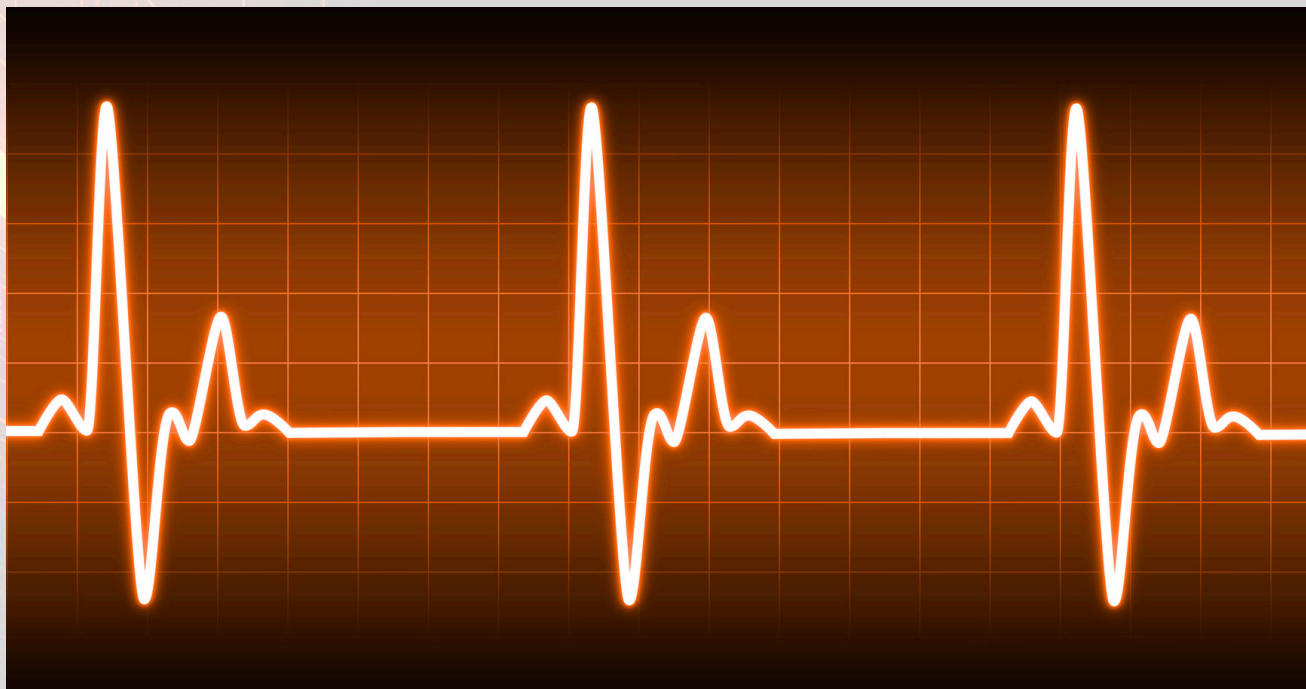


af FIRE REPORT

Forces, Insights, Risks &
Evolution (FIRE) Report Brief:
A Strategic Sector Outlook

2026-2028

Powering Tomorrow, Now.



THE OPENING PULSE

This is not another survey. The Association Forum (AF) FIRE Report Brief delivers a strategic snapshot of the sector—capturing the insights, risks, and forces shaping the future of associations during this pivotal moment in history. It distills the full FIRE Report into an accessible brief, giving everyone the opportunity to leverage critical insights that drive informed decisions and successful progress.

During our CEO and Excelerate Partner Session, leaders worked together to surface what's shifting across workforce, revenue, technology, learning, and community. In that room, CEOs and partners co-created more than thirty practical, future-ready ideas—solutions designed for real-world constraints and real-world opportunities. Those ideas are not published here. They are being shared only with current CEOs/EDs and AF's strategic partners.

What you will find in this brief is the strategic intelligence that unlocked those solutions—the signals, forces, and pressures shaping what's possible in 2026 and beyond.

THE MEETING

Twenty-nine senior leaders—13 association executives from the Association Forum Board of Directors and 16 strategic partners—shared their perspectives on the forces reshaping the sector. Collectively, these organizations influence:

