseille was more than just a venue, but a kind of co-author of the event. As one of Europe's oldest and most culturally rich port cities, its history of openness, hybridity and revolution resonates deeply with the spirit of NETNOCON. The co-chairs, led by **Aleksej Heinze** and **Anne Gombault**, have designed the conference to absorb Marseille's multifaceted identity, both conceptually and practice. "We began with several pre-conference field immersions in Marseille's multicultural markets, creative urban spaces and the radical history of architecture and design. We are both places concerned with culture, movement, marginal voices and shifting perspectives." These tours offered participants a taste of embodied field engagement, encouraging them to reflect on immersive observation and creative interpretation – essential elements of netnographic work. "Our participatory Tarot de Marseille exercise put participants into teams to design their own original tarot cards inspired by netnography. The exercise was an invitation to point out how symbolic thinking, visual representation and methodological reflexivity can intersect," recalls Kozinets. This grassroots approach continued during the conference meals, intentionally offering vegetarian, sustainable and locally sourced food. "Each meal featured a historical and ethnic element of the city's culture, with a focus on cuisine that included Greek, Armenian, Moroccan and Provençal dishes. Eating became another way of stimulating reflection on consumption, sustainability and local and global ethical involvements."

The conference's emphasis on creativity and locality was repeated throughout the programme, with panels on speculative futures, artistic and performative methods, visual culture and alternative forms of representation. This was also woven into the very fabric of the conference, which included long conversation-based sessions, practical workshops and community-building activities shaped by shared learning. "The creative and revolutionary spirit of the city drove the development of our methodology, the lifelines, the thoughts of our sessions and our shared experiences. This development of intentional localisation will continue in Izmir in 2026, exploring the theme of '**Cultural Crossroads**' in a

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LATVIA SPECIAL DESTINATION REPORT

Why are **Latvia** and its capital, **Riga**, becoming a trendy destination for distinctive and purpose-driven events, compared to many of its neighbours? From cutting-edge technology to sustainability features, from state-of-the-art infrastructure to an endless array of incentives, this Baltic country offers an alternative meeting experience in the "New Nordic" region.

On the following pages, you will find an in-depth and detailed handbook on how to set up your event in this fast-developing country.

Enjoy the read!

A destination report by Manuel Fernandes



All photos courtesy of ©MeetRiga



A Fairy Tale in Riga

How Meetings and Events are Transforming the City

Under the sway of former empires, Riga was one of the largest and most advanced industrial and port cities in old Europe. Today, though, the city is known for its cultural and architectural heritage, and also wants to shine in the meetings and events industry.

Wrapped in the nostalgic and meditative atmosphere of this region, I arrived at Riga's RIX airport, the largest airport in the Baltic States, hoping to get a glimpse of an unknown side that would fill these pages. The capital Riga is served by the domestic airline **airBaltic**, which brought me from Brussels on an unblemished journey; from there, it only took a 20-minute drive to check the first signs of the landscape and silhouette of a sprawling city. This has reveals a truly international side with more than 100 direct flight connections, operated among others by Lufthansa, Finnair, LOT, which guarantees great connections for participants from all over the world. Latvia, especially its capital Riga and the other seaside towns, is situated in a privileged geographical location where time moves slowly, making it a strategic and pleasant location for international business travellers in this region of the 'New Nordics'. Quick access to the city centre together with an efficient and smooth local transport network makes Riga, a relatively small capital by European standards, a paragon of urban mobility and car-free environment. Already settled in the towering **Radisson Blu Latvija Conference & Spa Hotel**, I spent my free time wandering around the city, swallowed up by its signature landmarks. The architecture is a reflection of the historical memory of the country: from Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque to post-war Modernism and the meandering Art Nouveau streets like **Alberta**, the physical canvas that engulfs me recalls the eclecticism and diversity of each era that has stamped Riga over the centuries. In fact, many of these historic landmarks, such as the former cargo station, **Hanzas Perons**, or the monumental *ex libris*, **House of Blackheads**, have now been appropriately recreated as meeting and event venues for international associations of all kinds. A cultural heritage properly converted for our industry.

A City that Encourages "Slow Travel"

Another of my quick observations in Riga was the gentle pace and balance between the city and the person to exist, to think, to move... to meet. The increasingly widespread phenomenon of overtourism across Europe is not echoed here, and this demonstrates not only the opportunities for quieter, more laid-back conferences, but also the challenges of redesigning Riga's visitation



itself. According to the **Latvian Investment and Development Agency** (**LIAA**), business events are an excellent driver for the development of other industries, as well as strengthening Latvia's image, developing relevant business contacts, and attracting foreign investors. The message is endorsed by **MEET RĪGA**: the MICE segment has become a pillar for Latvia's economy, offering significant opportunities to attract international business travellers and events. The sector is a key driver not only for the tourism industry, but also for related sectors such as hospitality, transport and retail. "We are a four-season destination. In terms of leisure, tourists tend to flock here more in the summer. However, we also see more and more travellers coming for so-called city breaks during other times of the year. If we are talking about meetings and events, these usually take place in spring or autumn, when Riga is not so crowded. Why? First of all, you get reasonable prices for rooms and a place to breathe, without missing out on the great customer service and hospitality that the city has to offer," says **Aigars Smiltāns, Meetings & Events Ambassador of Riga City CVB at Riga Investment and Tourism Agency.**

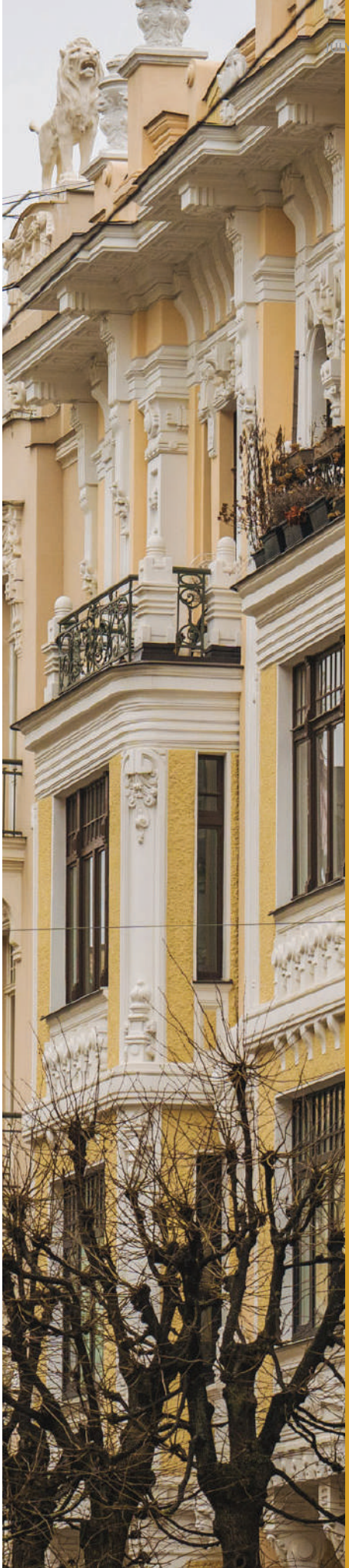
Less for More

In this respect, Latvia continues to offer very competitive prices, allowing organisers to optimise services, event budgets, and delegate costs, compared to other traditional MICE destinations. This cost advantage is another great asset of the country, coupled with its creative industries and supply chain that has gained global recognition for the viable alternatives for both global organisations and smaller national association ; as my visit to the multi-purpose **ATTA Centre**, which was hosting the **Latvian National Farmers' Exhibition** at the time, proved. "We are having conversations about accessibility, connectivity and compatibility of institutions with various health associations for their conferences. As we already know, all prices are going up. While all other expenses have increased, catering prices have remained comfortable among our suppliers. Here in Latvia it is still quite affordable to sign contracts, so we are able to take advantage of some medical events outside the classic destinations. I believe that, especially when it comes to events in the healthcare sector, many associations can do more with the same money they spend in other destinations," adds Smiltāns.

Just a 15-minute drive from Riga International Airport is another Latvian hotspot. The largest seaside resort in the Baltic States, **Jūrmala** combines vast kilometres of white sand and large wooden cottages with modern event facilities, and four- and five-star hotels. In this small coastal town on the Gulf of Riga you can hold all kinds of events in a fairytale setting, from art exhibitions and concerts to corporate meetings, seminars or even team-building activities. Make the most of the natural and architectural richness of this independent city with its many healing properties while exploring venues such as the **Dzintari Concert Hall**, **Jūrmala Culture Centre**, **Baltic Beach Hotel**, **Hotel Jūrmala SPA** or **Lielupe by Semerah Hotel** – the largest conference hotel in Jūrmala.

On the following pages, you will find an in-depth checklist of tips, recommendations and guidelines for navigating your event in Latvia, whether it is making it more sustainable, finding the right partner or choosing the venue that best suits your needs.







National Library of Latvia

How to Find your Dream Venue in the "Baltic Pearl"?

The character of the classic buildings and contemporary spaces in Riga and Jūrmala reflect the present and future of meetings in Latvia. The rapid development of the local infrastructure has been complemented by the renovation of its monumental venues, cultural centres, warehouses and vintage hotels, which now boast bespoke event facilities, state-of-the-art technology and integrated services. This interesting mix of centuries-old heritage and contemporary masterpieces offers an attractive environment for associations and event planners, from small-scale meetings to large international congresses. Riga now offers **13,500 hotel beds** in a variety of three-to four-star establishments within walking distance of each other, while the capital's 350 event venues range from grand historic ballrooms to renovated industrial spaces

Here's a round-up of the best venues and hotels we visited in the region:

ATTA Centre

Imagined as a shopping and service complex just a short distance from the old town, the newly renovated ATTA Centre has become the largest convention centre in the Baltics, offering contemporary facilities for up to 3,000 participants. With a total area of 11,500 m², the centre has 22 conference rooms of different shapes and sizes, where exhibitions, congresses and summits can be held. ATTA also makes it possible to change the layout of the entire first floor using its high-tech multimodal system, as well as guaranteeing accessibility for people with reduced mobility. The **NATO Foreign Ministers' Meeting**, the **Three Seas Initiative Summit and Business Forum** and the **Latvian Dental EXPO** all took place here.

The House of Black Heads

'If I were to ever collapse, raise me up once again!' – built in 1334, the 'New House' (as it was then known) was already imbued with the spirit of meetings and festivities as the city's Great Guild. From 1522, it was modified several times until the arrival of a group of German merchants, known as the Brotherhood of the Black Heads, who became the guardians of the house. Thus, was born the House of the Black Heads, which was burnt to the ground during the Second World War. In the 1990s, a decision was made to restore this unique symbol of the city using archaeological evidence. Today, the House of Black Heads represents Latvian resilience against all odds, and is a must for planners and associations with its seven magnificent halls for banquets, board meetings and luxury receptions.

Hanzas Perons

Formerly a railway freight depot in the heart of Riga, Hanzas Perons was remodelled as a concert hall, an arts platform...but also as an event venue. Dating back to the early 20th century, the building has survived to the present day as an adaptable and functional space for presentations, workshops, and conference sessions. Within its complex structure made up of brick walls, wooden beams and steel and glass finishes, there is now a 1,200 m² hall that can be divided into 2 or 3 parts to accommodate up to 2,100 people. Various services can be incorporated on request, such as a kitchen, bar, private rooms and technical staff.

Riga Latvian Society House

Rooted in the 19th century, the Riga Latvian Society House is the cultural and intellectual soul of the country, serving as a historic haven of national identity. A five-storey building (six storeys in the courtyard wing)

designed in a symmetrical neoclassical style, the House was also the seat of the Latvian National Opera. It is currently used for various events such as conferences, seminars and presentations, and can accommodate more than 3,000 people in its nine charming rooms. On the top floor, there is a theatre hall with 450 seats in the audience and 210 in the balcony, while the second floor houses a hall for meetings and symposia.

National Library of Latvia

The National Library is an ode to contemporary Latvian architecture by the prestigious Gunnar Birkets. On the left bank of the Daugava, this building stands like a 'castle of light' representing one of the most significant bastions of Latvia's restored independence. Opened in 2014, the library offers an eclectic and extensive programme with the help of a digital guide to seven exhibitions, a breathtaking view from the top floor, and the '*Dainu skapis*,' a set of local folk songs included in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. Among its premises are nine spaces that unfold into 15 well-equipped meeting rooms for conferences, seminars or receptions.

Radisson Blu Latvija Conference & Spa Hotel

The largest conference hotel in the Baltic States, the Radisson Blu Latvija Conference & Spa Hotel has 571 rooms in various formats, the ESPA Riga spa centre, the Esplanade restaurant and a conference centre with 16 large rooms equipped with audiovisual resources in a space of over 3,661 m² – the crown jewel being the Omega hall suitable for conferences of up to 1,000 people. Of particular note is the event space located on the 27th floor and the Skyline Bar on the 26th, both offering 360° panoramic views of the cityscape. Designed as the first choice in Riga as a convention hotel, this Radisson Blu is also committed to providing a clean and safe environment through health and safety protocols. It offers regulations for health events through its certified venues and partnerships, ensuring compliance with health sector standards.

Hotel Jūrmala SPA

The resort town of Jūrmala also has a well-planned infrastructure, which has led to the creation of a vast network of restaurants, event venues and hotels. One of these is the four-star Hotel Jūrmala SPA, which has a conference centre with eight halls of various configurations, capable of hosting more exclusive seminars to a conference with 300 guests with in-house technical support. This hotel also has 190 comfortable rooms with access to a sauna and pool centre, a gym and over 200 spa treatments.

Baltic Beach Hotel & SPA

Right next to Jūrmala beach, the Baltic Beach Hotel & SPA is another great option for blending leisure with business events. Nestled between a strip of sand dunes and a pine tree park, the hotel offers a 1100 m² conference complex with 12 adjustable area rooms and large atriums for networking. The combined Jura+Jūrmala halls can accommodate 320 people, while the Pērle hall with panoramic windows overlooking the Gulf has a capacity for 220 people. The hotel also boasts 165 guest rooms, one of the largest spa centres in Northern Europe and a collection of six restaurants and bars.

