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MEETING PROFESSIONALS INTERNATIONAL

Mapping the Future of Onsite Learning

***A White Paper by
Meeting Professionals International***



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Executive Summary

In recent years, a growing number of meeting professionals have come to recognize that sound, measurable learning outcomes are the next frontier—just as they were the original frontier—in defining the power and strategic value of meetings and events.

From March 18-20, 2007 in Copenhagen, MPI's *2007 Professional Education Conference-Europe* (PEC-E) took that understanding a step farther, with a program that combined dynamic content on the design of successful learning meetings with an in-depth look at emerging global trends in meetings and events.

The drive toward learning meetings is picking up momentum at a time when meeting professionals are under pressure to transform their events in several different directions. That momentum will only intensify in the years ahead, as younger generations bring their own learning styles and technological savvy into the work force and the meeting hall.

At the same time, employers and stakeholders are demanding more tangible, measurable results from meetings and events, extending beyond financial return on investment to encompass a wider range of learning and business outcomes. Further, attendees themselves are looking for more memorable experiences and more solid takeaways from the meetings they attend.

Meeting professionals' responses to these challenges will help determine the relevance of meetings and events in helping client-side organizations respond to a host of global trends. From an opening keynote address on corporate social responsibility, to a series of workshop presentations on emerging economic, environmental, and social trends, PEC-Europe introduced participants to the issues that will give their clients and employers a new lens for assessing meetings' ROI.

The Learning Meeting

Much of the breakthrough knowledge at the *2007 Professional Education Conference-Europe* focused on the Learning Meeting—on how adults learn, and what meeting professionals can do to maximize the learning experience at every event they touch.

- **Ib Ravn, Ph.D.**, associate professor with Learning Lab Denmark at the University of Aarhus, introduced a series of 17 participant involvement techniques to maximize onsite learning. He said a true learning meeting should be constructed with five design principles in mind: Concise presentations, “active digestion” of plenary content, greater emphasis on participant self-expression, structured opportunities for sharing knowledge,

and effective facilitation. “Conferences are occasions for people to inspire each other, learn from one another, and flourish together,” he said.

- **Tyra Hilliard, Esq., CMP**, associate professor at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas and a member of MPI’s Georgia Chapter, called for a more participant-centered approach to session design. “We’re great at logistics, but we forget to put ourselves in the shoes of the attendees,” she said. Learners retain 10% of what they read and 20% of what they hear, but much more of the material they have a chance to discuss. Although meeting design usually emphasizes formal learning, participants can benefit from a variety of formal, informal, and even unexpected formats, and from a more deliberate approach to session and meeting room design.
- Hilliard said online communities can accommodate a wider range of educational objectives and approaches, based on their own learning agendas and styles. Limitations to online learning will always leave an important role for face-to-face meetings, but email and specialized Internet forums have opened up new pathways for learning and co-creation.
- Inspirational coach **Kevin Cottam** of Aspire 4 Excellence Coaching identified sound, color, visuals, scent, taste, and touch as some of the ingredients that motivate attendees by helping them form compelling pictures in their minds. He placed the purpose of an event at the center of a conceptual diagram that incorporated the mental, the physical, the emotional, and the spiritual. “The purpose is the very center, and that’s what the client wants,” he said. “That’s the starting point, and the seed of information comes from there. Out of that seed, the event begins to blossom.”
- Experience at the Comwell Danmark hotel chain shows that facilities can move beyond a focus on function rooms, furniture, and food and beverage service by training convention sales staff as meeting designers. **Lotte Marie Roesgaard**, Comwell corporate meeting designer and human resource manager, said facility representatives can open up “a whole new world” by asking customers about their meeting objectives and tailoring the use of space to match. “It seems that if we give people better meetings,” she said, “they come back.”
- Roesgaard warned that it will be absolutely essential to adapt traditional meeting space to the collaborative, participatory, visually-oriented learning models now used in K-12 education, and to students’ own capacity for multi-tasking and co-creation. “These kids go to school in a whole different way than we did,” she said. “When they’re being taught math, they may be learning it in a different language. They don’t even sit nicely in chairs. What happens when they become the majority at meetings?”

- **Maarten Vanneste, CMM**, CEO and president of Abbit Meeting Support and a member of MPI's Belgium Chapter, cited *meeting support* as a category of products and services designed to improve education, networking, and motivation at meetings and events. When meeting professionals focus only on the hospitality side of an event, he said, the result is "a little tent on top of a big foundation." To help clients deliver on the key objectives behind each event, he said meeting professionals must develop proficiency in content design and a better understanding of the "architecture of meetings."

The surrounding environment for meetings and events

While much of the discussion at PEC-Europe centered on the tools and techniques that contribute to onsite learning, participants also heard about the broad societal challenges their clients are likely to face in the near future. Many emerging trends suggest an unprecedented need for collaborative learning and creative solutions, all pointing to an increasingly important role for learning meetings and the professionals who organize them.

- Opening keynote **Mads Øvlisen**, chair of LEGO Denmark and a member of the United Nations Global Compact Board, traced the emergence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a concern for businesses of all sizes. Based on a "triple bottom line" that puts economic, environmental and social performance on an equal footing, he said CSR implies a broader duty "to behave ethically and contribute to the economic development of society, while at the same time improving the quality of life of our employees, our employees' families, and local communities." He stressed the importance of genuine community and stakeholder dialog in defining any company's commitment to CSR: "It's also about what other people expect of you and how you're going to live up to it."
- Øvlisen and futurist **Rohit Talwar, MBA**, CEO of Global Futures and Foresight and a member of MPI's United Kingdom Chapter, identified a series of emerging trends that will represent serious external challenges for meeting professionals. Talwar cited a wide variety of emerging issues that will shape the context for meetings and events, including:
 - ◆ A rapidly shifting international economy and new economic models;
 - ◆ An aging work force and society;
 - ◆ The new learning styles and expectations for constant electronic access that younger generations will bring onsite;
 - ◆ "Feminization" of households and the work force, with women achieving higher performance and greater recognition in all spheres;
 - ◆ Widespread travel fatigue;