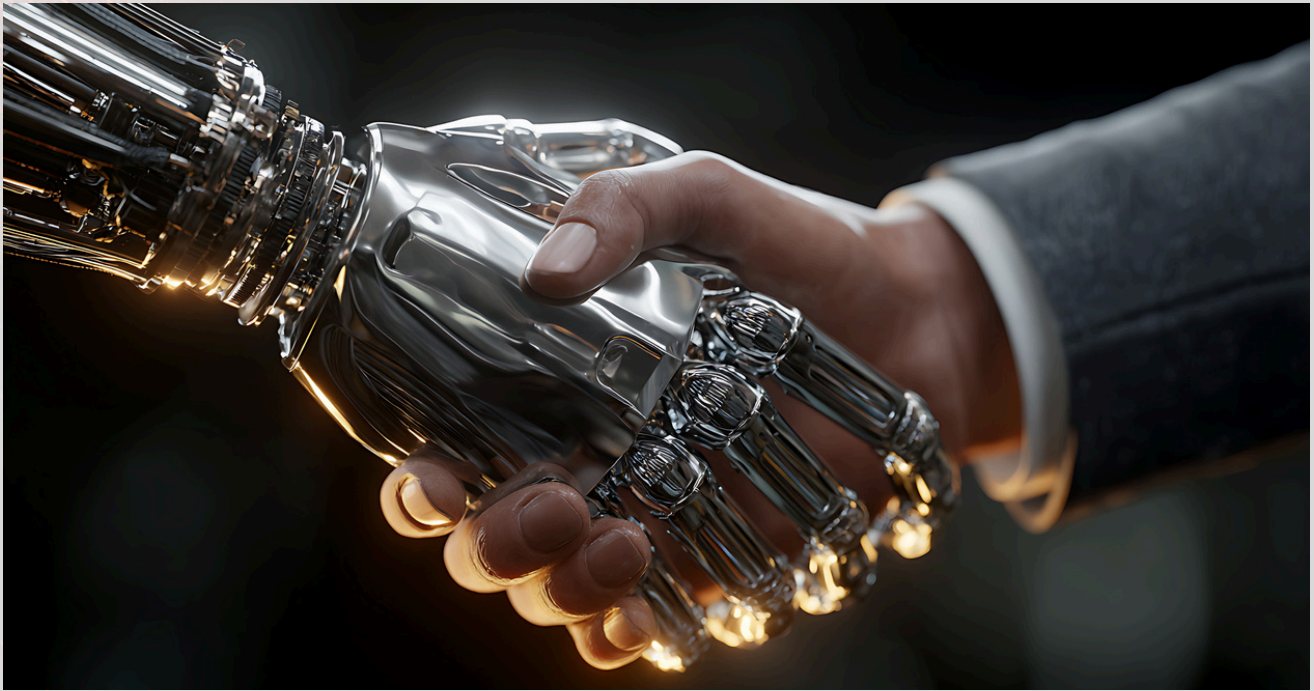
- Millions in annual economic activity,
- Multiple professional ecosystems, and
- A cross-section of the association landscape from global societies to emerging nonprofits.

THE MESSAGE IS CLEAR:

1. Associations are stable but stretched.
2. Partners are optimistic but selective.
3. And the next era will reward those who design the future, not react to it.



THE 2026 + PLAYBOOK



Translating Insight Into Industry Acceleration

A synthesis of Association Forum (AF) 2025 insights, industry benchmarks, and emerging macro trends propelling us forward.

1. ADAPTIVE BUSINESS MODELS

→ From Events to Ecosystems

AF INSIGHTS 2025

- 78% of CEOs report budgets as “stable but cautious.”
- 62% cite event-dependency as their biggest vulnerability.
- Partners report longer decision timelines and increased demand for ROI transparency.

INDUSTRY INTELLIGENCE

- Global events market: \$1.23T (2024) → \$1.34T (2025) (CAGR: 9.1%)
- Associations worldwide are replacing “annual event cycles” with year-round learning ecosystems (MCI 2025).

2026 Strategic Plays

- Membership-as-a-Service: modular, value-based access and predictable outcomes.
- Revenue Labs: co-funded pilots in subscription learning, credentials, analytics.
- Partner Co-Ownership Models: shared-risk programming replacing transactional sponsorships.

DIRECTIONAL IMPACT Diversified revenue delivers stronger reserve stability and reduces fiscal fragility.

2. AI & AUTOMATION

→ Human-Centered Intelligence

AF INSIGHTS 2025

- 68% identify as “AI-curious, not confident.”
- Barriers: governance uncertainty, staff readiness, ethical concerns.

INDUSTRY INTELLIGENCE

- 92% of employers now value AI micro-credentials.
- Alternative credential market projected at \$69.9B by 2032.
- Demand has shifted toward applied workflow-based AI competencies.

2026 Strategic Plays

- AI On-Ramp: 30-day guided AI adoption.
- AI Governance Essentials: frameworks for privacy, security, risk.
- AI Sandbox: AF-led experimentation environment.

DIRECTIONAL IMPACT Governed, structured AI adoption increases capacity, speed, and trust.

3. WORKFORCE FUTURES & LEADERSHIP RESILIENCE

→ Talent as Infrastructure

AF INSIGHTS 2025

- 71% cite capacity as their primary operational risk.
- Volunteer participation is down ~30%.
- Upskilling remains the top priority.

INDUSTRY INTELLIGENCE

- 60% of workers will require reskilling by 2027.
- PD market: 6% CAGR through 2035.

2026 Strategic Plays

- Leadership Pathways: career-spanning, stackable learning.
- Intrapreneur Studios: 4–6 week innovation labs.
- Belonging Index: culture → performance → retention.