Other venues to keep an eye on:

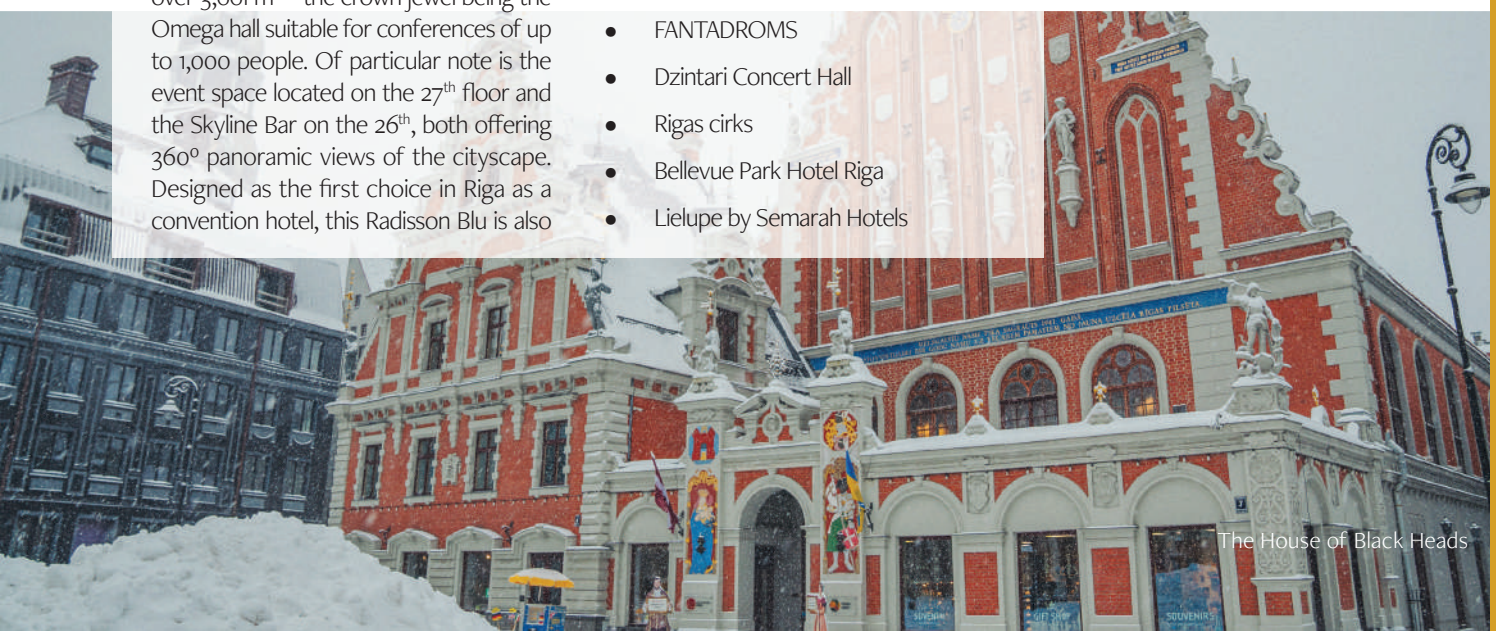
- FANTADROMS
- Dzintari Concert Hall
- Rigas cirks
- Bellevue Park Hotel Riga
- Lielupe by Semarah Hotels



Hanzas Perons



ATTA Centre


The House of Black Heads

An Ambitious Journey Towards the Three Pillars of Latvian Sustainability



The Mežaparks Great Bandstand in Riga

In a country that has the fifth highest percentage of land covered by forests in the European Union, with around 56% of the territory's total area, sustainability runs neck and neck with Latvia's legacy and values. With more than 12,500 rivers, 2,256 lakes, and swamps and bogs occupying almost 10% of the territory, Latvia is a haven for biodiversity with many rare species of plants and animals.It also boasts hundreds of kilometres of coastline, surrounded by pine forests, sand dunes and pristine white sand beaches. With 706 state-level protected natural areas, including four national parks, a biosphere reserve, 42 nature parks and seven marine protected areas, the country is steeped in a long tradition of conservation enshrined in the **Latvian Red Book**, which contains the list of endangered species.

Likewise, the country's agricultural areas account for nearly 29% of the total land area, where approximately 200 farms use organic methods for regenerative purposes. This long standing principle of subsistence farming has created the roots for a responsible and sustainable approach in all sectors, namely tourism and the conference sectors. A large number of suppliers outsource their products to local farmers and producers using regenerative resources to mitigate their carbon footprint and achieve zero waste. This is especially relevant at a time when planners and associations are incorporating authentic experiences, delegate-orientated natural settings, eco-friendly venues and, broadly speaking, sustainable solutions into their RFPs – to balance their financial flows with Environmental, Social & Governance (ESG) policies. If we talk about Latvian hotels, they are increasingly refocusing their green practices to tackle waste reduction, to purchase local products, and use green energy and water conservation, towards more ecological certifications, such as the **Green Certificate** and **EarthCheck**, and **Eco-labelling**. Currently, 76 accommodations in Latvia have been awarded the Green Certificate eco-label, according to Baltic Country Holidays. Several establishments have been actively involving guests in sustainability initiatives through information boards and separate waste collection programmes. Some of the best success stories can be found at the **Riga Islande Hotel**, with its efforts to use green energy and waste management, the **Grand Hotel Kempinski Riga**, a forerunner in energy-efficient technologies, or the **AC Hotel Riga by Marriott**, which will renovate its building to save and maximise energy.

Latvia and Riga on The Same Page

Internationally, Latvia is one of the leading countries in terms of meeting the **UN Sustainable Development Goals**

(**UN SDGs**), ranking 13th in the latest report monitoring the progress of the countries included in the so-called 2030 Agenda. Experts from the **Sustainable Development Solutions Network** estimate that Latvia is close to achieving 63.4% of the targets, demonstrating notable progress in UN SDGs 11 on **Sustainable Cities and Communities** – the main achievements in this area include progress in affordable housing, improving the energy efficiency of buildings and making public transport more accessible, especially for vulnerable groups. In this regard, the country is implementing the UN SDG in the crossroads of the goals defined by the **National Development Plan 2021-2027** and its sectoral policy guidelines, with a focus on science and innovation, reducing inequalities, modernising governance, assisting the least developed countries, and supporting peace in Ukraine and the world. This development policy aims to instil a balanced strategy for economic growth, environmental protection and social well-being (the trifecta approach), while encouraging best practices and benchmarks to support tourism stakeholders and players towards a more sustainable future.

The events sector has this unique feature of being closely involved with the progress of various other industries, leading to a constant updating of measures and procedures. Major global trends and social needs have an impact on dialogue with clients, pushing events to pay greater attention to ESG. In Riga, sustainable meetings and conferences cover a broad spectrum of topics, from university and social policy directives to specific projects such as the '**Sustainability Reporting Tool (SusTool)**' and the '**Donut Economy Approach**'. We can add to this the various co-operations such as the **Strategic Alliance of the National Convention Bureaux of Europe** and **Gevme's Sustainable HUB for Events**, where information has been shared on sustainability and case studies of various destinations. Cumulatively, the city is supported by various initiatives, including the development of a **Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan 2030 (SECAP)** and participation in the EU mission for 100 climate-neutral smart cities by 2030. The SusTool project has developed a free digital platform that helps companies understand ESG criteria to improve their sustainability reporting, while SECAP proposes the concept of a Donut City Portrait to help identify priorities and select activities aligned with the principles of sustainability and climate action, such as mobility, transport and citizen engagement. For 2025, a number of sustainability-focussed events have been planned in Riga, including the **International Conference on Waste Management**, the **International Conference on Waste Management, Recycling and the Environment**, or the **SPOTLOG Exchange of Experience** with a focus on sustainable logistics. Other events include the **annual conference of the European University Association**, the **XVIII International Scientific Conference of Environmental and Climate Technologies CONECT 2025**, along with meetings on sustainable logistics and events focussed on youth energy and green practices.

Riga Airport Sustainability Strategy

Another of Riga's cornerstones, **Riga Airport**, has developed a corporate **Sustainability Strategy by 2030**, which includes reducing the airline's environmental impact, promoting a more inclusive and safer working environment, investing in fair business practices, and co-operating with the local community. Some of these measures include the development of a solar park, the replacement of light fittings with LED bulbs in all areas of the airport, and the gradual replacement of the airport's vehicle fleet with CO^2-neutral alternatives. The airport has also pledged to set up a social entrepreneurship fund aligned with the needs of the community, to promote the development of start-ups and educational projects, in addition to expanding the Rail Baltica connection – strengthening cycling infrastructure and cooperating with transport service providers in the use of low or zero emission vehicles.

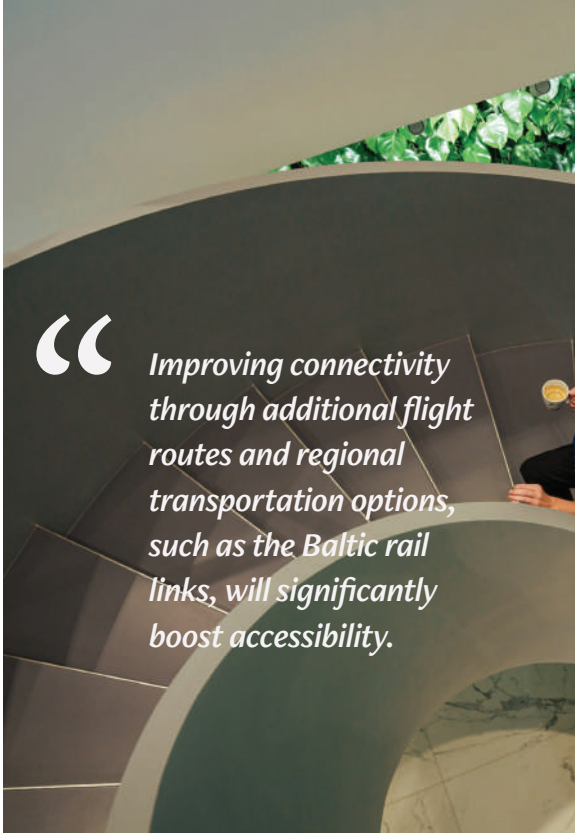


Latvia as a Business Hub for 'New Nordic Meetings'

Riga has focused on meaningful growth opportunities in its conference and exhibition sector, optimising a clear, consistent and modernised destination brand in order to increase its visibility in international markets. Increased investment in infrastructure, digital transformation and emerging markets could further boost the growth of the association events sector, while the integration of artificial intelligence and cutting-edge technology will make the participants' experience even easier.

From an economic point of view, Riga offers excellent value for money compared to many Western European destinations, making it an attractive option for budget tourists and business travellers alike. However, this trajectory is also influenced by the recent economic upswing that has taken place in its economy with knock-on effects across various sectors and industries. In the years following the 2008-2009 financial crisis, Latvia experienced a kind of 'economic miracle' characterised by rapid GDP growth and a strong recovery in living standards. During this period, the country went from a struggling economy to one of the fastest growing in Europe, with a significant reduction in public debt and high rates of GDP. Among the factors that contributed to this economic performance were significant fiscal reforms, including spending cuts and tax increases, strong export growth, an increased demand for its goods and services, the EU membership in 2004 – providing access to larger markets and financial support, and, last but not least, foreign investment due to the relatively low cost of labour and its skilled workforce. By way of example, Latvia is home to more than 500 companies with Danish capital, many of which are concentrated in the Kurzeme region. Following Latvia's accession to the EU, the stock of foreign direct investment increased rapidly, and by 2024 had reached 26.3 billion euros, attracting investors from Estonia, Lithuania, Germany, the Netherlands, Cyprus, Denmark, Luxembourg and Malta.

Due to its growing focus on innovation and development, Latvia today boasts an integrated and connectable network of fast and reliable internet, an essential factor for digital events and live broadcasts. The current trend towards remote working and digital nomadism also represents a competitive advantage for Riga to attract visitors from various latitudes looking for a high-quality and well-established working environment. On the other hand, the country has established itself as a regional hub for deep tech companies and start-ups, characterised by a strong focus on smart specialisation, an 'industry-research-state' collaborative model, and a growing digital technology start-up scene. With a robust ecosystem focused on innovation and R&D, the country is also betting on solid educational foundations



> *"Improving connectivity through additional flight routes and regional transportation options, such as the Baltic rail links, will significantly boost accessibility.*

to convince strategic players in global markets, with engineering and technology programmes at institutions such as **Riga Technical University** or the **University of Latvia**. In this sense, Latvia is actively working to increase its performance in research and innovation through initiatives such as the **Latvian Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3)** – a national framework to drive economic transformation through investments in research and development in specific areas of the Latvian economy *(see below)*.

In 2024, Latvian tech companies raised approximately 34.9 million euros in sectors such as fintech, AI and health technology. As a result of strong collaborations with universities and industry leaders, the Latvian



> *"Latvia offers startup visas to foreign talents and founders in order to facilitate entry and the establishment of their unicorns.*



ecosystem is now valued at 2.3 billion euros, and, according to the *Latvian Startup Report 2024*, it is home to more than 500 startups – 13% of which operate in the deep tech sector. These include **Sonarworks**, a sound calibration scale-up, **Mintos**, an online platform for retail investors, and **Lokalise**, a localisation and translation management platform. Recognised as one of the most startup-friendly destinations, Latvia came second among OECD countries last year thanks to various strategic initiatives such as start-up funding, tax benefits, innovation vouchers and the **Start-up Visa programme**, facilitating the entry of international talent. To reduce bureaucracy, the country features a fully digitised business environment, allowing entrepreneurs to open a company online in just ten minutes, with electronic signatures and digital tax returns to streamline operations. In line with such disruptive policies, the Riga Investment and Tourism Agency launched the '**Co-financing Programme for Business Events**', which aims to increase the attractiveness of the destination for international conferences, congresses, trainings and fairs by providing financial support to event organisers on the condition that at least 20% of the participants come from abroad.

Business events in Latvia serve as a strong catalyst for key sectors that can trigger foreign investment where Latvia has great expertise, promoting networking, knowledge exchange and cementing crucial opportunities for the country. With forests occupying approximately half of its territory, the **knowledge-intensive bioeconomy** is one of the key industries for the country's economy, encompassing sustainable agriculture, forestry and fishing. Moreover, ranking 5th in terms of turnover among manufacturing industries, Latvia leads the field of **biomedicine** in the Baltics and is at the forefront of research into precision medicine, specialising in the use of big data – the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries also have a long history of success leaving a rich legacy. Likewise, Latvia has an extensive coastline of 500 kilometres, which represents a huge potential for **offshore wind energy** – estimated at 16 GW – which has propelled the smart energy sector to new heights. Added to this is the harnessing of **hydrogen technologies** for energy storage units, with the prospect of further utilisation in various processes. While Latvian IT exports account for approximately 1.2 billion euros in exports, the city of Riga has an ambitious project ahead to become the first '**Metacity**' in the Baltics. This ambitious hub will encompass educational and professional opportunities for the Information & Technology and Communication sectors. Finally, Latvia is among the global pioneers in the production of **fibre optics** and also operates in the manufacture and in-house assembly of various electronic equipment, such as 5G routers, and in research into the microchip supply chain – **photonics and smart**



materials, technologies and engineering are thus key drivers in the economic transformation of fast-paced solutions and value-added products/services.

For all these reasons, Latvia has tapped into a new potential for events of various scales, emphasising the individual approach, the comprehensive nature of communication, the quality of services, the synergy of different sectors and its high creative potential – all crucial aspects for sustaining global competitiveness with regard to other European countries. The economic and historical aspects unlock professional activities and allow the discovery of innovative ways to surprise and inspire associations and planners. You are welcome to invest here!





