



# The Business of Meetings

*An MPI Foundation Canada White Paper*

National Meetings Industry Day 2007

April 19-20, 2007

Vancouver • Edmonton • Calgary • Winnipeg  
Toronto • Ottawa • Montreal • Halifax

## **The Business of Meetings:** **An MPI Foundation Canada White Paper**

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The business impact of meetings and events—along with the factors that underpin or undermine that impact—served as the common thread for the 2007 National Meetings Industry Day meetings hosted by the eight Canadian chapters of Meeting Professionals International (MPI) April 19 and 20.

Each year, MPI chapters across Canada organize dozens of professional development events to help their members keep up with the logistical and strategic knowledge at the heart of the meetings business. National Meetings Industry Day (NMID) is the moment when Canadian meeting professionals take a step back and focus on the importance of meetings and events for their employers and clients. This emphasis on the business of meetings extends to the impact of meeting planning as an economic activity, as well as the broader economic and community impact of the decisions and outcomes that flow from a well-orchestrated event.

This year, the NMID meetings in Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, and Halifax had significant news to report. Participants heard that MPI Foundation Canada (MPIFC) had just launched the country's first study of the economic impact of meetings and events.

They learned that the professional development programs that are so essential to the industry's front-line impact had received a major boost, thanks to Ottawa Tourism's multi-year sponsorship of the Anna Lee Chabot Scholarship Fund.

And they got to share in the celebration when their chapters announced the winners of the 2007 NMID Influence Awards, which recognized business community leaders for their significant contributions to meetings and events.

But the business of meetings was the unifying theme for a coordinated series of local panels on topics as diverse as the Canada-wide labour shortage, green meetings, virtual meetings and technology, pandemic flu preparedness, and the impact of local environmental change on meetings and events.

### **2007 NMID Influence Award Winners**

**British Columbia:** Green Meeting Industry Council

**Greater! Calgary:** Calgary Olympic Development Association

**Greater Edmonton:** Edmonton Economic Development Corporation

**Manitoba:** Destination Winnipeg

**Toronto:** Metro Toronto Convention Centre

**Ottawa:** David Luxton, Canadian Tulip Festival

**Montreal:** Institut de Tourisme et d'Hôtellerie du Québec

**Atlantic Canada:** RCR Hospitality Group

## **Meetings Mean Business**

In Toronto, Meetings Mean Business was the theme of a panel that included Alon Marcovici, vice-president and chief marketing officer at the Toronto Board of Trade. He

said meetings of all sizes are at the core of the Board's business and a key part of their members' day-to-day operations.

The business impact of meetings is often taken for granted, Marcovici said, but "what if we didn't have face-to-face? It would be devastating, and it would make it difficult for many businesses in Toronto to operate."

The opportunity to meet and network with colleagues is one of the main reasons that business leaders join the Board of Trade, and members expect more than just a meeting space from the World Trade Centre, where the Board is located: The location adds credibility to a news conference or a meeting, and face-to-face meetings create a "power of personal engagement" that is diminished by teleconferencing or other virtual meeting options.

In Calgary, MPI International Chairman Mark Andrew, CMP, CHA stressed the impact of meetings that bring people together to create dialogue and share a common business purpose. "As all of you know, meetings don't just happen," he said. Successful events depend on the qualified personnel and the body of knowledge that will enable organizations to maximize their impact onsite.

Edmonton Mayor Stephen Mandel acknowledged the economic value that meeting professionals bring to the local business community, an impact that Mike Fitzpatrick, general manager of the Shaw Conference Centre, calculated at \$37 million per year. He said meetings feed the local economy by hosting events and accommodating visitors, fuelling the tourism industry, and creating opportunities for participants to discuss matters of common concern. In Calgary, Deputy Mayor Craig Burrows noted the significance of hosting the upcoming Federation of Canadian Municipalities annual conference.