- ◆ Decreased attention spans;
 - ◆ Higher human life expectancies, leading to changing needs and expectations in areas as diverse as pensions, lifelong relationships, and demands for larger print and shorter sessions onsite;
 - ◆ Declining public confidence in government institutions, private enterprise, and other individuals;
 - ◆ Technological innovations in travel and tourism;
 - ◆ The rise and widespread use of social networking sites like LinkedIn and virtual worlds like Second Life.
- Talwar cited the overwhelming scientific consensus and growing private sector concern over global climate change. He said former U.S. vice-president Al Gore has shared the data behind his Oscar-winning documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, with most major corporations in the United States and many in Europe. Travel is one of the world's biggest greenhouse gas producers, Talwar said, and while no similar analysis has been done for meetings, "this is a huge industry with a huge impact."
 - Yet participants heard the beginnings of a green response to climate change and other environmental challenges. In a luncheon presentation, **Vanessa Cotton**, CMM of ExCeL London announced that the 2008 Professional Education Conference-Europe will be MPI's first carbon-neutral event. **Fiona Pelham**, managing director of *Organise This* and a member of MPI's United Kingdom Chapter, stressed the positive impact of green meeting practices on the global environment, client relationships, and business bottom lines.
 - Pelham said sustainability onsite begins with practices as simple as switching off lights when they're not in use, recycling paper, choosing the right materials, measuring the waste generated during a conference, and buying carbon offsets. Session participants suggested double-sided printing, constructing new buildings out of used materials, and using energy-efficient light bulbs. "The client dictates to us, not the other way around," said one participant. "We have to show that we take it seriously. We will lose business if we *don't* do it."

A White Paper by Meeting Professionals International **Mapping the Future of Onsite Learning**

In recent years, a growing number of meeting professionals have come to recognize that sound, measurable learning outcomes are the next frontier—just as they were the original frontier—in defining the power and strategic value of meetings and events.

From March 18-20, 2007 in Copenhagen, MPI's *2007 Professional Education Conference-Europe* (PEC-E) took that understanding a step farther, with a program that combined dynamic content on the design of successful learning meetings with an in-depth look at emerging global trends in meetings and events.

The focus of the conference could hardly have been more timely. Scarcely a week before, MPI had announced a new global development strategy that will extend its organizational reach to the Middle East and Asia. In support of that strategy, PEC-E introduced a palette of topics and challenges that will be new to many meeting professionals, but crucial to the success of a truly global industry. The conference provided an opportunity for the association to introduce new knowledge, set the stage for professional networking, and maximize the benefit of bringing together more than 500 meeting professionals from 29 countries.

What's the issue?

The trend toward learning meetings is picking up momentum at a time when meeting professionals are under pressure to transform their events in several different directions, some of them contradictory.

PEC-E participants heard that audiences are demanding more of the “wow” and entertainment (or “infotainment”) that have characterized meeting design over the past decade. New technologies and more sophisticated session development and presentation skills have created a new standard for everything from a closing gala to an opening general session. Now that the expectation has been created, it may be difficult for meeting professionals to deliver anything that is seen to be less ostentatious than last year's event.

This trend will take on an added dimension as younger generations enter the mix of conference attendees. After observing their teenagers' ability to work on school projects, send text messages to friends, listen to music, and carry on live conversations—simultaneously, and without losing any of the threads—a couple of speakers looked ahead to a day when it will no longer be practical to ask participants to turn off their cell phones and pagers at the beginning of conference sessions.

At their best, these forms of communication cross the boundary between content and entertainment. Sometimes, substance and knowledge development are lost in the effort to entertain, motivate, or divert. Yet a concurrent trend is the expectation on the part of employers and stakeholders that meetings will generate tangible, measurable results. Those results include a return on the financial investment in meetings and events, but increasingly extend to clear learning outcomes, more effective interaction among participants, and more robust business relationships.

Employers aren't alone in seeking a better return on their meetings investment. Time-challenged attendees are asking more of the events they attend—in the form of a better, more memorable experience, as well as solid takeaways that will help them do their jobs more effectively and improve their own business impact. This wide variety of demands is challenging enough to meet at a time when conference budgets are relatively strong, but many PEC-E participants predicted that spending will eventually tighten as business cycles turn over.

Meeting professionals' responses to these challenges will help determine the relevance of meetings and events in helping client-side organizations respond to a host of global trends. From an opening keynote address on corporate social responsibility, to a series of workshop presentations on emerging economic, environmental, and social trends, PEC-Europe introduced participants to the issues that will give their clients and employers a new lens for assessing meetings' ROI.

Trends in learning design

The Learning Meeting

Much of the breakthrough knowledge at the *2007 Professional Education Conference-Europe* focused on the Learning Meeting—on how adults learn, and what meeting professionals can do to maximize the learning experience at every event they touch.

The focus was summed up by a representative of the Copenhagen Convention and Visitor Bureau (CVB), who welcomed participants to the opening general session with the “Five D's” of new meetings:

- Dialog rather than meeting;
- Dedication and involvement of participants;
- Design of format, agenda, and surroundings;
- Digital media;
- Dramatizing content.

From a CVB's point of view, he said the motivation is simple: destinations should embrace the learning meeting "so that you don't come back and ask, 'can I please have the last three days of my life back?'"

Ib Ravn, Ph.D., associate professor with Learning Lab Denmark at the University of Aarhus, led a session in which he both explained and demonstrated a series of 17 participant involvement techniques to maximize onsite learning. The techniques were distilled through a research project that involved nearly 2,000 attendees at 30 meetings organized by Danske Bank and hosted by four participating venues—Radisson SAS Hotels (Rezidor SAS Hospitality), Odense Congress Center, Hotel Legoland, and the Best Western Nyborg Strand.

