

Academic Paper

How to Define (Your) Legacy?

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*Event Strategy, Long-term Goals, Association Impact,
Measurement Challenges, Global Change, Strategic Outcomes*

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Research Note

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores and questions the diverse interpretations and understandings of the concept of "legacy" across various organizations and individuals. A recurrent theme encountered is the perception of legacy as the ultimate goal. Many organizations, associations, and individuals aspire to create a lasting impact and indelible influence in their respective domains, a feat equated with legacy. As an instrumental tool for fostering global change and propelling success into the future, association events are asserted to have immense strategic potential. However, they do not provide a legacy in their own right – ultimately and most importantly, the legacy must be derived from the association itself.

However, the paper recognizes that events can support association legacy; it highlights that realizing an event's full potential does not occur in isolation. There is a need for strategic facilitation in various ways across many stakeholders. Whether this involves the creation of the perfect physical environment for individuals to gather, providing guidance, the allotment of necessary resources, or even financial support, crucial groundwork must be laid to ensure the success of these events.

Any legacy programme's establishment and ultimate success should be noticed and appreciated. Indeed, the paper advocates for initiating these programmes from the top level of an organization, as strategic direction is fundamental to their success. Furthermore, given the long-term nature of legacy, measurements should consider a broader perspective and not strictly adhere to typical short-term outlooks. This challenge is how to accurately measure these long-term strategic goals, especially when these goals need to be time-based, a major problem identified in the paper. Thus, careful consideration must be given to the metrics and indicators used.

KEYWORDS

Event Strategy, Long-term Goals, Association Impact, Measurement Challenges, Global Change, Strategic Outcomes

Introduction

The notion of ‘legacy’ has consistently been met with ambiguity when it comes to its relevance for associations and their events. It is widely agreed upon that legacy entails long-term influence, but considerable variation exists in how it is defined and evaluated. Legacy extends well beyond the immediate results or financial gains of an event. In this scholarly analysis, we explore the intricacy surrounding the concept of a legacy by differentiating between event outcomes and true legacy, examining the difficulties associated with measuring intangible and enduring impacts, and examining the role played by associations and destinations in crafting a lasting legacy.

In academia, the term “legacy” is a subject of considerable debate and pertains to myriad research domains (Chen, 2022; Davies, 2021; Thomson et al., 2019). At its most basic, it often signals an enduring impact, a work or influence lasting beyond one’s immediate involvement or lifespan. However, the specific interpretation of legacy can vary depending on the context. In social and human sciences, legacy is typically discussed in relation to the lasting impression or long-term effects that human actions or events introduce on societies or communities. In the organizational context, it often refers to the sustained impact a leader or a corporate entity might leave behind, resonating in the organization’s future direction

Legacy has been extensively studied within the context of events or projects, as with associations. Here, legacy usually refers to long-lasting impacts, both positive and negative, that remain once the event or project has concluded. These can range from tangible (infrastructural developments, economic boost) to intangible aspects (community pride, cultural exchange, knowledge advancement). However, the measurement of legacy in any domain is a complex endeavour. The long-term and often intangible nature of legacies comes with inherent challenges in quantification; thus, the track of influences or impacts often takes nuanced approaches and may necessitate the adoption of indirect measures or proxies.

This brief discussion underscores how ‘legacy’ as a concept ebbs and flows with the context in which it is employed. It also highlights a pivotal challenge academia grapples with measuring and analyzing a legacy’s impacts. This highlights the pressing need for continued theoretical development and empirical exploration in further understanding the concept of legacy across different contexts.

Considering the multifaceted concept of legacy in the academic sphere and its fundamental application within association events, this research note aims to clarify these perspectives. This

leads us to the primary research question: “How can we effectively define and measure the long-term legacy of association events, and what role do associations and destinations play in shaping and supporting the creation of this legacy?”

In this paper, we will delve deeper into the current understanding and implementation of ‘legacy’ within the scope of events. We will also examine how associations perceive their significance and identify potential barriers hindering them from attaining their legacy objectives. Furthermore, we will present propositions on how the industry can actively contribute by facilitating discussions surrounding legacy in associations. Ultimately, our goal is to foster consequential changes at a global level through induced transformations in association practices.

Research method

Although many articles, opinions and ideas on the subject of legacy exist across the wider business events industry, we desired to focus on the international association sector. We wanted to understand what legacy means to the individuals bringing together membership organizations worldwide for conferences and events that include networking, learning, and more. The research to create this paper was split into two distinct parts:

Qualitative

We brought together a group of 11 association industry professionals for a 90-minute online workshop. The participants in the workshop were selected from a pool of current and potential Hague clients as well as other leading industry influencers with a reputation for the highest levels of professionalism and knowledge. They were approached in 2022, approximately a month before the workshop. During the workshop, we explored the concept of legacy as a wider group and split into smaller subgroups to discuss specific topics. The workshop was facilitated by an independent association professional with international experience as both a PCO (professional conference organizer) and AMC (association management consultant).

