ELX

FUTURE-READY LEADERSHIP

A strategic study on the evolving role of event leadership

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This whitepaper was authored by Chloe Richardson,
produced by ELX, with research in partnership with
Explori, and the generous support of our partners.

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INTRODUCTION

In an event environment where economic pressures, digital acceleration and shifting stakeholder expectations collide, senior event professionals are facing an urgent need to rethink how they lead. Most event leaders are looking to be future-ready, in an environment where futureproofing isn't always possible.

ARE EVENT LEADERS TRULY FUTURE READY?

What skills matter for tomorrow? What technology will transform attendee experiences and event strategy alike? And how can event teams balance stakeholder expectations, innovation demands and their own capacity to evolve?

This white paper explores five critical challenges identified by ELX members and surfaced through recent research led by Explori, ELX's research partner. Combining quantitative and qualitative inputs, the aim of this report is to provide a strategic lens on where event teams are today, and what's required to lead them into the future. There are some evident success stories, as well as clear gaps. This resource doesn't just identify the barriers – it lays out what to do about them.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The ELX Future Ready Leaders survey was sent out to the entire Event Leaders Exchange community in March 2025, after a need to dive deeper into certain event leadership areas was highlighted.

The survey was completed by just under 100 members and contained an opt-in question inviting respondents to participate in one-to-one interviews and discuss their thoughts in more detail. From these opt-ins, the ELX team selected ten individuals, each of whom was interviewed by Explori's Qualitative Research Director via Teams for 30 minutes. These interviews took place between 28th March and 25th April 2025.

Transcripts of these conversations were analysed to draw out recurring themes, tensions and opportunities, while the quantitative survey results provided the foundation for validating trends, assessing priorities and identifying performance gaps. The insights in this report are drawn from this mixed-methods approach, offering a robust view of the realities - and ambitions - of today's event leaders.

01

THE TALENT TIME LAG:

WHY TRAINING STILL TAKES A BACKSEAT

INTRODUCTION

Despite widespread agreement that people are the engine of event success, the reality is clear: Most event leaders are not investing in team development at the level they know they should. Time, budget and structural limitations are creating a bottleneck in team growth - and in many cases, causing long-term stagnation.

With nearly half of team working time going to program execution, upskilling is consistently deprioritized. This imbalance doesn't just impact performance – it risks burning out experienced teams and creating knowledge gaps as event programs become more strategic.

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

40%
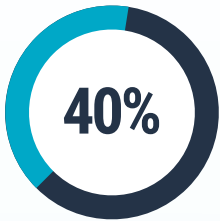
Only 40% of event leaders plan to increase their investment in training and development in the future.

However, it should be a priority, as research from Josh Bersin, global HR analyst, recommends that 10–15% of a leader's time be spent on development to remain agile and future-ready - double the 7–8% currently reported by ELX members.

TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT IS WHERE BUDGETS FALL SHORTEST

- Program execution takes up over half of budgets (>50%)
- 8% of budgets spent on program innovation
- 5% of budgets spent on team development and training

While 54% of leaders feel confident guiding team development, most lack the bandwidth, support structures or budget to scale learning effectively. With 50% of team time spent on execution, there's little capacity left for coaching, which in turn sees just 5% of the overall event budget – accounting for the smallest share across the board.
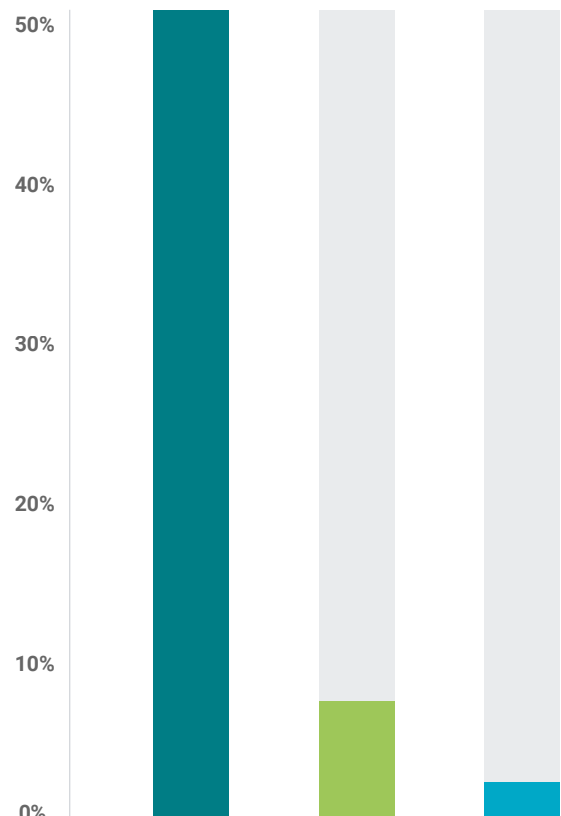
THE HIDDEN COST OF UNDERINVESTMENT

According to our ELX study, the two main challenges are managing the balance of different needs and perspectives within a varied team, and dealing with an organizational structure that has limited upward mobility for event roles.
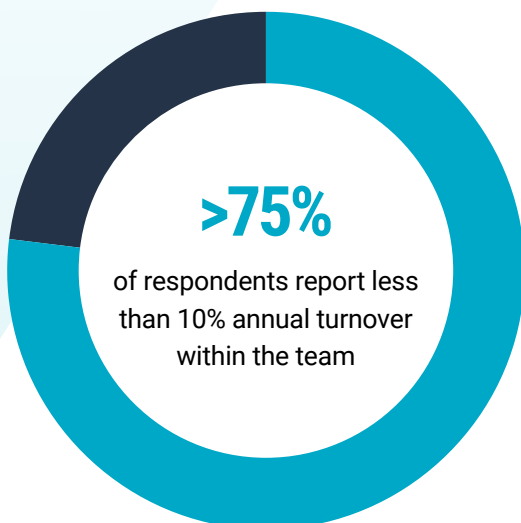
Promotion trends show us the potential consequences that lack of training and development might have on a team:

Over half of leaders report fewer than 10% of their teams were promoted in the last 12–18 months.