Ravn said a true learning meeting should be constructed with five design principles in mind:

- **Concise presentations:** Presentations should be limited to three bullet points and run no more than 20 to 30 minutes.
- **"Active digestion" of plenary content:** Audiences must have opportunities to "actively interpret what they hear from the podium." Rather than expecting participants to receive material as passive listeners, program designers must build in time for people to relate presentation content back to their own professional concerns and experience.
- **Self-expression:** People attend conferences to talk as well as listen. "Most people don't want an audience of 1,000, but they may want an audience of one or two colleagues," Ravn said. Learning designers can help meet that need by setting aside agenda time for interaction in small groups.
- **Sharing knowledge:** Beyond lunches and receptions, conference sessions should be designed to maximize networking among participants. "We may not all be as socially competent as we would like to be, and there are many interesting people to be met."
- **Effective facilitation:** If a meeting is to introduce new learning techniques, it must be facilitated by a skilled moderator. "You need to create the atmosphere to conduct the whole meeting in a way that is slightly different from what is usually done," he said.

Ravn was sharply critical of conventional conference design. One-way presentations are a "pretty ineffective way of transmitting information," and the question periods that often follow them can degenerate into a competition for attention among participants who've "been repressed for so long by hours of passive sitting." Breakout sessions can be an

excellent opportunity for discussion, but not if they are so heavily packed with presentations that they become mini-plenaries in their own right.

Without adequate attention to session design, panel sessions can become “congestion on a one-way street, [with] more experts who want to tell you their opinion of things,” Ravn said. And the design of lunches, receptions, and other networking sessions favors participants—and cultures—that are naturally gregarious. “We in northern Europe are more timid,” he said. “We tend to stick to ourselves,” so that anyone who arrives at a conference with a colleague from home is likely to stick with that individual and miss the hundreds of potential contacts at the event.

Learning as ‘human co-flourishing’

Ravn characterized traditional approaches to meetings and events as “the empty container model of learning. There are experts who come in with a full container that holds all kinds of knowledge and experience, and they want to transmit that to the audience, who aren’t supposed to know very much.” It’s an approach that “has been much ridiculed and maligned for the last 50 years, and rightly so, because it’s just not the way we learn.”

As an alternative, he put forward a model of “human co-flourishing,” which assumes that each of us seeks to learn, communicate, and act responsibly—in our lives, and in our work. “Conferences are occasions for people to inspire each other, learn from one another, and flourish together,” he said. When the right mix of participants and speakers can find each other and “that little spark flies,” he added, “that’s the kind of meeting we look for. It might happen once every year or every 10 years, where wonderful things result because we meet the right people and we’re inspired.”

The 17 techniques in the Learning Lab study were mostly simple adaptations—from opening a session with five to 10 minutes of informal conversation, to separating colleagues who are seated together, to allowing a few minutes for silent reflection after a presentation, to breaking up a longer lecture with a group exercise. The research demonstrated that small changes can make a big difference: participants were more likely to accept gradual shifts in session design that might have been overwhelming if they’d been introduced all at once.

“We were quite ambitious at the beginning,” Ravn said. But “you need to be conservative if you want to change conferences,” given the large number of attendees who’ve become accustomed to conventional session design. Across the 30 meetings, Learning Lab Denmark found that 60 to 70% of participants were pleased with the changes in onsite process, while five to 10% favored a more conventional approach.

Ravn also stressed the importance of tailoring program design features to different cultural and workplace groups—while researchers and technologists tend to be introverts, salespeople and health professionals “will mingle and talk to people like nobody’s business.”

Walking the talk

A number of the Learning Lab techniques were built into Ravn’s session at PEC-E—his presentation took up about one-third of the 90-minute time slot, and attendees were encouraged to expand on the content by talking among themselves or sitting quietly and taking their own notes. In one of the discussion periods, several audience members responded enthusiastically to Ravn’s emphasis on structured networking and strong facilitation.

A participant agreed that an interactive approach is the best way to maximize onsite learning, and that a trained facilitator is needed to lead the process. Another group member agreed that without strong facilitation and process design, “we’re like a construction industry without the architects.”

“Many of us have been in the situation where you don’t know anyone, or you only know the people who are like you,” an attendee said. He added that five minutes of silent reflection, followed by a round of structured networking, would have been the perfect follow-up to the opening keynote on corporate social responsibility: “By the time we left the hall, we were all dying for a drink and probably talking to people about other things,” rather than reflecting on the important content of the opening general session.

‘Put yourself in attendees’ shoes’

A participant-centered approach to session design was also the focus of a presentation by **Tyra Hilliard, Esq., CMP**, associate professor at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas and a member of MPI’s Georgia Chapter. She encouraged the group to notice how they felt during the session, what they were learning, and when they were losing focus, to better understand regular participants’ experience onsite.

“We’re great at logistics, but we forget to put ourselves in the shoes of the attendees,” she said.

Hilliard noted that conference presenters tend to deliver content in a fixed pattern that reflects the way they themselves learn, even though participants bring a range of learning styles to the sessions they attend. The result is that “if you learn like me, you’ll get something out of it,” she said. “If not, you might become frustrated.” And she agreed

with Ravn that peers and colleagues are often the most effective teachers: Some of the best learning takes place at coffee breaks, or in informal conversation.

The question for session facilitators is how best to maximize learning moments and reinforce the insights they bring. Learners retain 10% of what they read and 20% of what they hear, Hilliard said, but much more of the material they have a chance to discuss. Although meeting design usually emphasizes formal learning, participants can benefit from a variety of formal and informal formats, and from unexpected as well as intentional learning opportunities—by attending a reception or a cultural performance, through observation, or from informal conversation, networking, or storytelling.

