



## INDUSTRY VIEWS

All about community



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# OH CANADA

**Sven Bossu** shares the insights he gained at AIPC's first event Canada Academy.

**A**t our first ever Canada Academy, we brought together 36 leaders from 15 Canadian convention centres. During the four-day training we shared insights on the specificities of the Canadian market and the similarities with the global community of convention centres. It turned out that despite a diversity in venues, the challenges faced are very similar. What stands out, however, is the level of collaboration and sharing of data.

Together with our strategic partner, the Convention Centres of Canada (CCoC), AIPC organised the first ever Canada Academy. Of the 22 convention centres which are a member of CCoC, 15 sent one or more upcoming leaders to Toronto, where the training took place. It turned out that the diversity in venues can only be rivalled by the diversity of landscapes in this vast country.

Canada is indeed the second largest country in the world, with a surface of 9.98 million km<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, it ranks only 37th when it comes to population, with 40 million inhabitants. Just as a comparison: Belgium, my home country, has 11.5 million inhabitants on a surface of ... 30 689 km<sup>2</sup>. So, distance is a completely different concept in Canada.

### THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES

We started the training with an open question: what are the biggest challenges you face? The resulting avalanche of answers made it very clear: there are a number of hurdles to be taken before making it back to 2019 levels in terms of activity and P&L (profit and loss). Similar to venues across the globe, costs and labour are the biggest concerns. This was echoed during the CEO-panel debate we had on the first day.

When asked what kept them awake at night, the answer was unanimous: burnout. The increase in demand, combined with a lack of staff, has resulted in an increase of pressure on the staff and consequently in staff turnover, which has more than tripled compared to the situation before the pandemic. There are no obvious answers to this, but one of the CEOs took the bold move to have a close look at event bookings and decided to drastically reduce the number of events hosted, focusing on those with the highest profitability. This allowed more "breathing time" for the teams, while impacting as little as possible on bottom-line figures.

These bottom-line figures are of course also impacted by rising cost. While overall inflation in Canada has dropped to 3.62% in 2023 (from 6.8% in 2022), Canadian food prices are still expected to go up by 7% this year. Once again, there's no magic solution, but becoming more sustainable might have a positive impact. Local sourcing and going seasonal can reduce food cost without impacting the delegate experience.

### BENCHMARKING WITH TRANSPARENCY

So, no surprises when it comes to the challenges. But the contrary was the case when it came to the sharing of data and bundling forces in the field of advocacy. All 22 venues which are part of CCoC committed to participating to a yearly benchmarking report, providing detailed information on HR & labour metrics, food & beverage, revenue & utilisation, operating costs & profitability, event bookings & profile. All this information is collected and processed by a third party (HLT Advisory) and turned into a report which is shared with the full CCoC community.

As a result, venues of a similar size can compare each other's revenues, expected performance, and much more. All in full transparency!

### COLLABORATIVE ADVOCACY

The other thing which stood out is the joining of forces when it comes to advocacy. Nina Kressler, who is president and CEO of the Shaw Centre in Ottawa, played a pivotal role during the pandemic and explained how the Canadian event industry came together to make the case to allow events to take place, mainly by educating authorities on a local, provincial and federal level on the importance of the industry. Just as an illustration: business events have a CA\$47 billion (R638.3 billion) impact, creating 242 000 direct jobs, with an average spend of CA\$901 (R12 235) per delegate per event. What was striking for me is the fact that 'Meetings Mean Business' – as the alliance is called – is not asking for more money, but rather for more time for businesses to pay back their debt and a tailored approach to remove barriers to recovery and support initiatives which bring events to Canada.

It was a great experience to meet so many Canadian colleagues but the key take-away for me was the level of collaboration to grow as a community. Truly impressive. 4