Bleisure at your Convenience: How to Enjoy Latvia for **Team Incentives**?

Latvia's many options as a MICE destination do not end on the last day of your conference. Its wealth of restaurants, museums, spa and relaxation hotels and street markets make the country an underestimated treasure waiting to be explored in the competitive roadmap of incentives and *bleisure* activities. Beyond its multifunctional ballrooms and auditoriums, **Riga** invites you to extend your stay with a variety of urban and cultural choices that will be the envy of other large-scale cities; **Jūrmala**, with its glittering ensemble of wellness and healthcare centres, festivals, and sports tournaments, offers a complementary face of seasonal recreation free from the capital's hustle and bustle; around the bucolic and unspoilt surroundings of **Sigulda**, visit the many medieval castles, savour the delicacies of the small taverns and explore the trails of the Gauja National Park in the Latvian Deep Nature.

Whether it is a floating sauna in the centre of Riga, a treasure hunt in the Old Town, a bobsleigh ride in Sigulda, a boat trip on the Gauja River, climbing classes in Jūrmala, or an interactive cooking workshop, Latvia boasts products and services for every taste, desire and need. Riga has several arguments to convince you for a few more days (you never know when the next time will be.) High-speed Internet connection to check your emails and business contacts – with plenty of co-working areas, a compact size surrounded by design wonders, a vibrant music scene whose centrepiece is the Latvian National Opera, an underrated culinary scene that combines local flavours with top international restaurants, and a nice number of good value for money hotels. Finally, as an EU and NATO country, Latvia also guarantees a high level of security.

Here are some ideas for making the most of your incentive programme in Latvia in four days:

Welcome to The Capital!

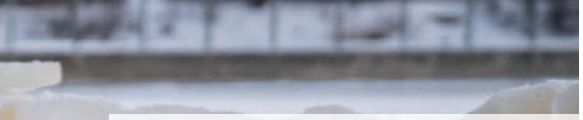
By booking your extra nights in one of the city's many hotels (**Grand Poet Hotel**, **Hotel Neiburgs**, **Hotel Metropole**, etc.), venture through the cobbled winding streets of the old town and step back in time for a liqueur at the medieval **Black Magic Bar**. If the trip was too long, we recommend a cocktail at **Gimlet**, **Bar Six** or **SNOB**, and when you get the munchies, feel free to explore the best bakeries in town – **Mīkla Bakery**, **Mulberry**, **Kūkotava** or **Bezē** – to taste culinary delights such as dark rye bread. You can also visit the largest food market in Northern Europe, **Riga's Central Market**, and excellent breweries such as **Labietis**, **lofts** or **Valmiermuiža alus**. At night, enjoy the



laid-back atmosphere of restaurants such as the classic **Rozengrāls**, the upscale **Kaļķu Vārti**, the temple **Ala Pagrabs** or the fine-dining **Barents**. Any energy left? Plunge into Riga's nightlife at places like **Cuba Cafe** and **B Bar**.

Immerse Yourself in The City's Unmistakable Culture

Riga is a melting pot of culture and history, evident in the rich buildings and national monuments that shape the country. Freshen up in the morning and choose from the impressive line-up of museums, such as the **Latvian National Museum of Art**, the **RSU Museum of Anatomy** or the **Riga Automobile Museum**, where history and art go hand in hand. Your tour will definitely include a visit to **Agenskalns**



Market – where you can take a lunch break – graced with architectural gems and captivating street art in one of the renovated zeppelin hangars. If you want to stretch your legs a little further, you can always opt for a **City Rally** with **PANCARS,** either through a historical theme or a treasure hunt, or take part in a backstage tour of the **Opera House**. Finally, put together your own 'thriller' with a spy game in the **Corner House** (the former KGB headquarters) to learn how secret agents ruled the streets of Riga.

Sport and Adventure on The Banks of the Gauja

Latvia is also a haven for outdoor activities, offering the perfect mix of sport and recreation. Just under an hour from Riga, **Sigulda** is a real gem at the gates of the **Gauja National Park**. Thanks to its mountainous terrain sloping down to the river, the 'Switzerland of Latvia' is the perfect setting for canoe races and rafting, and is home to the only bobsleigh and luge track in the Baltics. Here you will be tempted to go body flying at the **Aerodium** wind tunnel, complete the treetop rope courses in **Tarzāns** or have some group fun at the **Sports Center Water Park**. Heading upriver, we find the quiet town of **Līgatne** and its mysterious wellness resort tucked between the vast pine forests. Beneath these trees is an old secret bunker where you can set up KGB-themed team challenges and Soviet-style gastronomic experiences. An interesting way to continue the day can include the castles and mansions on the Lithuanian border, such as the **Rundale Palace** and the 15th century **Bauska Castle**, where you can set up orienteering games or Renaissance dance lessons.



A Seafaring Showcase to Slow Down the Clock

The Gulf of Riga is not just about relaxing hotels and spa resorts, where you can enjoy swimming pools, saunas, massages and thermal baths in the heart of Jūrmala. For those looking for more active options, you can always choose between a round of golf, fitness trails around the town or horse riding. However, this coastal town is mostly known by its kilometres of beach between the more rugged west coast or the pure sandy beaches, perfect for a picnic, outdoor sports and sunset catch-ups. Between water parks and the **Majori skating rink**, yachting or a sailboat trip on the Baltic Sea, Jūrmala's maritime vocation blends with the fishing tradition of its delicious restaurants. Otherwise, take one of the many trails and cycle paths that head towards the rural inns and campsites for a real campfire experience.

Take a deep breath, work will not be back until next week!

Latvia's DMCs are ready to create unique programmes that meet your group's most unconventional approaches. To consult this vast number of collaborators, go to meetriga.com and choose your favourite among the suppliers.







Lausanne and **ESA**'s 50th Anniversary: **Space** is the **Place**!

Between 23 and 27 May, Lausanne became the world's central stage for discussion on the mysteries and challenges of space on Earth. The four member cities of the **Space Cities Network** (Houston, Lausanne, Seoul and Christchurch) met for a general assembly, where they showcased their business potential, the network's roadmap for 2025-2028 and got to know the **EPFL Campus** and innovation centre in the canton of Vaud with **Patrick Barbey, director of Innovaud** – the innovation and investment promotion agency for the canton of Vaud.



The icing on the cake came on Monday with the **Space Community Days** and the celebration of the **50th Anniversary** of the **European Space Agency (ESA)** in Lausanne, at the state-of-the-art **SwissTech Convention Centre**, where *HQ* interviewed **Renato Krpoun** *(pictured right),* **Head of the Swiss Space Office** at the **Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI)**.

If we talk to anyone about the space industry today, most people will associate it with interspace exploration, astronauts, astrophysical science, and perhaps projects like the **James Webb Space Telescope**. At a critical juncture in the Space Age when we see launch costs decreasing and technological innovations at their all-time high, there are many new opportunities that will arise in the future for companies that want to invest in this cluster. "I think we have already entered a space race, one way or another. As we can see today, the ambition to explore Mars is growing, thousands of satellites are being launched into low earth orbit, and the big economic blocs are competing with each other. The question for Europe is how to stay ahead of the curve, and having an intergovernmental agency like ESA, that brings together the capabilities of the different member states, is a great advantage," Krpoun tells us.

Lausanne, in the Swiss canton of Vaud, has established itself as a hub for space activities and is looking to turn these strengths into top-level dedicated business events, with the **EPFL Space Centre (eSpace)** as the epicentre of this ecosystem working on sustainable space logistics. The *École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne* (EPFL) promotes space research, education and innovation with strong industrial and international collaborations, providing engineers with cutting-edge expertise, promoting space-related spin-offs, and serving as a networking platform between space actors. "Deep tech is really a Swiss value, especially in the Vaud region, with EPFL, the **Swiss Centre for Electronics and Microtechnology and the University of Lausanne** – there is a lot of deep research in the region," comments Patrick Barbey. "About 20 years ago, a number of spin-off start-ups were created, consolidating a deep tech culture in this ecosystem, with non-dilutive funding in the early stages and venture capital funds taking that funding to the next level. What we are doing here today is connecting with foreign visitors, but also supporting local innovators."

Several of these space startups are engaged in various aspects of the space industry, including satellite technology, radio frequency, in-orbit servicing, Internet of Things, and other space-related software and hardware, such as **SWISSto12**, **ClearSpace**, **Astrocast**, or **PAVE Space**, a fast-growing company providing engineering services in Guidance, Navigation and Control, and simulation solutions. Many of these companies were on display during the Space Community Days at SwissTech, where discussions were held on cooperation between science and industry, commercialisation of a new space economy, and business innovation in the sector. "Innovaud supports local entrepreneurs in their innovation projects with tools such as coaching, funding and also innovation parks like the one at EPFL. We also have a mission to help foreign companies in various sectors, such as life sciences, food technology, space and robotics, deal with the small challenges of setting up here, such as business regulations, bank licences and work permits," adds Barbey.

The Olympic Capital of the world, Lausanne combines the unique atmosphere of a medieval walled city with the picturesque landscapes of the Lavaux Valley near Lausanne, a UNESCO World Heritage wine region that we had the opportunity to visit. On the other hand, the Swiss economy has always been very creative – that is why Nestlé was born here in the 19th century – influencing the production capacity of companies, innovation and R&D institutions that are very sophisticated in terms of their presence in the supply chain, from the watchmaking industry to medtech and fintech.

"More than 99% of companies in Switzerland are actually SMEs with many of them in domains where quality, reliability and innovation capabilities are indispensable to compete. And the space sector is not too far away from that. The Swiss space industry has been very resilient, able to adjust its production capacity and be innovative in development, thanks to a great pool of talent in manufacturing, engineering and science," says Krpoun. "We see this today in the navigation and timing of the Galileo satellites, where the atomic clocks come from Switzerland. Not necessarily entire systems, but an efficient component chain for major projects."

The country carries out most of its space activities through the ESA. In November this year, there will be a ministerial conference at which ESA member states will sign up to various programmes to accelerate the implementation of the **ESA 2040 Strategy**. Renato, who is also chair of the ESA Council at delegation level, explains Switzerland's policy, which he says is a little broader: "We basically have three directions in which we want to work. One is more focused on infrastructure issues such as access to observation satellites, telecommunications and navigation. Then there is a more competitive element, where we are looking for excellence and competitiveness in industry and academia. Finally, we also want to adjust our strategy and programme participation at international level to fit in with ESA's modus operandi." On a national scale, integration with the various ESA programmes is taking place, for example, through an active user base, such as through data driven companies, the government as well as the academic sector.

The issues of private investment vs public funding in the space industry have also come to the fore. The global space economy is expected to reach 1.8 trillion dollars by 2035, driven by advances in technology, increased private sector investment and the growing use of space services and applications in various sectors. "We have areas, such as telecoms, where there is a lot of private investment. When it comes to navigation satellites, there is a partnership as the public sector invests in the infrastructure and then the private sector develops the applications on the ground. I think that in the field of exploration, which is ready to be disrupted, there are countless opportunities for both parties. In the beginning, it will be more about research, but in the medium-long term, when these discoveries come to light, we will be able to imagine factories in space that build manufactured materials that cannot be produced on Earth," concludes Krpoun.

This article was produced in collaboration with the Space Cities Network as part of HQ's editorial partnership.





> ***We have a very good structure in Switzerland, combining access to talent, research and development and a very favourable venture capital environment.***





Japan for Meetings: How Can the **Events Sector** Shape an **Entire Country**?

For event organisers, Japan remains a safe, upmarket and flexible country where delegates can experience a unique culture and be inspired by cutting-edge research and design. Plus, many associations benefit from multiple partnerships with Japan's century-old institutes and companies, advanced technology and modern infrastructure between research centres, factories and unique venues.

During **IMEX Frankfurt 2025**, our **Manuel Fernandes** sat down with **Koji Takahashi, Executive Senior Vice President of the Japan National Tourism Organisation (JNTO)**, to review the country's events profile.



How important are business events for Japan? Can you tell me about Japan's MICE strategy and goals?

I believe that the MICE industry is extremely important for our inbound tourism. Business events, in particular, have a significant impact as they attract visitors from vast parts of the world, extend their stay, and leave a lasting legacy in the host city. This impact is especially felt in cities outside major metropolitan areas, and the connections made at association meetings continue to stimulate R&D and create new opportunities for the event industry.

MICE activities are an important way of boosting local economies and raising awareness of regional identity and value. One of our strategic activities is the **MICE Ambassadors' programme**, which has been running for over 10 years. MICE Ambassadors are influential figures from academia and business who promote Japan in major international conferences. A strong and highly differentiated local identity is a key element in our long-term strategy.

Can you tell me about new facilities for MICE events in Japan? Are you satisfied with the infrastructure that has been built or is there still room for growth?

There are many projects underway, but two that stand out are **Takanawa Gateway City** in Tokyo and **Gran Green Osaka**, in Osaka. Both will be perfect centres for MICE events, as their conference and meeting facilities are being built alongside hotels, shops, green spaces, and are directly connected to transport hubs. Takanawa Gateway City is already accepting bookings from July this year and has one of the largest multi-purpose halls in Tokyo. Many of our existing conference centres are also continuing to modernise their facilities, with a strong capacity for hybrid events in all sectors.

How is the country planning business events and association conferences, not just as a return on investment, but as an effective resource to prevent overtourism?

Although most people think first of cities like Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto, we want to raise awareness of the plethora of other interesting places to visit in Japan. Thanks to our advanced transport infrastructure, it is very easy to access regional cities all over the country. Each region has its own unique culture, geography and history, which makes them very attractive places to visit. To help support meeting organisers, the Japanese government has designated 12 cities in Japan as global MICE cities, each with its own convention bureau, infrastructure and appeal. Many of the cities outside the Big Three also offer competitive support options to attract events. For example, the **International Astronomical Union** selected the city of **Koriyama in Fukushima Prefecture** to host its **Asia-Pacific Regional**

Meeting in 2023, as it wanted to support the region and encourage visitation.

How have Japan's main sectors and academic hubs influenced the process of selecting your international events?

The concentration of academic and industrial assets in each city is extremely important for us. For example, Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island, is rich in nature and cluster industries related to tourism and agriculture, which contributed to the successful bid for the **Adventure Travel World Summit** in Sapporo. In this case, the focus on the city's industry strengths led to the creation of a legacy in the form of guides and companies involved in adventure travel.

Similarly, other cities have attracted conferences aligned with their academic backgrounds, such as the **17th World Conference on Earthquake Engineering** in Sendai, or the **Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections & Biodiversity Information Standards 2024 joint conference**, in Okinawa. The success of these conferences is closely linked to these cities, leaving a lasting legacy. The JNTO has also compiled information on 16 of the country's cities in an electronic brochure called *Japan: Competitiveness in Academia and Industry*.