Learning needs, learning styles

Hilliard encouraged participants to place attendees' learning needs in the context of their motivations for acquiring new knowledge:

- **Goal-oriented learners** see new information as a tool for solving problems, and usually attend meetings, whole session tracks, or even networking sessions with a specific, defined purpose in mind. They expect presenters to follow a fixed agenda and use technology to reach a specific solution or goal. One participant said she would expect a presentation to end with a wrap-up and time for small-group discussion, to help her decide on a course of action before returning to her office. Hilliard said goal-oriented participants typically question whether a session will leave them with knowledge they can use: "In their minds, it has to be something they can use," she said. "I will get a certificate that I can walk away with."**Relationship learners** "are about people," Hilliard said. They'll often attend a session in the hope of learning from someone specific, but they might learn the most from touring an exhibition hall, interacting with colleagues, or meeting new people during refreshment breaks. A session designed to promote relationship learning would allow participants to move from one table to another and emphasize small-group interaction.
- **Learning-oriented learners** love to acquire knowledge for its own sake, so that their bookshelves might cover a wide variety of subjects. Participants said a meeting designed for this group would offer lots of different lectures, with background materials and background references to bring home.

A participant suggested that most people combine the three learning styles. Hilliard agreed, but stressed that presenters must tailor their material to all three groups. "Different people get motivated by different things," she said. "If we do it only one way, we'll lose a lot of people."

Hilliard also presented an inventory of four participant learning styles—visual, aural, read/write, and kinesthetic. She explained that:

- **Visual learners** use charts, graphs, arrows, and diagrams more effectively than written instructions.
- **Aural learners** ask lots of questions and tend to process information out loud.
- **Read/write learners** enjoy lists, paragraphs, and books, and assume that aural learners are just looking for attention.
- **Kinesthetic learners**, the largest group of the four, learn best by doing and place their learning in the context of the task.

“I am heavily a read/write person. To me, there’s no other way to organize information,” Hilliard said. But knowing that others find it difficult to sift through large volumes of text, “I’ve worked hard to incorporate more images into my presentations, because this is not about me. It’s about you, the learners.” She said the dominant learning style in a participant group may depend on occupations, and that can help determine the choice of speakers: while a marketing and sales audience would weigh more heavily toward visual learners, a group of physicians would have a higher proportion of read/write.

Putting the sensation back in ‘sensational’

To accommodate a broader range of learning styles, inspiration coach **Kevin Cottam** of Aspire 4 Excellence Coaching encouraged participants to design sessions and programs that appeal to all the senses. Drawing on the skills of a competitive skating choreographer and the metaphor of baking a cake, he identified sound, color, visuals, scent, taste, and touch as some of the ingredients that motivate attendees by helping them form compelling pictures in their minds.

Cottam placed the purpose of an event at the center of a conceptual diagram that incorporated the mental, the physical, the emotional, and the spiritual. “The purpose is the very center, and that’s what the client wants,” he said. “That’s the starting point, and the seed of information comes from there. Out of that seed, the event begins to blossom.” He led a small-group exercise in which participants brainstormed creative ideas and event solutions from a single word or image.

Earlier, Cottam invited participants to list the questions they would ask to determine the purpose and focus of an event. Working in several small teams, the group came up with the following list:

- What is the purpose of event: To educate? Inform? Sell? Motivate? Celebrate?
- What are the client organization's underlying values?
- What are the tangible and intangible objectives? What return on investment is the client seeking?
- Who is the audience? What is the audience profile?
- Do attendees already know each other?
- What is the message?
- What image does the client want to create?
- What should happen in attendees' minds as a result of the event? How should participants feel as they leave the site, and what message should they take away?
- What is the process for generating audience feedback?
- Is the event a part of a broader marketing mix? How will it incorporate the client's brand identity?
- When is the event? In what season does it take place?
- How many attendees will there be?
- What is the budget? Is the priority on décor, content, or a balance between the two?
- Is it a first event? If not, what is the event history?
- Who is the team? Who are the key contacts?
- Who are the partners, sponsors, and stakeholders?
- Where is the event taking place, and what are the specific site logistics?
- What was the client's dream when s/he was a child? What kind of cake does s/he want to make, and why?
- What does the client *not* want?

The virtual face of learning

Hilliard said the capacity to accommodate a wider range of educational objectives and approaches is one strength of the self-defined communities that have formed online, based on their own learning agendas and styles. While “we’re always going to need the face-to-face, and there are limitations to what you can learn online,” email and specialized Internet forums have opened up important new opportunities for virtual learning and co-creation. Like any other method, she said online courses are suited to a particular teaching and learning style.

In live meetings, as well, Hilliard said there is ample opportunity to break out of traditional learning environments, with classroom-style seating and lots of wordy PowerPoints.

- Meetings could be held outdoors, or in small pods with seats set in a circle.

- Natural lighting, comfortable chairs, room coloring, and other décor can be used to create a stimulating learning environment, just as noise can be a distraction.
- Certain aromas can also help attendees focus, though many people have mild to severe allergies to specific perfumes and fragrances.

Putting participants at the center

Lotte Marie Roesgaard, corporate meeting designer and human resource manager for the Comwell Danmark hotel chain, expressed the same concept as a set of concentric circles, with meeting facilities in the outer ring and participants—the facility’s customers—at the center.

“What we’ve traditionally been good at as conference centers is the hardware. What we’re adding now is the software,” she said. “The hardware is “all the stuff you look upon that provides the frame,” including function rooms and furniture, food and beverage. “The goal is at the center: That’s where the customer knows what they’re doing.”

A customer like Nokia “may be better off without our help” in deciding how to manufacture mobile phones, Roesgaard said. “However, we can help them with the software, and that’s the method, the process, the basic way of doing things. You don’t need to know everything about how to produce mobile phones to know what process can help the people discussing those mobile phones, or whatever a customer is talking about.”

From that starting point, Comwell trained the conference coordinators at its 13 properties to act as meeting designers. “They need to know what their hotels can do,” Roesgaard explained. “They need to know what’s possible. But on top of that, we add a lot of knowledge about learning meetings and various learning methods.”

Asking about objectives: ‘A whole new world’

When a customer calls a Comwell facility, one of the meeting designer’s most important duties is to ask what they want out of their event. “This is not rocket science, but it’s a whole new world when you call a conference center and the person on the phone asks you the purpose of the meeting. What’s scary is that they often don’t know.”

