

Human resources: a crisis in the making



Alternating with AIPC president Barbara Maple's bi-monthly contribution, we open a platform for the association's members to pass on some insights. The first to step forward is Calgary TELUS Convention Centre's Marcia Lyons.

Over the past few years, the meetings industry has understandably devoted a lot of its energy to dealing with visible crises such as the impacts of war and terrorism and the economic slump. But during this same period, there has been another, more subtle crisis developing which we (in common with most other industries) have largely ignored.

That issue is the fact that our human resources, a key commodity we all count on to carry out our business activities, are in increasingly short supply. Something we've taken for granted for many years – a continuing source of competent, qualified people to perform key functions – may well become the weakest link in the supply chain, and our greatest challenge as business managers.

And this is not a passing issue, it is one that will present a major challenge for decades to come.

The signs have been with us for a number of years, and we should have seen them coming. Demographics are the biggest factor, as years of aging populations combined with low birthrates have, in many countries, created a population heavily weighted toward older workers now contemplating retirement. At the same time, there have been fundamental changes in workplace dynamics and expectations.

As this situation evolves, we will face the tightest labour market in more than 50 years. And we're simply not prepared. Here are only a few of the tough questions that need to be answered:

First, how do we address a 'seller's market' in the labour force? Do we offer more money? More benefits? More flexibility? In fact, do we really even know what a new generation of workers are looking for and how we can respond to their demands?

Secondly, what does this situation mean to our industry and the organisations we represent? More cost? Less experience, and thus reduced consistency in servicing? And how does this square with a market with increasingly higher service expectations?

And, finally, what does it mean to us? Where will we be forced to concentrate our energies to ensure success? Developing retention strategies? Creating attractive career paths to attract new recruits? Putting more time and attention into training and development?

These questions will require innovation; we will have to explore

new areas such as non-traditional partnerships and rethink what constitutes a work force. But none of these things will happen without taking that first step, and recognising there is an issue we need to deal with now.

Liverpool, Adelaide and Bologna join the fold

The International Association of Congress Centres approved three new members at its June board meeting, bringing its membership up to 149 in 53 countries. The newcomers are: Arena and Convention Centre, Liverpool; Adelaide Convention Centre, and Palazzo della Cultura e dei Congressi, Bologna. They follow closely on other centres new to the AIPC fold, including Toronto Congress Centre, Hyderabad ICC and Expocentr Moscow.

The keynote address, 'Forward looking', at IMEX in Frankfurt this year was delivered by AIPC president Barbara Maple. And a joint seminar with IAPCO in Frankfurt, 'Carving up the financial pie: who gets which slice?' explored the pressures on congress centres and PCOs to deliver high client expectations within the current economic climate. The need to balance revenues against economic impact was underlined by many speakers.

While alliances, incentives, procurement policies and the role of intermediaries were among the topics at the AIPC day-long international sales and marketing summit at IMEX, attended by 40 delegates.

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