The attendees included:

- An in-house PCO running a large legal association conference
- An in-house association manager
- An agency PCO running international association events across multiple sectors
- An agency AMC/PCO running associations and association events across multiple sectors

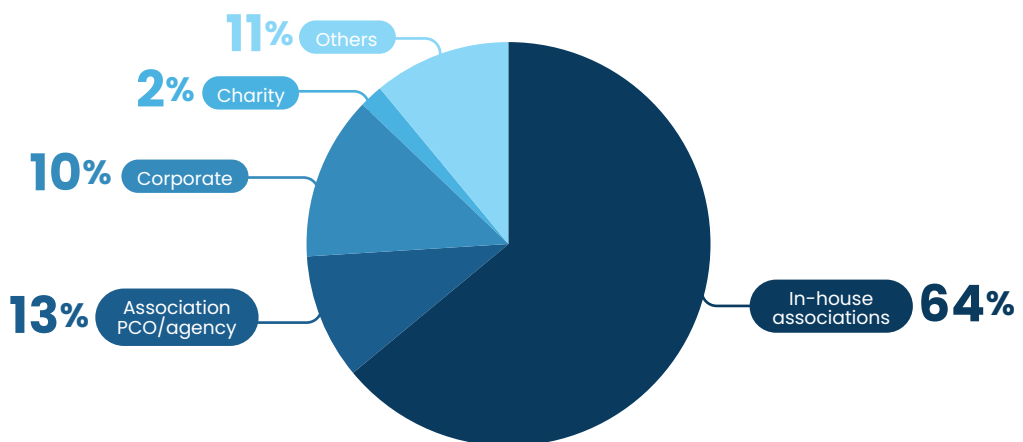
- An agency AMC/PCO running associations and association events with a specialism in the healthcare sector
- Representatives from two of The Hague's most substantial venues
- One destination representative

The Hague's marketing manager and independent PR consultant were watching but not partaking in the discussion.

Quantitative

Following the qualitative discussion, a series of questions were drafted reflecting the key points and outcomes of the workshop: e.g. "Is legacy a consideration when you organize conferences and events?" "What does your event legacy focus on?". Using an independent survey tool, these were distributed two weeks after the workshop to an external database of around 3,000 international associations and business event professionals. The database was biased toward contacts working in-house at associations organizing international events.

We received 70 responses with the following breakdown:



Results

Legacy sits at the heart of every association

The question “What is legacy?” will be something we will return to throughout this report. However, the key takeaway from the workshop and survey responses was that legacy is not destination-driven but organization-driven. As one respondent in the workshop pointed out, he described himself as a legacy sceptic: “Why should it be the associations’ responsibility to leave a local legacy?”

Delegates have now undertaken positive activities within destinations for more than 20 years. However, even a cursory glance can show that they do not usually leave a long-term legacy. They are beneficial in the short term but rarely last for years to come. Should they be undertaken? Yes - but it does not have to be the association event delegates doing it. Should it be called Legacy? Probably Not. Should it be called CSR? Absolutely!

By their nature, associations are legacy organizations - they exist to provide long-term value to their members and the communities that their members serve. As one participant pointed out: “Why should a healthcare association focus on leaving a legacy in the destination that goes beyond their healthcare specialism? Sure, they can do some good and CSR stuff - but a legacy must relate to the association’s goals.”

These opinions were backed up by the survey, which showed the association-focused respondents working to achieve a legacy or considering it prioritized:

- Alignment with the overall aims of the organization - (30%)

Followed by:

- Raising awareness/education on a particular subject (26%)

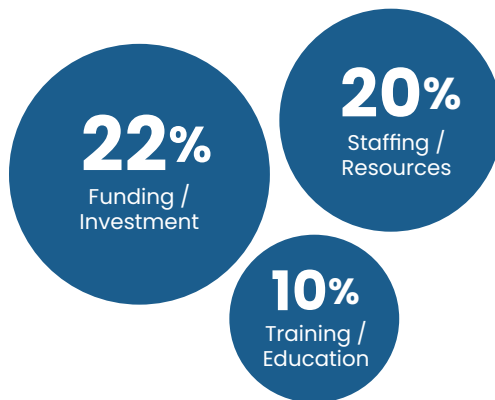
Conversely, having an immediate direct impact on the destination was only a focus for 12% and charitable and social good only 10%. The workshop also raises the point that some organizations see talent development (education) as a key metric and marker for a successful legacy. It could, however, again be argued that this links back to the goals of an association, particularly as so many associations are profession, career and job-role-focused. The survey reflects this opinion, with 11% of association-focused respondents working to achieve a legacy or considering it agreeing.