Sometimes, customers challenge the meeting designer’s motives in asking questions that go beyond pure site logistics. More often, the broader focus prompts clients to ask some thoughtful questions of their own. “That’s the challenge, actually, to encourage our

customers to find out why they're holding the meeting," Roesgaard said. "Once we know that, we can help them plan how to make the most of it."

Some specific insights from Comwell's recent experience:

- With more clients scheduling their meetings over 1.5 days, rather than three or more, there's just as much material to squeeze into a shorter time. If the right choice of meeting design frees up an extra half-hour, "that's a lot of time saved."
- When a meeting combines general sessions and breakouts, participants can lose valuable time in the transitions back and forth. With advance notice, it might be possible to hold the breakouts in the plenary room.
- Meals and breaks take up about 20% of a day onsite, and meeting designers can plan those time slots to maximize networking. At the same time, "I find it really sad when people say the best thing at the conference is the food, because that means they've wasted their time," she said. "If a meeting is run well, it doesn't matter so much how good the food is. If the meeting is average, the food becomes extremely important."
- Meeting facilities prefer to standardize room sets, but those designs don't necessarily correspond to different onsite objectives. "Yes, of course, I like fitting a lot of people into the room," Roesgaard said. "It means I sell lunch and coffee to more people. But it doesn't necessarily give them the best meeting, and that's one of the challenges we've been working with." At first glance, Comwell might appear to lose money by releasing more space than a meeting would traditionally need. But "it seems that if we give people better meetings, they come back."
- A better understanding of meeting design allows a facility to optimize in-house resources, by making better use of available space and anticipating delays in onsite programs that will have an impact on food service or other supporting activities.

Collaborative learning

Comwell launched its trademarked MeetingDesigner program to share the lessons its coordinators had learned from the groups that had booked space over a period of years. And none too soon: Roesgaard pointed out that K-12 education is shifting to more collaborative, participatory, and visually-oriented learning models that accommodate students' enormous capacity for multi-tasking and open the door to co-creation.

“These kids go to school in a whole different way than we did,” she said. “When they’re being taught math, they may be learning it in a different language. They don’t even sit nicely in chairs. What happens when they become the majority at meetings?”

An individualized approach to each meeting means that Comwell might have as many as 50 contacts in its database for a single client organization, compared to one or two when every event was the same. But the result is a more interesting, stimulating experience for attendees—and for coordinators. In an economy that is close to full employment, Comwell’s approach to events gives it a competitive edge in hiring junior staff who want to work their way up to the position of meeting designer. And in 2006, a year when the Scandinavian meetings market declined by 1%, Comwell’s business volume grew 10%.

Tools you can use

Maarten Vanneste, CMM, CEO and president of Abbit Meeting Support and a member of MPI’s Belgium Chapter, presented half a dozen practical tools that are currently available to help planners drive content at events. He cited *meeting support* as a category of products and services designed to improve education, networking, and motivation at meetings and events.

Vanneste said his interest in meeting support as a coherent industry segment was piqued in the late 1990s, when he attended a trade show with “an immense number of stands,” none of them offering production or other meeting support services. He eventually found that the trade show he envisioned—with coverage of the learning and content processes that go on at a meeting or event—did not exist. If learning is the goal, but meeting professionals focus only on the hospitality side of an event, the result is “a little tent on top of a big foundation,” he said.

Vanneste listed several reasons to organize a meeting: to improve communication among employees and colleagues; to encourage attendees to meet new colleagues; to increase an organization’s visibility in the market; or to recognize the achievements of employees, colleagues, or peers. Those objectives form the content of a meeting, he said, and a fundamental role for the meeting professional is to help attendees learn, get motivated, and use state-of-the-art tools, services, and methods to improve their onsite networking and learn from one another.

This line of thinking leads to a number of considerations for site and program design:

- Tables and seating can be set to encourage the moments of informal discussion, dialog, peer interaction, and bottom-up learning that might lead to the most important takeaways for many participants.

- Web resources and printed documentation can be used to help attendees begin their learning and networking before they arrive onsite and continue after the meeting concludes.
- Program design should reflect scientific research in a variety of areas that have to do with the onsite experience—some of them as basic as the effect of sleeplessness on mental performance. “How long should the party last in the evening, so that people can get enough sleep to be fresh the next morning?” Vanneste asked.
- The three basic functions at a meeting can be combined through deliberate meeting design. For example, when participants are learning together in small table discussions, they are also networking.

‘Who is the architect?’

The common denominator is that meeting professionals must understand the “architecture of meetings” that will help them deliver on the key objectives behind each event. The problem is that very few meeting professionals are trained in content design. To build a house or an office building, a client would hire an architect and a builder. “Meetings are big budget projects,” Vanneste said, but “who is the architect in our industry? Where is the architect in our field?”

Using the construction industry as a model, he said a meeting planner would meet with an educational content manager, to ensure that the conference host and participants got the best of both disciplines. The alternative would be for a meeting professional to bring both skill sets to the table.

But he said there are very few opportunities to learn the practice of meeting content management—the selection of contractors, production of materials, and evaluation and measurement of results. He said it would be useful for a post-secondary institution to develop a degree or certificate program in meeting architecture and content management.

Today’s meeting attendees “want more than just presentations,” Vanneste said. “They want more tools,” which opens up an opportunity for meeting professionals to “really improve the results of meetings.” The new emphasis on regulatory issues and ethics has brought a new seriousness to meetings and events, and definitions of meeting ROI now include the quality and quantity of onsite learning. Often, he said, the most important step in introducing that discussion to a meeting owner is to ask the right questions.

Vanneste led the formation the non-profit Meeting Support Institute (www.meetingsupport.org) to bring together the latest research and information on meeting design. The Institute maintains an online knowledge base of books, articles, and

other publications, and may eventually develop a certification in meeting content management.

The surrounding environment for meetings and events

While much of the discussion at PEC-Europe centered on the tools and techniques that contribute to onsite learning, participants also heard about the broad societal challenges their clients are likely to face in the near future. Emerging trends suggest an unprecedented need for collaborative learning and creative solutions, all pointing to an increasingly important role for learning meetings and the professionals who organize them.