How has the JNTO been using data-based tools to monitor the trends and behaviour of its visitor economy?

Monitoring visitor data to understand trends and develop strategies is extremely important for us as well as for local governments, DMOs, hotels and other tourism-related businesses. We work to aggregate data from sources across Japan and make it available on our **Japan Tourism Statistics** page. The tools available allow users to easily view the data in their browsers or download statistical data to carry out their own modelling. This data includes comprehensive statistics relating to international conferences, helping the MICE sector in Japan to continue to develop and identify new opportunities.

What kinds of sustainability initiatives is Japan involved with and what are the country's strengths in terms of environmental awareness?

When we interviewed overseas event organisers, they highlighted our green and efficient transport network, a safe and secure society, the preservation of traditional culture, proactive innovation as a technology-based nation, and the active involvement of local and central governments in achieving the SDGs. JNTO has created a new initiative called **Sustainable Japan**, an electronic brochure that summarises the strengths and main initiatives in 15 cities across the country.

Each city is carrying out various activities, including environmental considerations, preserving local traditional culture and promoting local production and consumption. Some examples of projects that are helping to drive the adoption of clean energy include the **Aichi Sky Expo**, which generates 100% of its energy internally using solar power, and the Takanawa Gateway City, which plans to achieve a zero-carbon society through the planned generation of wind, solar and geothermal energy. They also want to adopt a fleet of hydrogen-powered lorries for the transport of goods.

What do social impact and social legacies mean for Japan? How has this path gone beyond occupancy figures and direct turnover?

When we look at the overall impact from a holistic perspective, we include infrastructure development, protection of our natural environment, new business partnerships and product development, building local knowledge and international networks, facilitating cultural exchange and much more. To this end, our convention bureaux work with local associations and stakeholders to further engage with our residents and vice versa. We run legacy events in different sectors and locations and, by raising awareness of their long-term significance, we continue to promote MICE initiatives in every city in Japan.

This often leads to public lectures to inspire the next generation of researchers, such as at the **International Federation of Automatic Control 2023 World Congress**, where the organisers hosted the *Girls in Control* workshop, in which they introduced control engineering to girls aged 10 to 15 with the aim of increasing the number of women who will pursue science degrees in the future.



Florence: The City of Renaissance Art and Modern Congresses

Cradle of the Renaissance Era, Florence opens up to us like a treasure chest of mysteries, legends and revolutionary ideas that dot its corners and streets like a moving canvas. Capital of the Tuscany region, this living open-air museum is a tourist city that needs no introduction. But what about international events?

When it comes to events, Florence combines the prestige of a world-famous cultural capital with the efficiency and human scale of a medium-sized meeting destination. The city offers a unique combination of accessibility, compactness and atmosphere, making it easy to reach for both national and international delegates. Once there, everything is within walking distance, including its main congress centre – the **Firenze Fiera Congress & Exhibition Center**, in the heart of the historic city. "Florence's ability to provide memorable events also translates into real numbers: on average, conferences held here record around 30% more participants than expected, thanks to what we call the 'Florence Effect,'" **Ilenia Pasi, Head of Sales & Business Development** at **Fondazione Destination Florence Convention & Visitors Bureau**, proudly reveals. Florence has also made significant progress in improving its public transport system, including the expansion of the tram network. "Today, it is possible to reach the city centre directly from the airport by tram, offering a green, fast and very affordable option for delegates." What sets Florence apart, however, is the experience itself: the scale of the city fosters connections, the beauty inspires participation and the collaborative local ecosystem includes institutions and organisations.

Business events are a key factor in Florence's strategy to manage tourist flows and encourage visits all year round. "The meetings sector allows us to work proactively and strategically months or even years in advance, which gives us the ability to attract conferences during off-peak months. This not only helps to distribute visitors more evenly, but also attracts a higher-value, more committed audience who often return as leisure visitors later on," says Pasi. Therefore, congresses have a particularly positive impact when it comes to combating overtourism. "This supports a more sustainable use of resources, while allowing less visited areas to be included in the experience, contributing to the local well-being." As well as its qualitative impact, the meetings sector is also a powerful economic driver. By drawing on their cultural heritage, the CVB has created a few social programmes that benefit both the community and the delegates' experience. "Guided by a clear legacy mission, we look for targeted proposals aligned with the identity and expertise of our territory in liaison with Florence's academic, cultural and scientific fabric," adds Pasi. This approach has positioned the city as an authentic scientific hub, contributing to the long-term vision of the local knowledge ecosystem.

Florence definitely sees business events as one of the most sustainable forms of tourism, playing a vital role in preserving the city's soul. "Today, we act as a real facilitator within a broad ecosystem that includes public bodies, universities, hospitals, research centres, cultural organisations and companies. One of our most strategic collaborations is with the **University**

of Florence." The city was the first in Italy to sign a formal protocol with a university to support the acquisition of congresses and scientific promotion. Each major centre – including the University of Florence, **Meyer Children's Hospital** and **Careggi University Hospital** – is represented on the Bureau's Advisory Board, ensuring that MICE activity is aligned with local areas of excellence and innovation. "In this context, the **Florence Association Centre** aims to offer a real operational headquarters in Florence for associations, a strategic base to facilitate the organisation of events not only in the city, but also throughout Europe," says Pasi.

> *Scheduled for September 2025, the Low Vision International Congress will be a unique showcase of how inclusive measures can generate direct local impact, leading to the implementation of tactile signage in museums, partnerships with local institutions and further improvement of accessible paths at Firenze Fiera.*

To recognise the role that researchers, doctors, academics and cultural leaders play in Florence's success as a meeting destination, the local Bureau has created the **Florence Ambassador Award**. "Since its launch, the programme has enabled us to highlight those individuals who, often behind the scenes, are instrumental in bringing high-level international events to our city. Each ambassador acts as a bridge between Florence's knowledge centres and the global congress and association community." Despite being a medium-sized city, Florence often emerges as a favourite choice thanks to its unique combination of quality of service, academic excellence and a stimulating cultural environment. "Thanks to the *Intellectual Capital Index Study* by **Gaining Edge**, we have successfully mapped and actively engaged these leaders, achieving an impressive 90% conversion rate in international congress bids," Pasi states. On the other hand, the **Florence Academic Leadership Programme** has helped support and train new ambassadors by empowering them to promote the city in close collaboration with the Advisory Board. "As well as bidding, ambassadors are essential to design events that leave lasting impacts, from partnerships with universities and hospitals to knowledge exchange initiatives and social innovation."

New data-driven perspectives in Florence presented an opportunity to explore the dynamics of tourism in and around the city. "One of the most valuable aspects was the ability to analyse destination sentiment based entirely on digital footprints – reviews, social media and online behaviour – and segmented by various sectors of the tourism supply chain. This allowed us to capture, in real time, how visitors perceived different aspects of their experience, from hospitality to transport and cultural offerings." This fresh outlook gave access to predictive indicators, such as flight trends and booking windows, to better align the city planning with market behaviours. "We were able to measure not only the volume of tourists, but also the perceived impact on residents, which gave us a clear picture of how to manage multiple pressures and how our actions could improve that balance," continues Pasi.

Joining the **EU CVB Network** was one of the turning points for Florence in terms of its international profile. This informal network offers associations a simplified platform for interacting with eight destinations in terms of their shared values, infrastructure and knowledge economy. "A perfect example of the network's value was our successful bid for the **European Society of Surgical Oncology Congress 2023**, held at Firenze Fiera. This opportunity was initiated during the EU CVB Network event in Brussels in 2021, showing how collaboration can lead to concrete victories." At the next **ICCA 2025 Congress**, the EU CVB network (of which Porto, the host city, is a member) will organise a dedicated session for associations, offering visibility and facilitating new partnerships. "We will also be launching our first Client/Supplier Workshop next year in Lyon, which will then rotate through the member destinations, further deepening our engagement with associations," concludes Pasi.



Rotterdam's Regenerative Edge Aligns Events With Urban Transformation



As the Netherlands' second city and Europe's largest and smartest port, Rotterdam has long been associated with resilience and transformation. Rebuilt in the aftermath of war, the city has evolved into a living laboratory for urban innovation, guided by a future-oriented vision across its infrastructure, economy and planning. This mindset now shapes its business events strategy, with knowledge institutions, port assets and innovation hubs forming the foundation for hosting sector-driven conferences aligned with pressing global transitions.

Rotterdam's layered evolution, from the maritime roots of Oude Haven and Delfshaven to the post-modern architecture of Feijenoord, notably reflects its dual identity as both a logistical powerhouse and a testbed for sustainable urbanism. This makes it a strategic partner for associations seeking a destination and venues where climate action, digitalisation and resilient design intersect with practical implementation.

"Rotterdam is a second-tier city that punches above its weight in the European meetings and conferences market," said **Larissa Molenaar, Marketing Strategist B2B at Rotterdam Partners**. The city boasts excellent transport connections, including **Eurostar** links, direct tram access from the airport to the city centre, and a walkable layout and reliable public transport. When coupled with a portfolio of iconic venues and a thriving innovation scene, Rotterdam is elevated to the rank of leading contender for associations seeking to establish strategic partnerships with the foremost sectors in today's digital age, including the transition to a sustainable energy model and maritime innovation.

From the architectural icon of **Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen** to the maritime heritage of **SS Rotterdam** and the scale of **Rotterdam Ahoy**, event planners have a diverse range of venues to choose from. "We are proud of our versatile, high-quality infrastructure," Molenaar said. "And we are not standing still. Ongoing investment in smart, sustainable urban development ensures that in Rotterdam, you can *meet the unexpected*."

This forward-facing philosophy is embedded in the city's model to regeneration. Rather than restoring what was lost during World War II, Rotterdam rebuilt itself with a bold, future-oriented vision. This approach extends to the city's business events sector. "Events here do not just fill venues, they help shape the city," Molenaar noted. Whether addressing climate adaptation, circular economy, or smart mobility, conferences in Rotterdam are designed to make an impact.

Rotterdam's strength lies in the depth of its partnerships. The city's MICE network includes more than 190 partners ranging from universities like **Erasmus** and **TU Delft** to the **Port of Rotterdam** and a thriving start-up and scale-up ecosystem. "Through **Rotterdam Collaboration for Change**, we align events with the city's long-term goals: inclusion, innovation and sustainability," Molenaar explained. "It is a unique approach where business events leave a lasting legacy and contribute to a better future."

Key sectors such as IT & Tech, Maritime, Life Sciences & Health, and Energy underpin Rotterdam's bid strategies. For example, digitalisation is not just a theme but an active sector, drawing in conferences on gaming, AI and digital innovation. "These events reflect our city's strength as a hub for smart solutions and contribute to solving societal challenges," said

Molenaar. "Our knowledge ecosystems do not just support events, they shape them."

Rotterdam is a key player in national energy and climate programmes, with an energy cluster that includes both established industries and pioneering innovators. This alignment is evident in flagship projects like **PORTHOS** and **ARAMIS**, aimed at storing CO^2 beneath the North Sea. Initiatives like the **Hydrogen Delta**, the **Clean Tech Delta**, and accelerator **PortXL** are positioning the port as a hub for clean energy. Recognised as the smartest port in Europe, Rotterdam uses digital technology, automation and data-driven innovation to optimise its operations and enhance efficiency, while supporting sustainable logistics. This distinction reflects its operational capabilities and its appeal as a host for tech-driven events exploring digital transition, smart mobility, and logistics optimisation. "Innovation plays a central role in our strategy to attract events," says **Maaike Hamann, Business Development Manager, International Congresses & Events** at **Rotterdam Partners**. "By aligning conference proposals with real projects and sustainability goals, we position Rotterdam as an active contributor to climate action."

Rotterdam's MICE strategy also seeks to mitigate the effects of overtourism by integrating events into the broader urban fabric. "Business events attract high-value visitors who stay longer, spend more and engage more deeply," Hamann explained. Initiatives like social programming across diverse neighbourhoods and partnerships with community organisations ensure that benefits are spread and felt citywide.

Tracking visitor flows and event impact is also evolving. While still developing advanced data tools, Rotterdam is already leveraging insights from national and partner datasets to improve planning and resource allocation. This data-driven strategy supports the city's commitment to quality of life and sustainable urban growth.

Social legacy in Rotterdam is approached through concrete, programme-based collaboration with local institutions and communities. Through initiatives such as the Rotterdam Collaboration for Change, the city encourages organisers to develop event legacies that address local issues. Molenaar cited recent examples: the **European Symposium on Paediatric Cochlear Implantation 2023** collaborated with local schools to green playgrounds and raise awareness around cochlear implants, while the **Congress on Liver Transplantation 2023** focused on organ donation education through local youth engagement. "Our goal is for every event to leave a meaningful footprint," added Hamann.

Looking ahead, Rotterdam is preparing to host the **PCMA Convening Leaders** conference from 14 to 16 October 2025. This event is a significant milestone that highlights the city's ambition to be a leader in global event innovation. "Hosting PCMA Convening Leaders is more than a showcase," said Hamann. "It reflects our ambition to lead in innovation, sustainability, and global knowledge exchange within the convention sector. It is an opportunity to demonstrate our collaborative spirit, creative energy, and commitment to delivering meaningful experiences. Our close collaboration with PCMA is essential to tailoring the experience to both their strategic goals and our city's strengths."

Other upcoming events, such as **Breakbulk Europe**, **International Film Festival Rotterdam**, and the **European Robotics Forum**, align closely with the city's strategic focus areas, reinforcing its reputation as a platform for policy dialogue, research dissemination and cross-sector collaboration.

Rotterdam's involvement in the **EU CVB Network** has amplified its international profile through joint marketing, collaborative bidding and peer learning. "The Network allows us to approach the association market with a stronger collective voice," said Hamann. "It has helped us secure high-quality events and will continue to support long-term partnerships."

In Rotterdam, business events are not add-ons to city life; they are central to its purpose-driven growth. "Rotterdam is a city that dares to dream and dares to do. We believe in the power of events to shape better cities and better futures," Hamann concluded. "And we invite the world to be part of that journey with us."



ATHENS

Sustainability, Start-ups and Blockbusters

MANUEL FERNANDES REPORTS



The **Travel Trade Athens** trade show marked its tenth anniversary in April, evolving into a more dynamic and engaging forum, renamed **This is Athens Agora**. Three years on from our last visit, this year's event has improved its position on the global events map with a contemporary vision of sustainability, new business and the impact of cinema on the sector.

The main Greek tourism and business events meeting, organised by the **Athens Convention and Visitors Bureau** (**This is Athens CVB**) took place from 7 to 8 April at the emblematic **Zappeion Megaron** among other flagship venues. This B2B event hosted more than 120 Greek tourism companies and organisations, 15 MICE buyers, as well as more than 90 representatives of international DMCs from more than 25 countries; this time, they implemented a programmatic twist of panel discussions broadening Athens' vision for this strategic industry.