In Winnipeg, Brigitte Sandron, vice-president of product and market development for Travel Manitoba, said tourism added \$1.4 billion to the province's economy in 2004 and \$1.8 billion in 2005. In 2006, Winnipeg hosted 193 meetings that generated \$50 million in revenue. Over the next decade, Travel Manitoba and Destination Winnipeg intend to generate \$100 million in new revenue from mid-sized and large sporting and artistic events.

Chantal Sturk-Nadeau, director of tourism, meetings, conventions and events for Destination Winnipeg, said the city receives an estimated 54,000 conference participants per year. The average attendee spends an estimated \$880 per day while they're in town, more than any other kind of visitor. Sturk-Nadeau noted that convention bookings involve a much longer business cycle than other forms of travel, with bookings decided years in advance: In the first half of 2007, planning was already underway for 2010-2011.

Helen Van Dongen, CMP, CMM, chair-elect of MPI Foundation Canada, stressed the direct and indirect economic impact of meetings and events. The local community benefits when a cheque is written to a local hotel or convention centre, she said. Secondary benefits occur when taxi owners, retailers, restaurants, and entertainment receive spin-off business from conference attendees. After that, the economy sees a

tertiary, trickle-down effect when the dollars that attendees bring into the community are spent again by local residents.

Jim Baker, CA, president and CEO of the Manitoba Hotel Association, agreed that economic spin-offs from meeting facilities extend to “the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker,” and every other corner of the retail and restaurant industries. But while Winnipeg’s central location gives it an advantage over other Canadian destinations, he said the winter weather is perceived as inhospitable—a view that is often reinforced by random comments from airline staff and customs officials.

Lloyd McCoomb, president and CEO of the Greater Toronto Airports Authority (GTAA), emphasized the importance of business travel in supporting the head offices and other major businesses in the community. Of the 41 million people who pass through Pearson International Airport each year, one-third are business travellers who leave significant amounts of money in the community.

Lyle Hall, managing director of HLT Advisory Inc., a Toronto-based leisure and tourism consultancy, warned that the supply of meeting space exceeds demand. Yet Niagara Falls is investing \$35 million in a new convention centre, and facility expansions are in progress or under discussion in Windsor, Ottawa, Vancouver, and Calgary. Similar growth is going on around the world.

Toronto has already carved out an international reputation as a leisure destination, and “being known as a great place to go on holiday helps to sell the community as a meeting destination,” Hall said. But he cautioned against any effort to position the city as a low-cost destination: Toronto’s strong suit is its profile as a great place to live and to visit, and hotels need room rates that are high enough to support continued investment in facility improvements and maintenance.

Some of that refurbishment is underway in Ottawa, where Pat Kelly, president and chief executive officer of the Ottawa Congress Centre (OCC), stated that \$7 million in upgrades would be complete by autumn, 2007. Kelly said there is a “compelling” business case for an expanded OCC, noting that the capital city of a G-8 nation “needs and deserves a world-class facility.” Gail Morris, director of sales at the Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre (VCEC), reported that her facility would triple in size by the time its expansion project is complete in spring, 2009.

Kelly and Tom Price, director of meeting and convention sales and marketing with Ottawa Tourism, discussed different aspects of a destination marketing campaign that seeks to draw meetings and events to the community. Derek Coke-Kerr, managing director of Travel Alberta, said his organization has funded years of promotional activity aimed at the United States market.

This year, the province’s Strategic Tourism Marketing Council has called for a broader focus. “We will be investing more time and dollars generating leads around the world,” Coke-Kerr said.

Montreal’s NMID panel identified trained personnel, attendee safety, and cleanliness as key elements of a destination’s service promise.

Didier Rabette, vice president-business market (sales) with Tourisme Montréal, said a city's cleanliness is one factor determining visitors' sense of safety. He added that the most marketable destinations have landmarks like the Eiffel Tower or the Empire State Building, nice weather, the geography of a Rio de Janeiro, or the history of a Rome. But "our one landmark, the Olympic Stadium, is something that Montrealers detest." Montreal recently celebrated its 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but even that sense of history makes the city relatively young compared to European destinations.