Corporate social responsibility: the emerging trend

Opening keynote **Mads Øvlisen**, chair of LEGO Denmark and a member of the United Nations Global Compact Board, traced the emergence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a concern for businesses of all sizes. With nearly 3,000 participating businesses—many of them among MPI members' largest clients—he described the Global Compact as the world's largest voluntary corporate citizenship initiative, and the cornerstone of a new global governance structure.

The Global Compact formed when the then-secretary general of the UN, Kofi Annan, called on business leaders to become engaged with international issues, “not as consultants, not as advisors, but in a governance and steering role,” Øvlisen said. The invitation marked a fundamental shift in the 20 years since University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman had famously argued that the social responsibility of business is to deliver the highest possible return on investment within prevailing legal frameworks.

Corporate social responsibility is about a “triple bottom line” that puts economic, environmental and social performance on an equal footing, Øvlisen explained. “The thought is that we, as businesses, have a greater obligation than that of making a profit for our shareholders,” he said. CSR implies a broader duty “to behave ethically and contribute to the economic development of society, while at the same time improving the quality of life of our employees, our employees' families, and local communities.”

Øvlisen was previously the chair of Novo Nordisk, a Danish biopharmaceutical company with 25,000 employees around the world and a leading reputation in diabetes care. While Novo Nordisk and LEGO both have strong traditions of CSR, he stressed that the concept and the commitment extend to companies of all sizes: When the British government launched a corporate social responsibility initiative, it discovered 6,000 small and

medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Upper Thames Valley that were already involved in different types of CSR activity.

The other side of globalization

Øvlisen said the trend toward CSR has been driven by:

- The challenges and inequities that have accompanied the benefits of rapid globalization, leading to an expectation that private firms will do their part to correct the balance;
- Higher expectations resulting from a growing private sector role in delivering services—from telecommunications, to hospitals, to prisons—that were once in the public sphere;
- Eroding public trust in the intentions and ethical practices of business.

Øvlisen said many businesses have followed the trend to outsourcing and globalization in the absence of appropriate risk management tools that would enable them to anticipate difficulties on the ground—and the ethical issues that might result. The response has been a growing wave of ethical investors who expect responsible corporate performance as well as a high return on their dollar. The concern makes sense, he said, “because each and every one of us today is concerned about the way our society is developing. We don’t leave that concern behind when we go to work.”

But the instantaneous communication that enables global business means that news of corporate controversy can spread just as quickly. Novo Nordisk learned that lesson when it introduced genetically modified organisms (GMOs) as part of a new process to ferment insulin. “All of a sudden, we had to go out there and teach people what we were doing in order to get licence to operate and to innovate in our industry, in an area where very few people have literacy,” he said.

A sense of shared mission

With the convergence of information technology and media, “you have to make certain that you’re prepared to respond to criticism from stakeholders around the world. And you can only do that when everyone in your company assumes responsibility for the way you behave, and is prepared to defend it and protect it when necessary.”

That sense of shared mission, in turn, is reinforced when a company takes a responsible attitude to all aspects of its operations—from the carbon dioxide emissions associated with fossil fuels, to the health risks of obesity linked to the rise of fast food chains. “What

we're also seeing today is that we're being held responsible for the accessibility and affordability of our products," Øvlisen said. Emerging CSR issues now include access to essential medicines, availability of potable water, and the ability of developing countries and regions "to bridge the famous and still terrible digital divide between haves and have-nots, the 'knows' and the 'know-nots.'"

Øvlisen said many businesses have stepped up to embrace CSR issues, often inspired by their own employees. At Novo Nordisk, "I felt our shareholders had to know there would be situations where we might forego short-term profits" in favor of the long-term benefits of addressing social or environmental issues. The company established the World Diabetes Foundation to assist the more than 250 million people world-wide who suffer from the disease, 80% of them in developing or less-developed countries.

"When your company's whole mission is to help people, you cannot remain untouched," he said. You feel solidarity with the people who face this plight," then recognize that many countries lack the capacity to prevent the misery and suffering you can foresee. "Then, as a business, you must act."

Although corporate social responsibility begins with basic values and a commitment to international protocols like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Øvlisen stressed the importance of dialog with communities and stakeholders.

"It doesn't make sense to talk about social responsibility if you think it's something you can define on your own," he said. "It's also about what other people expect of you and how you're going to live up to it." Some of the brightest scientific and business minds can be found among Novo Nordisk's critics, and when the company wanted to introduce GMOs it arranged to meet with those critics—not over coffee and donuts, but over a period of days.

"I listened to them and learned from them," Øvlisen said. For a technology company that expects more than 70% of its innovation to come from outside sources, "that's an ongoing process and a basis for everything we do."

The challenges for meetings and events

Futurist **Rohit Talwar, MBA**, CEO of Global Futures and Foresight and a member of MPI's United Kingdom Chapter, flagged many of the same emerging trends as potential challenges for meeting professionals. He encouraged participants to make time to think about the future, since "it's a place where we plan to spend some time."

He stressed that the best way to prepare for unforeseen problems is to make choices that keep a range of future options open, citing energy and transportation policy as an area where governments failed the test: "When they had the chance, they chose not to invest in

alternative energy sources, so that today, they're not up to the level to be cost-competitive with carbon-based fuels."

Talwar invited participants to consider the information sources they use to find out about future trends, and how they use the information once they get it. After a short round of table discussion, the group identified business networks like MPI, online sources, and their own teenagers as key reference points.

Teenagers "are such great adapters to new technology, and they're such a critical audience," one attendee said. "They don't even sleep, because they have to get up and text all night." Eventually, this will mean keeping access points open during meetings, so that participants can communicate on multiple channels.