During the inaugural session, *Athens Forward: Collaborative Visioning for a Sustainable Future*, the city's approach to sustainable tourism was explored in a lively back-and-forth by **Haris Doukas, Mayor of Athens, Tim Fairhust, Director General** of the **European Tourism Association**, and **Yiannis Paraschis, President** of the **Greek Tourism Confederation**. A vital trend that the city has been following, sustainability and the legacy of events have impacted meeting organisers and associations around the world to balance any negative repercussions – such as carbon footprint or overcrowding – on the everyday lives of local citizens. During the press conference, the municipal authorities and the mayor reaffirmed their commitment to the sustainable growth of tourism, now fuelled by business events. This was evident in the overall message and initiatives at the core of the event's organisation. Going beyond half-baked statements, This is Athens CVB set the tone by measuring all carbon emissions to achieve a net zero result. Likewise, they collaborated with an Athens-based non-governmental organisation called **Boroume** to combat food waste. All the food (made with seasonal Greek products) left behind at Zappeion was donated to this organisation so that they could distribute it in a network with other charities that help people in need.



Engulfed by the city's timeless scenery, it is clear that films can play a big role in promoting Athens internationally. This was one of the central ideas in the following session: *Lights, Camera, Athens! Reframing Urban Identity Through Film*, with the participation of **Teija Raninen, Film Commissioner of the West Finland Film Commission, Orestis Plakias, Head of Cinema Department at Foss Productions and Leon Olsberg, CEO of Olsberg-SPI**. The **Athens Film Office** is part of **Develop Athens SA** – the city's DMO – operating under the same roof as the Convention Bureau. The influence of the film industry in the region is leveraged by some very interesting figures. Notably, 2024 was a record year for the city with 28 audiovisual productions completed for major television channels and international platforms such as the BBC, Amazon Prime or Netflix. This includes several commercials and music videos that generate more than 1,000 jobs for professionals in the Greek audiovisual industry and more than 150,000 euros in direct revenue for the city of Athens.

Regarding the second day's innovation and entrepreneurship sessions, the aim was to showcase some successful Greek travel technology startups or companies that are expanding into the global market. The local CVB recently began a collaboration with **Endeavor Greece** to showcase how innovation, data support and disruptive thinking are contributing to the resilience and transformation of the sector. This is in line with a change in the image of Greece from a traditional holiday destination to a successful recipient of tourism services, with companies such as **Welcome Pickups** – a global operator in ground transportation for travellers – or **hoper** – the first scheduled helicopter airline in Greece. The hotel sector was represented by **HotelBrain Group**, the







largest hotel group in Greece, managing a wide range of properties and destinations including luxury resorts, boutique hotels and family retreats in several Greek destinations.

This is Athens: An Ever-evolving Journey

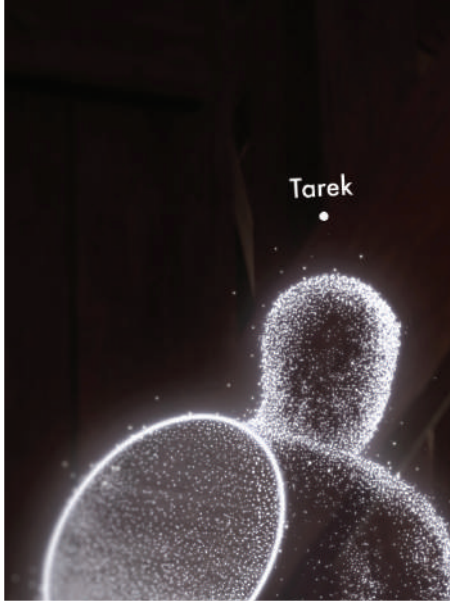
In the past, Athens was not always seen as a typical destination for events, but all that has changed in the space of ten years with a 140% increase in the number of trips and arrivals. In 2003, the former Travel Trade Athens was officially created to give the tourism industry greater prominence, at a time when Greece was going through a huge financial crisis. On the other hand, Athens has always been a safe and central destination for international travellers, which fuelled the need to show the destination in a more positive and professional light. Thus, in 2015, the international brand 'This is Athens' was born with the support and collaboration of important tourism players such as **Aegean Airlines** and **Athens International Airport**, among many other important DMCs. Later, This is Athens CVB joined forces with the **Thessaloniki Convention Bureau** and the **Hellenic Association of Professional Congress Organisers & Destination Event Specialists**, to create the **Greek Meetings Alliance** with the aim of raising the reputation of the sector and its impact on the national economy.

In 2024, this trajectory was reflected in the nearly 8 million travellers, an annual record for Athens, which was highly leveraged by this annual event. Every year, the city welcomes around 80 travel professionals from Europe and the USA to discover the resources of a city open for business. After the launch of the trade show in 2014, they also hosted the **TBEX – Travel Blog Exchange**, welcoming almost 1,000 travel bloggers, influencers, critics and travel columnists who gave a big boost to the digital segment. This year, This is Athens CVB felt the need to position itself differently and launch a new stage for the events sector, rebranding itself as 'This is Athens Agora'. Agora is an ancient word meaning assembly, the meeting place and public debate of the Athenians in ancient Greece. Furthemore, the city is on the lookout for a large number of international conferences in sectors such as new technologies, energy, medicine and cultural events. There is huge potential here in areas such as archaeology, philosophy or multidisciplinary arts, where delegates can connect with the city's history and heritage. Next year, they will host around 4,000 archaeologists for the **European Association of Archaeologists Annual Meeting**, an event organised in close collaboration with the Department of History and Archaeology at the **University of Athens**.

PARIS

Reimagine the Event Experience with Culture & Entertainment

JESÚS PARRADO REPORTS





At a time when association meetings are under increasing pressure to deliver relevance, retention, and reach, Paris is rethinking its cultural assets not as decoration, but as infrastructure. At **What's Up Day 2025**, hosted by **Paris je t'aime – Convention Bureau**, the city placed entertainment at the heart of its event strategy. Held over two days in April, the programme moved beyond site visits to demonstrate how heritage, immersive technology, and creative formats can serve as engagement drivers rather than experiential add-ons. The event offered a working example of how cultural programming can support delegate engagement and be integrated into the core planning logic of international meetings.

What's Up Day has continued to evolve as a platform to tell the story of Paris as a business events destination, celebrating its fourth edition in 2025. This year's theme, '**Season 4: Entertainment**,' focused on how film, immersive technology, heritage venues and live performances are integrated into Paris' long-term strategy to attract associations. **Corinne Menegaux, Managing Director** of Paris je t'aime, welcomed delegates to the event and highlighted the city's 942 MICE events in 2023 and its continued recovery trajectory post-pandemic. "Paris has always been a place of influence. But we want to show how cultural creation and entertainment are now central to how we host events," she stated.

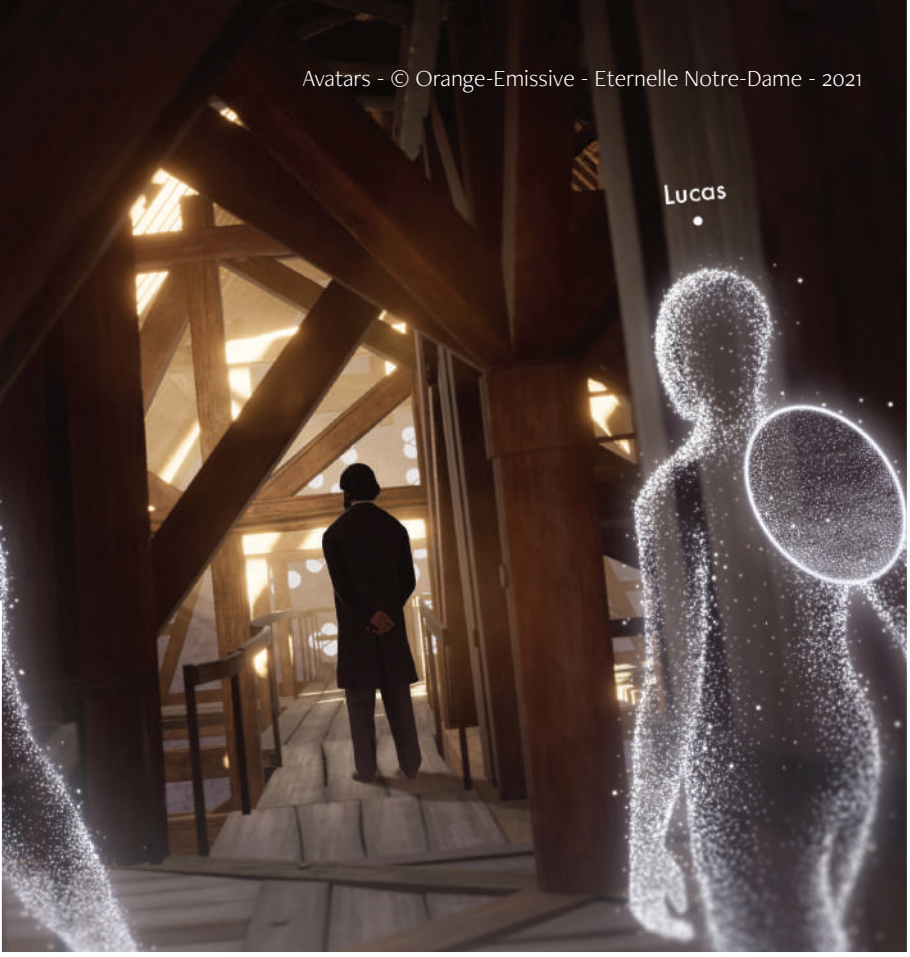
The opening session at **La Cinémathèque française**, a multi-purpose venue combining archive, museum and event space, reinforced this positioning. **Jean-Christophe Mikhailoff, Advertising Manager** at the Cinémathèque, emphasised the site's hosting capacity and how curated exhibitions and archival material can enhance the content of knowledge-based events.

The programme was deliberately structured to build thematic depth. Day one featured curated round tables at the Cinémathèque française, followed by a site visit to the **Adidas Arena** *(pictured on the next page)*, constructed for the **Paris 2024 Olympic Games**. On day two, participants selected from four themed itineraries (immersive VR, live performance, fashion heritage, and cinematic discovery), each demonstrating how entertainment can align with professional goals and personal interest.

During the roundtable '*Entertainment: A Driver of Paris' Influence?*', **Sophie Cazes, General Manager** at **Mission Cinéma**, and producer **Raphaël Benoliel, French Producer and Production Manager**, explored how shows like *Emily in Paris* shifted from being a risk to a strategic asset. "At first, no one wanted to join. Now everyone wants to be in it," said Benoliel, noting that visual storytelling has reframed how audiences engage with the Paris brand. Crucially, this ambition is supported by long-term investment: the city is partnering with schools and training institutions to develop a pipeline of creative talent, an approach that not only sustains its cultural economy, but also helps to bridge generational gaps and attract young professionals to the events sector.

In a session on venue diversity, **Harold Marraud (Group Strategy and Diversification Director for Accor Arena, Adidas Arena, and Bataclan), Thierry Vannier (Head of Market Development and Marketing Operations at Galeries Lafayette),** and **Didier Gouband (Chairman of Seine et Watts – La Cité du Cinéma)** explored how retail, sport, and leisure environments are evolving into multifunctional event spaces. Galeries Lafayette now incorporates a 400-seat auditorium, while La Cité du Cinéma is set to reopen in 2026 as a hybrid venue for public and private use. "Retailment," noted Gouband, "is not just about footfall, but interaction and shareability". This is a shift that reflects how delegates increasingly navigate event spaces as social, content-rich environments.

Expanding the conversation from venue functionality to how we experience different spaces, **Jérôme Tréca, Head of Patronage and Development** at **the Musée Carnavalet**, and **François Leclerc, Brand Director at JO&JOE** (Ennismore, a lifestyle brand within the **Accor Group**), brought a spatial perspective to the third panel. "Hotels are not just for sleeping. Museums are not just for culture. Entertainment in Paris is spatial, it is how we move, live and share," said Leclerc. This concept resonated across the city's hospitality evolution, from **Accor Arena** to new creative clusters emerging in Bercy and La Villette.



Avatars - © Orange-Emissive - Eternelle Notre-Dame - 2021



On-the-Ground Perspective

For participants, the structure of What's Up Day proved as informative as the content itself. Each day combined formal panels with experiential elements designed to test new event formats in practice. The Notre-Dame immersive VR exhibition, part of the '**Entertainment & VR**' route, was singled out for its narrative clarity and emotional precision. One attendee noted that it "captured the timeline of the cathedral's life in a way that felt immediate, not performative."

On the same 'Entertainment & VR' route, one stop stood out for its departure from traditional formats. **Listener**, a self-described "listening bar for music lovers" and private sound venue, offered an alternative form of sensory engagement. Designed with micro-spaces for small-group dialogue, solo rest pods, and creative studios, it reimagined the spatial dynamics of event participation. As one participant observed, "From a ten-person think tank to a VR meditation – it felt like a lab for future event formats."

This thread of multisensory design continued across the programme. Lunch at **Jungle Palace**, a concept restaurant blending immersive décor with tailored soundscapes, underscored how food and ambience are being rethought as part of the delegate journey. The closing dinner at the **Musée des Arts Forains** further illustrated this shift, using curated vintage fairground installations to activate storytelling. "This venue was not about nostalgia. It was about storytelling and narrative design" a participant remarked, pointing to how the space prompted interaction and memory without relying on spectacle.

The organisers' message was clear: entertainment in Paris is not a secondary matter to professionalism. "Culture is our content," said Corinne Menegaux. "We want associations to see Paris as a city that can carry their themes, not just their logistics."

