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“What comes next?”



*Reflections on the future
of meetings and events*

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“What comes next?”

Futurist, trends & innovation expert Jim Carroll regularly speaks on issues related to the future, innovation and change.

This article, based on several articles that he has written for Association Executives, reflects some of his observations from Meeting World 2004.

The skills shortage becomes pronounced

Simple demographics suggest that we will soon see a significant skills shortage given the ever increasing number of baby boomers entering their retirement years.

And as that happens, a lot of specialized expertise is set to exit our economy. It is expected, for example, that by 2015 we will see a shortage of up to 400,000 nurses in the US. This is happening just as the health care system will find itself under increasing strain as those same aging baby boomers begin to enter their retirement years, and begin to place additional demands on the health care system.

That type of reality is looming in every industry and every profession. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that over the next 10 years, demand for electricians will grow by 23%, or 154,000 new workers.

There is already growing alarm over where those skills are going to come from given current demographic trends. What this means is that every organization will soon be in a situation in which they are unable to access and find the talent they need to get the job done.

The result is that more and more of our event and meeting time will focus on the skills crisis – indeed, this could be the defining corporate issue of the early

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part of the 21st century. Not only that, but as event planners, you might find that you too are affected by an increasing shortage of qualified skills.

Watch this trend carefully, as it promises to be a big one!

The end of retirement

One of the potential solutions to the skills shortage comes from the likelihood that many of those same baby boomers will find that the idea of “retirement” as a definitive stage in life has come to an end.

It’s quite likely, given looming pension shortfalls, that many will find it increasingly difficult to completely finance their golden years. Add to this the reality that baby boomers will outlive any previous generation as a result of rapid advances in medical science. The Australian Financial Review recently noted, for example, that we will see a 250% increase in the number of people in the age 85+ category. The result is a dramatic lengthening in the period of retirement: men currently aged 55 will likely live for another 32 years on average, while women will live an additional 36 years.

The bottom line is that many will need to remain gainfully employed, not only for the money but also to prevent boredom - just as organizations start realizing that they desperately need access to their skills.

We’ll see the emergence of a workforce with an ever-increasing number of people aged 65+. Yet many of these individuals won't work within the traditional "corporate model." Past their prime, they’ll be “nomadic workers,” able to fulfill their functions and provide their skills from anywhere, even if that means doing so from a golf course via their Blackberry. The organizational relationship with them will be collaborative, electronic, and likely, long-distance.

What does this mean to meetings and events? From one perspective, we will certainly see an increased need to cater to the unique needs of an aging workforce. From an another perspective, it might mean smaller, more frequent regional meetings that involve far less travel for elderly members of the workforce.

And last but not least, it might also involve a lot more innovation in our event planning. Our elderly workforce might not want to hop on a plane for a three-

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day conference to discuss corporate strategy - they might prefer to do it from their own living rooms. Formerly technology adverse, many finally seem to be adapting and will likely use technology to form the basis of the key method by which they work.

Knowledge transfer becomes critical

Coincident with the trends above is the reality that through the next several years, a lot of important corporate knowledge is simply going to “walk out the door,” and organizations will need to prepare for this eventuality.

Not surprisingly, events and meetings will play a huge role in helping to bring about the knowledge transfer that must occur.

A lot of important internal knowledge with respect to operations, strategy, markets, products and services will be lost forever if an organization doesn’t ensure that their knowledge is passed on to the next generation of leaders and staff. That’s why knowledge retention and knowledge transfer will be the most critical issue that organizations need to prepare for – and why we will need to concentrate on helping to allow for the knowledge transfer to occur as a key component of our future meetings and events.

Ethnicity of society

There is no doubt that our society is changing, as ethnic groups come to play an ever more dominant role.

One estimate suggests that Hispanics will, in a dozen years or less, make up 18% of the US population. The Asian population, currently 4% of the US population, will grow to 6.5% by 2025. It seems that every other ethnic group is witnessing similar rates of growth.

And certainly business organizations have woken up the fact that ethnicity will drive future market opportunity. The Bank of America's has stated that they expect some 80% of their future market growth to come from ethnic markets. No wonder – according to the University of Georgia, Hispanic buying power will grow to \$653 in 2010, up from just \$222 billion in 1990.