Keeping up with rapid change

For those who believe they are too busy to think about future trends, Talwar had a number of time-saving tips—like making better use of the routine technologies available to them, or running "to-stop" lists alongside their standard to-do's. But he also underscored the value of looking to the past, if only to understand the phenomenal change that has occurred "in the space of months, not years":

- As recently as five years ago, before the widespread use of blackberries, far fewer professionals "were living our lives through devices in the palms of our hands."
- Two years ago, broadband access in the U.K. cost €300. Now, anyone who buys a mobile phone receives free broadband. "That industry has been turned on its head."
- Even a year ago, most organizations were far less concerned about climate change than they are today.

Talwar listed a series of broad societal trends that will shape the market and the context for meetings and events.

- Women are achieving the highest performance in every educational category, assuming a higher share of senior management positions, and receiving recognition as the most influential people in their households.
- Widespread travel fatigue reflects the inconvenience of flying and the often invasive experience of going through airport security.

- Decreasing attention spans have created a growing imperative for alternative presentation styles and formats.
- Human life expectancy may soon exceed 100 years, leading to changes in the way people plan their pensions and commit to lifelong relationships—and creating demand for larger print, different session lengths, and more frequent breaks at meetings and events;
- Public confidence in government institutions, private enterprise, and other individuals has declined dramatically. “If you’re creating an event, you can’t automatically assume trust on anyone’s part,” he said.
- The travel and tourism sector is being transformed by technological innovations, from larger aircraft to hypersonic flight. By 2015, Virgin Galactic hopes to offer service from London to New York City in one hour, a development that will vastly increase the range of available destinations for a weekend event...with corresponding concerns about the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that cause climate change. An entrepreneur in Dubai is building Hydropolis, a six- or seven-star hotel that will be located 30 metres underwater.
- Hologram technology is adding a new dimension to virtual meetings, making it possible to project speakers into conference sessions and allowing them to interact with participants onsite.
- At a time when hotels in the Middle East project a labour shortage of one million, Talwar showed a slide of a Japanese-built robot that walks, speaks four languages, and convinced 90% of the attendees at a 2006 expo that it was human. “Robot service is a very big possibility in this industry.”
- Business models are shifting rapidly to keep up with fierce international competition. In China, a market of 420 million mobile telephones created demand for public plug-ins, where users could pay a fee to charge their phones—but had to stay in one place until the process was complete. The service will soon be free to users, thanks to the revenue from advertising that fills the 10 minutes of down time. A software house in India, InfoSys, deliberately restructures its entire operation every year to maintain its competitive edge. The company generates more than \$3 billion in annual revenue, with costs and delivery standards comparable to western corporate giants like IBM and ETS.
- Social networking sites like LinkedIn and virtual worlds like Second Life are creating new opportunities for market research, employee recruitment, and new product development. Governments have used Second Life to test

emergency preparedness scenarios, and U.S. presidential candidates are taking their campaigns online.

Against this complex and rapidly-changing backdrop, Talwar said one challenge for meeting professionals is to create shorter events on shorter notice that “genuinely reflect as interactive a world as people live in outside.” Formal procurement processes may run counter to the need for speed, while the expectation of better learning and stronger, more measurable ROI will almost certainly be confounded by falling budgets over the longer term.

“Unless you know how [a client] wants to make a difference, how do you know that you’re delivering a good event?” he asked. But the broader challenge is to meet the expectations of today’s and tomorrow’s participants, at a time when customer service standards are declining and younger generations are introducing a range of new communication modes.

Green impacts...

At both of his PEC-E sessions, Talwar showed the 2½-minute trailer for *An Inconvenient Truth*, the Oscar-winning documentary by former U.S. vice-president Al Gore. He said very few members of the scientific community now doubt the evidence that climate change is an enormous problem on a global scale, and that the rate of change is accelerating.

Gore has shared the data behind *An Inconvenient Truth* with most major corporations in the United States and many in Europe, Talwar said, and there is growing consensus among business leaders on the need for action—some of the world’s largest enterprises are now interested in taking action on climate change together, so that early adopters are at no risk of competitive disadvantage. In the last year, retail giant Wal-Mart has begun shifting its operations to 100% renewable energy use and zero waste, realizing that it would save money on energy and packaging along the way.

Talwar said the implications for meetings and events are crystal clear. Travel is one of the world’s biggest greenhouse gas producers, and while no similar analysis has been done for meetings, “this is a huge industry with a huge impact.”

In the end, “we as an industry have a choice,” he said. “We can either comply with regulations, just enough to keep our customers happy, or we can move to a position where we’re giving our customers something back.” During one of the luncheons onsite, **Vanessa Cotton, CMM** of ExCeL London announced that the 2008 Professional Education Conference-Europe will be MPI’s first carbon-neutral event, meaning that the conference will improve its energy efficiency, reduce its carbon emissions, and pay for environmental initiatives that offset any emissions that remain. More and more client-side

organizations have set GHG reduction targets, aiming to make their operations carbon-, energy-, or even waste-neutral.

“How good would it be if we could make PEC-Europe carbon negative, if we actually did less damage through our actions and could make a positive contribution back?” Talwar asked. A recent survey by the IMEX exhibition found that 75% of respondents were thinking or doing something about environmental concerns.

But the sheer scope of world economic growth will be a crushing environmental challenge. A recent analysis by MasterCard predicted that a billion people in India and China will see their incomes reach a level where they can begin travelling internationally by 2020. China will be adding a fleet of 2,500 to 3,000 new passenger aircraft to meet the demand. “Think about the demand for resources, the demand for travel, and the impact on climate if all those people travel,” Talwar said.

The challenge is far broader than meetings and travel, he warned. One recent poll found that, in the next five years, citizens of 12 European countries believe 60% of the goods they consume will be totally unnecessary, and another 20% will be luxury items. If all the countries of the world had the “audacity” to consume at Europe’s rate, it would take three planets to provide the resources. It would take five planets to match the United States’ standard of living world-wide, eight planets to match California’s.

“So this isn’t just about recycling,” he said. “It’s about us getting much smarter about what we need to have in the first place.”

...And green solutions

Talwar encouraged planners and venue managers to incorporate carbon reductions and other green practices in their event plans and contracts. In a session on sustainability trends, **Fiona Pelham**, managing director of *Organise This* and a member of MPI’s United Kingdom Chapter, stressed the positive impact of green meeting practices on the global environment, client relationships, and business bottom lines.

