Stakeholder Challenges – Top Challenges that Stakeholders are Facing

Executive Overview

Association stakeholders are navigating a period of unprecedented disruption characterized by economic uncertainty, rapid technological advancement, workforce transformation, political volatility, and changing member expectations. While individual challenges vary by function and organization size, a clear pattern emerges: associations are being asked to evolve faster than ever while operating with constrained resources and increasing accountability.

The challenges identified by stakeholders fall into eight interconnected categories: leadership and workforce capacity, member value and engagement, technology and AI transformation, financial sustainability, governance and volunteer leadership, global growth and complexity, learning and professional development, and trust in an increasingly polarized environment.

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1. Leadership Capacity and Talent Development

One of the most pressing challenges facing associations is developing leaders capable of guiding organizations through increased complexity and change.

Stakeholders highlighted concerns related to:

- Executive recruitment and succession planning
- Sustainable leadership models
- CEO transitions
- Building C-suite competencies
- Leadership capacity constraints
- Workforce shortages
- Skills gaps across the profession

Many organizations are experiencing more frequent CEO transitions, creating disruption for staff, volunteer leaders, and strategic initiatives. At the same time, leaders are expected to possess increasingly sophisticated skills in strategy, finance, technology, governance, communications, and change management.

A significant challenge is ensuring professionals have opportunities to develop expertise without necessarily pursuing executive leadership roles. Stakeholders emphasized the need for meaningful career pathways tied to competencies, specializations, and professional recognition rather than solely hierarchical advancement.

Key Challenges

- Limited leadership pipelines
- Succession planning gaps
- Insufficient preparation for CEO and executive roles
- Managing organizational change with limited staff capacity
- Recruiting and retaining future leaders
- Balancing increased expectations with workforce constraints

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2. Demonstrating and Delivering Member Value

The most frequently cited challenge was demonstrating member value in an increasingly competitive and distracted environment.

Associations face mounting pressure to justify membership costs as organizations and individuals face tighter budgets, competing priorities, and growing expectations for personalized experiences.

Stakeholders consistently identified challenges in:

- Member recruitment
- Retention and engagement
- Communicating value
- Personalizing benefits
- Redesigning membership models
- Standing out in a crowded information landscape

Many organizations are exploring alternatives to traditional membership structures, including subscription-based models and tailored engagement experiences. However, determining the right balance between efficiency, personalization, and scalability remains difficult.

Key Challenges

- Shrinking attention spans and engagement
- Increased scrutiny of membership investments
- Changing member expectations
- Healthcare and industry-specific market shifts
- Retaining relevance amid expanding information sources
- Demonstrating measurable organizational impact

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3. Technology, AI, and Digital Transformation

Nearly every stakeholder group identified technology transformation as both a major opportunity and a significant challenge.

Organizations must adapt to rapidly evolving technologies while balancing innovation, risk management, ethics, governance, and workforce readiness.

Particular concern exists around:

- AI adoption and implementation
- Generative and agentic AI
- Cybersecurity threats
- Data privacy regulations
- Technology budgeting
- Staff training and adoption
- AI governance policies

Many leaders understand the importance of AI but struggle to move from awareness to practical implementation. There is also growing concern about ensuring AI adoption enhances organizational effectiveness without compromising trust, transparency, or stakeholder interests.

Key Challenges

- Translating AI into practical business applications
- Keeping pace with technological change
- Training staff across all functions
- Managing cybersecurity risk
- Establishing effective AI governance
- Balancing automation with human-centered experiences

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4. Financial Sustainability and Resource Constraints

Associations continue to face increasing financial pressure as traditional revenue models evolve and operating costs rise.

Stakeholders identified multiple financial challenges, including:

- Revenue diversification
- Rising health insurance costs
- Loss of grants and external funding
- Increased competition
- Budget uncertainty
- Non-dues revenue development

Meeting professionals noted particular concerns around budgeting for events amid economic uncertainty and increased competition from for-profit organizations entering the meetings and education marketplace.

Across organizations, leaders are being asked to accomplish more with fewer resources, creating significant capacity challenges.

Key Challenges

- Resource constraints
- Budget unpredictability
- Event profitability pressures
- Revenue diversification requirements
- Healthcare market disruption
- Demonstrating return on investment

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5. Governance, Volunteers, and Organizational Alignment

Governance challenges remain a significant concern across the association sector.
Stakeholders pointed to ongoing issues such as:

- Board and staff role confusion
- Lack of strategic direction
- Volunteer engagement difficulties
- Board preparedness
- Chapter and affiliate relationships
- Governance during leadership transitions

Many organizations struggle to recruit and retain volunteers due to competing professional demands and limited availability. Associations increasingly need engagement opportunities that are flexible, meaningful, and scalable.

Trust within the broader association ecosystem also emerged as a priority, particularly as organizations seek alignment among boards, staff, chapters, volunteers, and members.

Key Challenges

- Clarifying governance roles and decision-making authority
- Recruiting and retaining volunteers
- Preparing board leaders for their responsibilities
- Scaling volunteer engagement
- Building trust across stakeholder groups
- Managing chapter relationships effectively

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6. Global Expansion and International Complexity

Associations operating internationally face increasingly complex strategic and operational challenges.

Organizations must determine how to create globally relevant member experiences while respecting local cultures, regulations, languages, and market dynamics.

Leaders are grappling with questions such as:

- What should be globally standardized versus locally adapted?
- What international operating model is most appropriate?
- How can organizations manage geopolitical risk?
- How can global investments demonstrate mission and financial returns?

Associations must also navigate growing complexity related to:

- Data privacy regulations
- Tax compliance
- International payments
- Employment laws
- Travel requirements
- Political instability

Key Challenges

- Balancing consistency and localization
- Governing international operations effectively
- Managing global risk and compliance
- Building trust across cultures
- Demonstrating global value and impact

7. Learning, Professional Development, and Knowledge Sharing
Stakeholders identified significant challenges in both delivering and measuring professional development.

Many organizations continue to rely on traditional metrics such as attendance and satisfaction scores, yet boards and stakeholders increasingly expect evidence of:

- Knowledge acquisition
- Skill development
- Behavioral change
- Organizational impact

Associations also face pressure to design learning experiences for increasingly diverse audiences, including professionals at different career stages, varying levels of expertise, and different accessibility needs.

There is also a missed opportunity to better leverage and share successful innovations and award-winning practices developed by association professionals.

Key Challenges

- Demonstrating learning impact
- Supporting diverse learner needs
- Designing accessible learning experiences
- Building meaningful career pathways
- Capturing and sharing proven practices
- Securing leadership investment in professional development

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8. Trust, Reputation, and Navigating a Polarized Environment
Associations are increasingly operating within politically charged and socially complex environments.

Stakeholders expressed concerns regarding:

- Political polarization
- Immigration issues
- Regulatory uncertainty
- Public trust
- Social discourse
- Organizational positioning on societal issues

Leaders must make decisions in environments where information is incomplete, conditions are changing rapidly, and stakeholder expectations often conflict.
Associations face growing pressure to maintain their role as trusted sources of information while avoiding actions that could damage member relationships, business partnerships, or public