By contrast, companies like Pave (a technology-focused organization) report a 14% promotion average in their sector, rising to 18.3% in high-growth firms, at the end of 2024.

The outcome? Low turnover (~10%) and low mobility - on the surface, signs of retention, but underneath, signals of possible stagnation. In contrast to ELX insights, LinkedIn data shows marketing turnover at 17%, with other sectors hitting 25%.

>50%

of leaders report less than 10% of their teams were promoted in the last 12–18 months

>75%

of respondents report less than 10% annual turnover within the team

"Essentially, I tell my event planners that there's not a whole lot of room to grow.

The job is the job."

Anonymous

However, all is not lost. Successful approaches for talent development include open and honest communication, development beyond traditional training, striving for diversity within teams, and being flexible around individual requirements.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO THESE FINDINGS PRESENT THE FUTURE READINESS OF EVENT TEAMS?

1 Execution is killing strategic growth

With only 7–8% of time dedicated to learning, most event teams fall below the minimum threshold needed to create lasting skill development or behavioral change.

The results:

- **Individuals feel like they're always 'doing' but never 'developing'. Burnout risk rises, confidence drops, growth stalls.**

- **Teams lack space to collaborate, experiment, or build new skills. Silos form and motivation fades.**

- **Event programs become repetitive and reactive, not strategic or audience-led.**

- **The business perceives events teams as purely executional, not strategy partners. This limits influence, budget and boardroom credibility.**

2 Low mobility is undermining innovation

Without progression opportunities, employees become siloed in operational delivery. Teams may retain institutional knowledge, but fresh thinking and modern capabilities suffer as a result.

The results:

- **Individuals stop pushing themselves because there's nowhere to go.**

- **Teams operate well - but don't evolve; meaning you have less of competitive edge.**

- **Programs risk becoming outdated without new ideas, skillsets or perspectives.**

- **The business loses future leaders to other functions or industries with clearer growth paths.**

3 No learning culture means no competitive edge

While most leaders cite learning, certifications, or peewr exchange as a priority, few have embedded them into KPIs, review cycles, or internal expectations. This means that learning is often deprioritized.

The results:

- **Individuals who want to grow do so on their own time - if at all.**

- **Teams operate with uneven capabilities, lacking shared standards and less effective outputs.**

- **Programs suffer from inconsistency in delivery, data literacy or tech fluency.**

- **The business can't rely on the events team as a unified, strategic asset, and the function isn't seen as impactful and valuable as it should be.**

4 Unsupported leaders can't drive transformation

Many event leaders act as informal mentors - but few have access to formal coaching, cross-functional growth, or time to focus on their own skill gaps.

The results:

- **Individuals at the top feel stretched, undervalued and stuck.**

- **Teams lack strategic role models who can mentor and innovate.**

- **Programs get executed well - but not championed at a senior level, losing out on budget to other functions.**

- **The business misses out on internal event advocates who can speak data, brand and impact to the board.**

WHAT CAN WE DO TO CHANGE THIS?

REDEFINE TEAM GROWTH THROUGH DEVELOPMENT

Development should go beyond traditional training. Leaders have the opportunity broaden what "growth" looks like for their teams - embedding mentorship, cross-functional projects and internal knowledge-sharing as legitimate forms of professional advancement. And it's important.

IBM research tells us that training increases productivity by 37%, and the American Society for Training and Development says that training investment can lead to 24% higher profit margins.

All team members should aim for the recommended 10-15% training and development time per week. This doesn't need to be all at once, but it should be consistent.

"We think about people as having stages of their lives where they can fully commit - or need space. We try to manage development at the individual level."

Jonathan Dewe
Moody's

ELX

"You've got to listen to what they need. An engaged team does better work"

Jeff Welger
Arch Insurance

ELX's tactical tools:

1. Book a "learning call" once a month:

   Instead of another update meeting, invite your team onto a shared learning session, with an industry expert or thought leader, who can share skills and techniques in relevant areas

2. For your teams, use the PACE model for a strategic learning framework:

P — **Performance Focused** (Skills that improve outcomes, e.g. ROO, commercial communications)

A — **Aspirational** (Develop skills for the role you want next)

C — **Core** (Strengthen personal foundations like resilience, personal branding, delegation)

E — **External** (learn from outside your organization; articles, external events, TED talks, etc)

INVEST IN YOUR OWN DEVELOPMENT – TRAINING FOR TOMORROW'S SKILLS

Leaders should explore potential development and mentorship programs that support their own professional growth. Again, aiming for 10-15% of time.