One recent study concluded that Montreal is perceived as an "average" destination, a finding that Tourisme Montréal hopes to counter by focusing on the city's unique character and culture. But Rabette conceded that the limited sightseeing opportunities in the downtown core forces Montreal to excel in areas like service, cleanliness, and safety.

François-Gilbert Chevrier of the Quebec Tourism Intelligence Network, an initiative of the tourism program at l'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), noted that the top 10 destinations currently capture only 30% of the convention market, compared to 90% in the 1950s.

"With such an expansion in the number of destinations, how do you protect your market against new competition?" he asked. He identified the vitality of the downtown core as a key factor, suggesting that Rome's reputation as one of the world's dirtiest cities makes it difficult for the city to attract major events. One recent study identified the quality of meeting facilities, hotel personnel, and hotel rooms as three top factors determining site selection, ahead of price and ease of access. Another survey found that 57% of meeting planners look for excellent service onsite, compared to 24% who are motivated principally by price.

## Labour Force Issues

By far the most pressing issue facing the Canadian meetings economy in 2007 was the scramble to attract, train, and retain a qualified, motivated work force. While Alberta and British Columbia are seen as the epicentre of the labour shortage, the issue received some degree of attention in almost every MPI chapter, and was the principal focus of several local NMID events.

In Vancouver, MPI's British Columbia Chapter hosted a panel discussion led by Hon. Mike Harcourt, former premier of B.C. Harcourt said the experience of organizing the Expo '86 world fair had helped him understand the sheer breadth of the tourism and hospitality industry and its reliance on human capital.

### *A permanent demographic shift*

Labour economist Dr. Roslyn Kunin told the Vancouver meeting the labour shortage is likely to be a widespread and lasting problem, since the supply of workers is unlikely to keep pace with demand. Western Canada's economy is booming, British Columbia's unemployment rate is at a 30-year low, and the need for workers in construction and housing is being driven in part by hotel and convention centre projects.

Kunin said history has no precedent for Canada's current demographic picture. Age distribution charts typically form a pyramid, with a large concentration of young people at the bottom and older adults in dwindling numbers at the top. For the foreseeable future, Canada's population chart will look more like a lollipop, with very few children and young adults and a huge "ball" of people in their middle or retirement years. She said the trend is likely to continue at least to 2015, beyond the economic boom generated by the 2010 Olympics.

In Toronto, Wendy Swedlove, president of the Canadian Tourism Human Resources Council (CTHRC), said the hospitality and tourism sector will create 290,000 new jobs over the next 10 years. To meet that demand and account for employee turnover, the industry would need 500,000 new recruits, leading the Council to predict a shortfall of two million workers by 2015. The Council's director of communications and marketing, Jon Kiely, told the Ottawa NMID workshop the tourism sector's 164,000 businesses employ 10% of the Canadian labour force, a total of more than 1.6 million people.

Kiely said tourism relies heavily on a younger demographic: 33% of employees are aged 15 to 24. Only 64% of employees work full-time, and much of the work is seasonal. Swedlove agreed that tourism "won't suffer from an aging work force," but will see many of its employees "continually turn over" as they complete their education.

Karen Link, manager of Edmonton Workforce Connection (EWC), said Alberta's booming energy sector has created so much competition for labour that the labour market has shifted focus from job creation to employment productivity. She identified employee retention as the key issue for employers, agreeing with Calgary panelists that employers will have to be more flexible about meeting employees' needs.

In Calgary, Dr. Patricia Duffy Atkin, president of CEO Inc., noted that the labour shortage extends across sectors and national boundaries. In one factory in China, half of the work force declined to return to work after the Tet holidays. In Bulgaria, computer professionals are in such high demand that they don't bother returning calls from potential clients in Hollywood. Kunin added that strong demand for workers around the world might make the "magic answer" of immigration less effective for countries like Canada.