DIRECTIONAL IMPACT Workforce investment drives retention, adaptability, and strategic readiness.

4. COLLABORATION AS CURRENCY → Shared Success Economies

AF INSIGHTS

- 87% of partners want co-created engagements, not logo placement.
- Benchmarking is a top unmet need.

INDUSTRY INTELLIGENCE

- Funders prefer year-round partnership ecosystems.
- Data collaboratives accelerate innovation.

2026 Strategic Plays

- AF Data Co-op: anonymized membership + revenue benchmarks.
- Innovation Alliances: cross-vendor pilots in AI ethics, DEI, talent futures.
- Outcome-Backed Partnerships: transparent KPIs + shared dashboards.

DIRECTIONAL IMPACT Collaboration accelerates performance, ROI, and resilience.

5. ADVOCACY & COLLECTIVE VOICE

→ Influence by Design

AF INSIGHTS

- 74% cite economic and political volatility.
- Common risks: AI regulation, workforce funding, accessibility, equity.

INDUSTRY INTELLIGENCE

- 73% of executives cite policy uncertainty as a strategic threat.

2026 Strategic Plays

- Collective Influence Dashboard
- Impact Campaigns
- Policy Action Network

DIRECTIONAL IMPACT Coalition advocacy delivers reach and durable policy outcomes.

6. HYBRID INNOVATION

→ The Experience Multiplier

AF INSIGHTS

- 82% want hybrid access to learning and events.
- Partners rank hybrid as their top brand-activation channel.

INDUSTRY INTELLIGENCE

- 74.5% of planners used hybrid formats in 2025; 63% increased virtual budgets.

2026 Strategic Plays

- Hybrid Learning Studios
- Immersive Experience Labs
- Virtual Collaboration Exchange

DIRECTIONAL IMPACT Hybrid expands reach, diversifies audiences, and strengthens engagement.

INDUSTRY REALITY: The Vulnerabilities & Opportunities

VULNERABILITIES

- Overdependence on event revenue
- Membership models out of sync with workforce realities
- Shallow digital engagement
- Rising expectations from partners
- Limited AI fluency
- Staff fatigue and turnover
- Difficulty articulating measurable ROI in a compressed marketplace

OPPORTUNITIES

- Corporate partnerships built on shared intelligence
- AI-enabled operations that increase capacity
- Learning pathways fueling career acceleration
- Events redesigned for mastery and connection
- Community models based on identity and practice
- New revenue models grounded in impact, not access



EMERGING FUTURES (2026–2030)

Strategic possibilities, not predictions.

FUTURE 1: THE ADAPTIVE ASSOCIATION (LEADERS)

- Diversified revenue
- AI-enabled operations
- Strong partner ecosystem
- Modern learning models
- Identity-based networks
- Clear and consistent value delivery

Outcome: *Relevance, resilience, and growth.*

FUTURE 2: THE STATIC ASSOCIATION (SURVIVORS)

- Event-dependent
- Slow to adopt AI
- Limited digital engagement
- Flat membership
- Reactive decision-making

Outcome: *Relevance, resilience, and growth.*

FUTURE 3: THE FADING MIDDLE (NON-MOVERS)

- No modernization
- Weak differentiation
- Declining loyalty
- Inability to meet workforce needs

Outcome: *Gradual erosion or absorption.*

WHAT LEADERS MUST DO NEXT

- **Rebuild** the value story: Center impact, outcomes, transformation — not access.
- **Modernize** the operational backbone: Embed AI across workflows, content, marketing, and member service.
- **Redesign** learning around pathways: Shift from one-off programs to career-building journeys.
- **Reimagine** events for identity and connection: smaller circles. Deeper value. Meaningful convening.
- **Reinvent** membership for a new workforce evaluating meaning, access, advancement, and community. Membership must follow the worker, not the calendar.
- **Build** partnerships around shared intelligence: Move from logo placement → insight creation, data sharing, co-owned outcomes.
- **Empower** staff: Burnout drains strategy. Capacity-building accelerates transformation.



THE CLOSING SIGNAL

The actionable ideas generated during the CEO and Excelerate Partner Session are intentionally not included in this brief. They remain with the leaders and partners who stepped forward to design what's next—those actively shaping the sector's evolution rather than waiting for direction. If you want access to those plays and the full FIRE Report, you must be in the room where the future is being built.

What this FIRE Report Brief provides is the strategic foundation behind those solutions: the intelligence, patterns, and emerging forces that informed them. The work ahead will come from leaders who choose to move boldly, modernize intentionally, and collaborate across the ecosystem to meet the moment with clarity and purpose.

The FIRE Report Brief is the spark. Our community is the engine.

The next era of associations will be defined not by stability, but by design—and by the organizations willing to build the future with intention.

Contact BusinessDev@AssociationForum.org for partnership opportunities.