The role of the destination

As the responses show, legacy should be created by something other than a destination looking for reasons to bring a particular event to a particular city. Instead, destinations should facilitate the organizations’ desire to deliver a legacy related to the association’s goals. This was repeated several times during the workshop and backed up in the survey, where only 22% of the association-focused

respondents working to achieve a legacy or considering it said the destination should provide project recommendations.

Far more critical were other areas (78%) of practical support, which were broken down to include:



Most vital amongst these other practical areas of support, though, was the importance of network development through “Introductions to relevant stakeholders” - 25%, which shows how much the associations value the unique knowledge that destinations bring to the event planning process. This was also reflected in the workshop discussions, where key feedback from the venues was that they could work collaboratively with the destination and association event planners. They can deliver the necessary infrastructure required for event success and more abstract requirements that might be considered days, weeks, months or even years after an event.

But, what is legacy?

The results clearly show that the organizers and their organizations value legacy related to their messages and goals far above all else - particularly locally unrelated activations. However, we return to the question of what legacy is. Association organizers want their event legacy to reflect their organization, but there needs to be clarity between direct impact and long-term legacy.

As one member of the workshop panel pointed out: “We can measure the immediate effect and direct impact of a meeting on the delegates using well-refined event ROI methodology. Legacy, though, is about defining dreams and looking back on them in years to come and seeing an impact.”

Another member of the workshop panel said: “It is not for the delegates to leave a legacy in the destination - it is for the destination to create a legacy for the delegates.” He went on to say that the legal event he is bringing to The Hague is not about improving the destination’s status as the global leader in peace and justice (and, by extension, the law). Instead, the destination’s status and depth of

knowledge will benefit the delegates, who will take that back to their geographic origins and improve legal practices there. In this example, it is clear that the destination is not the beneficiary of the legacy activity but instead the catalyst for long-term global impact.

This sentiment was echoed by another workshop attendee who stated that “legacy goes beyond geographic borders. An event should not be about putting money and delegate spend into a specific destination - instead, the destination exists to reflect the goals of the organization, attract, engage, and ultimately develop future leaders.” The survey respondents provided a wealth of narrative thoughts and opinions on what legacy is and what it means to them, which are reflected in Figure 1.



Figure 1: A Word Cloud based on Legacy Thoughts and Opinions

What legacy to choose?

Returning to the clear fact that legacy should be organizationally driven rather than a destination sell and “add on”. It is interesting to consider how those organizations currently aiming to achieve an event legacy select and identify what their legacy should look like. Amongst the workshop attendees, there was considerable debate about the difference between outcome and legacy. In particular, the discussion ventured into the fact that for associations, legacy is not just about event activation but long-term communication and advocacy from associations across all of their activity - both internally and externally.

Key narrative responses in the survey include mentions of:

- Scientific value
- Scientific discovery
- Community Feedback
- Awareness generation
- Societal need
- Organizational goals
- Strategic plan
- Mission statement

Both these and the workshop discussion clearly show that legacy goals are challenging, far-reaching and high-impact. And they are certainly not likely to be achieved in the space of a single event. Consequently, all too often, when it comes to events and a desire for legacy, there is a focus on highly specific, defined and easily measurable outcomes. These are vital metrics and targets when it comes to defining an event and a return on event investment. However, they do not represent a legacy, which might, for example, be the eradication of a particular disease or a permanent solution to clean energy.

Realizing such significant achievements could take decades. Breaking them into smaller elements purely to provide a legacy for one event is a seemingly impossible task, and we should, therefore, instead be focusing on those other positive, measurable outcomes that can, in turn, add incremental value to the overarching strategic goals.

The challenge of measurement

Legacy, by the very definition of this report, is long-lasting, which makes accurate measurement a challenge. When we think of some of the long-term strategic goals of associations and place them into the smart goal headings, we can immediately see that “time-based” is probably our biggest measurement challenge.



What is long-term and long-lasting when it comes to legacy? Should we be looking at a week, a month, a year, a decade... perhaps even a century. To the Mayfly, a week represents 700% of its lifetime - for the average human, that would be more than 550 years. Modern homes are constructed to last 25-50 years in many places - yet there are examples of 2,000-year+ structures all over the world. It is, therefore, no surprise that 40% of the association-focused respondents working to achieve a legacy don't currently measure the impact or find it too difficult.

A further 33% use surveys of event attendees, whilst 14% base success on event attendance levels. However, we can see that these two groups would not be measuring long-term legacy - instead, they are focused on event outcomes and ROI. These are both worthy measurements to take - but they are not about legacy.

