



2021 Association Trends Study

Building the Next Normal

How member sentiments and industry changes are making way for associations to better serve their membership – even in uncertain times



communitybrands®

Insights about what comes next for associations and their members.

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Research conducted by: **Edge Research**

Introduction

Why care about this study?

In the past year-and-a-half, much has shifted for professional membership associations. Staff had to move to a work-from-home setting (and in some cases back again) while continuing to provide value to members in an all-virtual or hybrid (in-person and online) environment. Members faced challenges in many aspects of their lives as well.

After more than a year of disturbances, distractions, and adjustments, many associations now face a new challenge: How to build the next normal when members' needs, behaviors, and perspectives have changed.

That's why Community Brands conducted this study, which builds on previous association and membership surveys. It dives into key questions around important topics, including:



How are members feeling about their professional organization?



What's most important (and not as important) to members today?



What's happening inside associations, and what's the outlook on their future?



What do members and associations think these days about in-person events?



How can associations provide their members more value?



What can association professionals do to deliver on today's expectation for digital experiences?

Let's take a look at the findings.

A note about this study Parallel surveys were conducted with more than 1,000 members (834 current members, and 184 who lapsed within the last two years) of professional membership organizations in the United States and 868 professionals who work at those organizations (referred to in this report as **"Members"** and **"Pros"**, respectively). The online surveys took place between July 14, 2021 and July 30, 2021. In this report, "small organizations" refers to organizations with annual revenue of less than \$5 million. "Large organizations" refers to organizations with annual revenue of \$5 million or greater. Note that due to rounding, not all percentage totals in this report equal 100 percent.



Key findings

1 Professional organizations remain a beacon in uncertain times.

Members say the importance of their organization has grown – even more than in a similar study conducted last year. Loyalty metrics also remain strong, and younger and more diverse Members are increasing their engagement.



↑ Up from **51%** in 2020

2 Organizations are feeling more optimistic, but still face challenges.

Pros are more positive than they were in 2020: Their responses about acquisition, retention, and revenue have all improved, and forecasts for the future are positive. But this is not without challenges. Majorities of Pros say they are working harder than ever and hope that technology investments will help with the increased workload. More than a quarter of Pros say they will look for new jobs outside of their organization in the next 12 months.

Acquisition

Retention

Revenue

Staffing Levels

Increased Optimism

Increased Workload

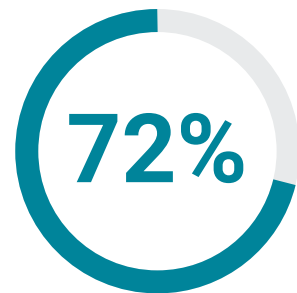
3 Members are focused on the bigger picture for their industry.

Members are focused on need-to-knows and protecting their industry. The most important areas of value are industry news and information, training, advocacy, raising awareness, code of ethics, and fueling industry growth. As in previous studies, there is some disconnect between where Pros focus their energy and what Members value.



4 Hybrid events are the future.

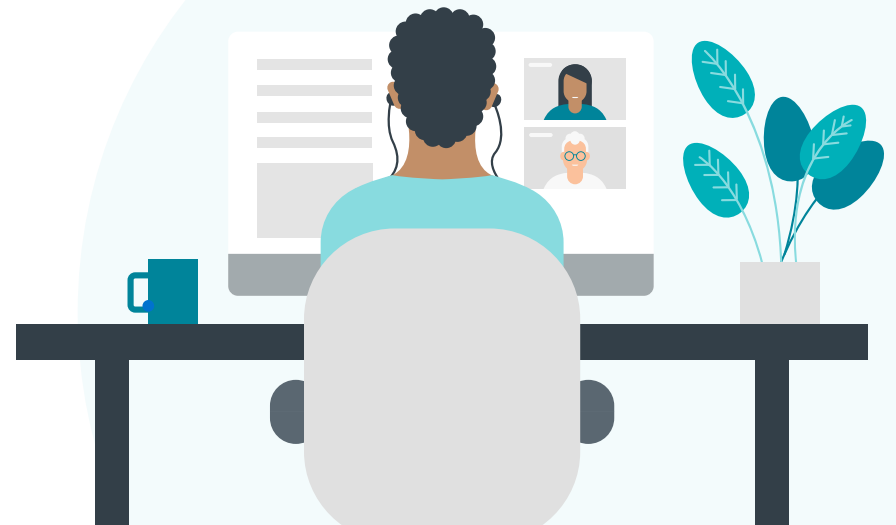
Members expect their organization to offer hybrid (in-person and virtual) options for all or most events and are more hesitant than Pros about getting back to in-person this fall. Pros are embracing hybrid event models, but it is not without challenges.



of Members agree that they expect their organizations to offer all or most events in a hybrid format



of Pros are very or somewhat likely to offer more hybrid events moving forward



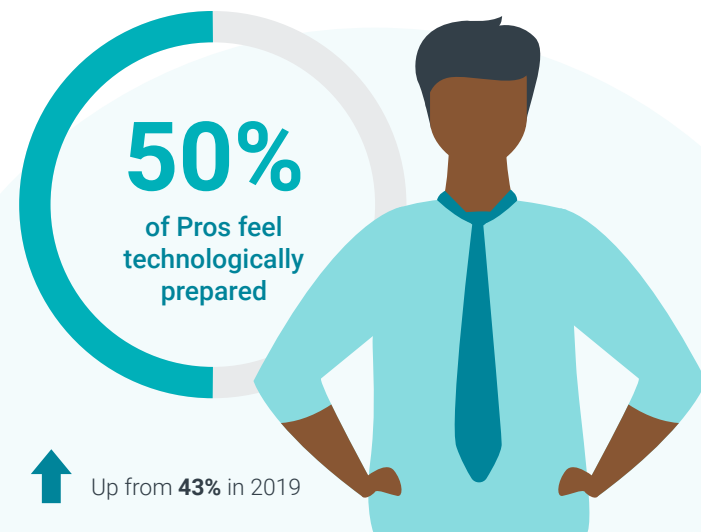
5 Members want more learning options.

As in previous surveys, employers and professional organizations continue to be the most popular sources of education and training for Members. At the same time, while most Pros are focused on traditional conferences and courses (online and in-person), Members are interested in a range of professional training opportunities.



6 Organizations still have work to do when it comes to technology.

While Pros feel slightly more technologically prepared for the future than they did in 2019, half do not feel as prepared as they would like. Most Pros (78 percent) say their staff is working more than they were a year ago, and 40 percent of those plan to invest in new tech to address the increased workload. Business analytics/intelligence tools are an emerging area for investment.





Member sentiments, engagement, and loyalty

Members were asked to think about the one professional membership organization most important to them, and then evaluate its importance now compared to a year ago.

Majorities of Members and Pros believe their organization is more important now than last year.

As with last year's study, the organization is even more important for younger Members, early-to-mid careerists, and those in the IT industry. In this year's study, importance grew for those that belong to a local/regional organizations and those in the finance and construction industries.



Importance of organization to Members compared to a year ago (current Member viewpoints)

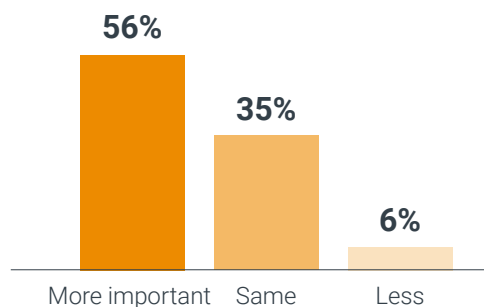


Figure 1. Question asked: How important do you feel your professional membership organization is now, compared to a year ago?

Importance of organization to Members compared to a year ago (Pro viewpoints)

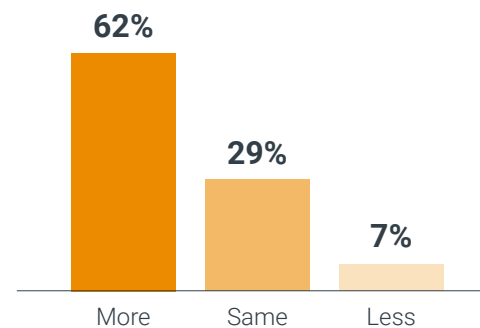


Figure 2. Question asked: How important do you feel your professional membership/trade organization is to members now, compared to a year ago?

As in previous studies, current Members were asked to evaluate their organization on multiple loyalty metrics.

Scores remain strong and stable across four key brand indicators: Net Promoter Score, Connection, Likelihood to renew, and Satisfaction.

These findings suggest that Pros have kept Members loyal despite disruptions and changes over the past couple of years.

In this study, 79 percent of Members whose employers pay for all or part of their membership dues say they would still renew even if their employers stopped contributing.



Member loyalty metrics over time

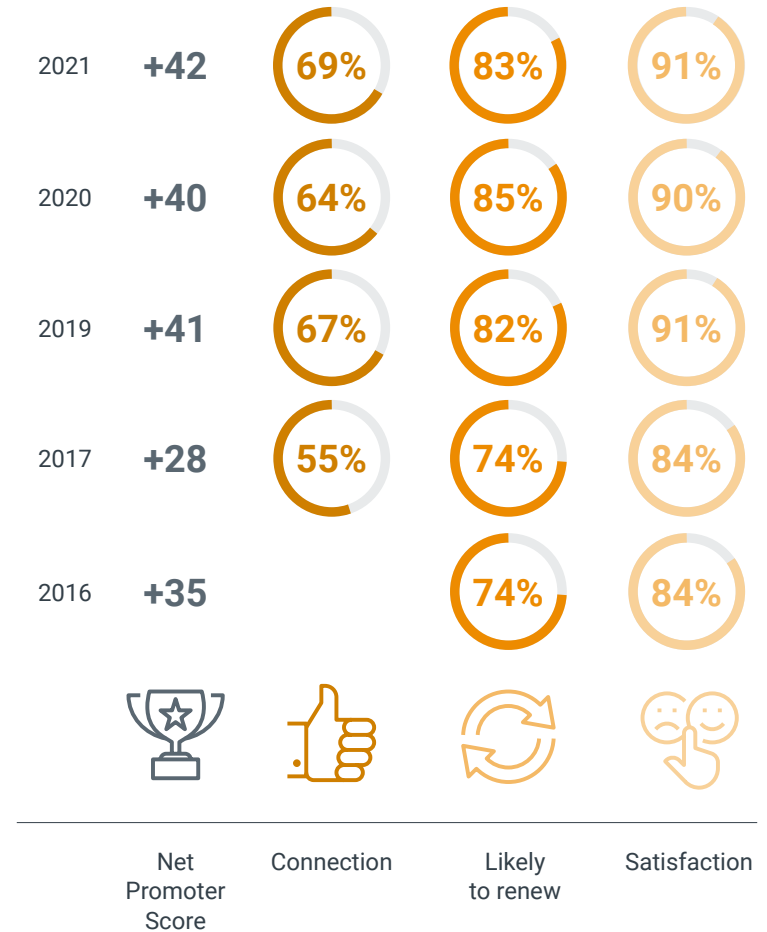


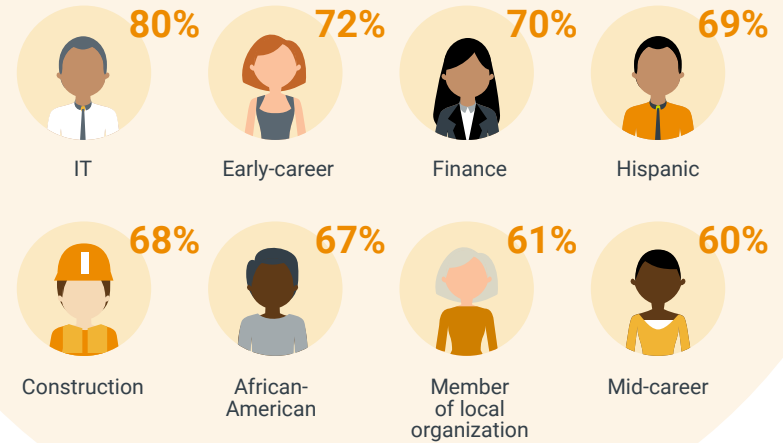
Figure 3. Questions asked: How likely are you to recommend this professional membership organization? | On a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 means extremely connected and 1 means not connected at all, how connected do you feel to this professional membership organization and the work that it does? | How likely are you to renew your membership in this professional membership organization after your current membership expires? | Overall, how satisfied are you with your membership in this professional membership organization?

Member engagement with their organization continues to climb. Nearly half of Members say they are interacting with their organization more than they did in years past.

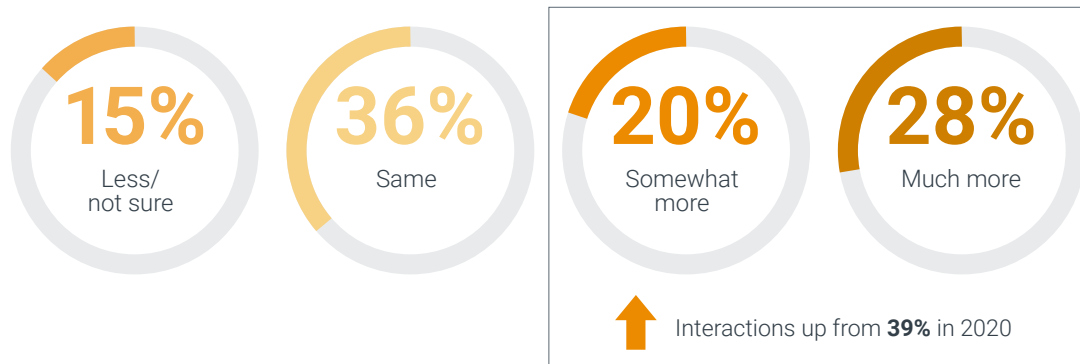
Of those interacting more, a majority plan to interact even more in the future.

Who's interacting more?

Of Members who are interacting more with their organization, Member audiences include:



Member engagement compared to years past



Member plans to interact in the future (of those interacting more)

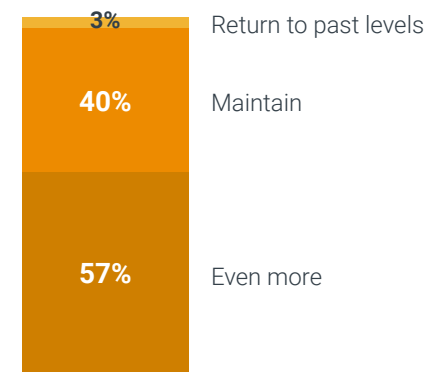
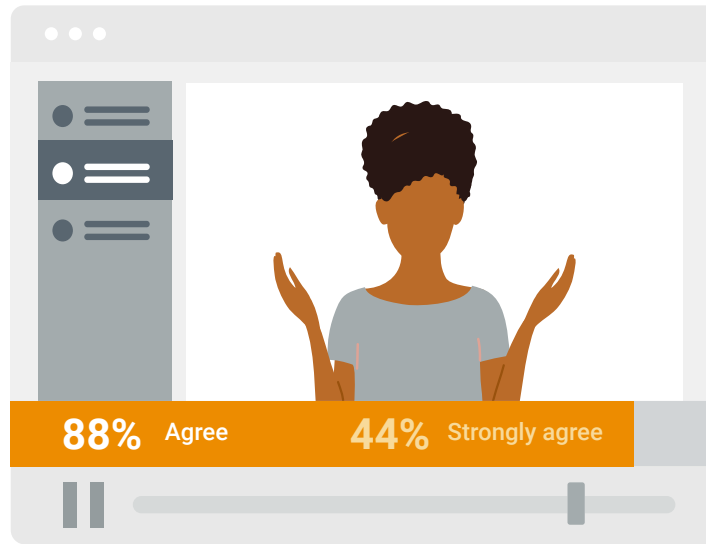


Figure 4 and 5. Questions asked: How much do you interact with your professional membership organization compared to years past? | You indicated that you are interacting with your professional membership organization more than you used to. As COVID restrictions are lifted will you...

Pros are seeing the rise in member interaction, and say that virtual events are a big part of their ability to reach members who had not been engaged in the past.

More than half of Pros say their members interacted with them more in the last year than they have in years past. Most Pros (88 percent) agree that virtual events allowed them to reach members who previously did not engage with the organization.




Perceived member interaction compared to years past (Pros)



Pros agree that virtual events allowed them to reach members who previously did not engage with the organization

Figure 6. Questions asked: How has member engagement overall changed over the past year (in terms of the number of members engaging and how much they interact)? | Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about virtual events, courses, and conferences offered by your professional membership/trade organizations.



Attitudes and outlooks of association professionals

Compared with last year, Pros are more positive about the future when it comes to staffing levels, member acquisition and retention, and revenue. They also report positive results in the same areas for the last 12 months.