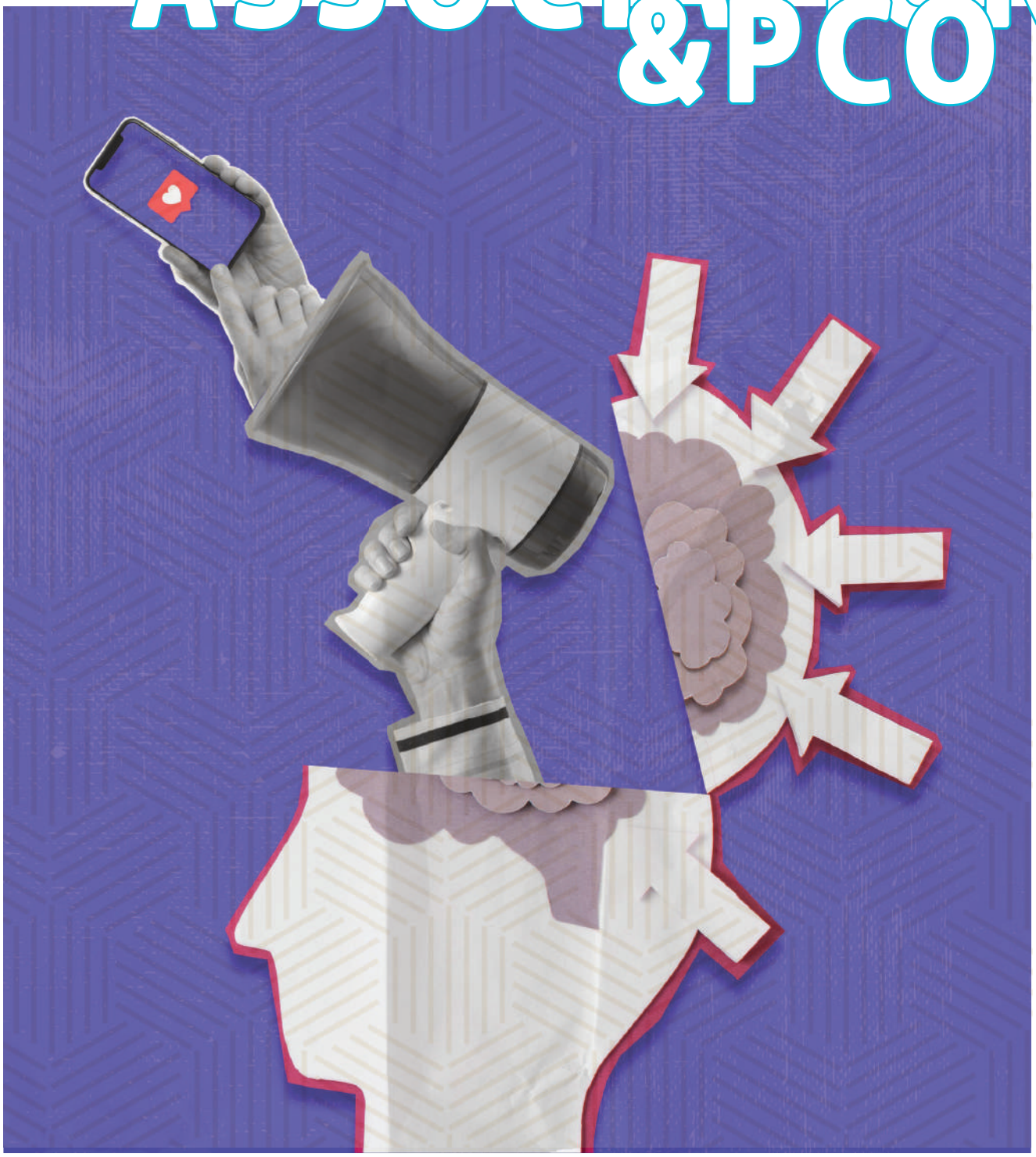
Equally notable was the city's willingness to re-examine its own brand identity, shifting from 'monumental Paris' to a more lived, accessible urban narrative. The focus on experience over infrastructure reflects broader currents in the association world, where values, purpose, and social resonance are taking precedence.

What's Up Day 2025 illustrated how cultural infrastructure can be used with strategic intent to shape not only the setting, but also the agenda. By positioning entertainment as an active design element, Paris offered associations a working model for events that are not only well-attended but also thematically relevant and forward-looking.



HQ INSIGHTS

ASSOCIATION & PCO



Enhancing **Attendee Engagement** with Technology

At the heart of innovation, **Kenes** is contributing to the growing trend of enhancing attendee engagement, helping set the stage for more dynamic, inclusive, and engaging events.

Author: Limor Cunia, Vice President, Clients & Operations, at Kenes Group

Today, participants expect more than just passive attendance; they want events that are interactive, convenient, and accessible. Technology, particularly Artificial Intelligence, plays a crucial role in shaping these experiences. It not only streamlines event logistics but also redefines how content is delivered, interacted with, and shared.

Streamlined Registration and Badge Printing

In response to the increasing demand for efficiency and convenience, many organisations are exploring ways to make check-ins faster and more intuitive. Kenes has embraced AI-powered solutions, such as facial recognition technology at onsite kiosks, so that attendees can swiftly collect their badges. This self-service approach is complemented by a Congress App, which offers an even more seamless experience, allowing delegates to print their badges directly from their phones.

"Our goal has always been to reduce friction for attendees from the moment they arrive," says **Uzi Drori, CIO, Kenes Group**. "By leveraging these technologies, we make the registration process incredibly efficient, giving delegates more time to focus on what truly matters – learning, networking, and engaging with content."

Real-Time, AI-Powered Content Accessibility

Traditionally, content accessibility has been limited by time, language, and other logistical constraints. Today, AI is breaking down these barriers. Tools like **Kenes AI Translations** provide real-time translations and text-to-speech services for live sessions, enabling a truly global audience to engage with content in their preferred language.

For those who miss a session or want to revisit key takeaways, AI is also helping attendees catch up. Session **AI Summaries** deliver concise, accurate overviews of presentations, while the **AI Podcast** tool allows session transcripts to be converted into engaging podcasts, making it easy to listen to content on the go – long after the event concludes.

Smart Assistance for Attendees

AI-driven solutions are also supporting attendees and exhibitors throughout the event journey. From the moment delegates register, they have access to AI-powered **Chatbots** and **Mailbots** that provide instant answers to common questions, offer event updates, and assist with logistics such as session schedules or accommodation. This reduces the need for manual intervention and helps attendees navigate the event with ease.

AI-Powered Abstract and Review Management

Scientific societies and event organisers face the challenge of managing the submission and review of a large volume of abstracts. Kenes is utilising AI to streamline this process, making it easier for authors to submit high-quality abstracts and for reviewers to make faster, data-driven decisions. The **AI assistant for abstract submission** helps authors optimise their submissions, improving both the quality and the likelihood of acceptance. Meanwhile, the **AI abstract review tool** analyses submissions, flags high-potential abstracts, and helps reviewers make more informed evaluations based on historical data.

"The use of AI in abstract management is a game-changer," notes Uzi Drori. "It is not just about improving submission quality but also about using data-driven insights to make the review process more efficient and consistent."

Setting a New Standard for Event Experiences

The role of technology in event engagement is evolving rapidly, and companies like Kenes are leading the way in integrating innovative solutions. From streamlining registration and content accessibility to providing real-time assistance and abstract submission processes, these AI-driven tools are helping shape the future of events.

By embracing these advancements, Kenes and other event organisers are setting a new standard for how events should be experienced. The integration of technology enables a future where every attendee, regardless of location or background, can engage fully with the content and connections that events have to offer.

This article was kindly provided by Kenes Group, one of IAPCO's long-standing members. IAPCO is a global not-for-profit membership organisation whose mission is to raise the standards of service amongst its members and other sectors of the meetings and events industry by means of continuing education, interaction with other professionals and research. IAPCO today represents 138 accredited businesses of professional congress organisers in 40 countries.

It is About the **People**



Technology seems to be high on the agenda of any event industry meeting, including **AIPC's Sales & Marketing Summit** which took place just before the start of **IMEX Frankfurt 2025**. However, the biggest challenge sits with the people, not the technology.

Author: Sven Bossu, AIPC CEO

The use of Artificial Intelligence has moved way beyond applications such as **ChatGPT**. AI agents can now not only define but also execute complex tasks, without any human intervention. For associations, who often struggle with a shortage of resources, these tools potentially allow them to increase efficiency and do (a lot) more, without the need for additional staff. However, a recent study by **Gartner** indicates that 47% of employees using AI say they have no idea how to achieve expected productivity gains and a whopping 77% say these tools have actually decreased their productivity and added to their workload. So, there is a substantial gap between the ambitions (and expectations) of leadership and the day-to-day reality when it comes to the use of AI.

Part of this is without any doubt due to a reluctance to change. While the number of changes, both in our professional and personal lives, seems to go crescendo, our mental ability to deal with these changes has actually decreased, resulting in what is called the 'transformation deficit' or 'change fatigue'. In addition, there might also be concern or even fear of being (partially) replaced by an AI agent, which does not help in the process of adopting new technologies. As a result, leadership will need to invest more time in explaining the context, the organisational goals, the strategy and the expectations they have from the staff in order to implement changes successfully.

Long term, it will become even more complex. As described in a recent paper by *Harvard Business Review*, the definition of 'qualified workforce' is changing. This is no longer limited to human talent, but also includes AI agents capable of handling many tasks once considered beyond the reach of automation. They are becoming digital teammates – an emerging category of talent. To get the most out of these new teammates, leaders in HR and procurement will need to start developing an operational playbook for integrating them into hybrid teams and a workforce strategy. Those who take the time to do so will unlock not just efficiency but a more scalable and resilient form of collaboration.

This will not be limited to large, international organisations. Once again, this technology offers an immense opportunity to smaller organisations, including smaller associations, to do more things more efficiently/effectively. Things like identifying potential new members, based on the profile of existing members, and doing an outreach campaign via different digital channels can now easily be done using a combination of tools, all of which are relatively easy to use. But at the end, it will come down to the most precious resource of any organisation: people. Therefore, almost all papers I have read on the implementation of AI stress one very important element: remain human-centric.

AI indeed reduces the need for people to conduct mundane tasks and elevates the importance of high-value, human-led tasks. Ensuring that employees can continue to carry these latter tasks out not only sustains morale but also delivers differentiating value to your association, which is something your competitors cannot simply download.

One key element to make the above happen is training. It is about identifying the skill gap and making sure a plan is in place to provide your team with the capacities and tools needed to bring your organisation to the next level. Given the speed at which the technology evolves, it is something to start as soon as possible.

> *"AI indeed reduces the need for people to conduct mundane tasks and elevates the importance of high-value, human-led tasks.*

To Ensure Your **Organisation's Future**, You Will Need to be **Multilingual**

Author: Mark Levin, CAE, CSP



According to the *HQ Media Kit 2025*, the majority of our readership is European, and a majority of the European readers are association-based. Even though my background is in association management, I have tried to make the columns that I have written for Headquarters over the past 10 years relate to a wide range of readers and not be just European- and/or Association- oriented. I think this time I can be pretty certain that my comments can be applied "universally."

Regardless if you are a professional working for a US professional society, a European trade association, an African tourism bureau, or an Asian resort destination, your future success may very well depend upon your ability to be multilingual. And I do not refer to how many languages you speak in the traditional sense (French, English, Farsi, Swahili, Mandarin Chinese, etc.).

You need to learn the 'language' of multi generations.

At no time in the history of the association and hospitality professions have we had to deal with a greater diversity of generations among our members, customers, leaders, and stakeholders. We have all been exposed to the demographics and generational descriptions – Baby Boomers, in their 60's and 70's, still occupying leadership roles in the private sector, governmental agencies and political positions, and not-for-profit organisations. Generation X men and women are frustrated by being overlooked as they are squeezed between the Boomers and the Millennials. Millennials now in their 30's and 40's wanting to become 'The New Generation of Leaders' in all fields; and Gen Zers just now graduating from university and looking to start careers, families, and lifestyle adventures.

Each of these generations has a language of its own, and we need to be able to speak (sell, lead, etc.) in the language that applies to each. Here are some suggestions on how to be a multilingual professional in today's diverse member, client, leader, stakeholder world:

1. **Do your research**: Be sure you can identify the characteristics of the various generations in your customer/member generations in your culture, in your part of the world, or in your profession or trade.

2. **Customise your communications**: Do not send generic messages about the value of joining your organisation or booking your property. Tell Boomers three ways they can gain professional recognition through your organisation; tell Gen Xers how they can ascend to top leadership or management in your profession; tell Millennials about the strength of your resort's internet, Wi-Fi, and video communications technology; attract Gen Zers with Mentoring (or "Reverse Mentoring") programmes.

3. **Tailor your communications styles as well as your message**: Remember the 'learning curve' of the various generations regarding technology. Boomers are basic: email is ok (finally); Xers and Millennials are fine with texting, instant messaging, etc.; Gen Zers want whatever is the latest technique or platform.

4. **Use your 'multilingual' skills to build multigenerational collaboration and engagement**: Advertise your ability to attract a multigenerational membership or clientele to your organisation or property as a lure for others. Promote the ability to interact with a (generationally) diverse group of people as a key benefit of being a member or traveling to your destination.

We, as leaders in our respective professions, need to keep changing with the opportunities and challenges that will be presented to us. Generational differences – what many consider to be one of our biggest challenges – can also be one of our biggest opportunities.

All we need to do is learn the languages.

(Editor's Note: Generation X – Gen X – born roughly between 1965 and 1980, and Generation Z – Gen Z – born roughly between 1997 and 2012, are distinct demographic groups with some overlap and distinct differences.)

Rethinking AI Adoption: How Associations Can Navigate AI with Purpose

At the **BestCities Global Forum** in Dublin, *HQ* met **Maryrose Lyons, Founder of the AI Institute**, an organisation that delivers world-class AI education to teams. Her keynote focused on using AI to streamline work and make sense of emerging technologies. *HQ* later joined her AI Core Skills course, which deepened our understanding of how organisations can adopt AI responsibly.



In this interview, Maryrose explores key challenges facing associations and professionals: gaps in understanding, ethical risks, the role of regulation, and how smaller teams can adopt AI without compromising their values.

You founded the Institute of AI Studies in 2023 and have since trained thousands in ethical AI adoption. What knowledge or action gaps do you commonly see in international associations and professional communities?

People think they are using AI well, until they join us. They have often been dabbling. Tinkering with prompts. Repurposing ChatGPT replies. Thinking that is the job done.

The truth? Prompting is just the surface. The real shift comes when you treat AI like a strategic partner, not a novelty. That is when you start getting serious results.

Here is what we consistently notice:

- **Confidence without clarity**: Leaders feel pressure to 'use AI' but lack a clear approach.
- **Missed potential**: Many teams use AI to save time, but the learnings are not shared, and they often are not willing to reimagine their workflows.
- **Too much experimentation, not enough execution.**

From ChatGPT to DeepSeek, AI tools evolve rapidly and carry hidden ethical and environmental costs. What is your advice for professionals who feel overwhelmed or hesitant to engage?

It is a very real problem; in fact, 'overwhelm' is the number one fear that participants are reporting to us in their pre-course surveys in 2025. This has changed from 'that AI will take my job' in 2023 and 'data security' in 2024.

The thing to remember is: you do not need to use every tool that is released every week. There is a lot of hype, and not all the tools are released ready to go. That is where we excel: we are a trusted voice in what is worth looking at now, and what is hype.

Your courses address digital trust and bias. How can organisations avoid building these biases into communications and services as AI tools become more ideologically skewed?

Awareness of these biases is a major advantage we lacked in the early days of the web and social media.

Think back to the early 2000s: we clicked 'accept' on terms and conditions, uploaded our lives to social media, and handed over personal data like confetti at a wedding. We simply did not grasp how that information would be harvested, analysed, and monetised. The awareness came years later, often accompanied by uncomfortable revelations about manipulation and surveillance.

