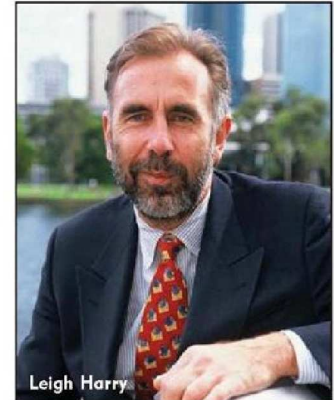


View from the bridge

The Joint Meetings Industry Council now has permanent funding and a new structure. President **Leigh Harry** draws some valuable conclusions from the recession and provides a unique view into the meetings industry's future.



Leigh Harry



JOINT MEETINGS INDUSTRY COUNCIL

What is JMIC?

JMIC was established in 1978 as a vehicle for exchanging information and perspectives among international associations engaged with the meetings industry. It meets annually and serves as a means of reviewing industry conditions and strategies and a link between its member organisations.

The Council consists of its member associations. At present, these are:

AIPC (the International Association of Congress Centres);
COCAL (the Latin American Confederation of PCO and Related Companies);
DMAI (Destination Marketing Association International);
ECM (European Cities Marketing);
EFAPCO (the European Federation of Associations of Professional Congress Organisers);
EVVC (the European Association of Event Centres);
IAPCO (the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers);
ICCA (the International Congress and Convention Association);
MPI (Meeting Professionals International);
PCMA (the Professional Convention Association Management Association);
SITE (the Society of Incentive & Travel Executives);
UFI (the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry).

JMIC now has "a permanent presence and an ongoing programme of industry advocacy". What will this mean?

For most of JMIC's 50-year history, the administration was rotated among member organisations, which limited a more extensive role. Administration will be maintained as a separate entity and the Chair will rotate among members. This has enabled the development of a programme that can be delivered on a multi-year basis. Funding has been organised and an activity plan approved by members. We are now rolling out the programme as our resources allow and developing a framework for our interactions with other industry interests.

How does JMIC's initiative differ from other industry associations and consortium groups?

Our membership is global. However, we will continue to make sure our messaging and activities are complementary to what others are doing.

It has not always been possible to present a united front simply because there are so many industry players. By having an organisation that represents the majority of major industry associations, we are in a position to address that weakness and present a collective position, rather than one that just represents the views of one sector.

Will the council begin government lobbying efforts on behalf of its members?

Our initial priority will be encouraging consistency of messaging and providing the tools to help deliver those messages more effectively. We need to achieve consensus and define positioning for key issues which can then be used in whatever way is likely to have the greatest impact.

In some cases that will be through JMIC as an overall industry representative, but we expect that much of the ongoing communications will still be at a regional or national level, by organisations most directly

engaged in specific areas. That is where the arguments in support of the industry have the most relevance and impact. However, we will be able to apply the full weight of collective industry opinion when that is called for.

How has the financial crisis affected the sector?

The meetings industry was affected in distinct ways in various parts of the world, depending on how hard the underlying economy was hit. Events were either reduced or cancelled in response to financial constraints. However, there was also damage inflicted on the overall image of meetings in various places, where they came to be seen as an unnecessary extravagance in a time of crisis. There was a real irony to this, as meetings were in fact a key element in stimulating economic recovery.

In some cases, government meetings and related travel were cancelled as a restraint measure, thereby demonstrating that governments did not attach a lot of importance to their role. At the same time, there were reductions in support for infrastructure development and marketing at a time when the local industry really needed a boost.

Overall, however, the industry demonstrated remarkable resiliency. That's a very encouraging sign for the future. Now there are signs that meetings-related travel is helping prop up hotel and airline activity at a time when other forms of travel are still lagging.

We have a long way to go in terms of making governments and communities understand the role meetings and conventions play in driving economic development. We should have been among the first industries to be looked to for economic stimulation, but weren't in many parts of the world simply because we are not well recognised. We were seen as part

of the problem rather than as an essential element in the process of economic recovery.

We will always react to the state of the overall economy, but as a long term business I believe we can do a better job of coming up with ways to ride out the down cycles.

Where will future growth come from?

Once the recession is over, we can expect to see a return to increasing globalisation. That will drive the importance of meetings, conventions and exhibitions because these are critical elements in the process of economic transition. In terms of specific sectors, growth in our business will inevitably be tied to those sectors where the greatest economic development activity is taking place.

As new forms of communication have been growing, there has been no corresponding reduction in meetings activities. In fact, meetings are now less about information exchange than they are about building personal relationships and networks because that's the one thing you can't replicate electronically.