ELX's tactical tools:

1. Block a 90-minute session monthly to tackle gaps in knowledge, from emerging tech and data fluency to C-suite alignment.

2. Treat technology demos as development. When in a demonstration with a potential vendor, don't just ask about the features, but establish "how would this platform impact audience engagement, data capture, or ROO (Return On Objectives) storytelling?".

3. Create a strategic sounding board with other leadership peers in your organization, outside of the events function. Do a quarterly reflection call to share what you're learning and what's working, and feel empowered to use ELX as a resource to support this.

4. Benchmark with your peers, whether inside or outside of your industry, to learn what others are doing in this space.

5. Leverage ELX or other similar organizations to discuss further opportunities and develop working groups.

Focus on areas like data interpretation, AI fluency, consultative stakeholder engagement, executive communication skills, storytelling and strategic planning in your training. These are the new essentials for the event leader beyond 2025.

> *"It is ironic that the more senior we become the less opportunity there is for professional development. That is why we are embedding professional development into all ELX in-person events"*

Nicola Kastner
CEO of ELX

BUDGET FOR RETENTION

Promotion may be limited in "flatter" organizations, but skill-development and leadership visibility can drive retention, improve productivity and justify your resource investment. Allocate budget accordingly - not just for courses, but for one-to-one coaching, event attendance and peer exchange.

Budget benchmarks:

According to Workramp.com, a simple way to allocate budgets is by percentage of payroll, with 1-5% typically being the sweet spot. For example, an organization with $500 million payroll would budget between $5million and $25million towards learning and development.

Alternatively, event teams may set individual training budgets based on employee salary. For example, a director earning $100,000 per year could have a $1,000 - $5,000 budget, compared to an entry-level team member on $37,000 per year receiving a budget of $370 - $1850.

According to further Association of Training and Development Research, organizations that spend $1,500 per employee on training see 218% more revenue per employee.

ELX's tactical tools:

Don't just spend your learning and development budgets on courses. Make sure to fund:

Coaching ☑

Event attendance ☑

Peer exchange ☑

Certifications ☑

CHAPTER ONE SUMMARY

WANT A HEALTHY EVENT CULTURE?

INVEST IN A LEARNING ONE.

There is no future-ready leadership without future-ready teams. Training can no longer be a "nice to have" postponed for post-event calm. It must be threaded into the operating model of modern event teams; and championed by those who lead them.

02

THE INNOVATION ILLUSION:

STILL STUCK IN THE SAME FORMATS

INTRODUCTION

While "innovation" tops every event strategy wish list, few teams are making meaningful changes to how they deliver events, which isn't through lack of aspiration. The ELX research reveals a sharp gap between desire and action especially when it comes to trying new formats, integrating new tools and thinking creatively about attendee experience.

But the issue isn't apathy. It's exhaustion. Teams are overwhelmed with delivery and lack the space, budget, permission, or support to experiment, and few promotions or low turnover mean that fresh perspectives are rarely being introduced.

It's like event teams are currently building the plane and flying it at the same time; landing it only partly finished and never having enough time to get back to it.

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

56%
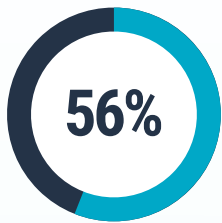
Event leaders are clear: Innovation is a priority - but in practice, it's not yet a reality. While 56% of ELX members say they plan to increase their spend on innovation in the near future, current activity tells a different story.

How many new event formats has your team implemented in the last 12-18 months?
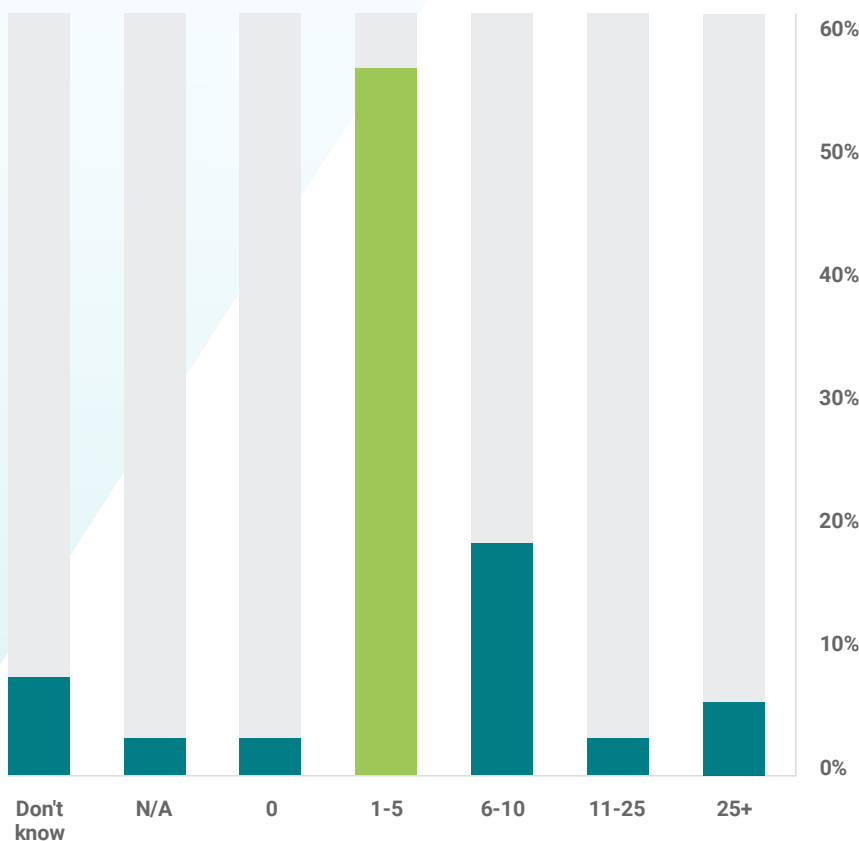
Most teams report implementing just 1–5 new formats over the past 12–18 months, and innovation accounts for only 5% of the overall event calendar.