Add it up and there is a significant societal and business change occurring, one that will be reflected in our future events. Clearly, with an increasing number of meetings and events that involve a stronger representation from specific ethnic groups, and an ongoing change in the make up of the overall

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ethnicity of the event, we will see a greater need for simultaneous translation services, an increase in special dietary requirements, and other unique needs.

Yet we will also witness ongoing business strategy change that will result in a greater number of events that focus on the ethnic opportunity. The Florida Times Union recently noted that while “*many Hispanics, though they may feel comfortable speaking in English in many situations, prefer complex discussions -- such as those involving finances -- to be in their native tongue.*” That’s why, the “*Bank of America, for instance, plans to staff each of its First Coast branches with at least one Spanish-speaking employee....*”

Project the trend into the future, and it is clear that we will witness a greater number of organizations focus on efforts to cater to an ever evolving customer, staff and membership demographic.

We will see everything from sales and customer service activities, to marketing and advertising campaigns, become more language focused, and more targeted to specific niche ethnic markets. We will witness HR efforts that recognize the uniqueness of our workforce, and training programs that, by simple necessity, are made available in multiple languages. We will see associations establish outreach programs to those ethnic groups that are not participating to the fullest extent.

Add it all up, and society will find itself with a crying need for a greater focus on the uniqueness of society – and as that happens, the meetings and event industry will be sure to follow.

Gen-Y in the workforce

They're multi-faceted, multi-tasking, and collaborative by nature. They are easily bored. There are 74 million of them -- and they will definitely present meeting planners of the future with some significant challenges.

To start out, their working life will be unlike anything we’ve known before. It’s quite likely that Gen-Y will reject the traditional career path that involves long term jobs within large organizations. Many will establish themselves in small, micro-organizations that can provide needed skills to a corporate audience, regardless of where they might happen to be located. Hence, they might not even be members of the association you represent, or employees of the or-

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ganization for whom you organize meetings and events. That fact in itself will present you with a challenge – how will you reach out to them?

And then there is the likelihood that they will be a generation that will truly embrace different types of meetings and events. They are certainly technologically adept – they are the first generation to grow up with microcomputers, the Internet and other online systems. They will likely be far more open to unique meeting methodologies that involve technology – we might finally witness a massive increase in the use of videoconferencing and other unique methods of communication as a result.

And yet, their technological prowess also presents the meeting planner of the future with a potential challenge. They’ve been weaned on Internet chat services such as ICQ and MSN, have mastered Nintendo and Xbox from an early age, and have never known a world that involves less than a few hundred TV channels. This brings to them a certain scatter-shot approach to things and an attention span that can be easily challenged. It’s not unusual to see them surfing a few Web sites while flipping back and forth between various TV channels, all while they carry out an Internet chat and talk on the phone at the same time!

What can you possibly do within the confines of an event to keep them from becoming bored? It is quite likely that they will demand far different programs and activities within a conference, sufficient to keep them interested at the unique pace at which they operate. They will expect fewer, long drawn out speeches and presentations, and will instead far more interactivity.

Coping with change

Ogden Nash once observed that “*progress is great but it has gone on far too long.*” That’s an apt metaphor for the attitude that many people have adopted when it comes to the change they’ve had to deal with in the workplace and in society through the last several decades.

There’s a lot more yet to come, and the meeting and event will continue to play a cornerstone role in helping people and organizations to cope with the rate of change that swirls around them.

If you think about it, we now live in a period of time of simply unprecedented change, with rapid market and product developments, furious new forms of competition in every marketplace, and ever more rapid innovation. There is also a greater degree of change that is driven by unforeseen external events –

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such as a new emphasis on ethics, the impact of Sarbanes-Oxley, and a worldwide focus on security issues, to name but a few.

The result is that the skills, capabilities and knowledge requirements expected of people are no longer static, since everything changes almost overnight. Add it all up, and people are struggling with issues that they might not even have dreamed about just a few years ago.

That's why your role as a meeting planner will continue to involve taking on the issue of helping to effect 'change.' There will be a crying need for a greater number of events and meetings focusing on the change issues and trends that are affecting organizations and the people who work for them.