What emerging trends do you see for the industry?

Meetings are evolving, and not just because of the impacts of the recession. They are becoming a lot more complex, and both planners and suppliers will have to respond to that. There is also a lot more concern around measurability, because both delegates and those who pay their way want to see a good return on their investment.

New technology will be an ongoing factor, because it can enhance the content of meetings and facilitate the trend toward more direct engagement of delegates into

their actual design. However, there is likely to be lots of trial and error as everyone sorts through what truly enhances the meetings experience and what is simply a novelty.

Finally, I think we can expect to see some of the challenges of growth re-emerge as the economy moves into a full recovery. For example, demographics suggest that we will be dealing with skilled labour shortages in many areas once there is greater competition for human resources, and we may find challenges as delegates have to again compete more aggressively for accommodation and flights.

'Meetings are evolving, and not just because of the impacts of the recession.'

What is your evaluation of the evolution experienced in the meeting sector over the last five years?

There is an increasing recognition of the fact that meetings are all about business and professional development rather than simply a form of tourism. That is an important distinction, particularly in a time when the focus is on economic recovery, but it also means we must do a better job of interacting with the business and professional communities to explain the difference.

In the future, we will increasingly be called upon to justify investments by both governments and corporations in the meetings sector, and we can only do this if we make it a priority and have the

measures and arguments organised to respond effectively.

What do you think the strengths and weaknesses are of the meeting sector?

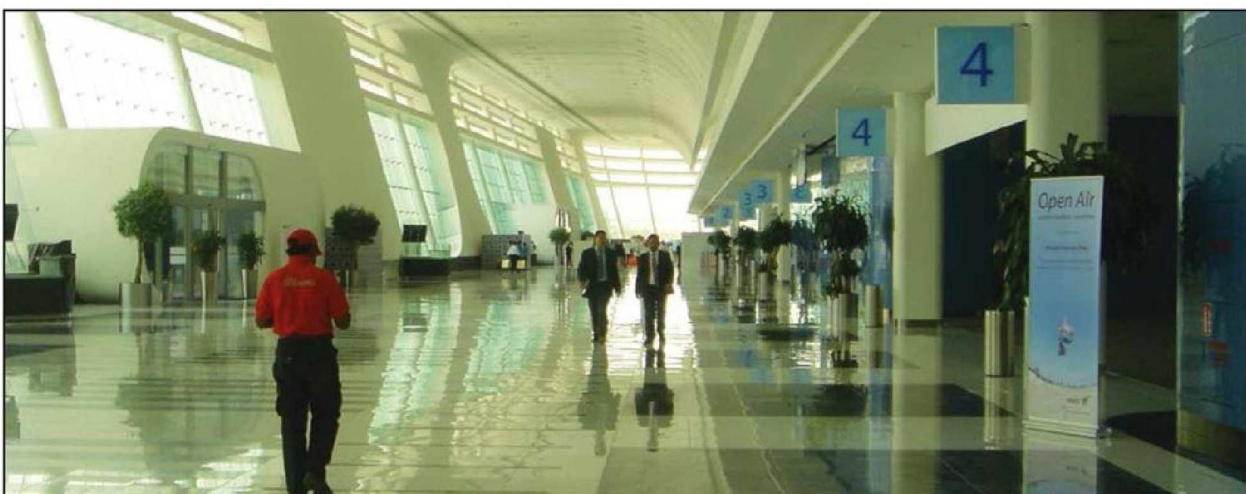
Our biggest strength is that we are a factor in every profession and business because meetings are how things get done in today's economy. We also have the strength of the fact that a desire and a need for face to face interactions is a fundamental human characteristic, and technology has done little to change that.

In terms of weaknesses, I'd say that number one is a lack of profile as a distinct sector and a lack of understanding of the value we create. We are a rather fragmented industry, and we have often been seen as a part of tourism, which has weakened our arguments about the role we play in economic development. Fortunately, these are all areas that can be addressed.

We don't expect that things will simply 'go back to normal' after the recession is over, but that there will in fact be a 'new normal'. The actions we have taken as an industry have been largely aimed at being better positioned to respond to challenges, such as placing more emphasis on things like education, research and advocacy, and these will be valuable in both good times and bad.

Having said that, some valuable lessons were learned, such as the importance of business diversification as a hedge against economic downturn. These lessons will be very useful for future planning.

Leigh Harry is also chief executive of Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre and president of ICCA.



A need for face to face interactions is fundamental, but industry weakness No.1 is lack of profile as a distinct sector, says Leigh Harry