BUDGETS AND TIME ALLOCATIONS REINFORCE THE DISPARITY

Budgets and time allocations reinforce the disparity. Only 8% of budget is currently earmarked for program innovation, and leaders dedicate just 12% of their own time to it - despite consistent recognition of innovation as critical to audience engagement, brand positioning and long-term competitiveness.

INNOVATION MATTERS, BUT IT'S STILL UNDERFUNDED

And yet, there is clear evidence that innovation pays off. Our research shows a positive correlation of +0.37 between program innovation and attendee experience scores. However, just 65% of leaders rated their innovation efforts as good or excellent - compared to 92% rating their attendee experience that way. That gap suggests many leaders are achieving high experience scores in spite of limited innovation, not because of it - a trend that may be unsustainable as audience expectations (and competitor events) grow.

+0.37

Crucially, the barriers to innovation aren't about a lack of desire. They're about capacity, culture and permission. Leaders cite relentless delivery cycles, resource constraints and risk aversion as major blockers. Combine that with low promotion rates and limited fresh thinking from outside the team, and it's easy to see how innovation efforts stall - even when the will is there.

"Technology obviously has a place in making an impact"

Jeff Welger
Arch Insurance

WHAT CHALLENGES DO THESE FINDINGS PRESENT THE FUTURE READINESS OF EVENT TEAMS?

1 Innovation is underfunded and unmeasured

Despite 56% of leaders saying they want to invest more in innovation, just 8% of budget is currently allocated to it. For contrasting context, the Ivey Business Journal tells us that IT functions allocate around 30% to innovation, particularly around technology. While not an event-specific study, a 2023 study published by MDPI found that digital marketing innovation drove both marketing capability and organizational performance.

As event teams move from program to program so quickly that experimentation becomes a luxury, not a default, innovation isn't a tracked KPI and remains peripheral.

The results:

- **Individuals don't feel empowered to take creative risks.**

- **Teams default to what they know, not what might work better, holding back on their own development.**

- **Programs are less able to evolve format, engagement design or technological enhancements, failing to meet attendee expectations and potentially losing out to competitor events.**

- **The business doesn't see the events function, or innovation, as much of a valuable asset as it should.**

2 Our attendees are at risk of becoming dis-enfranchised, and then not returning

Leaders spend just 12% of their time on innovation, and the average team only innovates 5% of their program annually. For those with a larger events program, that's leaving a huge volume of rinse and repeat events. With audiences becoming more selective and attention spans shorter, this puts satisfaction scores (and loyalty) at risk.

The results:

- **Individuals lose their creative skills and are reduced to exclusively executors.**

- **Teams operate on rinse-and-repeat, rather than test-and-learn.**

- **Programs start to have less of a USP (unique selling point), diminishing perceived value for attendees and risk impacting attendee numbers.**

- **The business risks less commercial revenue, brand engagement and customer satisfaction.**

3 Tech is seen merely as a tool, not a catalyst

While innovation correlates positively with attendee experience, many teams treat technology as a delivery mechanism, not a driver of strategy. This mindset limits both creativity and capability.

The results:

- **Individuals avoid unfamiliar tools due to lack of time or training.**

- **Teams underuse the platforms they already pay for, driving less ROI for technology investments, and negatively impacting future business cases.**

- **Programs miss opportunities to create smart, connected experiences, and risk losing attendees.**

- **The business underdelivers on its digital potential, coming up short against competitors.**

"Why are you doing what you did pre-COVID? Challenge that."

Fiona Richardson
Altair

WHAT CAN WE DO TO CHANGE THIS?

NORMALIZE INCREMENTAL INNOVATION

Being innovative doesn't mean you have to recreate or redesign your events every time.

"Same old" and "shiny new" are not the only options. Small, well-planned innovations - tested and refined - build a culture of continuous improvement.

Embed a test-and-learn culture by piloting 1-2 small innovations per event, spanning trying a new format, applying an unfamiliar tech tool or changing the attendee flow.

ELX's tactical tools:

Use the IDEA model for incremental innovation:

I — Identify one friction point in attendee or stakeholder experience

D — Design a small shift to address it (whether this be a new tool, layout, content format or communication touchpoint)

E — Execute at pilot scale

A — Assess outcome with a qualitative feedback or simple ROI markets (see below)

MAKE 'INNOVATION' A CORE KPI

If it's not measured, it won't happen and if it's not tracked, it can't be improved. Track and report innovation like you would satisfaction, leads, or attendance - whether that's new formats trialled, or new tools adopted.

ELX's suggested innovation metrics:

- % of events that piloted a new format or engagement tool, and compare that to the initial benchmark percentage of year one.