### ***Impacts on meetings and events***

Jacqui Nofball, director of human resources for the Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Centre, said the labour shortage will be a continuing challenge as the VCEC triples in size, particularly when the facility serves as the media centre for the Vancouver 2010 Olympics. Already, she said, the search for new employees takes longer than ever before. The facility has 200 regular employees, as well as an on-call work force of up to 500 sales, food and beverage, and security personnel who are often "shared" with other hospitality businesses to allow them more flexibility and better wages.

Richard Floody, chair of the British Columbia Restaurant and Food Services Association, said his industry faces an overall staffing shortfall of 13%. In communities like Whistler, local businesses are closing more often and cutting their hours of operation for lack of

employees. He said foreign worker initiatives aren't always practical for smaller businesses, although restaurant owners can try to retain staff by offering flexible time and good benefits or paying them a bonus for every new employee they refer.

Valerie Hunter, sales manager with the Banff Park Lodge, told the Calgary meeting that the mountain business is fully staffed for this year's tourist season, thanks largely to a foreign worker program that was recently extended to cover a full two years. "Having staff accommodation is a must for us," she said. "That's where Calgary has to go in the future."

Kerrie Blizzard, CMP, president of MPI's Greater Calgary Chapter and customer relations manager for the Calgary Stampede and Exhibit, brought the issue right back to the community's most enduring signature event. "We saw it last Stampede, and we know we'll see it this year," she said. While the Stampede is a place where young people want to work, they aren't available for daytime jobs during the school year. Organizers have approached the local public school board to set up a credit program for student placements.

A Calgary participant said one charter bus company had dealt with a staff shortage by recruiting retirees and providing a babysitting service for new mothers who are training as drivers. Another audience member said she had recently had a hotel refuse a guarantee for an event because there was no way to guarantee adequate staff. Blizzard agreed that "we're having to ask for our final numbers five days in advance, so our suppliers can ensure they have staff."

In Ottawa, a participant called for greater recognition of the intricacies of a meeting professional's work, noting that people are often parachuted into meetings positions with little experience and few qualifications. Jon Kiely said the Canadian Tourism Human Resources Council is working to build recognition of a broad range of industry certifications. He identified the need for an "integrated tourism learning system" that matches learning outcomes with national occupational standards, adding that employers need to recognize employees' qualifications and provide opportunities for training. Many employers worry about spending \$500 to train an employee who might leave, he said, but the best reply to that question is: "What if you don't, and they stay?"

An Ottawa participant stressed the importance of educating human resource officers about the industry and its designations, especially the Certified Meeting Professional (CMP). The group also discussed the long-term process of raising students' awareness of meetings as a career option, beginning as early as elementary school. Kiely said the CTHRC runs the Canadian Academy of Travel and Tourism, a program that creates short-term work placements for senior high school students.

### ***Broader economic implications***

Heather Douglas, president and CEO of the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, estimated that the community is about 100,000 employees short. Although Calgary's population is one of the youngest and best educated in Canada, changing demographics have taken a toll—and by 2015, most baby boomers will have retired.

“People have choices, and employers have a lack of choices,” agreed Sharlene Massie, president of About Staffing. “We thought of last year as hostage-taking. Employers had to keep throwing money out there to attract people to their companies.” That strategy won’t be affordable over time, so “the challenge now is to rethink how to get people to choose your company over the rest of the world.” Douglas commented, “Young people want snowboard Fridays”; one company had agreed to split a job between two women with MBAs who wanted more time with their children.

In Edmonton, human resources professional Doug Alloway underscored the need for a new level of flexibility. “It’s difficult these days to enforce things like punctuality,” he said. “We have to be a bit more patient than in the past. Otherwise, we’d have no one working for us.”

### *Attracting the new work force*

In Ottawa, Jon Kiely of the Canadian Tourism Human Resources Council identified youth, Aboriginal people, new Canadians, people with disabilities, and retirees as under-represented labour groups that should be drawn into the sector. He stressed that a specific, tailored recruitment and retention strategy will be needed for each cluster.

