

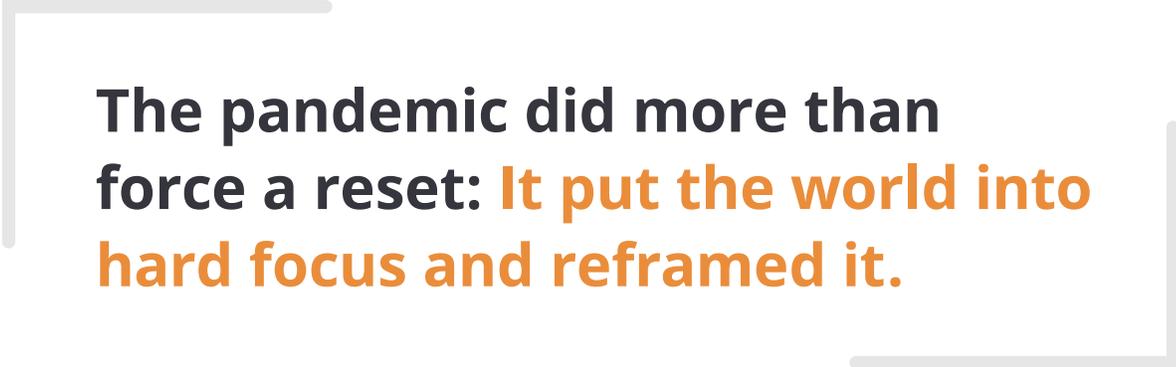


digitalNow 2021 content brief:

Designing the Future of Associations

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The pandemic did more than force a reset: **It put the world into hard focus and reframed it.**

It'd be hard to find an aspect of our lives that hasn't changed in the months since the world shut down in March 2020. In the days since, we've learned about how disparities and inequalities require surgical precision and fearless leadership to truly tackle and overcome. We've seen how it's possible and even necessary to completely rethink how we work and even how we have fun.

In surveys and conversations with the digitalNow Advisory Group, Leaders of Distinction, the digitalNow community and other association leaders, we've taken the pulse of what association executives are thinking about as they begin to apply all they've learned through the pandemic and seek ways to solve the most critical, newly discovered and rediscovered issues on the horizon.



Here are the key issues, trends and priorities association leaders are grappling with — and what digitalNow 2021 will address.

digitalNow 2021:

What we'll talk about

The pandemic forced many associations into faster digital transformations and disruptions than perhaps they'd bargained for while dropping the curtain on any expectations many members had for how successfully an organization moved through them. It meant, for a brief moment, an organization could experiment without fear of failure because simply trying was enough, if they had the financial reserves to accommodate those experiments. It also meant many organizations were able to prove their value more clearly than ever before because they offered resources and guidance members couldn't get anywhere else and desperately needed — even when members did not realize they did.

In the end, though, associations are in a world with more content, more competition and more distractions than ever before, and every organization is competing against the last best experience a member had — regardless of who or what offered it. We're left with more questions than answers about the future and how to more efficiently and more effectively shape our organizations to face it.



Associations are at a crucial moment in their history, and association executives are left with a choice: Design the future, or succumb to its vicissitudes.

For those who choose the bolder path, it will mean balancing innovation and tackling new initiatives and programs while also sustaining the mission and trust the organization has earned. While an obsessive audience focus should sit at the heart of all new projects, this prospect comes with an undeniable amount of freedom: Freedom from expectations, freedom from the burden of history, freedom from what's possible when you're not just setting the bar, but blowing it up.

Rebuilding, reframing and restarting

Filling the blank slate offered by the pandemic will happen through three key parts: Rebuilding, reframing and restarting.



Rebuilding: Associations must come back stronger.

What are the most effective ways to maintain and define culture as we bring our organizations back to full-staff?

How can organization leadership respond to the flexible workplace options many staffers have come to expect?

How can we move beyond DEI checkboxes for our workforce, membership and culture to embed supportive practices in all aspects of an organization? And how will these practices be sustained?

How do we leverage all of the new learning technologies and content that has entered the market and our organization?

How can an organization sift through new technologies to identify those that add value, and ignore those that do not?



Reframing: Associations must continue to prove their value in easy to understand ways.

How can our association clearly articulate what we offer uniquely better than anyone else?

How can we maintain and advance the culture of nimbleness our staff and board relied on throughout the pandemic?

How do we manage the tension between a return to normalcy and a need to advance change and address disruption? What did the disruption reveal about “normal” — and how should leadership respond if the disrupted state is more desirable?



Restarting: Associations must consider new future business models.

What will replace the association business model?

What should be our new office strategy in a world of remote work?

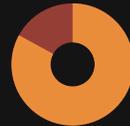
What are the modern models of membership?

Key observations & findings

More than **70%** of surveyed association executives considered it very important their organization **answer these questions in the next year:**

-  Are our members clear about how we create value for them and their ecosystem?
-  How well does our organization solve our members' problems and meet their expectations?
-  Why are potential members who already know about us NOT engaging with us?

Disruptive technologies in 2022/2023



81% expect **data science and analytics** to have a significant impact on their sector



69% expect **digital learning and education technologies** to have a significant impact on their sector



63% expect **virtual event platforms** to have a significant impact on their sector



Only **13%** expect **5G** to have a significant impact

On the horizon

Association executives are less concerned about technologies about virtual or augmented reality and artificial intelligence with about half of executives expecting only some impact on their sectors.

About the survey respondents

-  CEO/Executive Director/Chief Staff Officer **68%**
-  Director, C-level, VP **31%**
-  Individual Membership Organization (IMO) or Professional Society **70%**
-  Trade Organization (advocacy) **16%**
-  Corporate Membership Organization (no advocacy) **11%**

More than 45% of survey respondents' organizations were founded **70+ years ago**

Choosing the bold path

Regardless of how any organization tackled the difficulties brought on by the pandemic, there's one commonality in all their stories: 2020 was a catalytic year.

If what resulted was a choice between designing a new future and simply letting it happen, then how we focus the conversations at digitalNow 2021 is clear. We'll feature real strategies, worthwhile experiments and exciting technologies that can serve as the toolkit for forging a bold, exciting new future for associations.

What comes next is up to us. Let's dig in.