Pros' sentiments about last year and the future

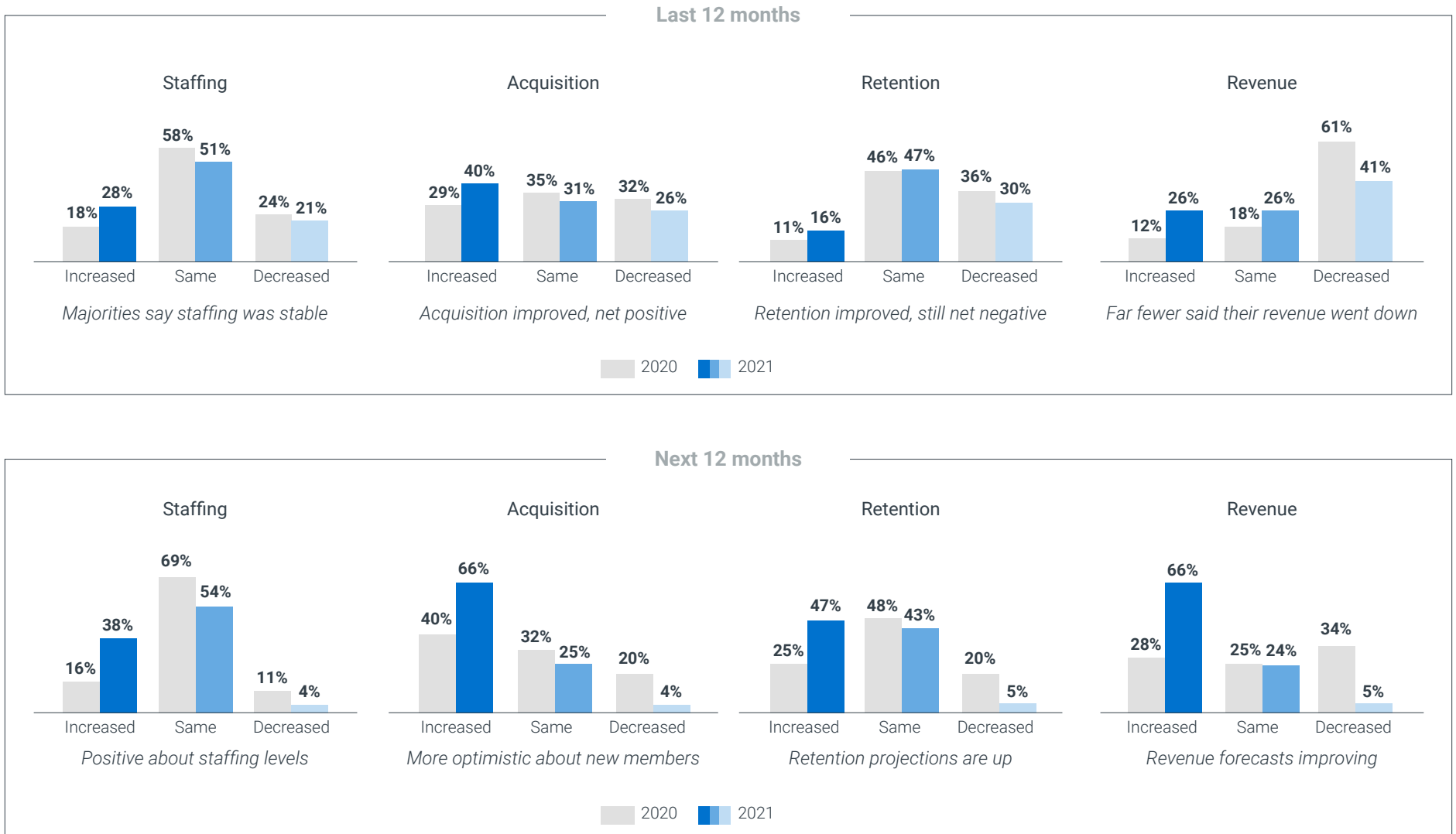


Figure 7. Questions asked: Over the last 12 months, has your organization increased, remained the same, or decreased in terms of: | And in the next 12 months, do you think each of the following will increase, remain the same, or decrease?

Pros' optimism bodes well for organizations in 2022, as a look at last year's study shows that Pros' predictions proved to be mostly accurate.

Pros' predictions from 2020 versus what happened



Figure 8. Questions asked: Over the last 12 months, has your organization increased, remained the same, or decreased in terms of: | And in the next 12 months, do you think each of the following will increase, remain the same, or decrease?

From a revenue standpoint, Pros say that membership dues and meetings / trade shows provide the majority of revenue, which holds true from past studies.

However, the percentage of revenue from meetings and trade shows is down four percent from last year's study. Revenue sources remain consistent regardless of organizations' revenue size.

Revenue sources (average percentages)

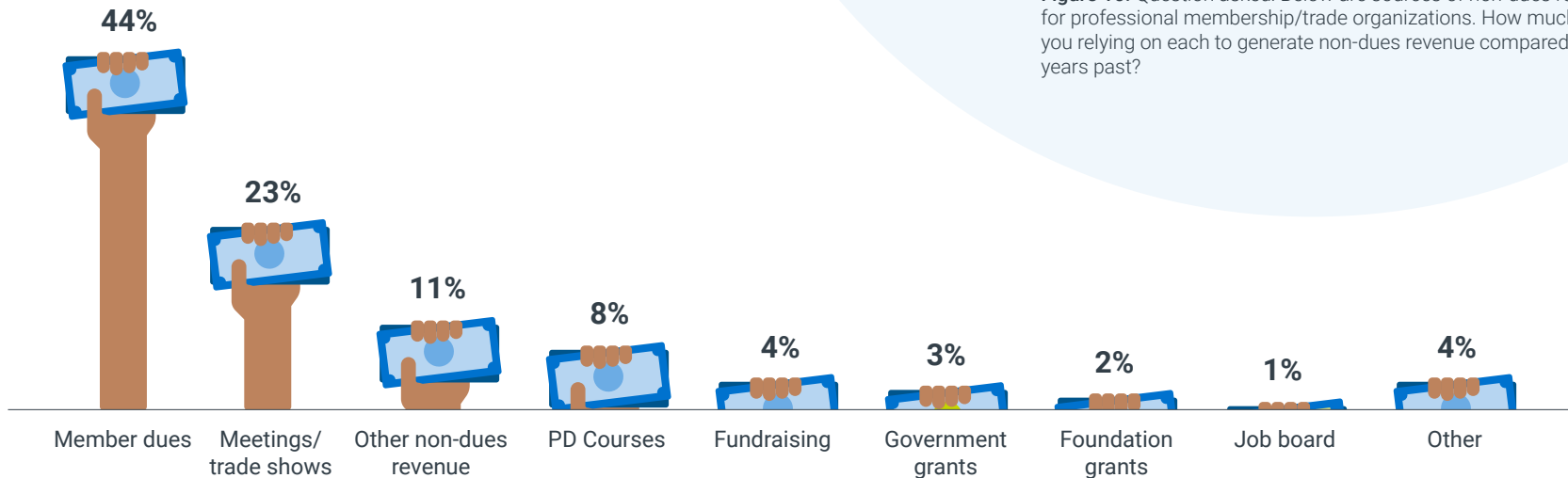


Figure 9. Question asked: In a typical year, what percentage of your organization's revenue is from each of the following? (Your best estimate is fine)

Reliance on non-dues revenue sources compared to years past

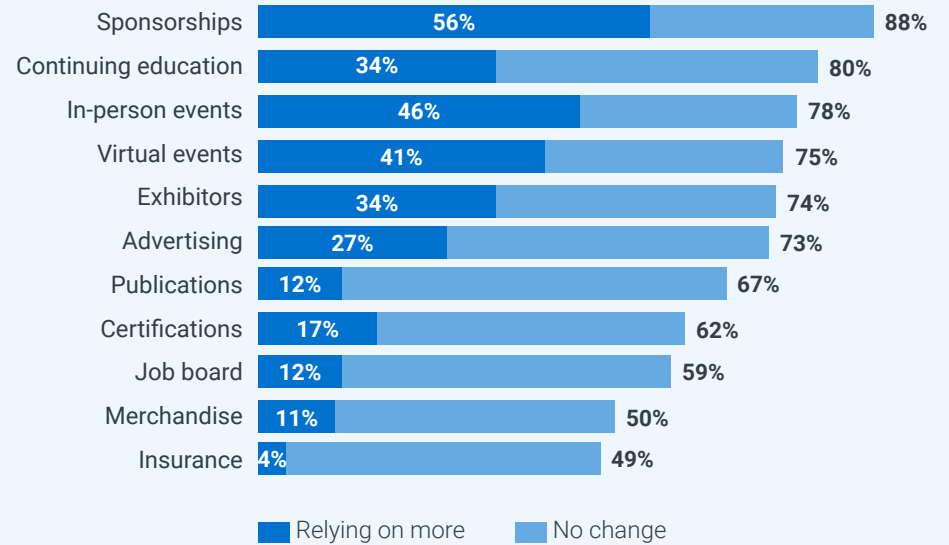
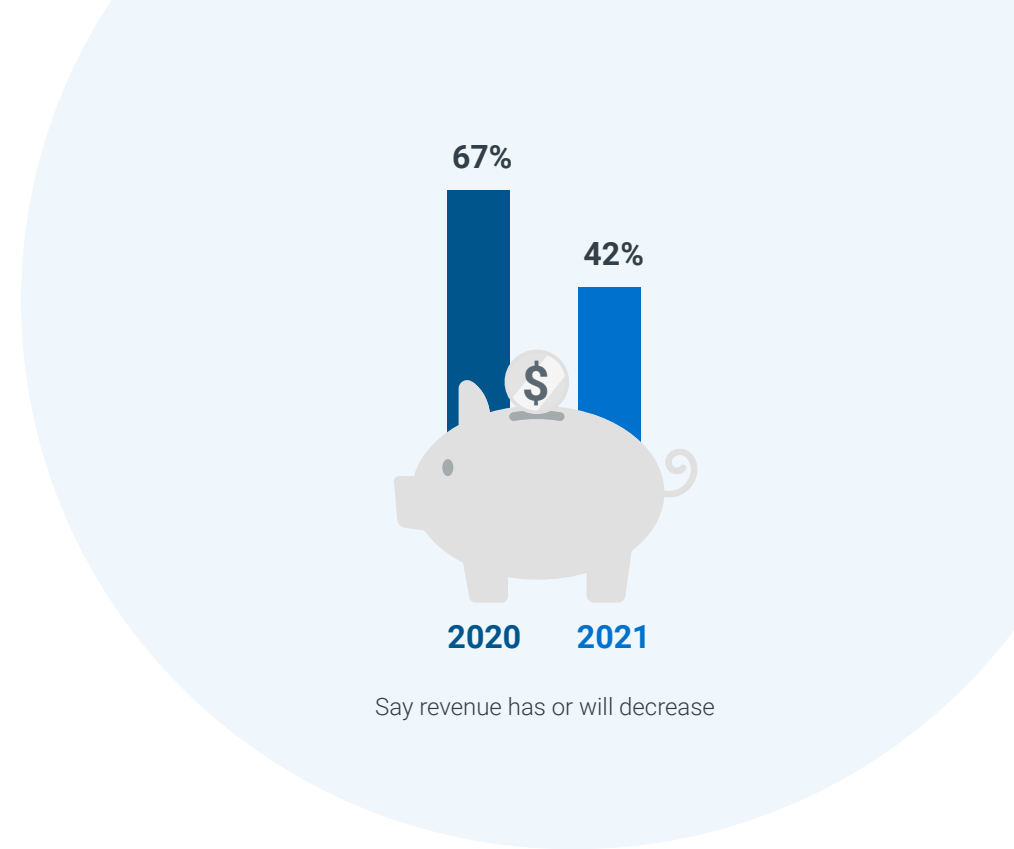


Figure 10. Question asked: Below are sources of non-dues revenue for professional membership/trade organizations. How much are you relying on each to generate non-dues revenue compared to years past?

Meanwhile, far fewer Pros than in last year's study say their organization's revenue has or will decrease.

They plan to turn to new forms of non-dues revenue more than other means to address any revenue losses. Compared with last year, fewer Pros say they will lay off or furlough employees. Though few organizations say they will cut back on member benefits and services, large organizations are more likely than small organizations to consider this approach.



How Pros plan to address revenue losses

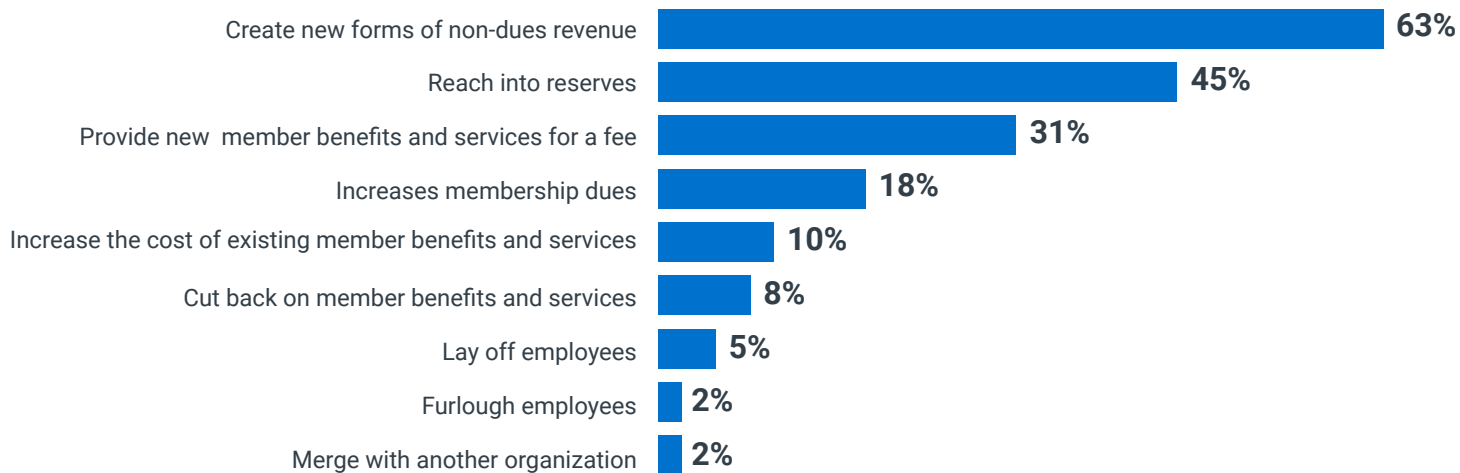


Figure 11 and 12. Questions asked: Over the last 12 months, has your organization increased, remained the same, or decreased in terms of: | And in the next 12 months, do you think each of the following will increase, remain the same, or decrease? | In which of the following ways do you plan to address revenue losses? Select all that apply.

Similar to last year's study, Pros are focused on improving membership acquisition and retention.

In this year's study, however, Pros are more focused on offering in-person events, and less on developing or improving virtual offerings. Pros at large organizations are more focused than small organizations on developing/improving diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, enabling greater staff productivity, and upgrading and/or integrating new technology.

Importance of each activity in the next year



Figure 13. Question asked: How important are each of the following for your organization over the next year?

While overall optimism is high, Pros say they face multiple challenges. Across the board, time, member engagement, and money are the biggest challenges.

Pros at smaller organizations list member engagement and finances as bigger challenges, while those at larger organizations struggle with business processes and operations.