With AI, we are in a different position, entering this age with eyes wide open, understanding that algorithms are not neutral mathematical entities but reflect the perspectives, assumptions, and blind spots of their owners. This awareness is our superpower.

Diversify your AI sources. Do not rely on a single provider or model. Systems trained on varied datasets by different teams will exhibit different biases. Using multiple sources creates a kind of checks-and-balances system that can flag when one algorithm is pulling in a particular direction.

Build human oversight that specifically watches for bias, not just accuracy. Train your team to recognise when AI outputs feel slanted, perhaps member communications consistently emphasise certain cultural perspectives, or event recommendations systematically favour particular speakers or topics.

The beauty of our current awareness is that we can bake bias detection into our processes from day one, rather than discovering problems years down the line. I particularly like **Anthropic** (the company behind **Claude**) for their attention to this area.

Hopefully, we are not destined to repeat the data privacy mistakes of the early internet era, because we have learned those lessons and can apply that wisdom to AI governance.

Some critics say the EU AI Act may stifle innovation compared to the US and China. Can regulation and responsible innovation coexist in Europe?

As a European, I am delighted that the **EU AI Act** is in place. It makes me feel safe that my government cannot spy on me and that companies cannot manipulate with impunity.

The 'race' narrative itself needs interrogating. Yes, the US champions 'move fast and break things,' but this strategy becomes profoundly problematic when we are not dealing with a social media platform that might lose users, but with technologies that could reshape human society itself. Breaking things in AI means damaging livelihoods, democratic processes, or fundamental rights. The stakes are simply too high for Silicon Valley's traditional approach.

China presents a more complex picture than many realise. Whilst Western media often portrays Chinese AI development as unrestrained, China implements significant controls, just different ones. They regulate AI to serve state objectives and social stability, with restrictions on certain applications and mandatory algorithmic audits for recommendation systems. Their approach is not 'no regulation', it is regulation aligned with different values and priorities.

Europe's position looks less like 'falling behind' and more like choosing a different finishing line entirely. Whilst the US optimises for speed and China for state power, Europe optimises for human dignity and democratic values. This creates different types of innovation, perhaps slower to market, but potentially more sustainable and trustworthy.

Europe is not falling behind; it is defining what responsible leadership in the AI era looks like. In my opinion, that is a race worth winning.

At the AI Action Summit in Paris, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced InvestAI, a €200 billion initiative to boost Europe's AI competitiveness. In a landscape dominated by US tech giants and China's state-backed models, can Europe truly compete? And what does digital sovereignty look like for smaller associations trying to uphold their values while adopting global tech?

Europe's €200 billion **InvestAI** initiative is not about beating the US and China, but redefining what winning looks like in the AI era, whilst democratising access to truly sovereign technology.

The US optimises for market dominance through venture capital and platform monopolies. China optimises for state control through massive public investment. Europe is optimising for something different: trustworthy AI that serves democratic societies, with open-source models as the great equaliser.

For international associations, digital sovereignty means strategic technology choices that align with your values, not just your budget.

Open source models may become a good option here, and in this regard, Europe's **Mistral** is one of the leaders.

Think of open-source AI as owning your building rather than renting from a landlord who can change terms at will. When you deploy models like Mistral AI or **Llama**, you gain genuine control over your technological destiny. Member data processing, algorithmic decisions, and privacy safeguards remain under your jurisdiction.

Past technical barriers to open source for smaller organisations are dissolving. Managed services and platforms like **Hugging Face** make deployment accessible without requiring machine learning teams.

Europe is not just competing; it is creating alternatives for organisations prioritising member trust over raw efficiency, transparency over black-box performance, and democratic values over authoritarian control.

Tech-Enhanced, Human-Centred: How **CityDNA** Elevates **In-Person Engagement**

City Destinations Alliance (CityDNA) harnesses digital tools not to replace, but to enrich face-to-face connections, empowering its community of destination professionals through meaningful, tech-supported experiences.

In a landscape where digital formats, remote collaboration, and AI-driven innovation are gaining momentum, CityDNA has carved a clear and bold path: to make technology a facilitator of real human connections, not a replacement. Since returning to fully in-person formats in 2022, CityDNA has focused on one strategic goal: redefining engagement through meaningful interactions thoughtfully supported by digital tools that enhance the human experience.

With more than 125 European destinations in its membership, CityDNA has embraced technology in service of relevance, impact, and accessibility. Their philosophy is simple: the best digital solutions disappear into the experience, quietly enhancing it without stealing the spotlight.

Beyond the Screen: Curated Encounters Through Digital Matchmaking

At CityDNA events, curated networking has become a signature. At the upcoming **CityDNA International Conference in Tórshavn, Faroe Islands** *(Editor's Note: 30 September – 2 October 2025)*, attendees will benefit once again from a digital matchmaking tool that pairs delegates based on mutual interests, priorities, and complementary expertise.

Far from being a simple convenience, platforms like this add structure to spontaneous networking. For time-pressed professionals attending for both learning and lead generation, these tools help make large events feel smaller and smarter.

But meaningful engagement does not stop at tech. CityDNA also invests in intentional event design: from interactive Q&A and live polling to campfire-style discussions, *walkshops* and meetings hosted in distinctive local venues. These design choices create more relaxed, participatory environments that encourage honest dialogue, serendipitous connections, and a stronger sense of community.

Insight Without Overload: How AI-Supported Content Capture Elevated Engagement

Perhaps the most transformative recent leap in event engagement was seen at the CityDNA Conferences in Bruges and Budapest, where the Alliance partnered with **Snapsight**, an AI-driven content capture tool.

Designed to relieve pressure, the platform became a behind-the-scenes pillar, automating note-taking, summarising sessions, and translating content into multiple languages, all in real time.

CityDNA did not adopt this solution to follow a trend. They faced a very real challenge: how to capture knowledge from over 15 high-density sessions with a core team of just four people. The tool ran seamlessly in the background, made easily accessible through QR codes printed on attendee badges.

The results spoke for themselves: a 65% adoption rate in Budapest, and high praise from both participants and speakers. Attendees appreciated being able to revisit sessions they missed or highlight key moments without relying on memory or scribbled notes. Meanwhile, the CityDNA team saved days of post-event content processing.

As the Snapsight team wrote, "What started as a tactical solution is evolving into a strategic asset, one that helps CityDNA transform raw event content into long-term value."

#BrugesTrainChallenge: Sustainability Meets Digital Storytelling

Digital engagement does not have to live within the walls of a conference. A standout example came during the **CityDNA Autumn Conference** in Bruges: the **Bruges Train Challenge**.

Participants were encouraged to travel to the conference by train, sharing their journey and reflections on LinkedIn using the dedicated hashtag **#BrugesTrainChallenge**. The campaign generated a wave of stories and images, connecting sustainable action with personal experience, and sparking dialogue across the broader community.

This initiative succeeded not just as a visibility exercise, but as a values-led campaign. It showed how technology and social platforms can amplify environmental leadership, community spirit, and the joy of purposeful travel.

Ethical Innovation: AI Readiness and Responsible Engagement

CityDNA's commitment to innovation is matched by its sense of responsibility. For the second year in a row, CityDNA is a collaborative partner in the joint AI learning programme **AI Opener for Destinations**, which is designed and programmed by **Group NAO**. The initiative empowers DMOs and CVBs to adapt to the new era of generative AI tools and platforms, supporting their work both within destination organisations and in the broader visitor economy.

By fostering peer learning and strategic reflection on the opportunities and risks of AI, CityDNA ensures its community is equipped to engage with emerging technologies with confidence, relevance, and integrity.

This commitment will continue at the **CityDNA Summer School in Luxembourg** (25–29 August 2025), where one session, led by **Jonathan Easton** from **Gevme**, will explore navigating the tech and AI revolution. It will examine the transformative role of AI and technology in the meetings industry, offering practical case studies and strategies for destinations to foster innovation in an ever-evolving technological landscape.

Barbara Jamison-Woods, President of CityDNA, sums up the approach: "Technology is a powerful enabler, but people are the reason we gather. At CityDNA, we design events that make space for both. By integrating the right digital tools, we create more relevant, more inclusive, and more sustainable experiences. We are not just adopting technology; we are shaping how our industry uses it with purpose."

Building Digital Capacity for Long-Term Engagement

CityDNA is evolving its digital approach – from simply supporting events to strengthening the digital capabilities of its member destinations over the long term. This commitment is further reinforced through CityDNA's participation in the EU-funded **DEPLOYTOUR** project, which supports DMOs in enhancing their digital maturity – laying the groundwork for more effective engagement strategies across events and year-round operations.

In this evolving model, the conference is no longer the peak – it is a point in an ongoing journey, supported by the right tools and reinforced by shared values.

Where Digital Tools Meet Human Purpose

CityDNA's experience offers a roadmap for other associations, DMOs and CVBs: do not adopt tech for tech's sake, use it to reinforce your human mission. Whether it is through AI-powered content capture, purpose-driven storytelling, or matchmaking platforms that make every handshake matter, the Alliance continues to explore how technology can support relevance, efficiency, and meaningful change.

Because in a world of algorithms and automation, the most enduring connections still happen face-to-face. And the smartest tools are the ones that help us get there together.



Leadership and Future Proofing Associations



The need to future-proof associations is more important than ever, but how do we do this in the ever-changing landscape of the events industry? **Andrew Harrison, Director of the Event Supplier and Services Association**, says it comes down not just to leading as an association, but empowering members to become leaders in their own right too.

As the events industry continues to evolve and change, so do the needs of event professionals. As these change, so too must our associations.

Associations, much like our own Event Supplier and Services Association (ESSA), have long been valuable bodies that advocate and represent their members, helping to raise standards and support the interests of businesses within the event supply chain.

For any association, these key areas continue to remain critical – but these alone are no longer enough when we are talking about future-proofing associations. As the needs of our members change, so too must our approach in how we support them. It is not simply about providing leadership where it is required but also about inspiring and developing our members so they can become leaders in their own right.

Developing Leaders

This need to develop our members as leaders was the foundation of our recent **Senior Leaders Summit**, an initiative that saw us bring together senior professionals from across the events industry and provide them with a unique space and opportunity to become better leaders within their own organisations.

From solo entrepreneurs to global enterprises, one of the great things about our industry and our association members is that we have many different types of businesses and different people behind them. While I do believe this is a strength, it also highlights that leadership is not a one-size-fits-all, especially in our industry.

As such, we crafted the Senior Leaders Summit to be adaptable to the diverse needs of attendees to ensure it remained relevant and impactful. Rather than just pure information delivery, the Summit was about offering a safe space for reflection, discussion and development where members feel they can grow as a result.

As the events industry continues to transform, forums like the Senior Leaders Summit are not just relevant – they are essential when it comes to future-proofing associations.

Giving Members a Voice

As with the Senior Leaders Summit, future proofing associations also require giving members not just a voice, but an ability to play an active role in shaping policy and creating change.

It is about moving away from one-way communication to more meaningful, two-way engagement. Be it working groups, member forums or digital communities, they all empower members by giving them a direct line to influence what the association does, helping them to feel heard, seen and respected.

When we look at how we measure success, it is easy to look at metrics such as membership numbers, revenue and event attendance. Yet, true value is found in the conversations, feedback and relationships we build with our members.

Platforms such as working groups are also vital when it comes to leadership too. By bringing members into the decision-making process, we can help build their confidence and capability as leaders in their own right. After all, you become a leader by engaging, not simply by just being taught.

Anticipating Member Needs

Listening to member feedback is vital for any association, but we cannot just wait for members to tell us what they need.

Associations therefore need to adopt a mind-set shift, a move away from being purely reactive but to being a proactive strategic partner for our members that provides value beyond just traditional lobbying and standards.

Our very own independently audited **Health and Safety Accreditation** and **Sustainability Accreditation** have long

been key tools to provide this value to our members, yet we have continued to look for other ways to meet our members' needs too.

A recent survey conducted at the Senior Leaders Summit found that two-thirds (65%) of event industry suppliers say that international and overseas markets are the biggest growth opportunity for their business.

A purely reactionary approach would mean creating resources to help support members in successfully being able to work abroad. Yet by adopting this more proactive approach by actively conducting research, speaking to government and other professional bodies etc., we are already ahead of the curve by having in place our comprehensive working abroad resource for members, offering up-to-date information and guidance on working abroad in the EU, as well as the creation of a working abroad helpline.

It is about equipping members to lead in an evolving market. As more businesses expand internationally or work across borders, ESSA recognised the need for clear, accessible guidance, particularly for smaller organisations without in-house legal or HR teams.

By anticipating these differences, we ensure our resources are inclusive, practical and empower every member, regardless of size, to make confident decisions and avoid costly missteps.

If we truly want to future-proof our associations, we must not be afraid to innovate. The only other choice is complacency, which is not an option for an association that wants to be future-proof.

Even during successful periods, reflection and innovation must continue. By being proactive, listening to members and empowering them to be part of the conversation, we can ensure our associations continue to be a vital voice as we continue to navigate uncertain futures together.



If we truly want to future-proof our associations, we must not be afraid to innovate. The only other choice is complacency, which is not an option for an association that wants to be future-proof.

Empathy Meets **Innovation**: An Interview with **Nuria Fernandez**



In a world where technology is rapidly transforming healthcare, one innovation dares to bring emotional intelligence to the forefront. This year, the **IAPCO Innovation Award** was presented to **Nuria Fernandez, Online Education Specialist at Kenes Group**, for her ground-breaking course *AI-Powered Simulation Training: Mastering Sensitive Discussions on Weight Management.*

The course, developed on the **UNLOK** education platform, uses emotional recognition AI to help healthcare professionals navigate complex, often uncomfortable conversations with greater empathy and confidence. We caught up with Nuria after her win at **IMEX Frankfurt 2025** to explore how this unique simulation came to life, and why the future of medical education just might start with listening.

Congratulations, Nuria! How does it feel to receive the IAPCO Innovation Award 2025?

Thank you so much! Honestly, it is an incredible feeling. I am so grateful to IAPCO for this recognition. It was one of the most meaningful professional experiences I have had. Just being nominated felt special, but winning was something else entirely. It is a great motivator, not only for me personally but for the entire team at Kenes Group. I feel empowered to continue pushing boundaries in medical education.

What does this recognition mean to you on a personal and professional level?

Personally, it is a big milestone. This is the first time I have received an award like this, and it really encourages me to keep growing in my career. For Kenes, it is also significant, it is the second time we have received an IAPCO Innovation Award. The first was for our digital learning platform, UNLOK, and now this win shows that we are still moving in the right direction. It reinforces our belief in the power of innovation and collaboration.

What inspired this course specifically, and why focus on weight management and communication?

Though I am not part of the diabetes community myself, we work closely with healthcare professionals, patients, and experts. What we consistently hear is that language



matters, especially when discussing topics like weight or chronic conditions. These conversations are sensitive, and traditional training often does not prepare professionals for the emotional side of them.