Work/life balance takes on more importance

There are more women in the workforce than ever, and more dads at home. People are time-shifting their day, adjusting their working schedule so as to spend less time in traffic and more time at home. The "boarding generation" prefers to adopt a lifestyle and then build a career that supports their efforts to stay on the slopes.

Take a look around, and it is clear that the issue of ensuring a proper work/life balance has taken on a greater importance than ever before.

And yet, people continue to find a massive intrusion of work time into their personal time. The last ten years have seen a remarkable level of connectivity emerge – we're wired with cell phones, Blackberries, PDA's and countless other devices. People are always on, always connected, and always available.

The results are quite dramatic – even as people demand better life balance, they're working harder than ever before, from an increasing number of locations. They're time shifting their day, starting work at home in the morning with a home-based PC, continuing to work during their commute, spending a full working day in which they're plugged in and turned on – and doing it all over again on the way home, before checking out their e-mail again just before they go to bed.

Maybe, just maybe, people have had enough.

That's why in a situation such as this, people are coming to expect more balance in their life. Increasingly, perhaps, their career becomes something in

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which work is but a means to an end – rather than a life in which the career defines who they are, they will live with an understanding that their career or job is but one component of an overall, rich, complex and busy life.

The impact on meetings could be profound – people will demand events that involve less intrusion on their time; perhaps, conferences that are held during the week, as opposed to those that take away weekend personal time. Locations closer to home that involve far less travel. And maybe even shorter, more tightly focused meetings that involve less of a time commitment.

Workforce / corporate change

It is interesting to think that so many people are surprised by the “sudden” migration of jobs to India and other locales.

After all, the evidence of significant structural organizational change has been with us for a long time, as have been many predictions of what we are now witnessing.

In 1987, the *New York Times* ran an editorial entitled “*Tomorrow’s Company Won’t Have Walls.*” It was a brilliant piece of writing, one that indicated that “*the 21st-century will be full of organizational surprises.*” The essence of the message was that the coming era of global connectivity would see a very significant change in the very structure of the organization, because companies wouldn’t have to hire every type of skill to do every type of function.

They could simply hire that skill, wherever it might happen to be, on an as-needed, on-demand basis. And that’s what’s happening now. Rather than trying to do all things with all kinds of staff, organizations are whittling themselves down to certain core functions. Anything that isn’t critical to their success – and which involves anything from simple, routine work to functions that are increasingly complex -- can now be performed by anyone, anywhere, at any time.

Back in 1997, I crystallized my own thinking on this issue by making a number of when I made a number of predictions as to what I thought would happen with the world economy as a result of the emerging opportunities for global work transformation. Among them:

- Companies will hire the best talent, regardless of where that person might be.

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- Where people work from won't matter – a trend that has implications for the geographic reach and locale of an organization.
- The shape of tomorrow's company won't be defined by the walls in its offices – it will be defined by the reach of its computerized knowledge network, and its ability to tap into the skills and capabilities of the specialized workers, wherever they might be.

Fast forward to today, and it is clear that the new era of global connectivity has not only transformed the workplace, but has also transformed the very nature of the organization.

The result for the meeting planner is obvious: just who is the target audience for your next meeting or event? If the very nature of the organization is undergoing a subtle and significant transformation, isn't it time to start thinking about the very essence of the audience?

“Just in time” events and meetings

Of course, our complex world also means that you probably need to bring your members together more frequently than ever before.

Indeed, the days of the one, big annual convention blowout are gone. In a world of constant and rapid change, you'll need to bring together your membership for a greater number of “strategic education events.” If you think about it, a world of constant knowledge growth implies a world of constant change – and constant change demands regular knowledge transfer, much of which will continue to take place at ever more frequent events and meetings.

A good example is what happened with SARS – an unforeseen world event created a pressing need for many medical meetings to be held, to educate health care administrators on unique and challenging circumstances in dealing with SARS: for medical professionals to learn about the latest knowledge and research on SARS; for emergency medical personnel to understand the unique issues in transportation of SARS patients. All of which might have involved a need for an urgent education-based meeting or event.