Challenges to achieving priorities

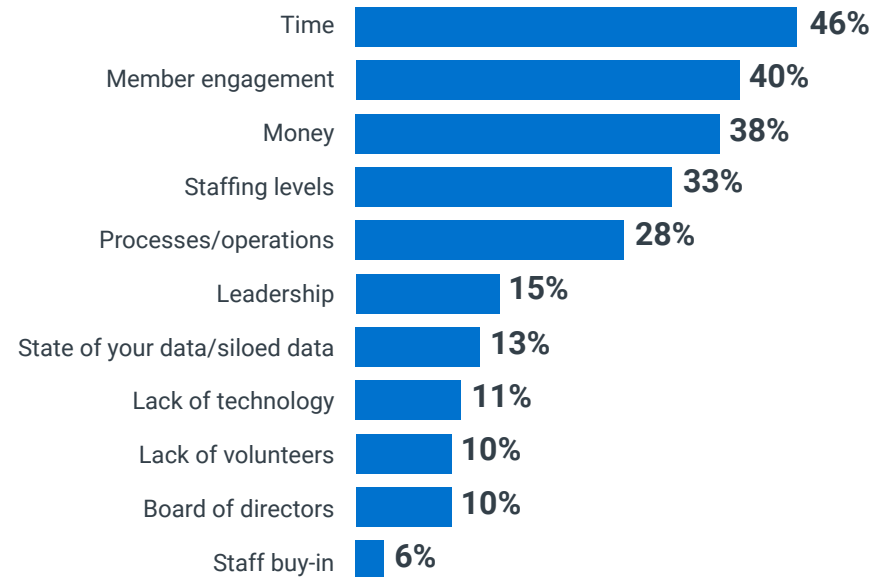
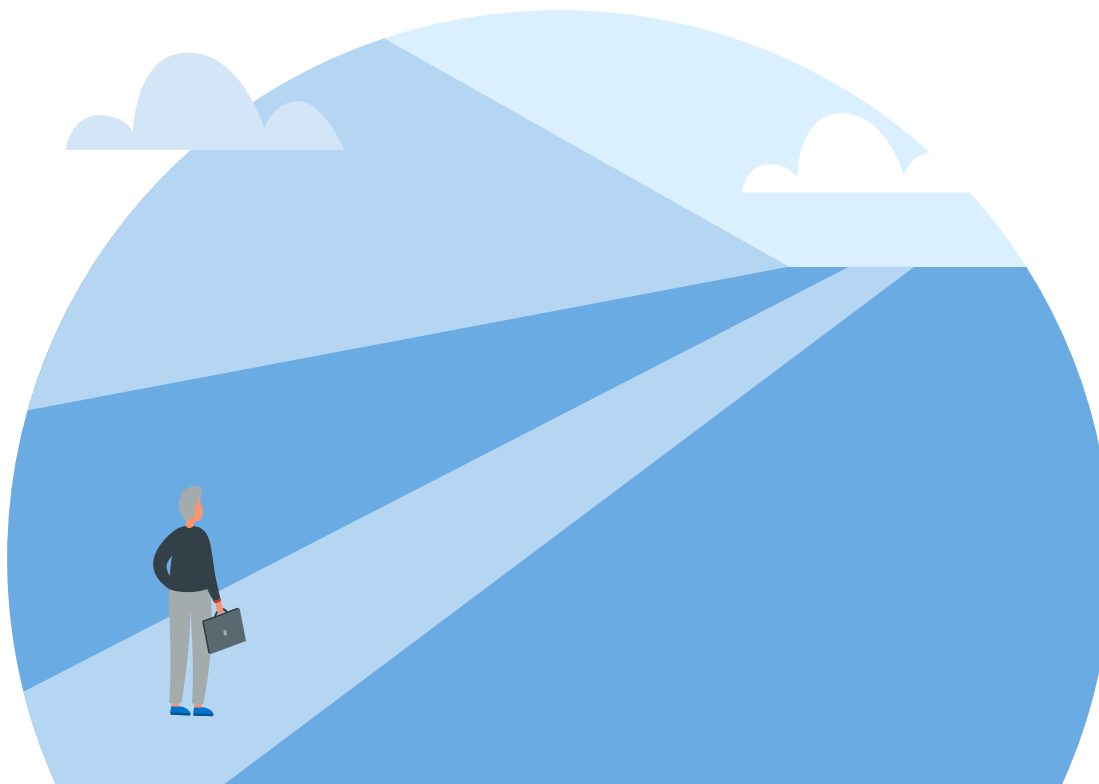


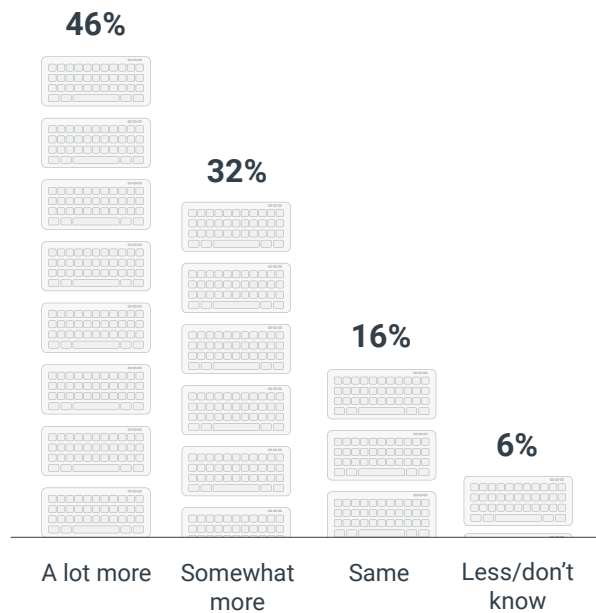
Figure 14. Question asked: What are the biggest challenges to achieving your top priorities? Select up to 3.



With time listed as one of the biggest challenges, it's not surprising that most (78 percent) of Pros say they are working harder than before.

They say the top way their organization plans to address the increased workload is to invest in new technology. Pros at small organizations are more likely than those at large organizations to plan to solicit more volunteer participation, while Pros at large organizations are more likely to plan to hire additional full-time staff.

How hard Pros say they're working



How Pros who say workload has increased say they plan to address increased workload

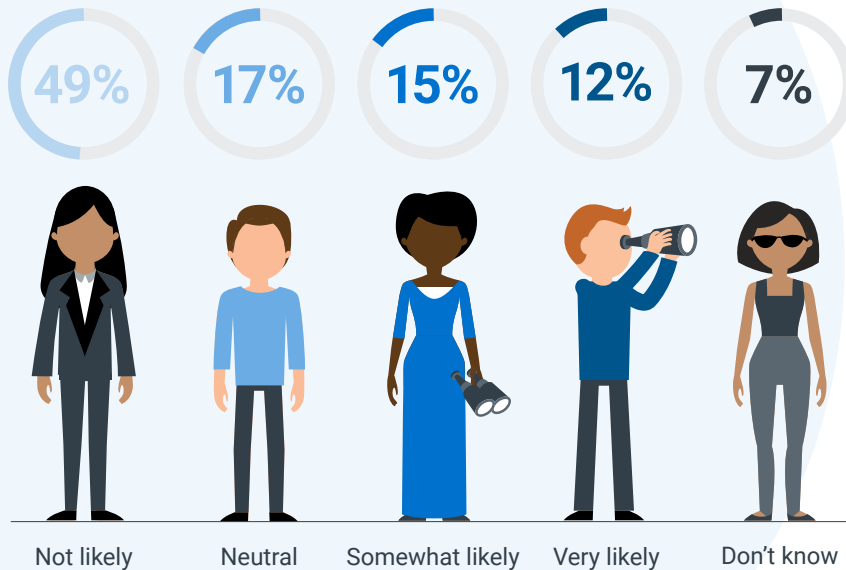


Figure 15 and 16. Questions asked: Generally, do you feel as if your organization's staff is working ... | You said that your organization's staff is working more than they used to. What steps, if any, have or will your organization take in the next 12 months to accommodate this increased workload? Select all that apply.

The post-pandemic workforce

More than a quarter of Pros say they will look for new jobs outside of their organization in the next 12 months. Those more likely to say they will look for new jobs are younger Pros, those who say they are working much harder or much less, those who see that technology investment declined in their organization, or those who feel their organization is unprepared technologically. The top reason given for leaving: better compensation.

Likelihood of Pros to look for another job in the next 12 months



Why Pros say they're considering leaving their organization (among those who are somewhat/very likely to leave)

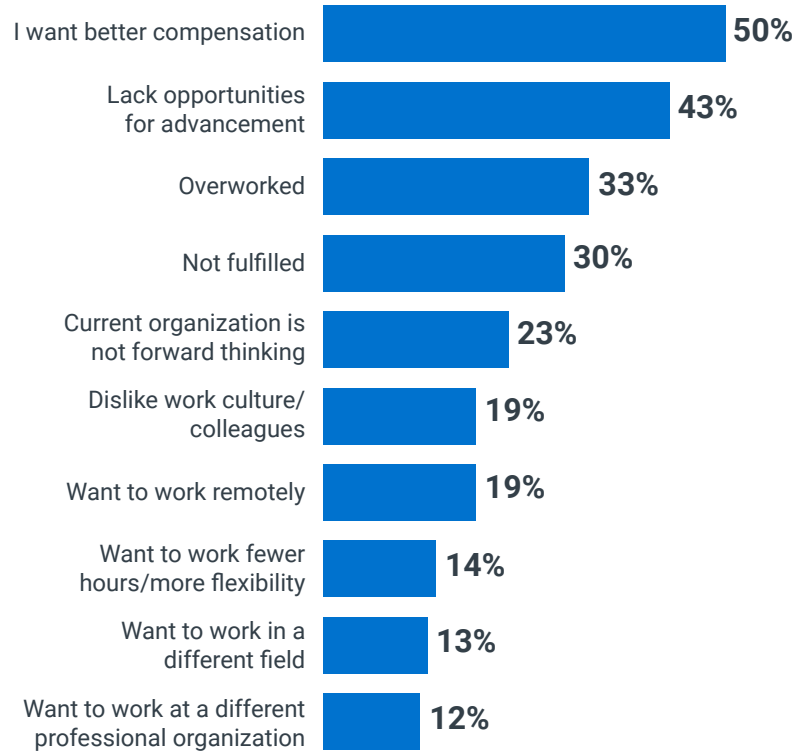


Figure 17 and 18. Questions asked: How likely are you to look for another job outside your company/organization in the next 12 months? | Why are you considering leaving your current organization/employer? Please select all that apply.



What members value today

When asked to rate the importance of key benefits from their organization, Members are focused on big-picture industry-related items, including industry news and information, advocacy, raising awareness and code of ethics. When it comes to individual tangible benefits, training and certification remain near the top of the list.

Across the board, top tier benefits saw an increase in importance since last year's study. Industry news and information, fueling industry growth, and reputation/status saw the largest increases in importance.

In comparison, Pros are on the same page as Members when it comes to advocacy and raising awareness in the industry. However, as in past studies, Pros continue to underestimate the value of individual benefits, including training and certification. At the same time, Pros over-value areas, including representing interests and gathering feedback from members. These disconnects suggest that Pros might be mistaking the daily operational tasks they must accomplish with what members truly value.

Top 12 most important benefits (current Member and Pro viewpoints)

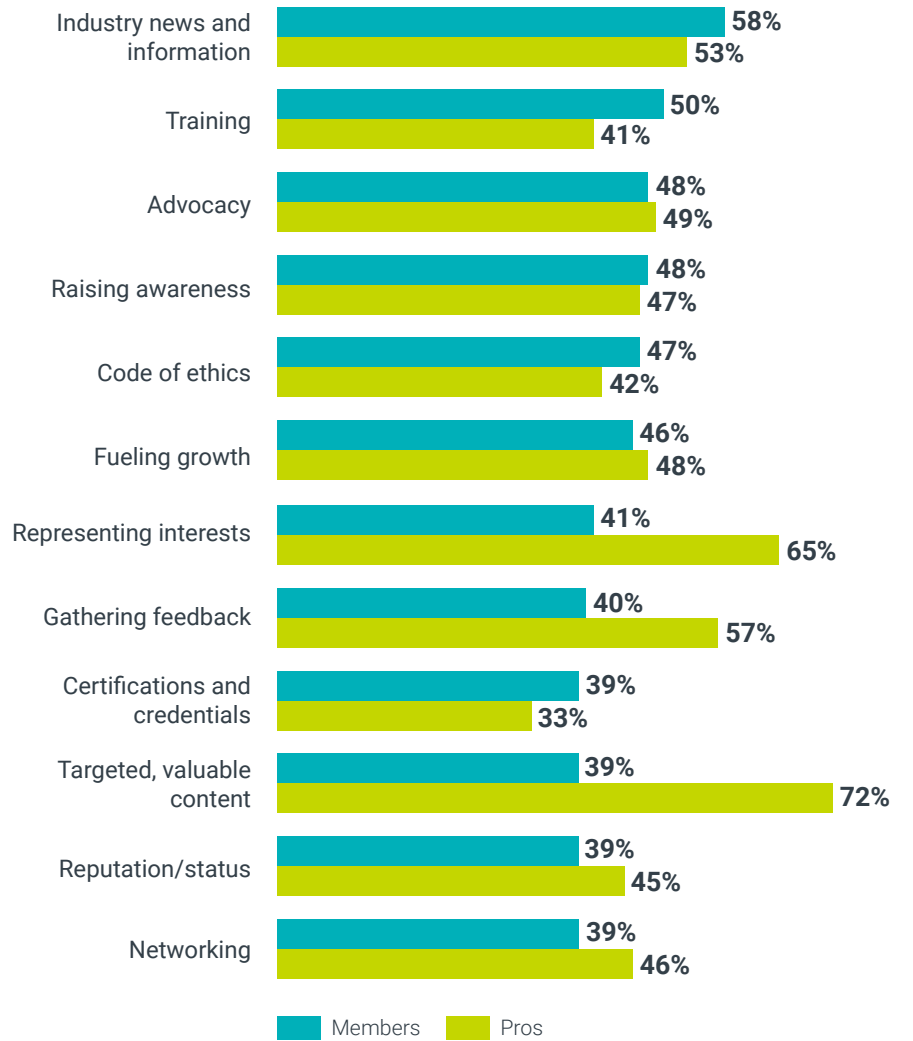


Figure 19. Questions asked: Below is a list of benefits that being a member of a professional membership organization might provide. For each, please indicate how important that benefit is to you. Would you say it is: | Below is a list of benefits that a professional membership/trade organization might provide to its members. For each, please indicate how important you feel that benefit is to your organization's members. Would you say it is ...



Secondary benefits remain relatively consistent compared to 2019. As in past years' studies, Pros continue to overestimate the value Members place on meetings/conferences, and underestimate areas, including job opportunities and help with career advancement.

Tier two benefits (current Member and Pro viewpoints)

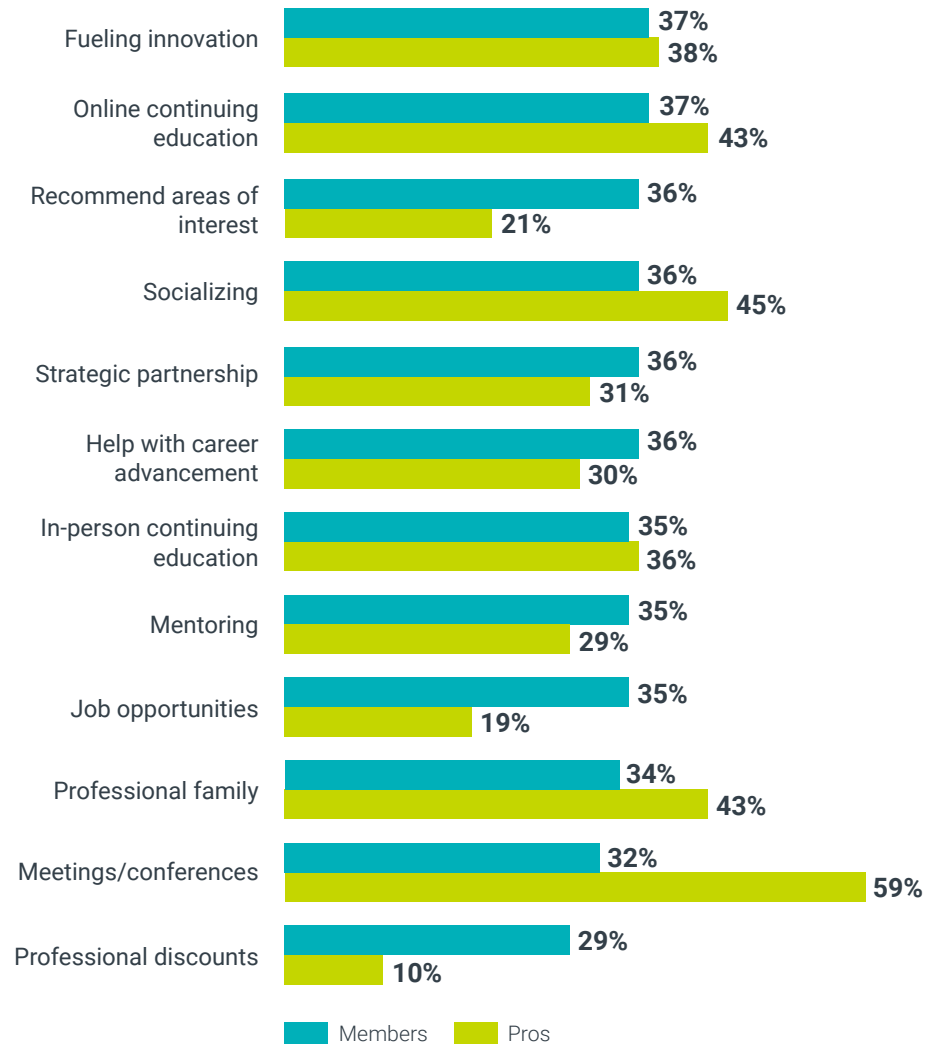


Figure 20. Questions asked: Below is a list of benefits that being a member of a professional membership organization might provide. For each, please indicate how important that benefit is to you. Would you say it is: | Below is a list of benefits that a professional membership/trade organization might provide to its members. For each, please indicate how important you feel that benefit is to your organization's members. Would you say it is ...

Similar to the disconnects in what benefits Members value most and what Pros *think* members value most, the investments Pros say their organization is making do not always align with what Members value.

For example, Members are looking to their organization to uplift their industry by raising awareness, advocacy, and training. Pros, on the other hand, are investing more on in-person meetings/conferences.