Pelham said she had spotted growing interest in the subject of sustainability. Indicators include the rising popularity of green meetings workshops and the number of high-profile green events on the horizon, notably the July, 2007 Live Earth climate crisis concerts and the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London. A participant agreed that “sustainability and environmental issues are on the news all the time in the United Kingdom,” prompting new initiatives from across the political spectrum. Other group members said they’d seen growing environmental concern among younger generations, stronger interest in sustainable tourism, more intense debate over biofuels, and greater awareness of the greenhouse gas emissions associated with air travel.

“It’s a dilemma to be part of a power-consuming industry and at the same time worry about the environment,” a participant said.

Consistent with Mats Øvlisen’s reference to the “triple bottom line,” Pelham defined sustainability as “an enduring, balanced approach to economic activity, environmental responsibility, and social progress.” She said sustainable practices could include switching off lights when they’re not in use, recycling paper, choosing the right materials, measuring the waste generated during a conference, and buying carbon offsets. Participants suggested double-sided printing, constructing new buildings out of used materials, and using energy-efficient light bulbs.

One participant said his organization was training 17 staff to focus exclusively on sustainability—for reasons that combine principle and pragmatics. “We’re changing our whole management methodology,” he said. “It’s the right thing to do, and it *will* get us more business. You start thinking, ‘how many people can we affect?’”

‘We’ll lose business if we don’t do it’

A representative of the IMEX exhibition noted that the annual show had introduced awards for green meetings and exhibitions, established a special global village for companies with green credentials, diverted 85% of its waste to recycling, and eliminated disposable cutlery. Other participants talked about using leftover food as fertilizer, recycling IT equipment, and introducing green transportation strategies that discourage private automobile use and promote train travel as an alternative to air.

Pelham cited an IMEX survey indicating that 68% of business leaders take environmental performance into account when they plan conferences. A representative of a major hotel chain agreed that green meetings are becoming an expectation. “The client dictates to us, not the other way around,” she said. “We have to show that we take it seriously. We will lose business if we *don’t* do it.” Another group member agreed that “clients are asking us about our green policies. We need to be more proactive.”

Although carbon offsets are a part of the picture, Talwar warned that the field is still unregulated, and that some carbon neutral businesses hold the funds they receive long enough to turn a tidy profit on short-term investments. He added that all of China would have to be reforested every three years to offset the greenhouse gas emissions of 3,000 new passenger aircraft. Pelham agreed that “this is a very challenging area,” and “it’s dangerous to think that money can solve all problems.” A participant said carbon offsets can involve more than planting trees.

Pelham stressed that an emphasis on green meetings can improve client relationships and contribute to business bottom lines. Organizations that focus on the waste they generate can usually improve their processes, reduce their raw material and energy consumption,

and cut costs accordingly. Participants agreed that meetings waste a huge amount of food, and one group member noted that the delegate bags at PEC-Europe had been manufactured in China and flown to Copenhagen.

“What about the waste of energy?” he asked. “Do we need those bags?” A participant suggested recycling the bags by passing them on to schoolchildren. Pelham encouraged the group to think about the “food miles” in event menus and limit imported foods in favor of local production.

A shifting global economy

Underlying the green imperative facing the industry, Talwar said broader shifts in global population will have huge implications for meetings and events, and for international travel. By 2050, Europe’s population will fall by about 100 million, while Asia’s will grow by 1.6 billion. “If you wonder why your organization is becoming obsessed with Asia, it’s because so much of the planet will be there.”

In the EU, a rapidly aging population will make it a challenge for businesses to find the skilled labor force to grow their operations. By contrast, China and India are taking their populations out of poverty at a rate that is driving the growth of the global economy, drawing on a “buzz and energy” that represents a challenge for wealthier nations. Already, China is the world’s fourth-largest economy, and India is tenth. By 2050, China is expected to overtake the United States as the largest economy, India will be in third place, and the top-20 list will include Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Brazil.

Although this transition comes as a shock to westerners, Talwar noted that China has been the leading economy in the world for 18 of the last 20 centuries. “They’re very keen to remind you that the west has only borrowed economic leadership from them.” By 2015, China is expected to have a middle class of 500 million people, and a challenge for meeting professionals will be to shift their attention to fast-developing economies and begin treating them as markets, “not just using them for cheap labor.”

At the same time, Talwar said issues of corporate social responsibility, technology transfer, and environmental protection move right to the forefront in countries like India, where 80% of the population lives on less than \$2 per day: “That cup of coffee you drank after lunch cost more.” He described the work of India’s Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank, a microcredit facility that serves customers who earn less than \$2 a day and began turning a profit within two years.

“We’re looking at people who don’t know it’s possible to have the level of resource that we complain about having,” Talwar said. The bank has two rules: its customers must be women, since they are most likely to make best use of the small loans they receive, and hence its staff must be women, to give them an affinity with their customers. Consistent

with the bank's customer profile, most staff had low or no literacy skills when they were hired. The bank currently has 47,000 customers, and its eventual target is several million.

The way forward

As MPI and its members extend their reach and expand their presence around the world, they can expect to encounter many of the opportunities and challenges that took center stage at the *2007 Professional Education Conference-Europe*.

Learning meetings like PEC-E give planners and suppliers the skills and knowledge to anticipate future trends that affect their work, while modeling the meeting design techniques that will enable clients to deliver critical information to their employees, customers, and stakeholders. By helping to position conferences as mission-critical programs for the organizations that host them, the concept of the learning meeting is rapidly becoming an essential part of the meeting professional's toolkit, and an essential part of the return they deliver and the standing they achieve within their organizations.

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Future international conferences

World Education Congress: July 28-31, 2007 Montreal, Canada

Professional Education Conference - North America: February 2-5, 2008 Houston, Texas

Professional Education Conference - Middle East: April 5-6, 2008 Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Professional Education Conference - Europe: April 18-20, 2008 London, United Kingdom