Youth can be divided into two groups, Kiely said: career-seekers and part-timers. The members of Generation Y—the children of baby boomers—were born between 1978 and 1994 and are typically motivated by causes, not companies. They value experience over stability, and are expressive but blunt. They are impatient for information, because they have never had to wait for it. For this group, one performance review a year is not enough—they need more regular feedback. They are a high-performance, high-maintenance group that expects constant learning and new challenges.

- Career seekers are attracted by opportunity and entrepreneurship, and are retained through fast-track positions, professional development, and recognition, he said. Part-timers are attracted to learning opportunities, and are looking for jobs that support their lifestyle with tuition and spending money. They stay with jobs that offer training and transferable skills, the opportunity to return season after season, and opportunities for career advancement.
- Canada’s Aboriginal population is growing faster than the national average, but Kiely said Aboriginal workers don’t always identify with the tourism sector, even if they already work there. He said many Aboriginal people are attracted to employers that build strong relationships with their home communities.
- New Canadians are expected to account for all of Canada’s net population growth within the next decade.
- People with disabilities represent another large potential labour pool. Kiely said only 24% of the employees in this group require special accommodations at work, and those adaptations are not usually difficult to introduce. An important first step for employers is to recognize the wide range of disabilities that exist and seek out individual employees whose abilities match specific jobs.

- An enormous number of baby boomers will retire over the next decade. But many mature workers can be re-engaged by employers that can accommodate their interest in seasonal jobs with flexible physical demands.

### *Motivating the work force*

At the Calgary meeting, MPI International Chairman Mark Andrew, CMP, CHA recalled the high school exhibit that inspired his son to consider a career laying cement: the buildings sector had positioned itself as the only industry with a future, offering great salaries and opportunities to work anywhere in the world. “We have an industry that’s really exciting,” Andrew said. “We have the human connection, and we work with people from all walks of life.” But so far, meeting professionals have not delivered that message to future employees.

“It’s incredible how absent we are and how non-absent other industries are,” he said. “So we need to ask ourselves—is there really a shortage of people, or is there an absence of want?”

Vancouver panelist Ted Wykes, past chair of the Thompson Rivers University School of Tourism, said many tourism graduates are recruited by the financial services industry, where their customer service skills are in high demand. In Halifax, a panel of human resources strategists chaired by the past president of the local Chamber of Commerce, Neville Gilfoy, agreed that banks, call centres, and retailers are competing for hospitality employees. The sector has a long history of strong training programs, and tends to attract organized, critical thinkers who are also friendly and natural “people persons.”

The panel identified the hospitality sector’s low wages and failure to recognize skills, quality, or the money spent on a post-secondary education as factors that inhibit employee retention. The results are telling. “Ten years ago, if I placed an ad for a kitchen steward, 200 people would show up wearing suits,” one panelist said. “Now, I’m lucky if I get 10 applicants.”

The Halifax panel agreed that younger workers bring different expectations and mindsets to the work force. They want jobs that allow them time to have a life, and many of them have personal responsibilities that preclude the 14-hour work days that might have been standard for earlier generations. One Ottawa participant said today’s youth may be less willing to make an unlimited commitment to an employer, after seeing their parents’ hard work rewarded with layoffs. But their work ethic is strong, even if they crave flexibility and a better work/life balance.

In Calgary, Patricia Duffy Atkin cited a recent Conference Board of Canada study in which employees expressed a desire for challenging jobs, two-way communication, and opportunities for growth. Calgary panelists said the meetings industry could meet that challenge by positioning itself as an interesting, edgy place to work, training employees to work outside their main areas of responsibility, and being prepared to pay overtime.

Karen Link said Edmonton Workforce Connection has developed a five-year labour market forecast and a suite of promotional materials to support employee recruitment efforts, as well as a best practices toolkit for attracting, hiring, and retaining Aboriginal

employees. The organization has run an international student retention campaign, as well as a job-shadowing program that brought several high school students to work at the Shaw Conference Centre.