% of Pros who will invest more in the next year

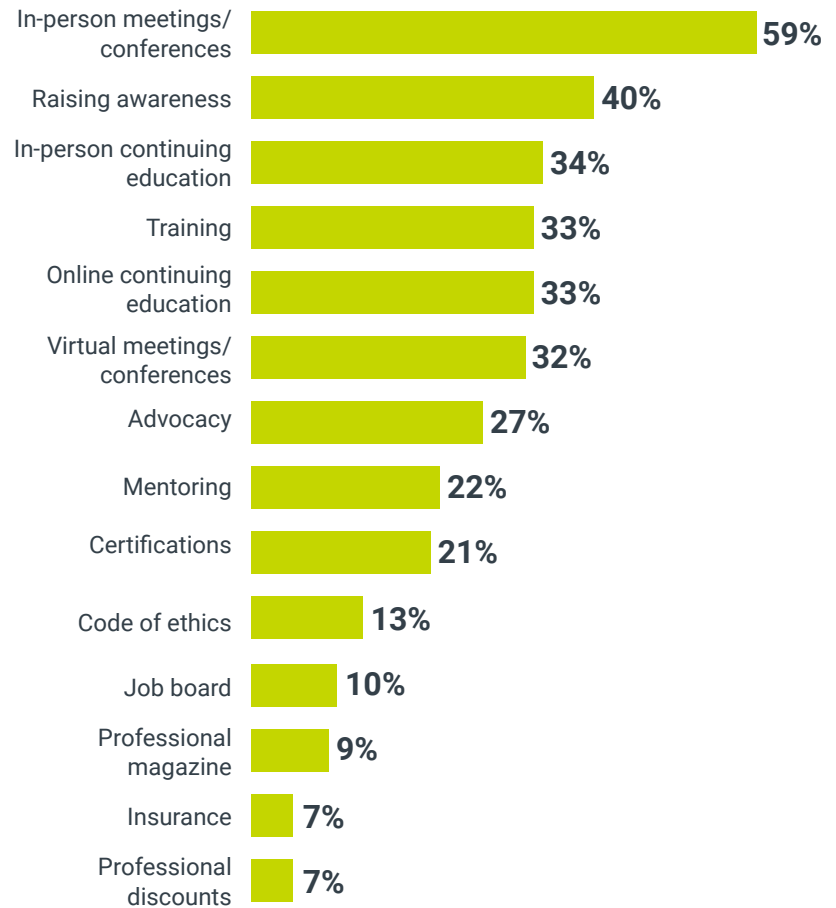


Figure 21. Question asked: To the best of your knowledge, how will your organization's level of investment in each of the following change in the next 12 months?



Audience drill-down: career stage

As in past studies by Community Brands, some Member priorities differ based on career stage. While training is still the number one priority for those early in their careers, this group's focus has shifted from personal benefits (such as job opportunities and networking) to more interest in professional benefits (such as advocacy and raising awareness of the industry). Early and mid-careerists place new emphasis on recommendations for areas that might be of interest to them.

Member priorities based on career stage

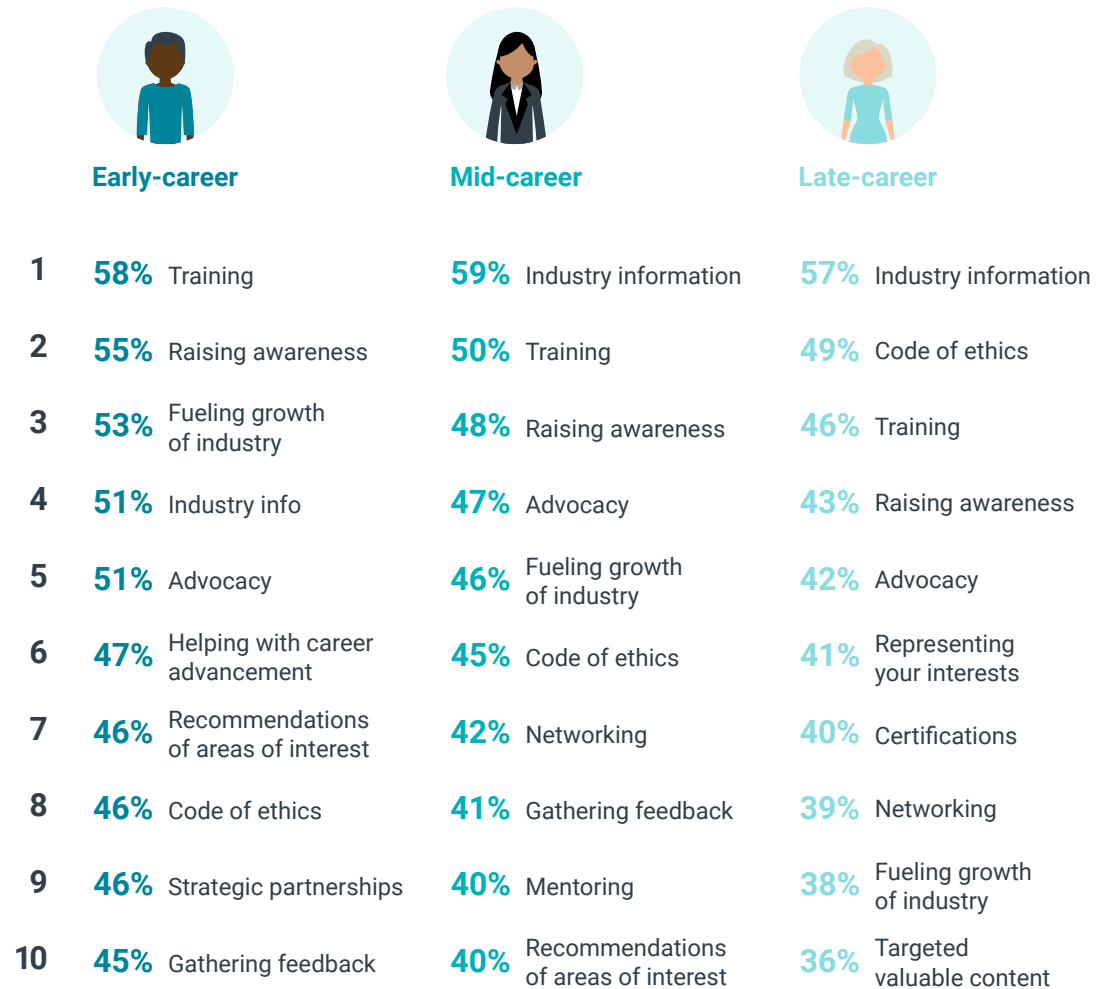


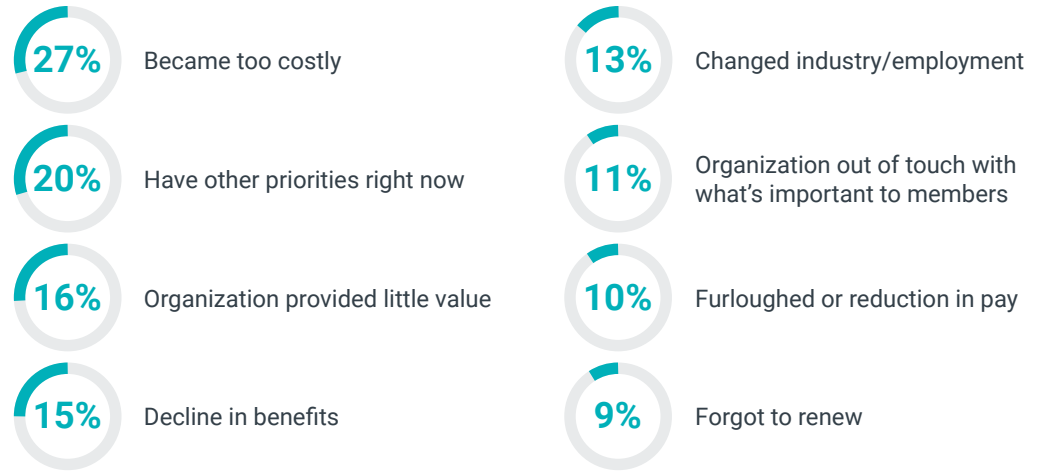
Figure 22. Question asked: Below is a list of benefits that being a member of a professional membership organization might provide. For each, please indicate how important that benefit is to you. Would you say it is:

Audience drill-down: lapsed Members

Findings show that lapsed Members leave for diverse reasons – the top being because of cost or other priorities. Almost two-in-10 say the organization was providing too little value.

A closer look at lapsed Members paints a picture of a group that is under-employed and in more junior roles versus current Members.

Top reasons for lapsing



Lapsed Member employment status

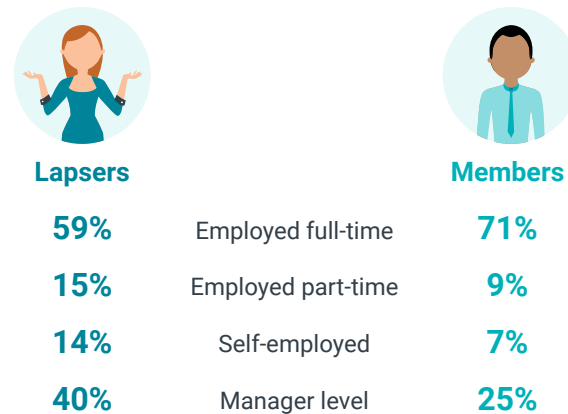


Figure 23 and 24. Questions asked: Why did you stop being a member of your professional membership organization? Please select all that apply. | Which of the following best describes your employment status? Please select one.

Lapsed Members' priorities are slightly different from those of current members.

They place significantly higher value on job opportunities and help with career advancement. Though they see all benefits as less important than current members do, benefits have increased in importance compared to studies from past years.

There is a big difference in terms of lapsed Members' perceptions of how well their organization understands their needs versus current Members' perceptions. This suggests an opportunity for associations to better understand these individuals so they can keep more of them from leaving in the future.

Importance of benefits: lapsed Members compared to current Members



Lapsed Members

1	Industry information
2	Training
3	Raising awareness
4	Code of ethics
5	Job opportunities
6	Advocacy
7	Help with career advancement



Current Members

1	Industry information
2	Training
4	Raising awareness
5	Code of ethics
21	Job opportunities
3	Advocacy
19	Help with career advancement

Perception of how well organization understands needs

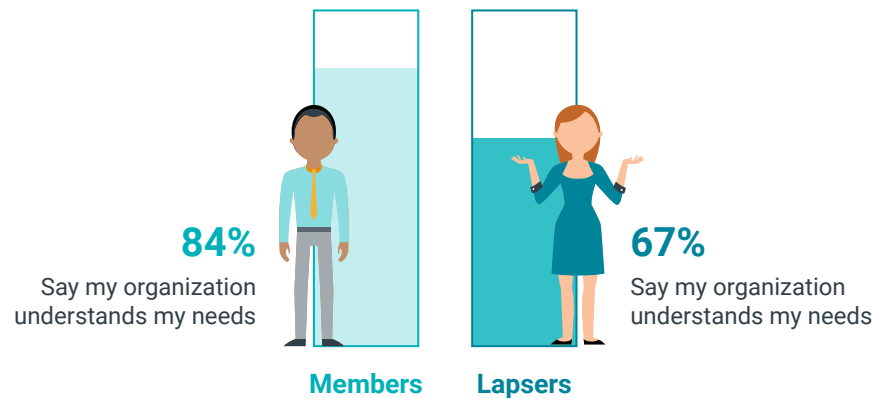


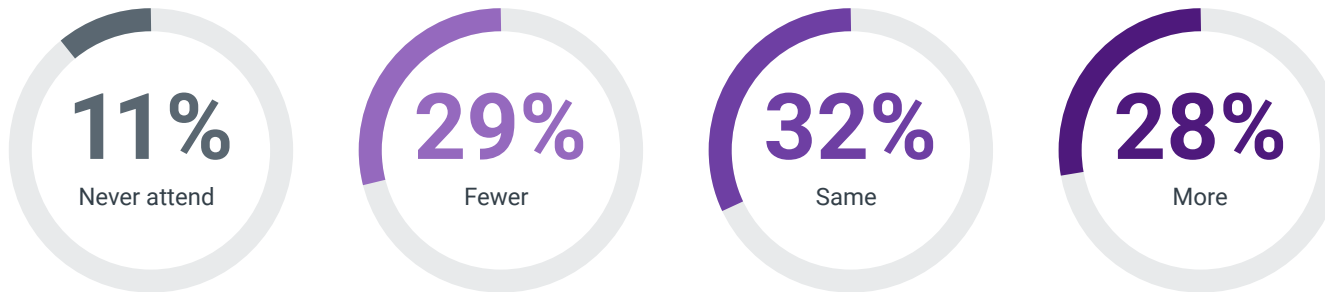
Figure 25 and 26. Questions asked: Below is a list of benefits that being a member of a professional membership organization might provide. For each, please indicate how important that benefit is to you. Would you say it is: | Overall, how well do you feel your professional membership organization understands/understood your needs?



The future of events for associations and their members

More than a quarter of Members say they have attended more of their professional membership organization's events in the past year. Top reasons are: because the organization offered more events, to maintain a sense of community and/or network with fellow members, and because virtual options made it easier/possible to attend more events.

Member event attendance compared to years past



Reasons for increased event attendance



Figure 27 and 28. Questions asked: How did the number of events you attended over the past year hosted by your professional membership organization compare to years past? Events can include conferences, meetings, townhalls, webinars, professional development, etc., and they can be virtual and/or in-person. | Why did you attend more events than you usually do?

The future of events for
associations and their members

Insights on in-person events

In 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of in-person events hosted by professional membership organizations plummeted, with 89 percent of Pros reporting a decrease in onsite events. Looking at the next 12 months, Pros say their organization is planning a comeback of in-person events, with 82 percent expecting to increase onsite events.

Pros' reporting on last year's events and plans for events in the next 12 months

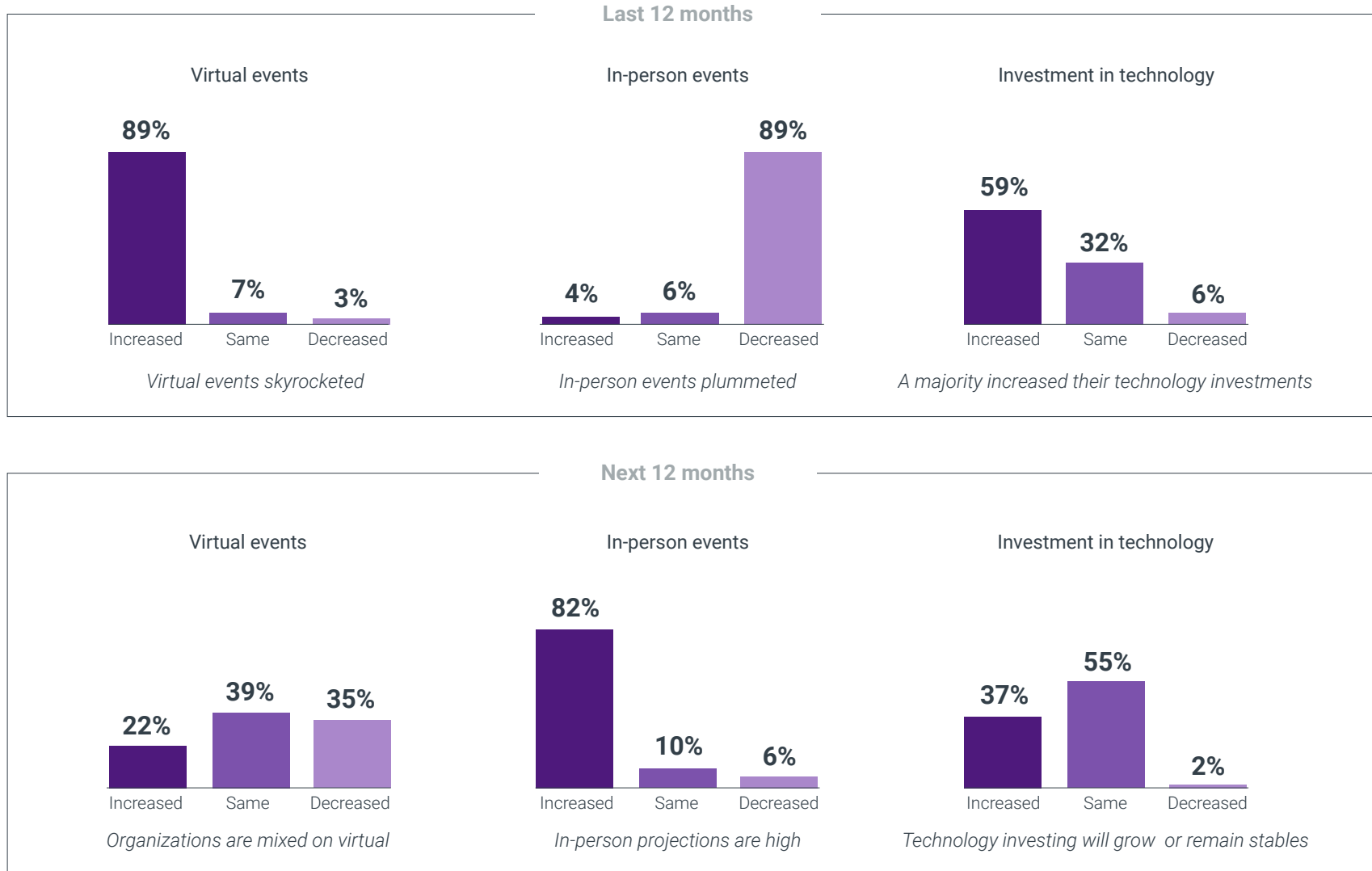


Figure 29. Questions asked: Over the last 12 months, has your organization increased, remained the same, or decreased in terms of: | And in the next 12 months, do you think each of the following will increase, remain the same, or decrease?