During the workshop, the subject of measurement was discussed, but again, the limitations were recognized. It was, however, made very clear by several participants that measurement is only possible if clear goals are set in the first place. KPIs and long-term strategic plans should be created at an organizational level. These feed into the event strategy and, therefore, any event legacy programme, which can be reflected over time.

Even with overarching strategic goals in place, long-term measurement can be a challenge. This was pointed out by one workshop participant as being particularly true where legacy is focused on the education of individuals. Success here might only be achieved through incremental changes that can be too small to measure but, over the years, add value and knowledge to not just one person but a whole sector - and that, in time, creates a global impact.

The simple truth is that goals and targets must be set - but for associations with lofty and long-term goals, it is perhaps our children or grandchildren who might see their success—relating that back to one specific event in one specific destination many years in the past will be almost impossible.

The importance of legacy

Legacy is being taken into consideration more by some organizations than others. However, how important is it even to those working on it and thinking about it? For those association-focused respondents who do consider the legacy of their events, on a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being most important), legacy is a high priority, with 62% rating it an 8 or above (27% gave it a 10/10).

Amongst those actively working on achieving a legacy programme, 62% consider it to be part of their overall event strategy, working on it from the very beginning of the process. A further 17% consider it at the destination selection stage, and the same number when planning logistics. It is of interest to understand why 34% of association-focused respondents are thinking about / considering event legacy but don't currently actively pursue it, and a further 9% do not consider event legacy at all. In both groups, it is no surprise to see that lack of budget is a significant factor (27%). This is particularly understandable at a time of significant global financial instability.

However, for those not doing anything at all, not knowing where to start is an equally (27%) substantial barrier to legacy work. Lack of time is a similar challenge for both at 20% and 18%, respectively. Amongst these same respondents, we then looked at where they would go to seek support on defining and achieving an event legacy, and it was here that the role of the destination is important.

20% would approach industry associations, whilst a further 18% would seek advice from the destination. It is no surprise in the modern digitally connected world that internet search also ranks high at 15%, closely followed by academics with 12%.

Conclusion and Key Messages

Ultimately, we should start by remembering that association events are an incredibly powerful tool to bring people together and bring about global change. They are a catalyst for future success and must always be considered. The destinations facilitate this by creating the perfect physical place for people to gather.

Legacy must not be a destination, but in most cases, the destination must be on hand to guide and provide tools and resources, perhaps even financial support, to ensure success. The creation and subsequent success of an event legacy programme must start at the top of an Association with organizational goals, aspirations and plans. Once these are in place, elements can be filtered down, and they can be broken into manageable pieces and focused on as a part of individual event strategy. However, whether they should be described as event legacy is a big question, as it is clear that one event over a finite period is unlikely to achieve a long-term legacy. Instead, the events create significant outcomes and steps on an association's journey toward its eventual legacy.

In essence, the event creates the outcomes that feed the association's legacy, and the destination's role is to facilitate this process. They do this by providing the too-busy event planners and association executives with the tools and resources they need to achieve more than their immediate desire to deliver the event.

As controversial as this might sound, moving forward as an industry, we should not be driving the legacy discussion. Instead, we should be asking questions about what more we can do to support the

legacy discussions within associations. We should be providing them with the tools to make their own decisions - which sometimes might not be to include a legacy programme in their events at all.

In the light of academic findings, the real-world definition of legacy seems particular to each situation and carries its own nuanced understanding. Academia suggests that legacy encapsulates both tangible and intangible impacts, including knowledge advancement, infrastructural improvements, and societal changes. Similarly, this research illustrates that associations perceive their legacy in terms of long-reaching, substantial outcomes, possibly leading to global changes.

Contrasts are also evident; while academia emphasizes the challenge in measuring legacy due to its long-term and intangible nature, associations appear to segment their legacy outcomes into smaller, quantifiable targets connected to event strategies. Academia might critically view this approach as diluting the profound, sustained nature of true legacy.

Painting walls and tidying a city are admirable and positive ways to help an event achieve its corporate social responsibility goals, but they are not a true legacy. As a global industry, we can be a part of the change, but first of all, we need to recognize our place as a partner and supporters - then do everything we can to help achieve the long-term success that will deliver global change for our descendants.

Regarding future research directions, there are several crucial areas to explore. One is the development of more robust and comprehensive methodologies for legacy measurement. This could involve creating indicators that capture long-term impacts and are flexible to the specific context of each association.

Second, future studies should delve further into the role of different stakeholders—such as association leaders, event attendees, and destination providers—in shaping and sustaining legacy. Understanding their interactions and mutual influence could offer valuable insights for enhancing legacy outcomes.

Finally, the research could explore how to enhance associations' understanding and application of legacy in their strategic planning, moving legacy considerations from an ancillary role to being a central, guiding aspect of their long-term efforts.

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