- % of budget allocated to innovation, and how it increases year-on-year.

- Attendee sentiment score, based on the area of innovation. Ie, "Did anything feel new/different, and on a 5-point scale, how much did it improve your experience?" or, with reference to a new component "How much out of 5 did X improve your experience at the event?". You could even link the sentiment data to whether or not they're more likely to attend next edition if they believe the event will bring something near year-on-year.

- Promote innovation success with "Innovation Spotlight" sessions or bulletins to share what worked, and promote the value in innovation internally.

USE INNOVATION TO SOLVE REAL PROBLEMS

Focus less on short-term trends and more on decreasing friction; attendee ease, cross-functional collaboration, or operational efficiency. Innovation earns buy-in when it's useful above anything else, and the best innovations make things easier, faster, better or more valuable.

A practical example:

STAN (Science and Technology Angel Network) launched a campaign in April 2025 where keynote speakers recorded personal invitation videos shared via social channels and the event platform. The result? Their event attendance jumped from the expected 60 to 90+ participants - an uplift of at least 50% post-video rollout.

CHAPTER TWO SUMMARY

WANT FUTURE-READY PROGRAMS?

EMPOWER YOUR TEAMS TO SHAPE THE FUTURE.

One smart change at a time. It's time to finish the aeroplane before we land it.

Innovation isn't an idea problem. It's a resource, capacity and time problem. The teams with the most ambition often have the least time to act on it.

To build future-ready event programs, innovation must become part of the process, not an optional extra. That means funding it, measuring it and integrating it into how we work.

03

THE AI GAP:
BIG BUZZ, WITH BASIC USAGE

INTRODUCTION

AI is supposedly transforming industries - but most event teams are barely past the copywriting stage. Around seven in ten ELX leaders say they're already using AI, yet the bulk of that use centres around copy tweaks, speeding up agenda writing or tidying up RPFs. So, while it's great for admin, it's hardly making a dent in strategy.

There is opportunity here for the events industry to better leverage artificial intelligence, to both streamline tasks and design more creative attendee experiences.

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

69%
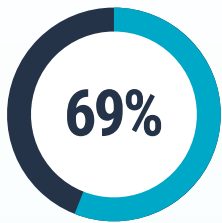
ELX data shows that 69% of event leaders are already using AI, with another 28% planning to adopt it in future.

But when we dig deeper, the headline numbers flatten, as 65% use it for copywriting, while only 35% for research, 1 in 4 for ideation, and 20% for admin tasks. Critically, very few are leveraging AI for measurement, forecasting or strategic planning - even though those areas are top priorities for our members.

This "breadth without depth" trend, however, isn't necessarily limited to the events function, as it echoes across the wider business world. A McKinsey/WSJ report shows 88% of large enterprises have embarked on AI transformations, but only 5% have fully integrated it into any business domain. Similarly, a global study by Mezzi found that 72% of companies use AI in at least one area - yet many struggle to scale due to training and infrastructure gaps.

AI use appears to mainly focus on copy writing

65% *Copy writing* **35%** *Research* **25%** *Ideation* **20%** *Admin*
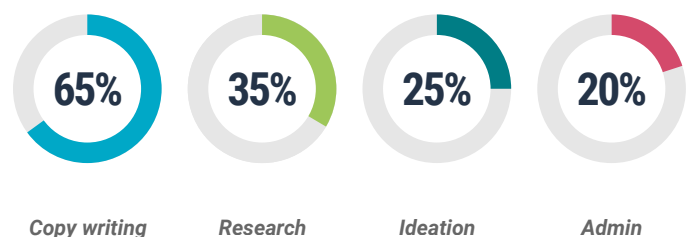
"We're piloting an AI agent to help with venue discovery and automate competitor analysis. It's saving time and giving us an edge we didn't have before"

Anonymous

That being said, when it comes to the job market, PwC's 2025 Global AI Jobs Barometer tells us that skills for AI-exposed jobs are upskilling 66% faster than others – highlighting how rapidly the skills in these positions are evolving compared to roles with less AI exposure. By 2028, it's anticipated that 60% of companies will require basic AI skills from employees, and with sales functions in particular seeing a boost of AI adoption (forecasting through use of AI is now standard at 40% of enterprises), and businesses expecting a 38% boost in profitability this year due to AI adoption – it's no wonder that the events team is at risk of being left behind.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO THESE FINDINGS PRESENT THE FUTURE READINESS OF EVENT TEAMS?

1 Admin-only AI means the team are tactical, not strategic

With 65 % of usage stuck in copywriting and admin, AI is saving minutes but not moving KPIs in the way a strategic events function should expect.

The results:

- **Event professionals become experts in writing prompts, rather than turning into data-savvy strategists, hindering a growth in talent skillset and capability.**

- **Teams remain blind to deeper insights or optimization.**

- **Attendees might be getting faster communications, but not smarter, more personalized experiences.**

- **The business might struggle to see the strategic value of events.**

2 Hesitant up-take will dimin-ish your com-petitive edge

Nearly a third of leaders still "plan" to use AI but haven't begun, and very few apply it to measurement or forecasting.