Majorities of Members and Pros say they are close or ready to return to in-person events this year.

Those who feel extremely connected to their organization, are very satisfied with their membership, and/or early careerists are most interested in meeting again in-person.

Comfort level of attending/hosting an in-person event this year (Member/Pro viewpoints)

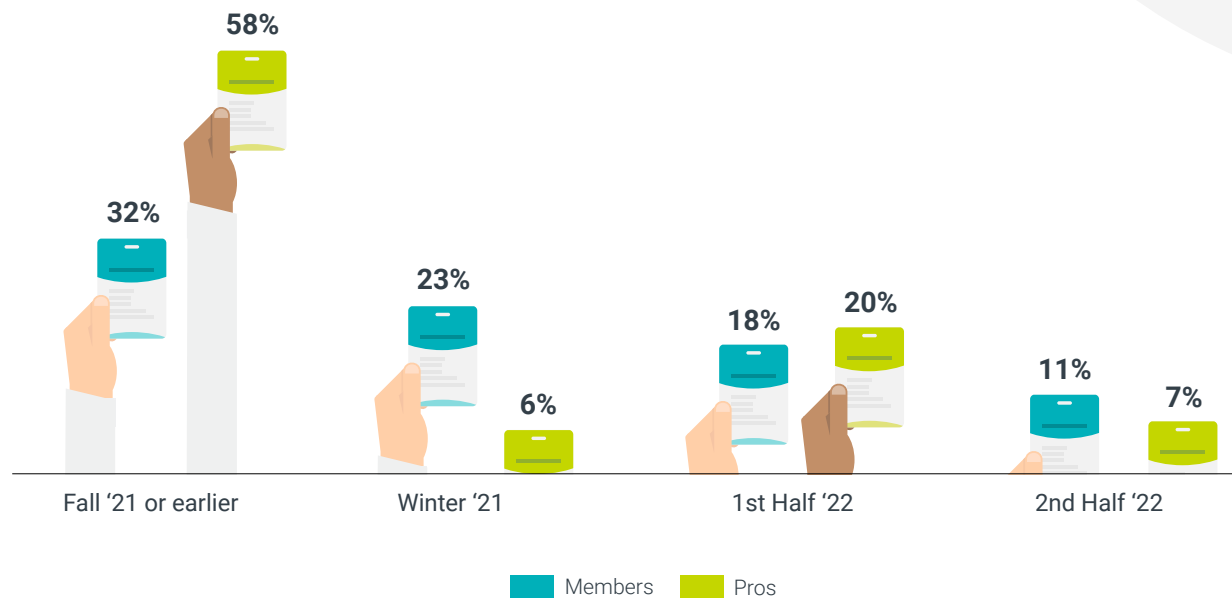


Figure 30. Questions asked: When do you think you will feel comfortable attending an event hosted by your professional membership organization in person? | When will you host your next in-person event?

Many Members say they want specific safety measures in place to feel comfortable attending an in-person event, while Pros are more focused on following Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines.

What Members need to feel comfortable (Among Members who will attend in person)		What Pros will do (among Pros who will host in-person events)	
Member is vaccinated	51%	Require vaccination	9%
All event attendees who are vaccinated	41%	On-site COVID testing	2%
Household/family is vaccinated	28%	Daily temp checks	8%
All attendees have a negative COVID test	26%	Location accommodates social distancing	34%
All attendees have their temperature taken	23%	Follow CDC guidelines	63%
Event location accommodates social distancing	22%	Low COVID transmission rates/hospitalizations in area	21%
CDC guidelines stating an in-person event is safe	22%	Event is outside	11%
Nothing, would go right now, no questions asked	11%	Event has less than 50 attendees	10%
		All attendees are need to be local	9%
		Know all attendees personally	6%
		Outside events only	3%
		Have 50 or fewer attendees	6%
		Local attendees only	2%
		No safety protocols	12%

Figure 31. Questions asked: What would need to happen for you to feel comfortable attending an event hosted by your professional membership organization in person? Select all that apply. | What, if any, safety protocols will you implement for upcoming in-person events? Select all that apply.

Factors with the biggest impact on Members' decisions to attend events in person include the location of the event, friends or colleagues who are attending, if the event is within driving distance, and if their employer will pay for them to attend.

What makes Members more likely to attend an event in person or virtually

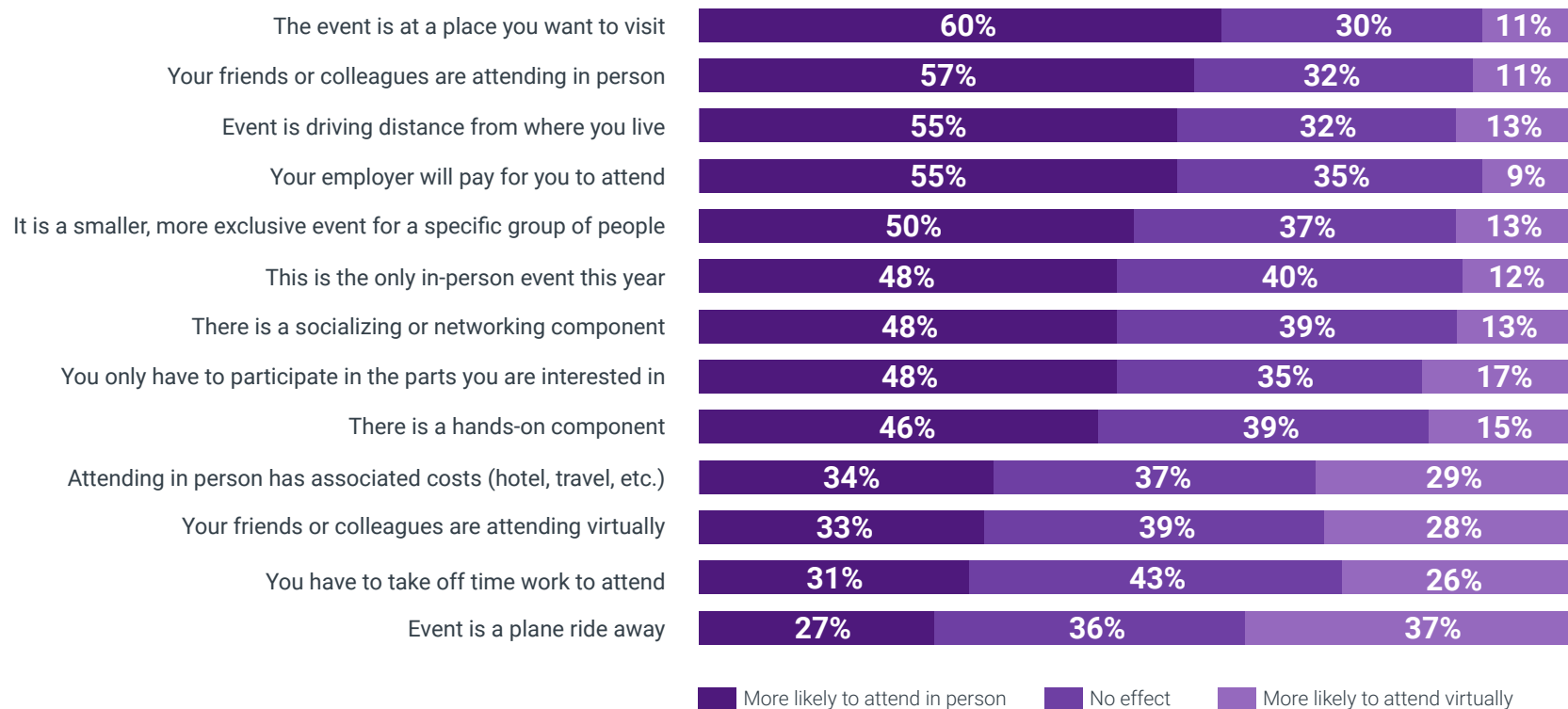


Figure 32. Question asked: Imagine in the next 6 months, your professional membership organization is hosting an event that you are very interested in attending, and you can attend either virtually/remotely or in person. For each of the following, please indicate if it makes you more likely to attend in person, more likely to attend virtually, or if it has no impact on how you attend.

The mixed bag of member engagement

In last year's study, a significant number of Members said they planned to shift from mostly or all in-person engagement to a mix of virtual and in-person. Generations Y and Z and those early in their careers were already engaging primarily online. In this year's study, a small shift away from virtual engagement comes from the same generations, though the majority will still stay virtual.



Members' plans for future engagement with their organization

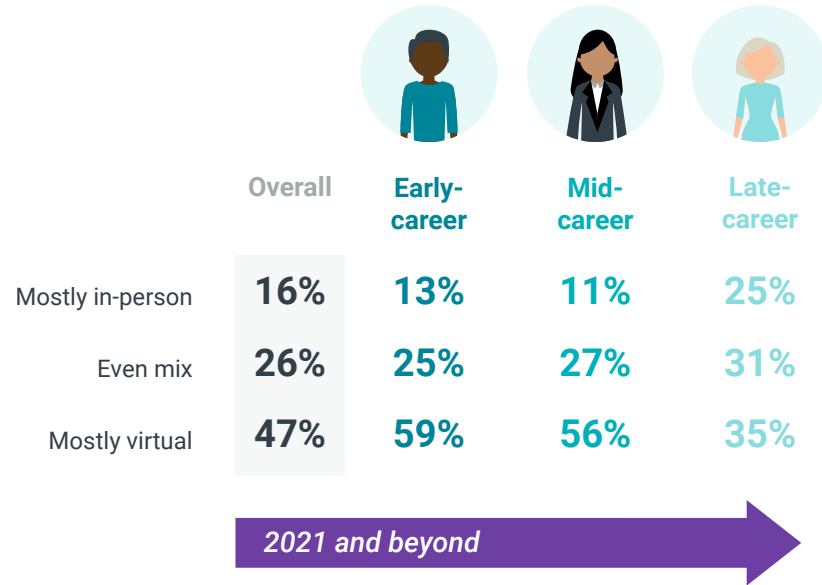


Figure 33. Question asked: How do you think you will engage with your professional membership organization in the coming years?



The future of events for
associations and their members

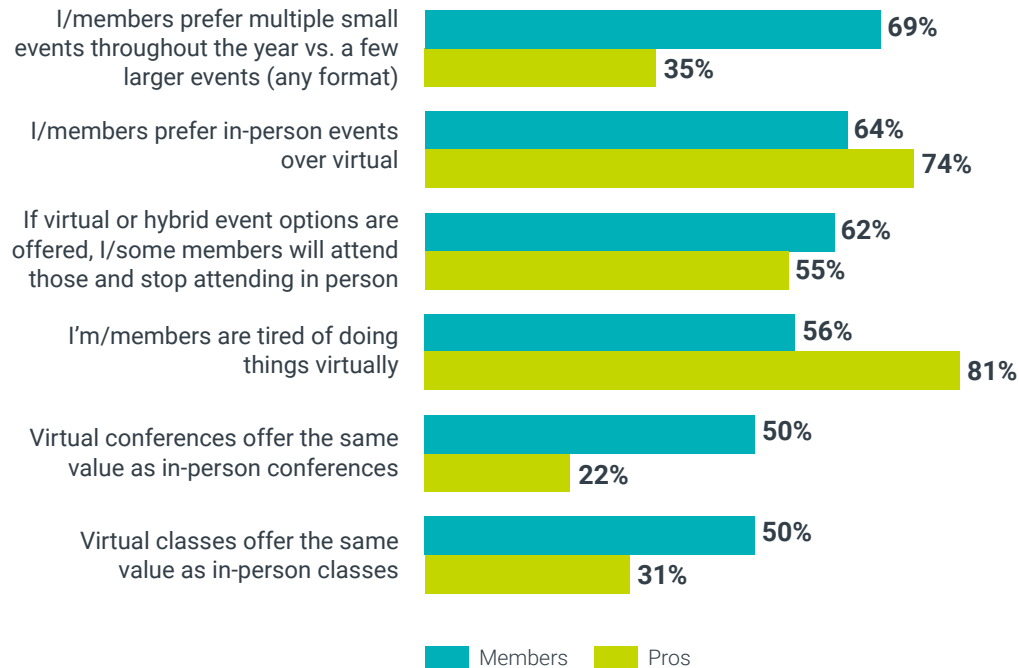
Viewpoints on virtual events

Findings from this study suggest disconnects between how Pros and Members view virtual events. Members indicate they are interested in multiple smaller events throughout the year versus a few larger events.

While Members still value in-person events (though less than what Pros think they do), they also recognize the benefits of virtual events more than Pros do.

Also, Members agree at significantly higher rates than Pros that virtual conferences and classes provide the same value as in-person events.

Pros' and Members' perceptions of virtual events (strongly/somewhat agree)



What Pros will offer more/focus on

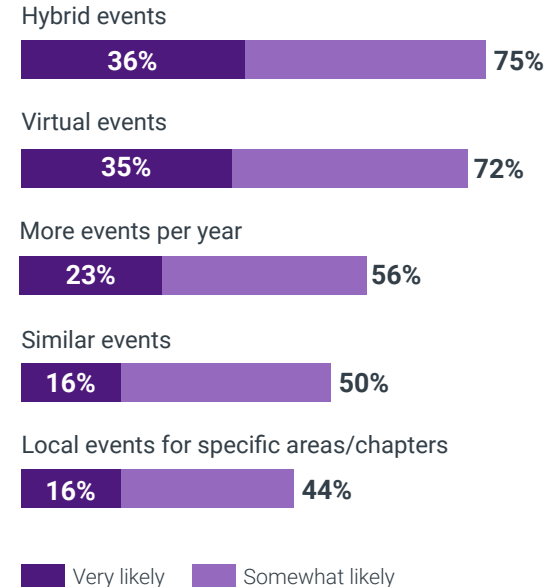


Figure 34 and 35. Questions asked: Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about virtual events, courses, and conferences offered by professional membership organizations. Please answer to the best of your knowledge, whether you have attended these kinds of events before or not. | Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about virtual events, courses, and conferences offered by your professional membership/trade organizations. | Moving forward, how likely is your organization to do each of the following compared to years past?



The future of events for
associations and their members

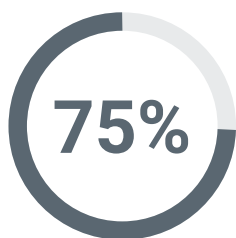
The hybrid event option

When it comes to hybrid (in-person and virtual) events, Pros and Members are in agreement: Members – especially early careerists – are interested in hybrid event options, and Pros say they will likely deliver them.

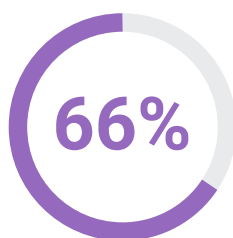
Early careerists might be more inclined to attend virtually because of the costs of attending in-person events, the ability to get approval to travel, or other factors that previously didn't allow them to attend events.



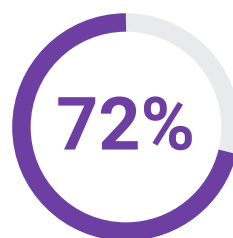
Members' and Pros' perspectives on hybrid events



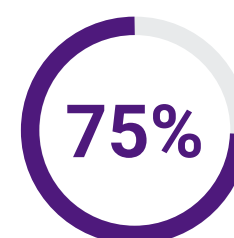
of current and lapsed Members say it's important for their organization to offer events that can be attended in person or virtually, depending on their preference



of Pros agree that Members will expect their organizations to offer all or most events in a hybrid format



of current and lapsed Members agree that they expect their organizations to offer all or most events in a hybrid format



of Pros are very or somewhat likely to offer more hybrid events moving forward

Figure 36. Questions asked: How important is it for your professional membership organization to offer events than can be attended in person or virtually, depending on your preference? | Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about virtual events, courses, and conferences offered by professional membership organizations. Please answer to the best of your knowledge, whether you have attended these kinds of events before or not. | Moving forward, how likely is your organization to do each of the following compared to years past? | Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about virtual events, courses, and conferences offered by your professional membership/trade organizations

Of the three modes (in-person only, virtual only, and hybrid), hybrid events are the most popular among Pros for their most common events, including annual conferences, committee meetings, and continuing education classes. However, more than a third are still committed to offering an in-person only annual conference.

