

**Multi-cultural meetings 'climbing the MICE agenda'
- Event planners identify issues, lessons, and predictions**

Planning for multi-cultural meetings is climbing the agenda for MICE buyers both in the corporate and association sectors.

This insight follows from an IMEX email survey involving over 150 event organisers representing most European countries and the USA. Whilst the average number of nationalities included in such ethnically-diverse meetings averaged from 5 to 10, in some cases (notably association conferences) the total ranges from 20 to 40. The typical sizes of event in which multi-cultural considerations are most likely to arise involve from 75-200 delegates, and from 500+.

prioritise values and issues

At the heart of the research were questions inviting event organisers to prioritise those values and issues in multi-culturalism that most affected their work.

Multi-cultural values were classified by buyers in the following sequence:

- individualism v collectivism in a society
- rules v relationships in an organisation
- corporate status which is designated v earned
- orientation in society which is focused towards the past and present v the future
- internal v external sense of control in an individual
- decision-making in an organisation that is hierarchical v egalitarian
- subdued v expressed feelings and emotions in a person

Issues were also identified, and categorised, that currently affect event planners when they become involved in managing multi-cultural meetings. The hierarchy is (in order of importance):

- alternative approaches to negotiation and compromise
- varying national styles of leadership
- differing understandings on contracts and business

agreements

- varying approaches to informality, politeness and etiquette
 - alternative styles of motivation
 - contrasting interpretation of acceptable meetings behaviour
 - alternative religious backgrounds
 - differing management language
 - varying national attitudes to younger and older people
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- contrasting attitudes to gender
 - contrasting attitudes towards punctuality

Respondents were also invited to recall examples of where their multi-cultural approaches had contributed to a successful meeting, and in contrast, offer cases where the absence of such a strategy had damaged the outcome.

positive

On a positive note buyers 'had involved a translator for each person not fluent in English' 'adjusted the conference programme in response to all the nationalities which were represented' ... and 'sought inclusiveness by treating all delegates as individuals, regardless of gender, age, cultural or ethnic background, and by encouraging interaction'. In addition, allowances had been made by some organisers for Muslim attendees during Ramadan, including the provision of facilities for prayers and break fast meals'. Another highlighted the importance of a 'multi-cultural menu' for a gala evening, and a further recommended approach is to arrange for delegates to become acquainted in advance of the meeting, and also to engage in informal talks between sessions.

Conversely there were instances where insensitivity to multi-culturalism had caused problems. Instances included 'set menus that did not accommodate fasting by some delegates' ... 'contrasting approaches of some nationalities to dining and wining during a cruise' ... and 'mistakenly failing to offer separate seating areas for men and women from Arabic countries'. Another organiser recalled a bad experience arising from assuming that professional profiles were equivalent in different cultures. Also cited is the challenge of implementing decisions following a multi-cultural event, because delegates do not equally see the need to act to honour their commitments.

lessons

The event managers were asked to put forward their favourite lessons on the issue of multi-culturalism. One point that was frequently made warned that over-emphasising cultural differences could make some participants feel uncomfortable, and could be counter-productive. Similarly, it was suggested that the topic could be approached in too negative a way. Specific tips include 'giving delegates the flavour of the host country at an early stage' ... 'make allowances for the rules of the Koran' ... 'involve local staff at all events' ... 'brief all members of the support team, including juniors, in cross-cultural issues' ... and 'study in advance the profile of each delegate in detail'. The prevailing message is 'to overcome, not try to circumvent, the challenges of multi-culturalism'.

increasingly relevant

Well over half (61%) of those questioned anticipate that multi-cultural issues will become increasingly relevant to their work in future. Explanations centre largely on the arguments that 'the world is getting smaller', and 'trade is becoming more global', but there is also a recognition that 'expectations are rising that cultural differences should be honoured'.

Meetings organisers were also asked to predict which 'cultural dilemmas' they thought would most affect their work in future. In order of importance these were seen to be: religious issues; contrasting interpretations of language and of the concept of quality; dietary considerations; and the varying emphasis placed on the work ethic, and to business agreements.

Over a third (37%) said they would welcome more information and advice on multi-cultural issues from industry associations and other leadership organisations.

Ends