The results:

- **Members of the events team are unable to boost their skills in a way that really feels like professional development, which could see frustrations rise across the team.**

- **Event teams start to fall behind sales and marketing peers already using predictive analytics, which in turn could risk losing out to further budgeting decisions.**

- **Programs struggle to personalize journeys or recommend next-best actions.**

- **The business loses differentiation and risks attendee attrition to more advanced competitors.**

3 A skills gap scares the next generation of talent

LinkedIn's 2025 Workforce Report notes roles requiring AI fluency upskill 66% faster than others, and Gen Z expect AI-enabled workflows. If events continue to lag, they'll struggle to hire or keep the next wave of digital talent.

The results:

- **New hires disengage when they see manual processes dominating, making it difficult to really nurture the next generation of event leaders.**

- **Event programs will start to lack the fresh thinking AI can unlock for design and engagement.**

- **Businesses will face higher churn and slower upskilling costs across the function.**

4 No AI in measurement leads to debilitating data blind spots

Leaders rank measurement as a priority, yet almost none use AI for analytics or forecasting. Meanwhile, according to a recent Smartsheet study, marketing teams using AI on analytics and reporting save an average of nine hours a week – with 82% saying it boosts efficiency. Events that stick to manual spreadsheets will struggle to prove impact against the AI-driven reporting of their marketing counterparts.

The results:

- **Individuals spend hours manually interpreting spreadsheets instead of strategic storytelling.**

- **Teams with little time often then operate on gut feel and can't surface actionable insights fast enough – making longer-term decisions much less robust.**

- **Improvements rely on anecdotes, not evidence, and attendee experience plateaus.**

- **The business is much less able to see clear event impact, so future budgets and influence shrink.**

WHAT CAN WE DO TO CHANGE THIS?

BUILD LARGE LANGUAGE MODEL LITERACY ACROSS THE TEAM - QUICKLY

Remember, not all AI is created equal. Many teams use AI-enabled tools that automate tasks or crunch numbers behind the scenes. But large language models (LLMs) take this further by generating content, ideas and insights in natural language. Understanding the difference can really help teams use the right AI for the right task – and not expect one tool to do it all.

To explore this, create low-barrier training to show how AI can support real-world event use cases beyond writing - like data analysis, journey mapping, event design, or attendee experience. You might even assign one or multiple team members as the AI ambassador, upskilling and promoting them, avoiding the potential stagnation of your team.

ELX recommends that you use your contacts:

There is also an opportunity for your partners, suppliers and communities (like ELX, our resource library and our on-demand content) to support your team with their AI education.

Run a 90-minute "AI Clinic for Events" with partner vendors or internal experts. The checklist:

- **Prompting live demo: Show how to upload raw attendee feedback and ask ChatGPT to identify top themes.**
- **Journey-mapping session: Input persona data to generate customized attendee journeys.**
- **Content optimization: Feed your event schedule and ask AI to flag overlaps or suggest optimizations.**

Then, ask your AI Ambassador(s) to run monthly "AI Discovery Sprints" and share one new tool or prompt that improved productivity for the team.

EXPERIMENT WITH AI IN STRATEGY, NOT JUST DELIVERY

Move beyond the use of AI purely for content creation. Use tools to forecast KPIs, recommend next-best actions for attendees, or simulate outcomes based on different scenarios.

ELX's simple strategic AI suggestions:

1 Registration forecasting: Use a no-code AI tool (like Smartsheet and Copilot or Google Vertex) to predict registration spikes and adjust budgets accordingly.

2 Next-best content offers: Automate a ChatGPT prompt like:

"Based on these 200 survey responses, what session combinations would increase relevance for Senior Marketers?"

3 Budget scenario modelling: Use built-in Excel or Google Sheets AI to simulate:

"What's the ROI if we add two market day formats at £10k each, targeting 20% more sponsors?"

4 Track a hard metric per pilot (like forecast accuracy, opened session engagement, or sponsor uptake) to show early value.

LEVERAGE AI FEATURES THAT MIGHT ALREADY BE HIDDEN IN YOUR STACK

AI isn't just a time-saver - it's a perspective expander. When prompted well, it can generate unexpected ideas, identify gaps and challenge assumptions.

Look into your current tech stack and establish what is already available for you, and document this to share with your team. You'd be surprised where AI is already supporting you, and what else your current tools can do as thinking partners:

Microsoft 365 Copilot:
- Summaries in Word/Teams,
- Timeline creation in Excel
- Presentation creation in PowerPoint
- Smart calendar management

Google Workspace Duet AI:
- Helps brainstorm invite language or summarize email threads
- Audio overviews

Zoom AI:
- Meeting summaries and action items
- Content generation

Slack AI:
- Intelligent search and summaries
- AI-powered huddle notes

RainFocus
- AI survey sentiment analysis
- Personalized recommendations
- Generative AI for content and data analysis

Explori
- AI verbatim benchmarking for sentiment data

Salesforce and Agent force
- Can help to identify the right people to target and invite to your next event

Asana
- Automations for task creation, reminders and status updates
- Smarter project planning and workload balancing
- Improved reporting across project summaries and post-event wrap-up reports

CHAPTER THREE SUMMARY

FUTURE-READY EVENTS NEED AI-READY TEAMS.

Across the events industry, AI talk is loud. But AI usage is light. Event teams toy with copywriting while strategy, measurement and personalization sit untouched. Without deeper adoption, individuals stagnate, programs plateau and businesses miss out on data-driven growth.

04

IF YOU CAN'T MEASURE IT, YOU CAN'T PROVE IT!