Event modalities in the next 12 months

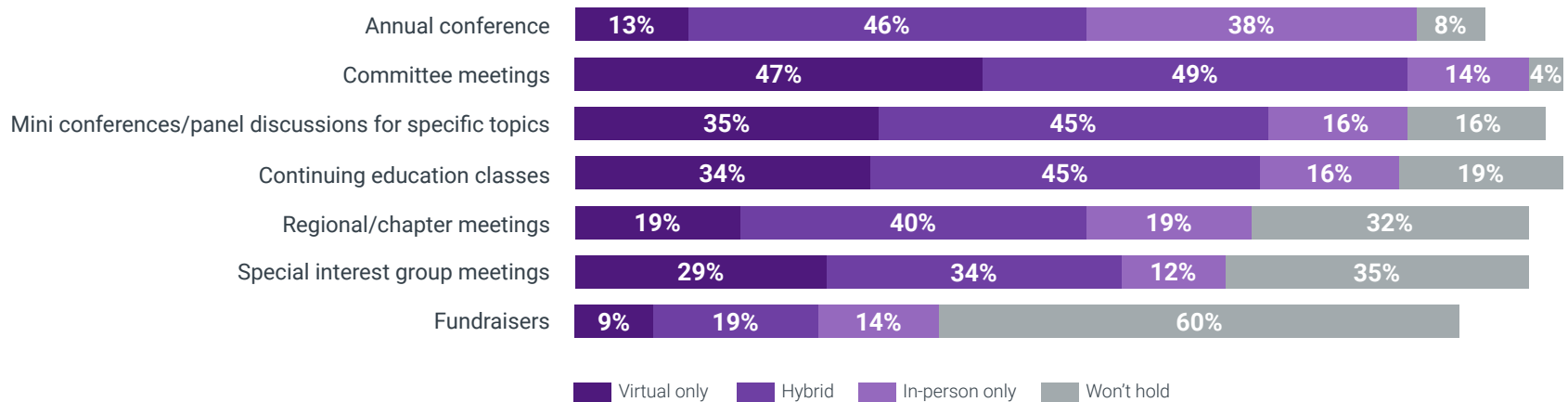


Figure 37. Question asked: To the best of your knowledge, how will your organization hold the following types of events in the next 12 months? Please select all that apply. If your organization will not hold that type of event, please indicate so.

Pros see both benefits and challenges to offering hybrid event options, with the biggest benefits being increased flexibility and reach.



Biggest benefit to holding hybrid events



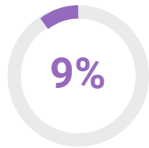
Greater flexibility/choice for attendees



Attract new attendees who do not come to in-person events



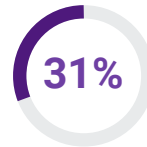
Easier to connect people from different geographic areas



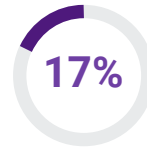
Increased attendance



Biggest challenge to holding hybrid events



Providing comparable value to in-person and virtual attendees



Audio/visual planning and execution



In-person attendance forecasting



Paying for the technology

Figure 38. Questions asked: What do you see as the greatest benefit to holding hybrid events? Select one. | What do you see as the greatest challenge as you think about hosting a hybrid event in the future? Select one.

Likelihood to host a hybrid event varies by event type and organization size with large organizations significantly more likely to offer hybrid events. Small organizations are less likely to hold continuing education classes, regional, chapter, or SIG meetings.

Likelihood of holding hybrid events (by organization size)

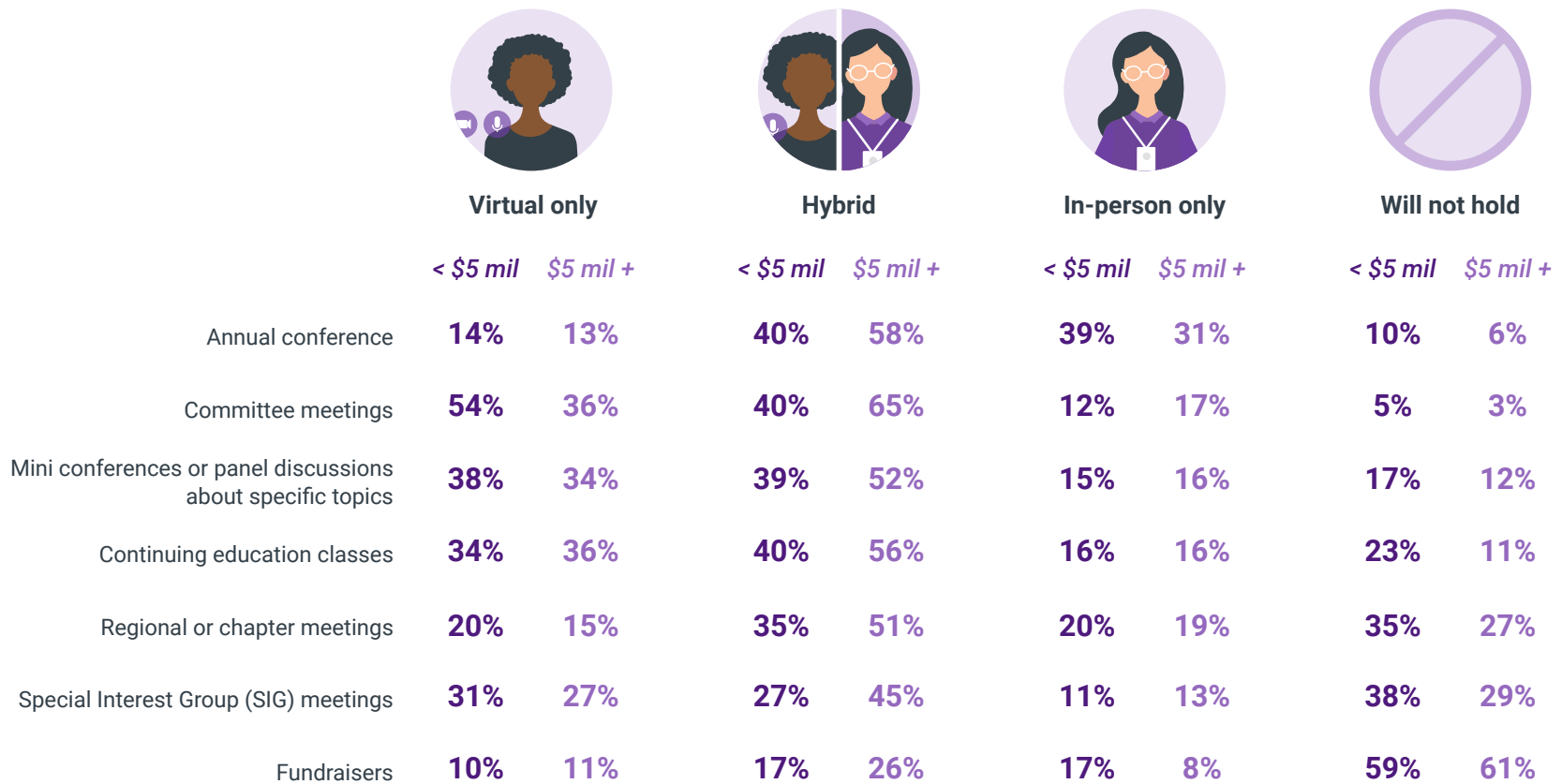


Figure 39. Question asked: To the best of your knowledge, how will your organization hold the following types of events in the next 12 months? Please select all that apply. If your organization will not hold that type of event, please indicate so.

The future of events for
associations and their members

Events: looking forward

As Pros look to the future, they indicate that sponsorships and in-person ticket sales will be the top drivers of revenue from their events. To assist with event planning and execution, Pros say online registration tools, a virtual event platform, and audio/visual services for virtual attendees are the most important tools.

Primary source of future events revenue

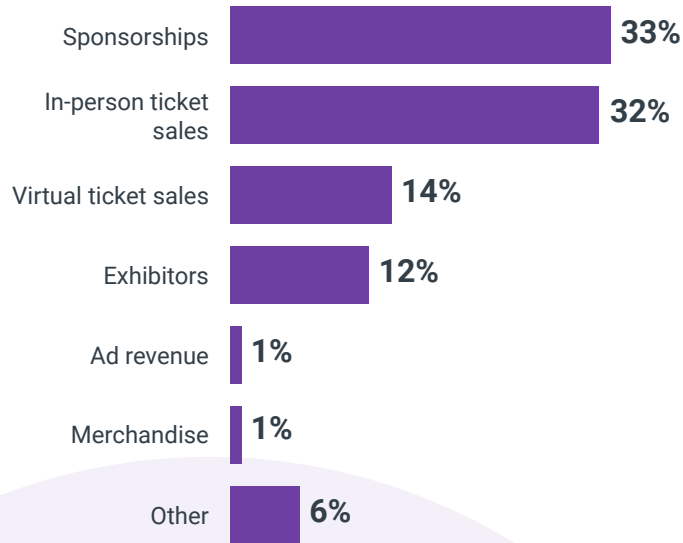


Figure 40. Question asked: What do you think will be your primary source of events revenue moving forward? Select one.

Importance of event tools moving forward

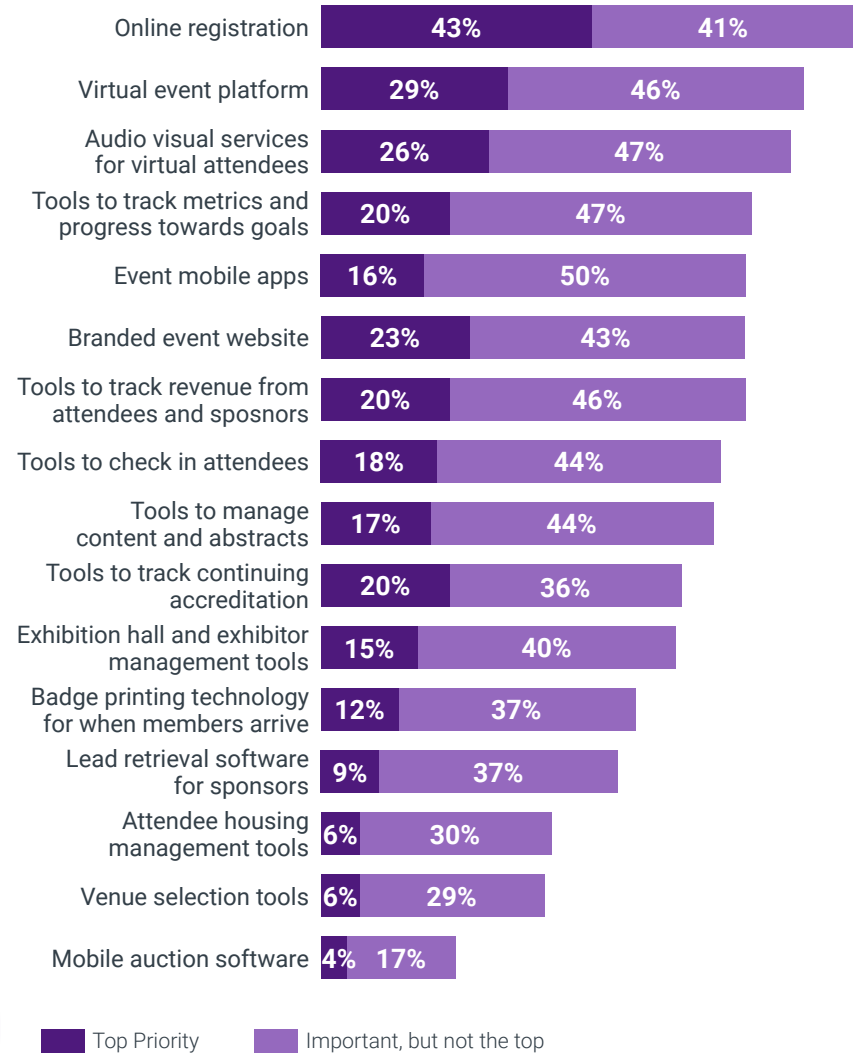


Figure 41. Question asked: Below is list of technological tools to assist organizations with event planning and execution. How much of a priority is each for your organization to invest in moving forward?



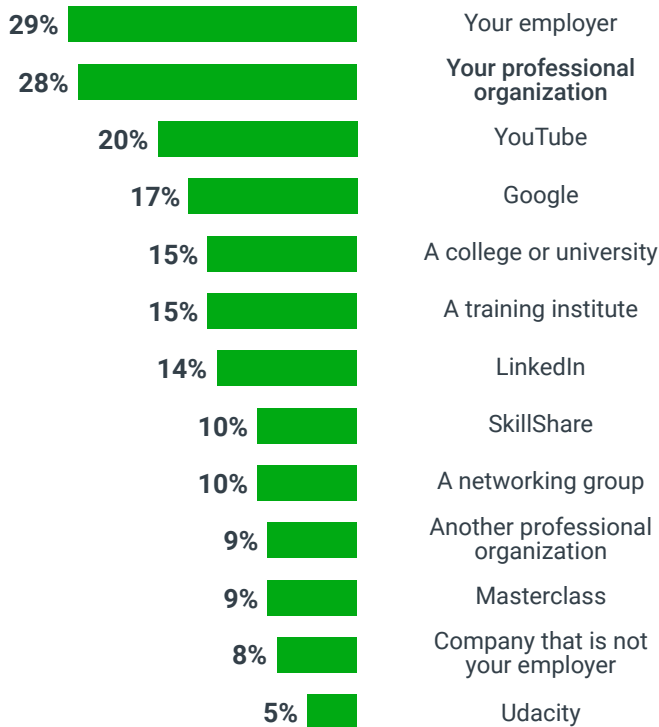


Member expectations for more learning opportunities

Members say they are getting professional education and training in multiple ways. While they turn most frequently to their employer or their professional organization, other sources are close behind, indicating considerable competition for organizations.

When asked about the quality of training, Members give their professional organization a so-so rating compared with other sources, indicating an opportunity for organizations to step up their education and training programs.

Where current Members received training in the last two years



Quality of training

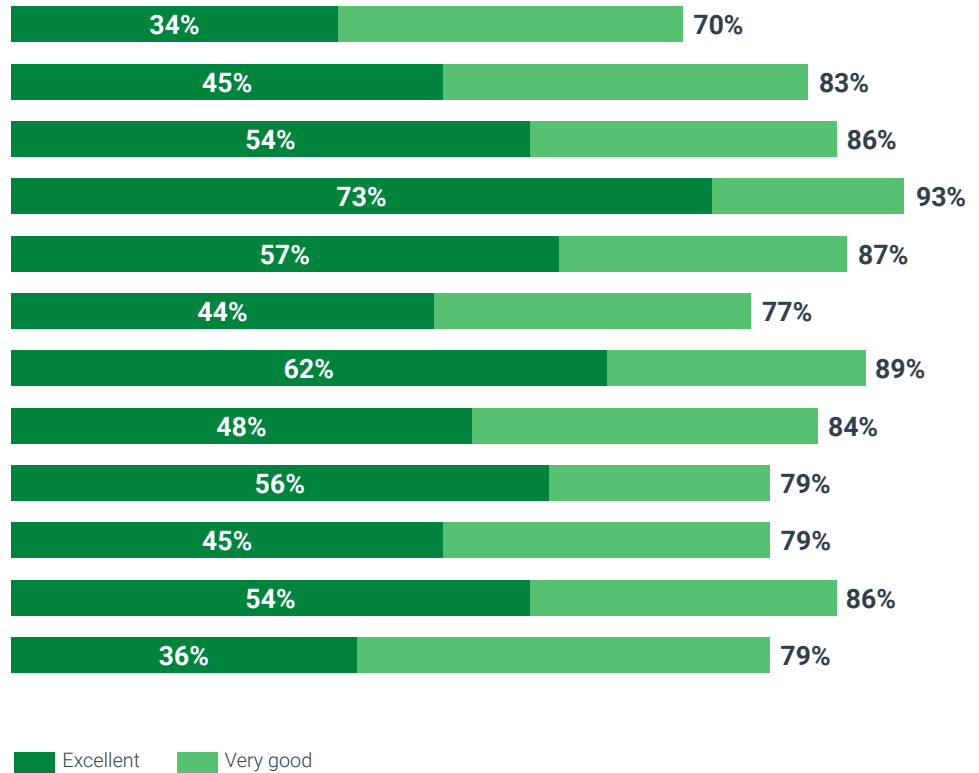


Figure 42. Questions asked: Within the last two years, through which of the following organizations or venues have you received professional education and training? | Overall, how would you rate the professional education and training you received from each of the following?

Two-thirds (67 percent) of Members say they are required to take professional education and training courses to comply with industry standards. Of those, most turn to their employer or their professional membership organization for the courses.

However, those who are not required to take training are more likely to turn to YouTube than their membership organization.



Where Members turn for professional education and training

	Training required	Training not required
Your employer	33%	23%
Your professional organization	31%	14%
YouTube	20%	19%
Google	20%	12%
A training institute	18%	8%
A college or university	17%	10%
LinkedIn	16%	13%
SkillShare	13%	7%
A networking group	11%	8%
Masterclass	11%	6%
Another professional organization	11%	4%
Company that is not your employer	10%	4%
Udacity	5%	5%
Did not receive any	6%	29%

Figure 43. Questions asked: In the industry that you work, are you required to take professional education and training in order to comply with industry standards (i.e., licensure and certification)? | Within the last two years, through which of the following organizations or venues have you received professional education and training?

This study's findings show that Members are interested in more learning modalities than their organization currently offers, suggesting an opportunity for professional membership organizations to provide more learning options.

Most organizations offer only conferences and individual courses (both online and in-person). Members say they are interested in a wide variety of professional education and training opportunities, including webcasts of live events, recommended courses, short videos, social learning, and just-in-time learning.

