

Quality standards

AIPC President **Edgar Hirt** introduces a valuable tool for both centres and clients.



In today's complex and competitive market, convention centre clients need, more than ever, some reliable means of assessing the performance of a given facility, while centres themselves need a way to demonstrate their accomplishments. That immediately suggests some form of rating or accreditation that would help both.

The problem has been that for a very long time, no such accreditation has existed. Yes, there were credentials that could be adapted from other areas, such as hospitality or manufacturing, but these

generally failed to really reflect the kinds of performance important to the management of a centre. At the same time, there were credentials developed in particular countries or regions, but these lacked the universality required by clients who were regularly looking for venues worldwide because of their event rotation.

It was for this reason that AIPC undertook a few years back the seemingly overwhelming task of developing a performance standard specific to convention centres. The reason it seemed overwhelming was due to the fact that the huge variation in centres worldwide made it very difficult to imagine, let alone develop, standards that would accommodate all.

To be universally applicable, such standards would have to meet a number of tests:

First, they needed to be flexible and adaptable to a wide variety of facility types, ages and configurations. Second, they needed to be seen from a client perspective, so they were relevant to the market. Third, they had to be 'graduated' in order to give participating centres a way forward in addressing any performance issues. Finally, they needed to be seen as having been developed and maintained by an external body like AIPC, using an external auditor, rather than by individual facilities or groups of facilities, in order to maintain their credibility.

To achieve this, the AIPC board authorised a four-step process. Step one was to review other quality standard models, as well as centre operations, and define key areas where a quality standard was appropriate.

Step two was to draft an AIPC version of quality standards based on this research and 'test' these categories with representative member centres.

Step three was to set out a procedure that would allow centres that wish to adopt the AIPC quality standards guidelines to do so through an initial self-audit, and finally, there was a step four which consisted of a formal process that would allow centres to document their accomplishments and have these reviewed by an external auditor.

The standards that were developed addressed 10 key areas of centre management: Customer Service, Quality of Facilities and Operations, Employee Relations, Health, Safety, Security and Emergency Response, Financial Integrity, Community Relations, Environmental Responsibility, Industry Relations and Supplier Relations. The process was essentially one of having to have demonstrated measurable policies and procedures in place for each area in a form that could be reviewed and assessed by the auditor.

This process has now been completed, and to date, seven centres - the Brighton Centre; Sibelius Hall, Congress and Concert Centre Lahti; the Kursaal Centre, San Sebastian; the Lisboa Congress Centre; the Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre; Finlandia Hall, Helsinki and the Melbourne Exhibition and Convention Centre have achieved the accreditation set out in the Quality Standards programme.

At AIPC, our challenge now is to facilitate as many members as possible to achieve this distinction. We realise it's another demand on centre managers who are already very busy with meeting client expectations. However, it is a way for centres to distinguish themselves for their performance in a way that will be increasingly recognised in today's highly competitive market.

AIPC is an international association of over 160 of the world's leading convention and exhibition centres.

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