Use that as your barometer for your meeting and event future – you will have a pressing need for far more strategic events, often arranged at short notice, to deal with issues of pressing concern.



Tactical to strategic transition

Finally, many organizations and associations are discovering that there is a rapid need to help effect a transition of the skills and roles of their members from those that are tactical, to a more strategic role.

Given the impact of change, companies and organizations need more assistance than ever before in defining strategy, as well as translating strategy into action. And it seems that to this point in time, they aren't getting a lot of help in doing so. That's because there exists within many an organization a big disconnect between management and their staff.

A recent survey of several major organizations found that only 12% of senior business executives believe that a majority of their staff understand the company's business strategy. If there was ever an indicator for how many people are failing to cope with the change swirling around them, and are mired in a tactical role, it is certainly found in that statistic!

No where is this tactical focus more pronounced than with middle management – individuals who might excel at pushing paper around, assembling reports, and yes, managing events. Yes, they do what needs to be done to help an organization function and manage – but can they provide the additional assistance that can help the organization in this world of incessant change?

If they can't, then they might not be bringing the value that is required to the organization.

Hence, one of the key roles for the event and meeting in the future is helping people discover how they can bridge this disconnect by playing a more strategic role within the organization. This means learning the essence of how to bring strategic value to an organization, by helping in one of three ways.

- Run the business better: how can they help the organization achieve cost savings and/or efficiencies through their activities?
- Grow the business: how can they help their organization attain competitive advantage and/or revenue enhancement through what they do?
- Transform the business: how can they help in the achievement of other core business goals through innovative thinking?

If they can enhance their skills so that they can provide these services to the organization, then they are successfully effecting a change from a tactical to a strategic role.

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Jim Carroll, FCA

Jim Carroll lives five years in the future. As a leading international futurist, innovation & trends expert, he dedicates his time to helping people and organizations understand how they can aggressively adopt tomorrow, today.

Jim wakes people up to the trends that will affect them, and challenges them to cope with a world that continues to witness constant, relentless, dramatic change. He is recognized for his critical thinking and business-oriented view of issues related to emerging technologies, social, consumer attitude, workplace, demographic and lifestyle issues, as well as economic and business trends. Jim's programs are based on extensive research and customization, and are delivered with his signature humor, high-level energy, deep insight and challenging observations.

A prolific author, his works have been sold in the U.S., Germany, India and Canada, with sales exceeding a half-million copies. As a columnist, he has written over 600 articles for a wide variety of national and international publications. As a media commentator, he has provided his insight in over 3,000 interviews on radio, television and in print. He is an award winning columnist, has been listed as "*One of 50 International Names to Know*" by the *Online Journalism Review*, and was recently honored with the Lifetime Achievement Award by a major national new media organization.



As a frequent keynote speaker with some 1,000 high profile presentations to his credit over the last 15 years, he is recognized as someone who provides presentations that deliver relevant, unique insight. His client list includes some of the world's largest organizations and associations, such as the BBC, the US Department of Defense, the American Federation of Teachers, Microsoft, American Express, the American Payroll Association, VISA, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, KPMG, Monsanto, Deloitte & Touche, the North American Newsprint Papers Association, Nortel Networks, J.D. Edwards, the American Academy of Ophthalmologists, the World Congress of Association Executives, Towers Perrin, and many more.

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Jim provides unique insight on:

- the emerging trends, threats and opportunities that will impact your organization
- how to become a more forward thinking organization that can anticipate and manage change, rather than reacting to change
- how staff can make the transition from a tactical to a strategic role
- guidance on how to do things differently in a world that demands constant, relentless innovation

In his keynote presentations and workshops, he focuses on issues related to your needs. He approaches every assignment with a view to crafting together a riveting presentation that will speak directly to the issues your industry, association, organization or company faces, by undertaking extensive research and consultations. His topic areas can cover diverse subjects such as • the future • ethics and integrity • coping with change and encouraging change • motivation • innovation • technology • e-commerce • business strategy in the digital age/strategic planning • customer service/marketing

An extensive Web site containing information about Jim, including video, client references, and other information, can be found at www.jimcarroll.com. He welcomes your comments at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com