INTRODUCTION

Measurement is the lever that justifies budget, secures stakeholder buy-in, defends decision making and proves the event team's impact. Yet most teams still track surface-level metrics, or wrestle with data trapped in silos, which creates a widening gap between what leaders say matters and what they can tangibly prove. When budgets are flat-lining and other marketing channels offer real-time dashboards at the click of a button, events risk becoming the easiest line item to cut.

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

28%
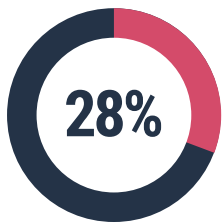
Unfortunately, execution doesn't always equal insight. While 98% of ELX members score program delivery as "good" or "excellent," only 46% say the same for measurement.

In fact, a scary deep dive shows us that a full 28% admit they either don't have KPIs or don't know if their events meet them.

ELX members satisfaction with program delivery vs measurement

100%

80%

60%

40%

20%

0%

Delivery Measurement
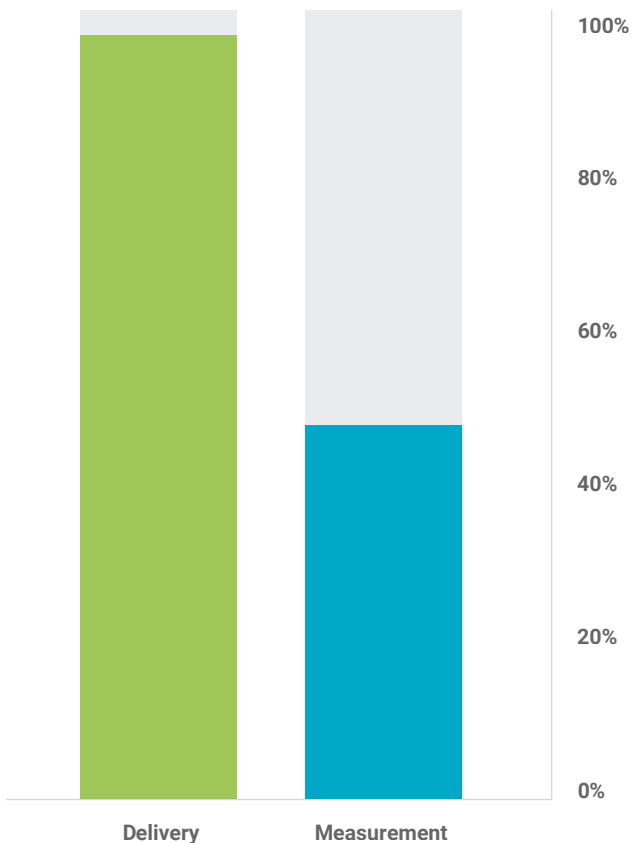
That isn't where the alarming measurement statistics stop. According to our report, budgets don't match ambition. Average measurement allocation sits at 6% of total event spend and just 11–12 % of team time - placing it last among budget lines. By contrast, Gartner finds high-performing marketing organizations invest up to 15% of their budgets in analytics and tools.

THE GAP THAT THE NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED

It's no surprise, therefore, that there is a lack of confidence when it comes to measurement standards. Only 47% of leaders rate their teams as "good/excellent" at measurement; with around half describing it as average or poor. Yet measurement ranks in the top four success drivers in ELX onboarding surveys, so there is clearly disparity in this area.

38%

of respondents expect to boost measurement spend in the next year
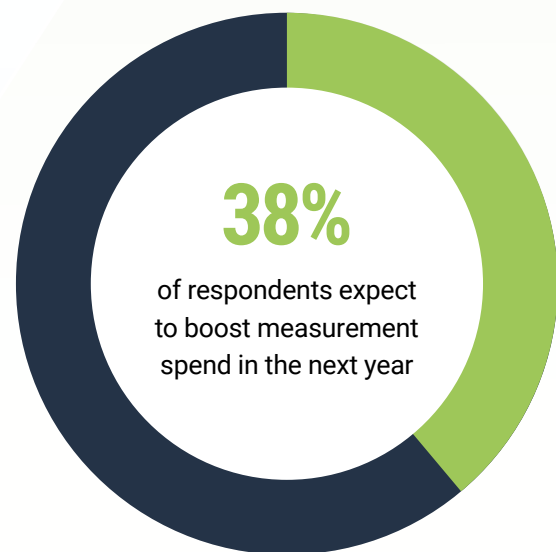
However, 38% of respondents expect to boost measurement spend in the next year; demonstrating an awareness that there is a gap here, and it needs to be addressed.

Our data also shows us that better measurement tends to lead to better attendee experience, with positive correlation between robust measurement practices and higher attendee-experience scores, and that technology use positively correlates with impact on business goals, demonstrating the importance of investing time and budget into improving these particular strategic elements.

"The challenge with data is garbage in, garbage out. If everybody doesn't input the data, we can't get what we need"

Monique Rochard-Marine
Cordis

WHAT CHALLENGES DO THESE FINDINGS PRESENT THE FUTURE READINESS OF EVENT TEAMS?

"We're constantly competing with other marketing departments (like digital or social) for budget, and they have a huge bank of actionable insights and commercially-focused analytics at their fingertips. Where so many event teams are often lacking in this area, it's no wonder that a CFO would feel more comfortable investing in digital marketing instead!"

