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“A Truly Global Summit”

On April 30, 2008, more than 400 association industry professionals convened at the new Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center just outside Washington, DC with the ambitious goal of identifying the capabilities and ambitions of the association community in the area of social responsibility.

They were connected virtually and in “real time” with another 400 industry executives meeting face-to-face at 19 connected sites in the U.S., Asia, Europe and the Middle East, or working independently online. Over the next three days, they put aside cultural and organizational differences to collaboratively explore the capacity of associations to effect positive change around the world.

The organizers of this first-ever Global Summit on Social Responsibility, ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership, had envisioned the program as a truly global meeting of the minds – where association industry stakeholders all over the world were engaged in a historic process of knowledge sharing and collaborative thinking around the practicality and potential of associations to be change agents.

The goals of the Summit were lofty, and the work is really still just beginning. But it was quickly evident over the three-day program that a new era of online, multi-day conferencing for association leaders was not only feasible, it could be extraordinary effective.

“The excitement and energy from participants at the Global Summit was palpable,” said ASAE President and CEO John H. Graham IV, CAE. “It was evident to everyone involved in the planning of the Summit that we were witnessing a milestone event, where the level of engagement both face-to-face and online was off the charts.”

“We had a multitude of concerns when we first sat down and considered the challenges of connecting participants at our host site with 15 U.S. locations, four international locations, and hundreds of virtual participants working from their individual offices or homes,” said Susan Sarfati, CAE, president and CEO of The Center for Association Leadership and executive vice president of ASAE. “Beyond the obvious questions about whether something like this was even possible, we really had the sense that just getting people to register for this program was not going to be enough. To have a chance of taking the dialogue on social responsibility to the next level, we really needed everyone to be fully engaged in this process.”

To handle the logistical challenges of connecting participants all over the world, ASAE & The Center partnered with the Walnut Creek, CA-based iCoHere, a company that in the past eight years has built hundreds of online communities for large and small associations, nonprofits, government agencies and corporations. iCoHere regularly works with clients to provide a software platform where meeting attendees can network and share resources pre- and post-conference. They also had experience creating summaries of presentations at face-to-face meetings and posting that content online for feedback from virtual participants.

But for the Global Summit on Social Responsibility, iCohere was asked to design a project workspace that, in one integrated environment, provided all the interactive tools participants would need to collaborate online and in real time. The platform connecting participants in the Global Summit involved flash-based video streaming as well as two-way audio communications that allowed for questions to facilitators as well as feedback and interaction with the hub site participants in Washington. “Scribes” sitting in on each roundtable discussion at the Gaylord were also posting discussion briefs for virtual participants, and vice versa, so there was a regular exchange of information, questions and ideas among all Summit participants.

“This Summit was a leap above anything we had done before,” said Pascal Kaplan, Ph.D., CEO and founder of iCohere. “In the past, in order to have connected locations, you had to go with very expensive, satellite-based video equipment which was really prohibitive. We decided to take these relatively new technologies and, at very low cost, provide an opportunity for people to have an ‘anytime, anywhere’ connection.

“I don’t believe you can substitute online for face-to-face,” Kaplan added. “But to supplement and complement what’s happening face-to-face, the online capabilities right now are just wonderful and, if designed correctly, can be very engaging.”

Kaplan attributed the success of the Summit to the passion and commitment that participants had for the topic of social responsibility, and to the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process created by Summit facilitator David Cooperrider, Ph.D., a professor at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, OH. Cooperrider has enabled positive change in organizational systems of all sizes, including very large and complex organizations like the U.S. Navy, the United Nations, World Vision and Verizon Communications. Kaplan and iCohere worked closely with Cooperrider to customize the Appreciative Inquiry process to serve the needs of virtual participants in ASAE & The Center’s Global Summit.

Appreciative Inquiry starts with organizational strengths rather than seeking out what’s broken. It works to uncover and elevate those qualities that give life to an organization or system that, if spread, could generate exponential returns. “Appreciative Inquiry is very inspiring. It creates connections and builds on people’s strengths,” Kaplan said. “Once one starts to see the change process, people just want to keep going, and push it further and further.”

Through the online workspace created for the Global Summit, project leaders and participants are working through this summer to further define next steps and practical guidelines for associations that are committing or exploring a commitment to social responsibility.

“With face-to-face meetings, people get excited, they get engaged and then they go back home to their offices, their other responsibilities take over and you lose a lot of the energy,” Kaplan said. “With the Global Summit, we’re putting a lot of energy into sustaining the momentum through a variety of strategies that use the iCohere platform as a convening location where the Summit can continue.”

The platform design Kaplan and iCohere created for ASAE & The Center has already been replicated by the University of California-Berkeley, for a multi-site global conference on creating age-friendly

communities. Kaplan said the Global Summit on Social Responsibility can be a model for associations and other types of organizations seeking to sustain momentum after any kind of face-to-face meeting.

“This [Summit] was proof that these technologies and this way of working are going to be a way of the future,” Kaplan said. “The Summit really bridged the virtual and the physical and created a totally seamless experience where time and space just totally dissolved and people who shared the same goals were working together as one ... In another five years, what we did at the Summit will be commonplace.”

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