Edmonton panelists said meetings industry employers could improve their ability to attract and retain employees by:

- Ensuring that everyone involved in screening prospective employees is trained to “hire right” by asking suitable interview questions
- Finding out what benefits employees want—whether the answer is laser eye surgery, an airline ticket, a holiday weekend in Jasper, or a movie pass—rather than making assumptions about which incentives will attract new workers
- Inviting younger workers to recruit friends to work with them, thereby creating a sense of engagement and belonging
- Offering courses for employees who want to improve their English, along the lines of the English as a Second Language (ESL) program at the Shaw Conference Centre
- Targeting recruitment according to the career paths that different employees want
- Allowing flexibility across the work year, as well as the work week, to accommodate mature workers. “Sure, let your employee go to Phoenix for four months,” Alloway said, “as long as you get them for the other eight.”

In Vancouver, Arlene Keis, CEO of go2, said organizations could win the “war for talent” by:

- Attracting employees with superior compensation, benefits, workplace culture, and opportunities for growth and leadership
- Recruiting managers who will retain existing employees by treating them with respect
- Becoming a “learning organization” that identifies and trains awesome employees and offers them opportunities to advance (in Ottawa, a participant asked what role a strategic meetings management program could play in this process)
- Recruiting older adults, Aboriginal people, new Canadians, youth at risk, people with disabilities, and members of other under-represented labour groups
- Recruiting workers from other communities across Canada, and from other countries

Participants in Montreal said tourism businesses could promote employee retention by encouraging employees to share ideas and best practices, funding job exchanges and other mentoring opportunities, creating internship programs and other forms of

partnership with students, encouraging employees to plan long-term career paths, and offering better working conditions with more flexibility.

In Toronto and Ottawa, panelists Wendy Swedlove and Jon Kiely said the Canadian Tourism Human Resources Council is reaching out to under-represented groups with the message that hospitality is a fun industry, with opportunities that go far beyond the perception of “McJobs.” Swedlove commented, “We spent 20 years dealing with that image problem, and it’s getting better.”

Although tourism will never be able to match the wages offered by high technology or other industrial sectors, the CTHRC’s Jon Kiely told the Ottawa meeting that pay rates in the tourism sector should rise. He added that the lifestyle aspect of working in tourism is a selling point: tourism operators can offer flexibility, fun, opportunities for advancement, and a range of careers.

Yet Vancouver panelist Ted Wykes said as many as 80% of tourism graduates leave the industry within two years. In Edmonton, Jewel Buksa, president of Buksa Conference Management, said employee retention strategies could be difficult for small companies to implement. On the other hand, a smaller, more nimble organization can make it easier for employees to initiate change, influence their own job situations, and help create a form of learning organization—as long as their learning is self-directed.

“It’s a very customized learning path,” she said. “It’s not always about a designation.”

### ***A rebirth for customer service***

In Montreal, the Quebec Tourism Intelligence Network’s François-Gilbert Chevrier identified the labour force as the industry’s most precious resource, but recalled one catering company that had been willing to hire anyone who owned a pair of black pants. “Think about that,” he said. “You are entrusting the most important part of your business—customer service—to someone whose principal competency is their wardrobe.”

Adèle Girard, director of the Quebec Tourism Human Resources Council, cited employee training as a factor that can help companies out-perform their competition. “You are a misunderstood resource, particularly meeting planners,” she told participants. “You are an important part of the tourism sector, and you have an enormous impact in determining the quality of the sector’s human resources.”

Girard said the sector’s challenge is not to attract employees, so much as to retain them in a labour market where sellers are in higher demand. One recent study found that 60% of tourism businesses are prepared to hire new staff without an interview, and employers must often offer flexible working hours or on-the-job training to keep employees in place.

She noted that only 20,000 employees in Quebec have received basic customer service training, compared to 300,000 in British Columbia. “We have people with college or university degrees who still haven’t received the most basic training,” she said, adding that quality control is particularly difficult for the very small businesses that make up more than half of Quebec’s tourism sector.

## Virtual Meetings and Technology

In Ottawa, one of three keynote presentations dealt with what will change in the business of meetings as the result of virtual technologies—and what will remain the same. Richard Worzel of futuresearch.com noted that “telepresence” would soon make it possible for speakers to address and interact with participants from a distance of thousands of kilometres.