% Members likely to use versus what Pros offer

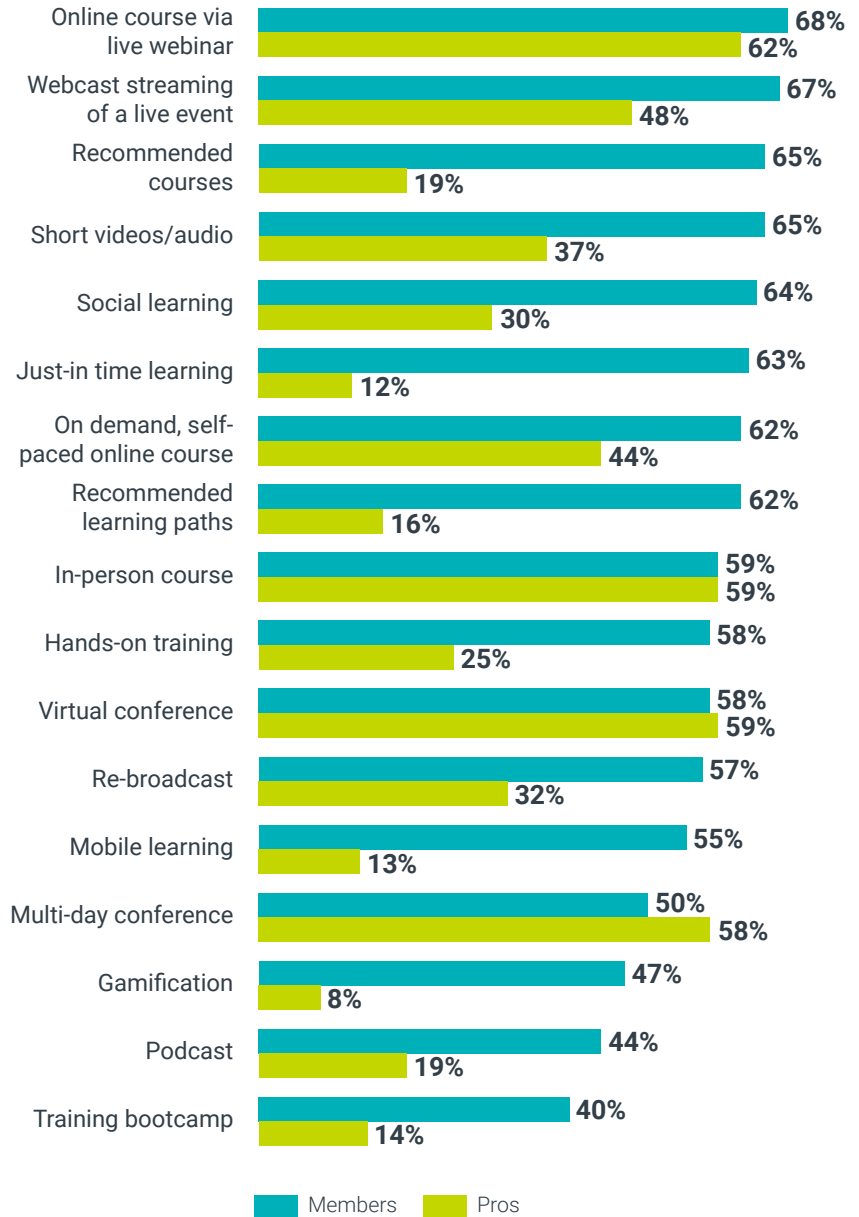



Figure 44. Questions asked: How likely are you to utilize the following professional education and training opportunities in the next 12 months? | How do you currently offer professional development or training to your members? Select all that apply.



Technology usage and concerns for association professionals

More Pros say they feel more technologically prepared for the future than they did in a 2019 study by Community Brands. However, still only half of them feel prepared.

How technologically prepared Pros feel for the future

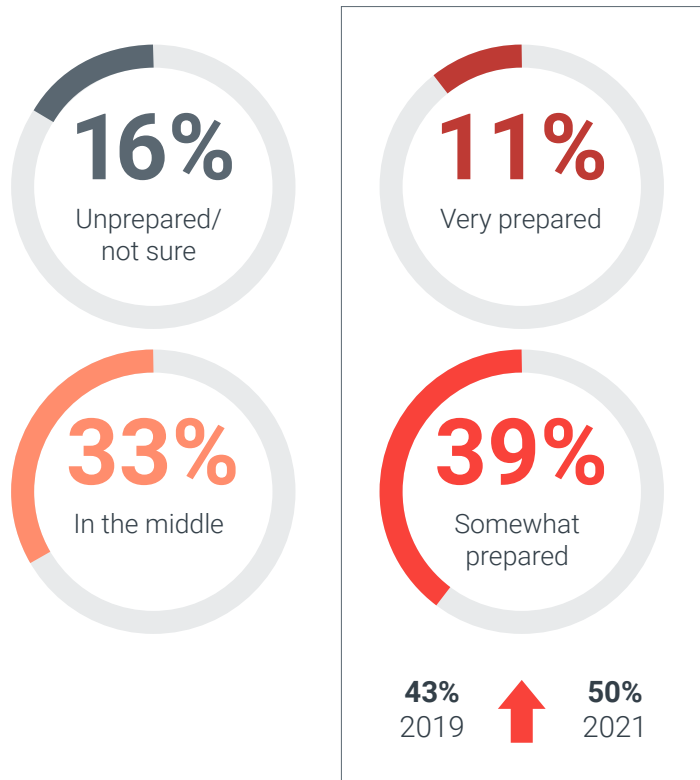
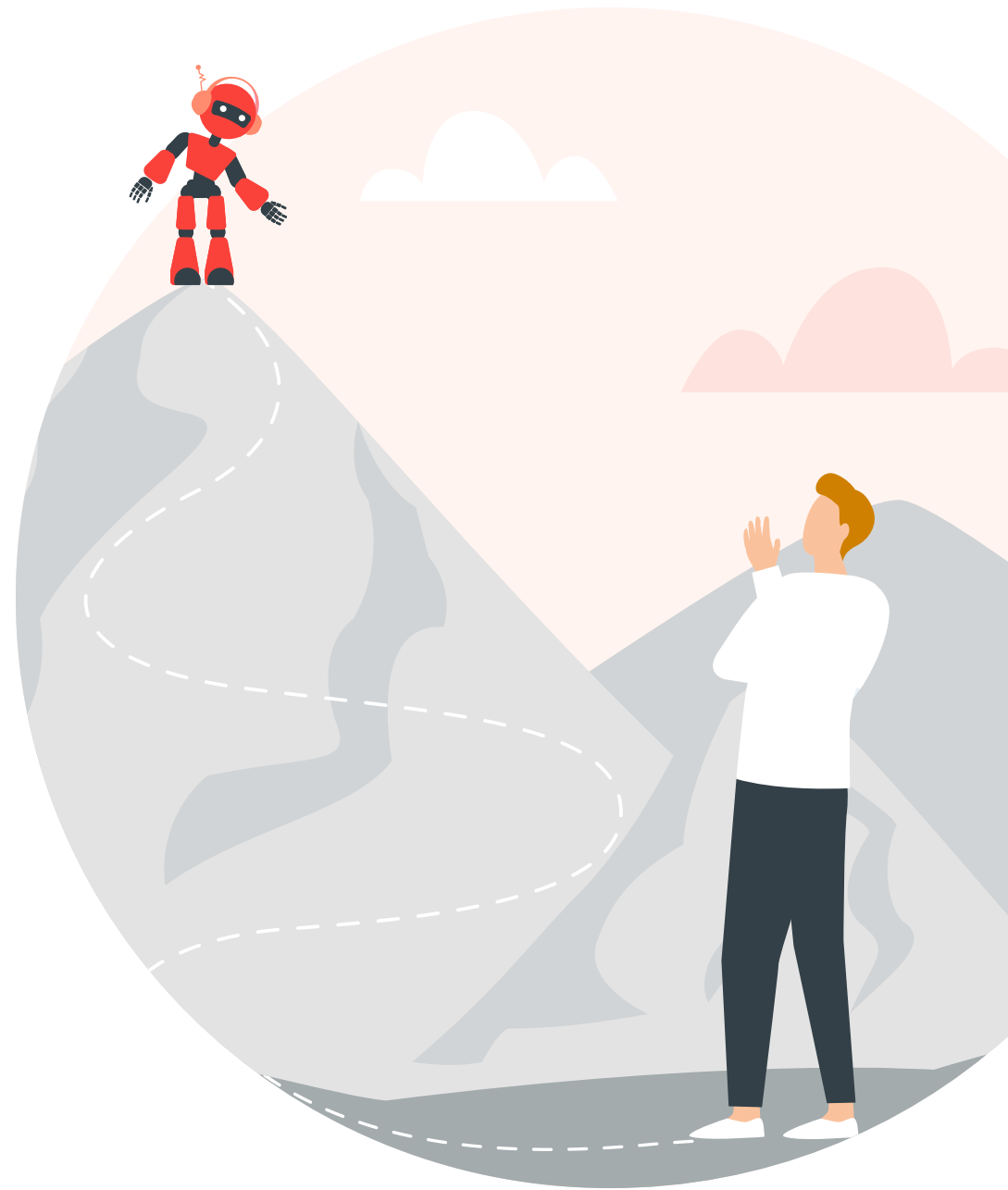
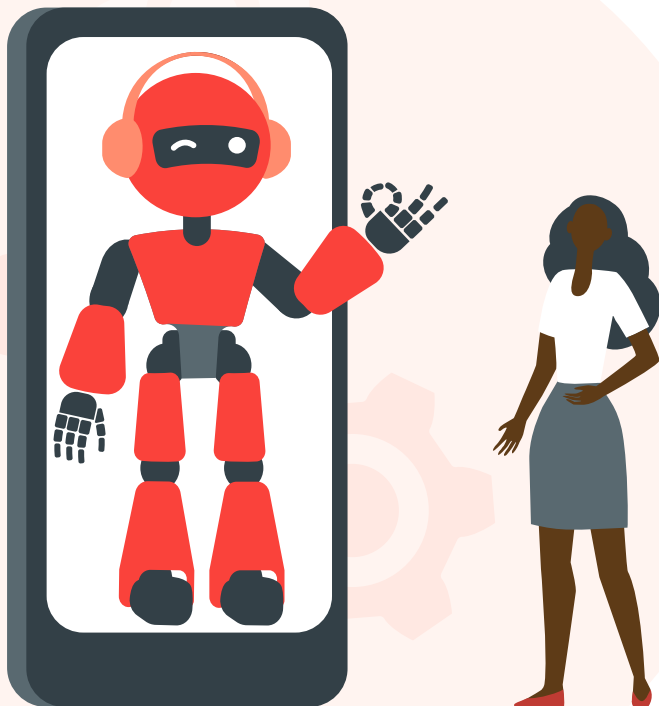


Figure 45. Question asked: When it comes to technology, how prepared do you feel your organization is for the future?



The top two technology tools Pros say their organization uses are association management software (AMS) or customer relationship management (CRM) systems and email marketing platforms. Given the situation in the past year-and-a-half, it's not surprising that webcast/webinar and virtual event platform tools follow close behind.

Meanwhile, less than five percent of Pros say they are using predictive intelligence, artificial intelligence, and/or machine learning.



Technology/solutions used



Figure 46. Question asked: Which of the following technology/solutions does your organization use? Select all that apply.

Looking ahead at the next 12 months, the technologies Pros are most likely to say their organization will spend more on are AMS/CRM systems, learning management system (LMS) software, and business analytics tools.

Large organizations are significantly more likely to spend more on tools for business analytics.

Planned technology spending changes (among Pros using)

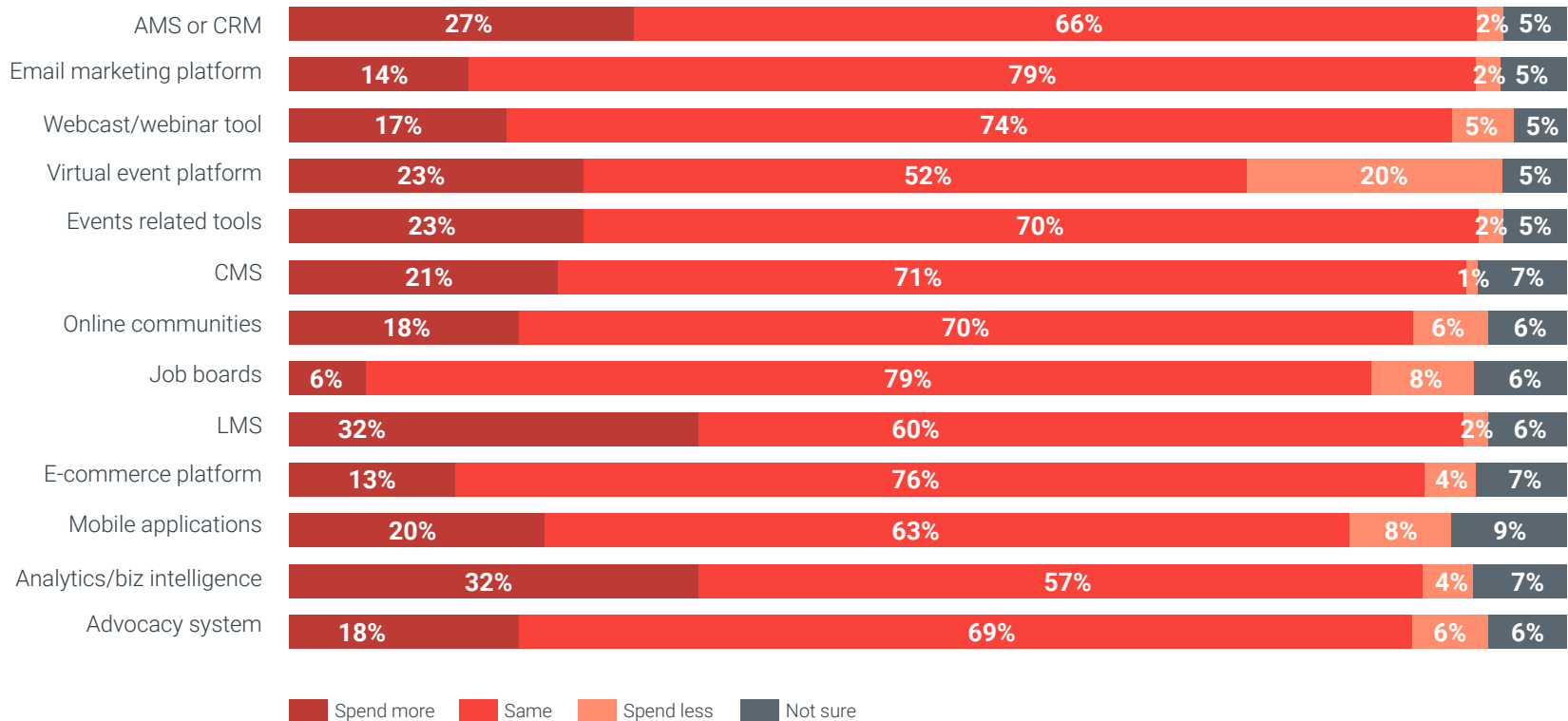
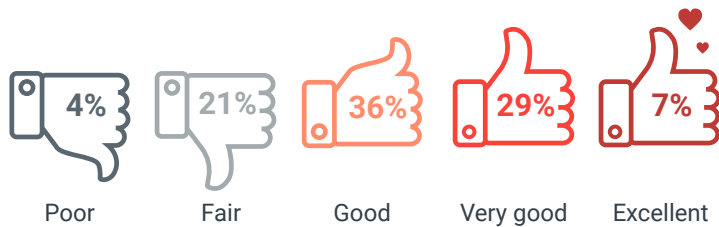


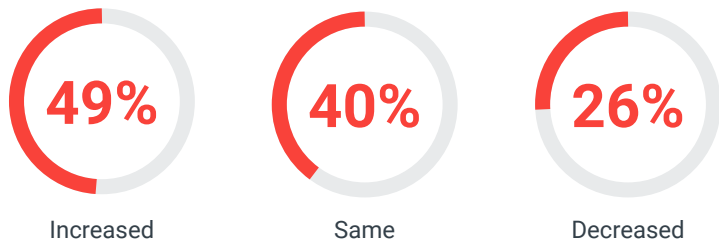
Figure 47. Question asked: In the next 12 months, will your organization spend more, less, or the same on each of the technology/solutions it uses?

Survey responses from Pros suggest that the state of their member data has room to improve. Just over a third of Pros say their member data is excellent or very good. Pros with poor member retention in the past year tend to report worse member data.

State of member data



Excellent/very good data by member retention (last 12 months)



The top member data challenge Pros face is integrating data from various resources to paint a clear picture of their members.