This course was created in response to direct feedback from our learners. We wanted to give healthcare professionals a way to practice these conversations in a safe, reflective space, to build empathy, confidence, and communication skills.

How is this course different from other medical training?

The main difference is the integration of emotional recognition AI. While the patient in the simulation is portrayed by a real actress, the AI monitors your facial expressions, tone of voice, and the words you use during the conversation. Based on that, it gives you personalised feedback creating a unique experience tailored to each user.

You are not just passively watching a video or reading slides. You are interacting. You are reflecting. You are learning how to become more emotionally aware and that is incredibly powerful, especially in healthcare.

What were the biggest challenges in developing the simulation?

Definitely integrating AI in a way that was meaningful and accurate. AI can sometimes 'hallucinate', meaning it generates incorrect or misleading responses. We had to train the system carefully, feeding it the right language and emotional cues so the feedback would be realistic and helpful.

Finding the right actress to portray the patient was also key. We needed someone who could really convey the emotional nuances of such a sensitive conversation. That authenticity was crucial to making the simulation feel real and impactful.

Who can benefit from this training?

This is not just for physicians; it is for anyone involved in patient care. Nurses, nutritionists, even support staff. The skills you develop through this activity are universal – eye contact, active listening, respectful language. These are things we sometimes forget in the rush of daily routines, but they make all the difference in how we connect with others.

The experience is also highly personalised, no two users will receive the same feedback. It is all based on how you communicate, which makes it both practical and deeply personal.

What kind of feedback have you received so far?

It is overwhelmingly positive. Over 300 healthcare professionals have already registered for the course, and the response has been fantastic. Many were surprised by how engaging it was, not just because of the technology, but because it made them think differently about empathy and communication.

Our key opinion leaders were also impressed. It is rare to see such innovation applied to soft skills training in medicine. And that is exactly where we see huge potential for growth.

What is next for UNLOK and Kenes Group's digital learning?

We are continuing to grow the platform and expand our content. While this activity focused on interpersonal skills in diabetes care, our goal is to apply this model to other areas. For example, pregnancy and diabetes, older adults with comorbidities, or even patients with Alzheimer's or cancer.

UNLOK is not just about technical knowledge. It is about building confidence and compassion. And that is what sets us apart. As I like to say, the sky is the limit.

Any final thoughts for readers who might want to explore this experience themselves?

Yes, I encourage anyone interested to visit the UNLOK platform and try the simulation themselves. It is not just about learning a skill, it is about seeing how technology can help us become more human. And that, to me, is the most exciting part of all.

Nuria Fernandez's work is a reminder that innovation does not always mean faster or flashier – it can also mean more human. By blending advanced AI with real emotional connection, her award-winning course shows that empathy can be learned, practiced, and refined like any other clinical skill.

As the UNLOK platform continues to evolve, one thing remains clear: meaningful progress in healthcare depends not just on what we know, but on how we make others feel. And with leaders like Nuria at the helm, the future of medical education is in thoughtful, compassionate hands.

kenes group

The **AI Revolution**: How **Associations** Are Enhancing Marketing and **Member Engagement**

Artificial Intelligence is quietly transforming the way associations interact with their members, enhancing personalisation and efficiency across multiple touchpoints. In this article, some partners of the **World PCO Alliance** offer their insight into the undeniable advantages that AI delivers as well as what the future has in store.

AI Enhances Member Engagement through Personalisation

Associations rely heavily on marketing strategies to engage their members, attract new audiences, and deliver valuable content. AI-driven tools are making personalisation more precise by analysing member behaviour, preferences, and interactions. For instance, smart marketing tools are now routinely used to segment audiences and deliver hyper-targeted messages, ensuring that members receive relevant content tailored to their interests and professional needs. Personalised email campaigns not only boost member engagement but also increase conversion rates, demonstrating AI's impact in making marketing efforts more efficient.

Across the association landscape, there is growing interest in using AI tools to enhance personalisation and post-event engagement. **Ksenija Polla of Talley Management Group, Inc.** notes, "AI-generated summaries and personalised content are transforming post-event follow-ups into valuable engagement opportunities."

AI in Event and Content Recommendations

Beyond customer service and marketing, AI is playing a pivotal role in content distribution and event promotions. **André Vietor from Bco Congresos** points out that associations are now utilising AI-powered tools to make recommendations based on individual member preferences. By analysing past engagement data, AI can suggest relevant opportunities tailored to a member's professional focus. "AI-driven tools are also being used to direct members to events, webinars, or articles that align with that member's professional focus, improving both relevance and engagement."

This level of multi-faceted personalisation fosters deeper connections between members and their associations, ensuring that they receive meaningful content instead of generic messaging.

AI Analytics: Understanding Member Needs

Data analytics is another area where AI is proving invaluable for associations. AI-powered analytics platforms help organisations understand their members' needs with greater accuracy, allowing for strategic decision-making in content creation, programming, and outreach. For instance, associations can use AI to track engagement metrics, identify trends, and segment audiences for smarter content distribution.

AI's ability to collate and analyse market data has developed at an exponential pace over a very short space of time, and this ability will only improve over time. **Thea Farrant Adam, CEO of The Conference Company**, predicts that AI will become increasingly adept at identifying the optimal strategic and creative direction for marketing campaigns across varying audiences and demographics, even further maximising effectiveness by reducing time with A/B market testing. She says, "What would have taken hours of research and analysis to compile relevant insights that inform targeted marketing plans, can now be done in a matter of seconds, allowing associations to focus marketing budgets on delivering impactful marketing strategies with increasing levels of effectiveness and ROI."

AI Transforming Events

While AI is clearly enhancing efficiency and member engagement within an association, it is also amplifying an attendee's experience at an event. Some examples of AI-inspired initiatives include:

- Real-time transcription and summaries for accessibility and instant value-add.
- Matchmaking platforms that use attendee data to recommend relevant networking connections.
- AI sentiment polling and facial analysis, offering live feedback during sessions to adjust tone, content, or format.

- Gamification elements with leaderboards, AR scavenger hunts, and QR-based challenges, all enhanced through AI decision trees and logic.
- AI-driven chatbots in event apps to provide real-time assistance, answer questions, and guide attendees through the agenda, venue logistics, or content highlights.
- Interactive audio kiosks and live agents.
- Digital MCs and conference hosts.

Post-event analytics powered by AI to better understand attendee behaviour and tailor future events based on data-driven insights.

These innovations signal a shift far beyond traditional formats, and offer real-time, legible, data-backed feedback that is not just a nice-to-have, but that is essential. Adds Vietor, "AI has helped us move toward a more responsive and participant-focused approach to event design and delivery."

As a concrete example of an event's AI innovation, **MeetAgain's Caroline Knies** cites *Deep Talk*, a podcast created for the **World Tunnel Congress** that took place in Stockholm this past May. *Deep Talk* took listeners on a journey beneath the surface by exploring the inventors and pioneers who shaped Sweden's mining and tunnelling legacy.

AI Does Not Come Without Its Ethical Issues

While the advantages of implementing AI are undeniable, associations need to take into account AI's limitations and ethical implications.

The most pressing ethical issue is data governance; how an association collects, stores, uses, and shares personal data. Associations hold a privileged position with their members and must treat that relationship with care. With AI, the stakes are higher because data is used not just for analysis but to generate content, predict behaviour, and automate decisions.

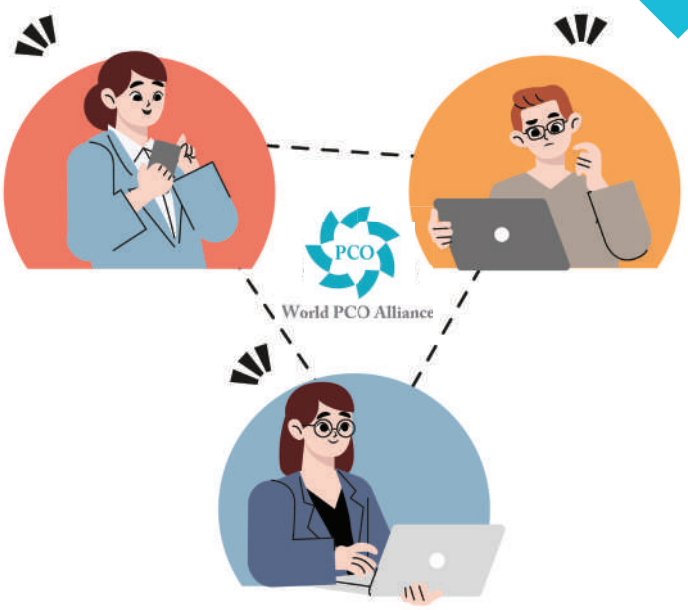
There is also the risk of bias in algorithms. AI tools are only as good as the data they are trained on, which may include historical biases or certain underrepresented groups. If AI systems are built on incomplete, unbalanced, or non-representative data, they can reinforce existing inequalities or make unfair assumptions. Vietor points out that this raises serious concerns around fairness, accountability, and transparency – especially when AI is used in decision-making processes that affect people's opportunities, access, or inclusion. He says, "Ensuring ethical AI requires ongoing oversight, diverse input, and a commitment to human-centred design."

Polla adds that "to mitigate these risks, associations should adopt guiding principles such as transparency, member control, accountability, and inclusiveness. These align with our sector's mission-driven ethos and help ensure AI enhances community trust."

These ethical concerns and others were echoed by the other World PCO Alliance partners contributing to this article. "I believe we all share a moral and ethical responsibility to support and sustain a thriving and viable economy within our sector," says Farrant Adam. "By allowing AI to increasingly replace the roles of a wide range of contributing industries and individuals, we not only reduce the potential for many to earn a viable living, but also compromise the potential to attract emerging talent. If creating human connection is our north star, then preserving the richness and diversity of authentic human thoughts, ideas, values and creativity needs to remain a priority."

The AI Shift in the Association Landscape

The key thing for associations to keep in mind is that AI is not replacing human connection; rather, it is enhancing the ability of organisations to serve their members more effectively. As AI continues to evolve, associations will likely expand their use of automation, machine learning, and data-driven decision-making to create more meaningful interactions with their members. From personalised email campaigns and chatbots to event recommendations and analytics, AI-powered tools are making interactions more relevant, efficient, and impactful. Associations that embrace these technologies are better equipped to foster stronger relationships with their members and adapt to the digital landscape.



Embedding **Intelligence** into **Association Event Strategy**

At **IMEX Frankfurt 2025**, *HQ* sat down with **Nick Tinker, Senior Manager of Sales for Event Solutions** at **Cvent**, a leading technology provider serving the needs of associations, corporate meeting planners, venues, and other professionals involved in business events, to explore the practical impact of artificial intelligence in our industry.

Tinker shares insights on AI-driven efficiencies, the boundaries of personalisation, and new compliance challenges in Europe.





At the moment, everyone is talking about AI, but it seems that there is a lack of understanding about expectations and reality. How would you explain this, and what practical impact is AI already having on event planning workflows?

People often expect AI to be a visible, standalone tool, when in fact it is increasingly embedded within everything we use. At Cvent, it is part of nearly every product line, driving efficiencies where planners need them most, from venue sourcing to analytics. One of the most prominent trends we are seeing is a shift to smaller, more frequent events. While these micro-events are more targeted, they take just as much time to plan. According to our research, one small event can take around 60 hours to produce. Multiply that by 15 additional events per year, and planners are suddenly facing 900 extra hours of work. That is where AI comes in; it automates parts of the RFP process, personalises attendee experiences, and even enables quicker decision-making through tools that allow users to ask natural language questions like, "How many attendees came from Spain last year?" and get an instant report. That is a huge time saver.

Beyond time savings, how else is AI changing the experience for both planners and attendees?

AI is reshaping content delivery and engagement. Our Cvent Events+ product, for instance, uses AI to break down a 40-minute recorded session into short, shareable clips with titles and takeaways. That is valuable content that planners can quickly push out across their channels. AI also plays a key role in personalisation. The better the data, the more tailored the experience, like matching attendees with sessions or networking opportunities based on their



interests. In my opinion, there is a misconception about 'over-personalisation,' but often the issue is simply poor data. If the data is clean and centralised, the AI tool works well.

Many planners, including those who are technically proficient and proactive, find it challenging to keep up with the constant stream of new tools and rapid updates. What is your advice for them?



It is true, tools evolve so quickly that it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Associations, or meeting planners, do not need to chase every new tool, but they do need to partner with providers who focus on education and support. A lot of what we do now at Cvent is not just about product, it is about training and knowledge-sharing. The pace of change will likely not slow down, so the best strategy is to invest in learning for staff members and find tools that simplify rather than complicate. To give you an example, our product Cvent Essentials is designed for high-volume, small in-person events – like field marketing, training sessions, or internal meetings – often managed by decentralised teams. It allows these non-specialist users to create branded, compliant event websites using pre-approved templates, while central planners maintain oversight. It also includes easy registration, check-in, built-in compliance checks, and integrations with platforms like **Salesforce** or **Hubspot**. When team members are trained, this tool proves to be cost-effective and scalable, designed to make event planning accessible without sacrificing control.

Sustainability is top of mind for many associations. What is your perspective on the environmental concerns surrounding AI?

It is a valid concern, especially around energy and water usage in data centres. The problem is, there is not enough concrete data to truly assess the footprint of AI in events. What we need as an industry is more transparency. Ideally, any time saved and efficiency gained through AI would create an offset, but we cannot assume that until we can measure it properly. Until then, being aware and proactive about data use and sustainability goals is the best approach.

Finally, what regulatory or compliance issues should associations be watching right now that will affect who they use technology?



The big one in Europe is the new **European Accessibility Act (EAA)**, which took effect on June 28, 2025. It mandates that public-facing websites, including registration pages, be accessible to users living with disabilities, such as screen reader compatibility and alt text for images. The Act applies to a broad range of digital and physical services, including electronic communication devices, ticketing systems, and consumer electronics. The legislation requires that services and platforms be designed inclusively, accommodating a range of visual, auditory, motor, and cognitive needs. Businesses operating in or selling into the EU must ensure compliance or face potential penalties, including fines, particularly within the public sector. The goal is to remove barriers in the digital landscape and encourage innovation through inclusive design. There is also the EU's upcoming requirement for e-invoicing. These new rules are becoming increasingly relevant, and tech providers have a responsibility to stay ahead so planners are not caught off guard. At Cvent, we are ensuring that our platforms will be fully compliant so users do not have to worry.

From streamlining repetitive workflows to enabling micro-event personalisation, AI is becoming essential infrastructure for the modern planner, including growing awareness around accessibility and sustainability. Associations now have the opportunity to adopt smarter, more ethical practices, as long as they continue to invest in both technology and training.

> *"You will not lose your job to AI, but you might lose it to someone who knows how to use it better.*

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