The option raises practical questions about the fee the speaker would command, the money saved through virtual presence, and the added cost of transporting specialized equipment and a technician to maintain it. But Worzel said the broader question is whether participants would be disappointed to hear a high-profile keynote by virtual means—or whether there are times when some access to a speaker like Alan Greenspan or Bill Clinton is better than none.

“You need to think about what you want from your speaker,” Worzel advised, including the degree of interaction between speaker and audience after the formal presentation concludes. “Think about the emotional impact, not just what they say.” For most participants, he said meetings are about face-to-face contact and interaction, not just acquiring information: “Hiring a speaker is not just about getting a speech but about delivering impact, and telepresence just can’t do that—yet.”

## Preparing for the Unexpected: Climate Change, Pandemic Flu, and the Transition to Green Meetings

At least half of the MPI communities that took part in National Meetings Industry Day defined the business of meetings in a way that included a focus on environmental and economic sustainability.

In Vancouver, the British Columbia Chapter chose the Portland, OR-based Green Meeting Industry Council as the recipient of its 2007 Influence Award. In Toronto, the Influence Award went to the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, in part because of the facility’s commitment to hosting zero-waste events. And Ottawa and Winnipeg both incorporated green features in their onsite plans for NMID.

In Ottawa, medical geographer Dr. Kirsty Duncan focused on two pressing issues that will affect the broad sustainability of meetings and events: climate change and pandemic influenza.

Offering a brief overview of some of the realities of climate change, she noted that by 2050, 1,200 people in Toronto alone would die each year as a result of extreme heat—compared to just 180 in all of Canada today. Climate change will also lead to more extreme weather events such as flooding, hurricanes, and tornadoes, with severe impacts for travel, tourism, and human health.

Duncan said meeting professionals can offer more environmentally friendly meetings by considering sustainable travel options, destinations, and meeting facilities. Where air

travel is required, planners can offset greenhouse gas emissions by buying carbon credits or planting trees.

Pandemic influenza should be another issue of concern for meeting professionals, Duncan said. Like the Spanish flu of 1918, which killed more than 50 million people in just one year, the current strain of avian influenza can be transmitted to humans and attacks young, healthy adults.

In 1918, the disease sickened half the population, closing government offices and schools and contributing to staggering losses to business. The World Health Organization (WHO) believes another pandemic is inevitable, if not imminent. Duncan warned that all communities will be affected, widespread illness will occur, and 15–30% of the global population will likely be affected.

Describing a pandemic scenario, Duncan asked participants to imagine a 12- to 18-month global blizzard as the outbreak circulates around the world, hitting local areas for four- to eight-week periods, sometimes more than once. Governments will have limited resources to respond; and 20–30% of the work force will be absent at any one time. Even in the worst-case scenario, however, 98% of the population will survive. But businesses must have contingency plans in place to protect employee health and to maintain business continuity, and meeting professionals should be prepared for restrictions on travel or large gatherings.

In a breakout discussion following Duncan's presentation, an Ottawa participant suggested a link between emergency preparedness and Richard Worzel's comments on virtual meetings. "We may have to work virtual communications into all our planning so we can be part of the solution," she said.

Another participant said a broader commitment to environmentally responsible events would mean making meetings more sustainable in "normal" times, perhaps by incorporating virtual technology. Several attendees stressed the need for information, workshops, and tools to help make green meetings a reality.

"There is lots of good will, but confusion over how to translate that into action," a participant said. Audience members agreed that planners can create demand for suppliers to green their operations—but will move in that direction more quickly and consistently if their own clients require it. "Our role as meeting planners is to market to our audience," an attendee said, but it is also important to get the message to employers and industry leaders so that greener meetings become their expectation, too.

Participants said there is less concern about added costs associated with green meetings. Many green measures actually reduce the cost of operating an event or an event facility, and human, ethical, and moral benefits must be factored in. One participant said her organization had arranged a sponsor to fund a carbon-neutral conference.