Challenges of reporting and data analytics

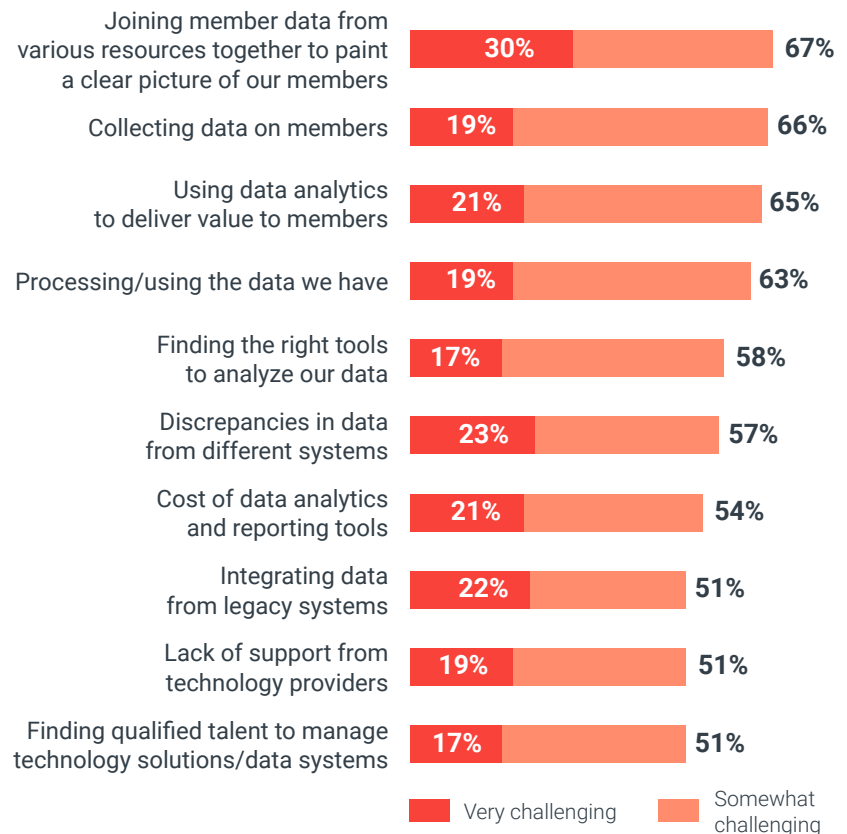


Figure 48, 49, and 50. Questions asked: How would you describe the state of your member data today? | How challenging is each of the following when it comes to reporting and data analytics?



Where to go from here

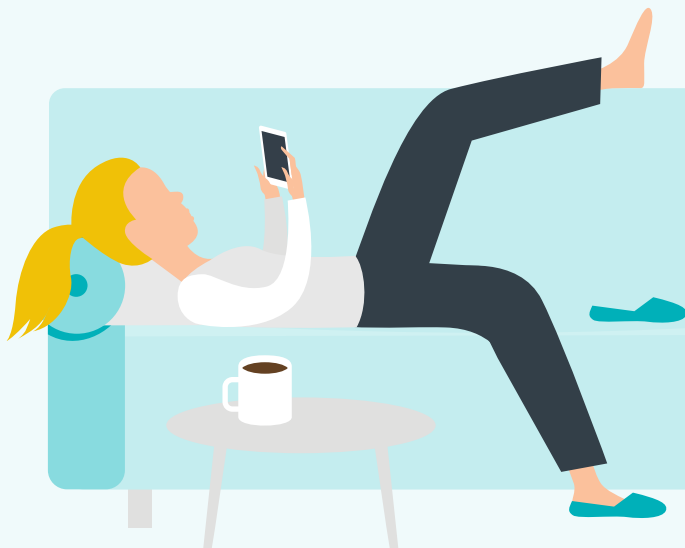
Member sentiments and loyalty for their professional membership organization remains strong and steady as the world emerges from more than a year of disruptions into a still-evolving era. At the same time, organizations feel positive about a bright future.

Here are **six ways** to use the data and findings from this study to make the most out of this optimistic, yet still uncertain, time as you build the next normal for your organization:

1 Say goodbye to traditional in-person only events.

Even during a time of mass disruption, more than half of members say they attended the same amount or more of their organization's events in the past year than in years before. And while in-person events still have a valuable place in member engagement, nearly three quarters of Members now expect their organization to offer all or most events in a hybrid format.

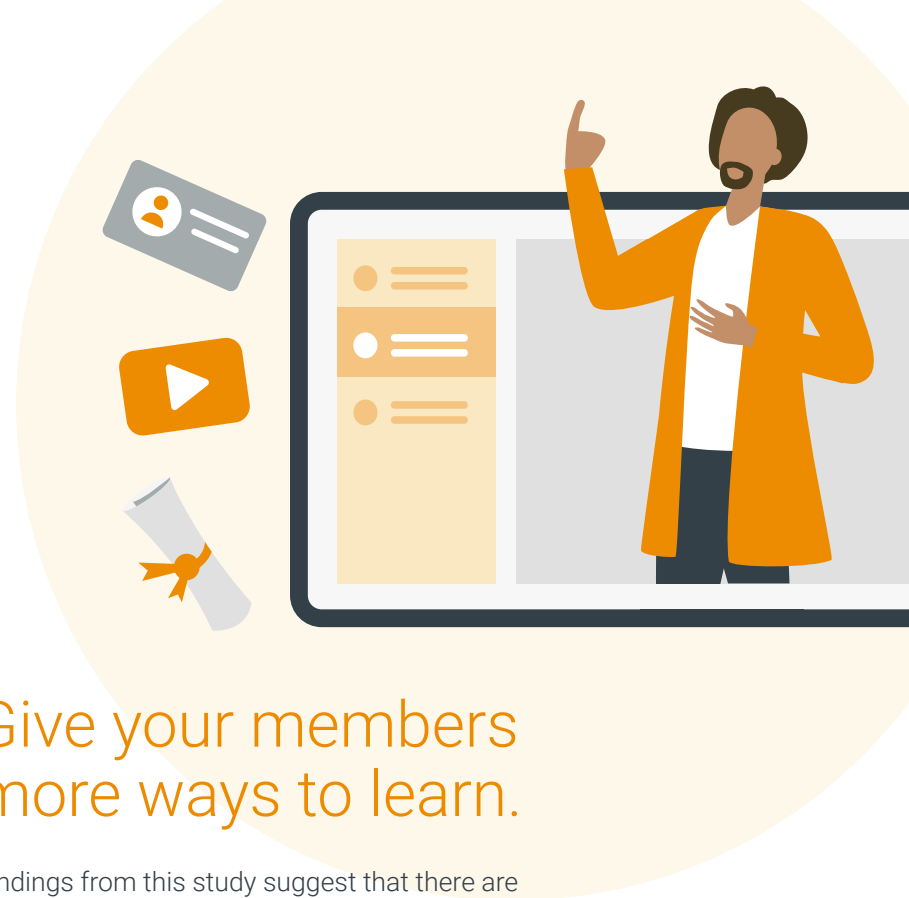
It's time to move beyond traditional in-person only events. Prepare to offer a great hybrid event experience for your members by putting in place the right tools and strategies to engage both in-person and virtual attendees. Your members will appreciate the ability to choose the option that best fits with their schedule, budget, health concerns, and expectations.



2 Give your members more ways to learn.

Findings from this study suggest that there are some disconnects between organizations and their members when it comes to the importance of certain benefits. For example, training and certification continue to be two of the most important benefits to Members, yet Pros still tend to undervalue these benefits. Meanwhile, data from this study indicates that Members are looking for a greater variety of learning modalities, including online courses via live webinar, webcasts of a live event, course recommendations, and short videos.

Revisit your professional education and certification programs and find new ways to offer a variety of learning options to address members' schedules, educational and certification needs, and learning preferences.



3 Work smarter, not harder, to deliver greater member value.

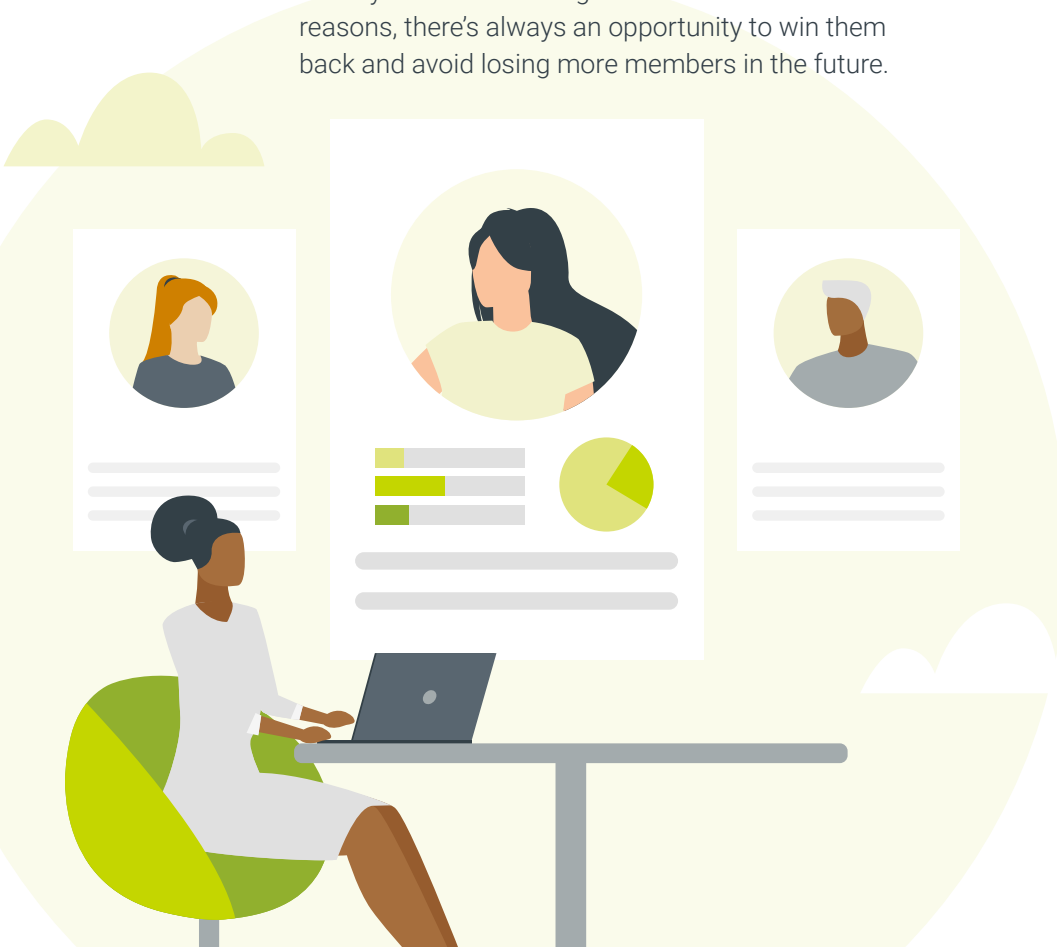
Results from this study suggest that Pros are working harder than they were a year ago, with time and member engagement being the biggest challenges to achieving organizational priorities.

One way to address these challenges is to focus on the return on member value from your programs. This means focusing more effort on those areas that will drive the greatest impact with today's members – individual benefits such as training and certifications, and industry-focused benefits such as industry news and information, advocacy, and raising awareness.



4 Show members you understand them to avoid the lapse.

The top three reasons Members give for allowing their membership to lapse are that the membership became too costly, they have other priorities now, and the organization was providing little value. While your members might fail to renew for various reasons, there's always an opportunity to win them back and avoid losing more members in the future.



This study shows that lapsed Members' priorities are slightly different from those of current Members. They place significantly higher value on job opportunities and help with career advancement, yet Pros continue to undervalue these areas as member benefits. Give your members more of the value they seek by making sure you're investing in your online career center. For example, if you think about your organization's online career center as simply a place for job postings, you're missing an opportunity to engage more with members by offering them valuable career advancement opportunities and resources.

To avoid members leaving due to financial reasons, offer budget-friendly installment payment options or create a membership tier for those in-between jobs.

And remember that this study shows that Pros with poor member retention in the past year tend to report worse member data. Meanwhile, lapsed Members are much less likely than current Members to say they feel their organization understands their needs. Get a handle on your member data – keep it updated, de-duplicated, and all in one place – so you can use it to communicate with your members in a more personalized way and send them more targeted content that delivers greater value and shows you understand them.

5 Strengthen your governance model.

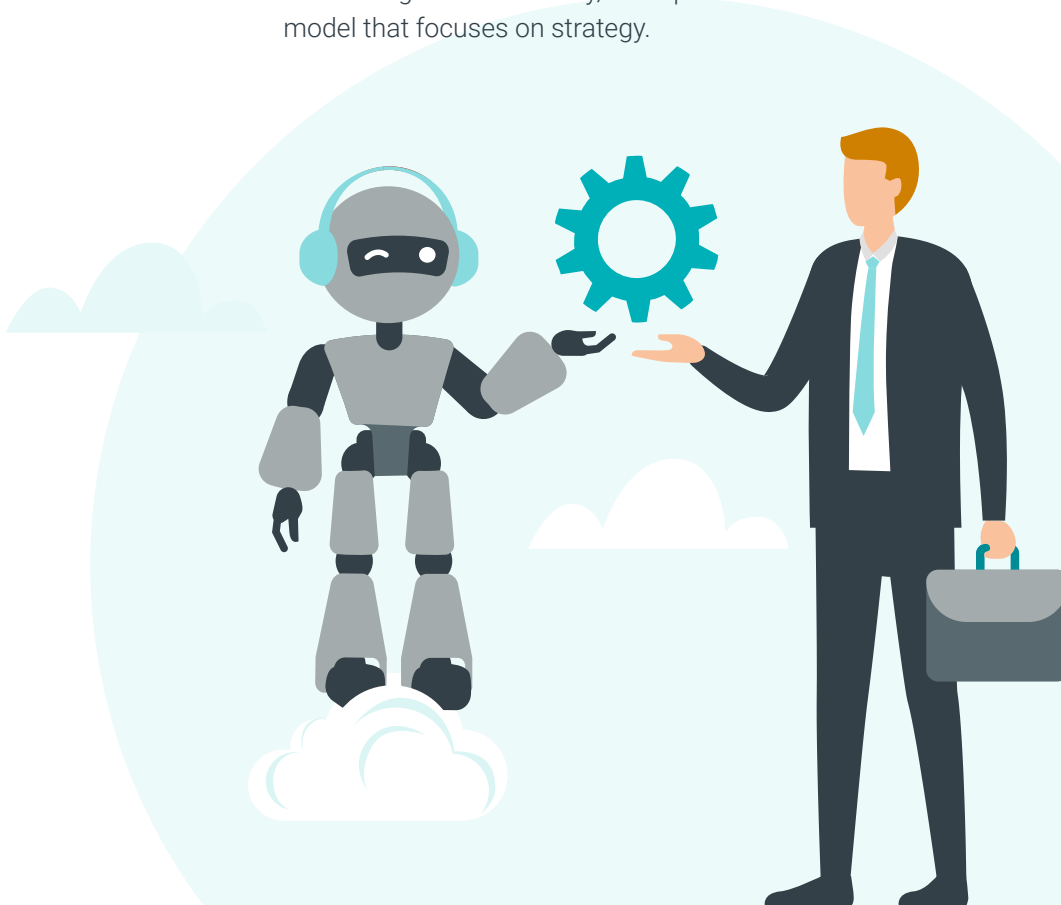
Members say the importance of their organization has grown – even more than in last year’s study. Loyalty metrics also remain strong, and younger and more diverse Members are increasing their engagement. To capitalize on this momentum, governance models must support the future of professional organizations. Ensure your board is reflective of your membership, has foresight and creativity, and operates within a model that focuses on strategy.

6 Always be tech-ready.

While the association industry’s future looks bright, these are still uncertain times. This study’s findings suggest that the state of member data remains lackluster, and half of Pros continue to feel technologically unprepared for the future. Considering Member appetites for hybrid events and new learning options, combined with already-heavy workloads for Pros, it’s time to turn this around.

For example, an AMS system with modern tools, including process automation, artificial intelligence, and data analytics, can help you manage member data efficiently, streamline work, and provide a modern digital member experience. A strong event software platform and professional audio/video services can help ease the challenges of managing hybrid events while helping to deliver a great attendee experience. The right learning management system (LMS) can help you provide the variety of learning options your members expect.

Investing in these types of tools as part of a long-term technology strategy will provide a strong foundation to prepare your organization for what comes next – no matter what the future might bring.



Put the insights from the 2021 Association Study into practice.

Learn how Community Brands can help your association be prepared for the future that lies ahead.

Let's chat



Research methodology Commissioned by Community Brands, Edge Research conducted an online survey of 1,018 U.S. Members (834 current Members and 184 who lapsed within the last two years) who self-reported they are 18 years old or older and a Member of a professional membership organization. Survey respondents were recruited through an online non-probability sample, meaning findings are not projectable to the larger population of members. The term "Members" refers specifically to those who were surveyed. Quotas were set so the survey is representative of key demographics. A parallel online survey was conducted among 868 professionals who work in these organizations. Survey respondents were recruited using Community Brands lists, which, too, is a non-probability sample. The terms "Professionals" or "Pros" refers specifically to those who were surveyed. The surveys were in the field during July of 2021.

About Community Brands Community Brands helps mission-driven organizations thrive. Our software, services, and payment solutions power nonprofits, associations, and K-12 schools to engage the people they serve through programs and events; raise funds to enable their mission; and manage their financials and operations. Our family of brands are bound by a common purpose to serve the organizations that make our communities a better place to live.



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