Chloe Richardson

1 A data deficit invites budget cuts

With only 6% of spend on measurement, events look soft next to digital channels flush with analytics.

The results:

- **Event leaders have no, or less robust, numbers to defend their work, or even role, and morale can dip.**

- **Event teams and the function struggle to prove ROI versus other business channels.**

- **Programs can't iterate intelligently, seeing a stall in improvement and innovative event design.**

- **The business views events as expendable in economic downturns.**

2 Low confidence equals low credibility

Less than half of leaders trust their own metrics, and a quarter have no KPIs at all or aren't sure that they're being met.

The results:

- **Individuals default to vanity metrics like attendee numbers or dwell time, which often doesn't actually get into the real understanding of impact.**

- **Teams are forced to present results of events, portfolios and overall programs that are easily vulnerable to business criticism.**

- **The attendee experience suffers when design decisions rely purely on anecdotal feedback.**

- **A recurring theme, the business treats events as tactical rather than strategic.**

WHAT CAN WE DO TO CHANGE THIS?

CREATE, ADOPT AND COMMUNICATE A UNIFIED MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK

Measurement can no longer be a post-event afterthought or an inconsistent spreadsheet from one portfolio to the next.

To gain trust and demonstrate strategic value, event teams need a unified, business-aligned measurement framework - applied consistently across all regions, event types, and formats. That means defining what success looks like at the program level, not just per event.

"We've automated data flows into a central set... now we report back to stakeholders in real time."

Jonathan Dewe
Moody's

ELX's suggested measurement framework:

At a minimum, your framework should track three categories of impact:

MARKETING VALUE:

- Brand perception shift (pre/post sentiment data)
- Share of voice (event mentions vs. competitors, via social listening tools)
- NPS (advocacy metric that can project growth)
- Memory recall (retention of key messages post-event)

SALES VALUE:

- Influenced pipeline (deal value influenced by event)
- Accelerated pipeline (reduced time to close)
- Qualified leads/MQLs/SQLs
- Customer lifetime value uplift (event-attending vs. non-attending customers)

STRATEGIC VALUE:

- Attendee alignment to key personas (Did the right people attend?)
- Stakeholder advocacy/internal alignment score
- Content impact (change in knowledge or confidence from session to session)
- Event ROI/ROO ratio (results compared to objectives or investment) – see below for more

Start by aligning just three of these metrics across 80% of your annual program. It's better to track fewer KPIs well, than dozens inconsistently.

And don't forget to tailor the communication of the results – your event team might need the minutia, where your senior leadership will be satisfied with the most business-impactful headlines.

TRAIN TEAMS FOR DATA FLUENCY, NOT JUST TOOL PROFICIENCY

Empower your teams to interpret what data means, not just how to pull a report. Measurement is insight, not admin, and giving them the skills to be able to interpret data will also improve internal discourse around the strategic nature of the events function.

Instead, build their skillset around data storytelling, stakeholder reporting and turning numbers into next steps.

ELX's tactical tools:

- **Roll out quarterly data clinics.**

  Team walk-throughs of real event results and how to interpret them.

- **Create scorecard narratives.**

  Practice writing simple one-pagers that link event data to business impact.

- **Drive persona-linked insights.**

  Teach team members how to link measurement results back to key attendee segments.

As a leader, be explicit. Data isn't a spreadsheet - it's the story of event team success.

"Our centralized dashboard tracks results across events. It's helped improve team alignment and made our impact more visible."

Anonymous

ELX

EVOLVE YOUR LANGUAGE FROM ROI TO ROO

ROI is binary and often misleading - especially for brand, engagement, or internal events. Instead, you should focus on Return on Objectives - tracking impact on brand perception, pipeline momentum, engagement quality, advocacy, value for time and customer lifetime value.

Define what your objectives are at the beginning of the planning cycle. Once you know your objectives you know what needs to be included in the event design (i.e. if you want to accelerate deals, you need to make sure the big deals are in attendance), which in turn tells you what to measure. Measurement should not start at the end of the program as a way to falsely define success.

If you start to reframe the terminology, ensuring that measurement reflects the impact of the events program itself, then your stakeholders will start to change their mindset on what metrics really matter.

Start this process by asking:

- **What are we trying to change through this event? (Perception, pipeline, behaviour, etc.)**

- **Who are we targeting, and what do we want them to think, feel or do?**

- **What does success look like, in business terms?**

Then, measure only what maps back to that. Stakeholders don't want vanity metrics; they want proof their strategic objectives were moved forward.

"Stakeholders back the work when they understand it. But first, you've got to speak their language."

Jeff Welger
Arch

CHAPTER FOUR SUMMARY

IF YOU CAN'T MEASURE IT, YOU CAN'T PROVE IT.

IN THE FUTURE - UNPROVEN PROGRAMS WILL BE THE FIRST TO GO.

Event teams so often overperform in execution but fall short in data. With just 6% of budgets and 12% of time spent on measurement, events remain vulnerable to proof of impact – which is easy prey when finance looks for cuts. Standardize KPIs, automate data flows, teach teams to tell insight-driven stories and reframe success as ROO. Future-ready events can't run on vibes; they need verifiable value.

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PERMISSION TO PROGRESS:

STAKEHOLDER BUY-IN AS THE HIDDEN BARRIER

INTRODUCTION

Ask event leaders what's blocking progress, and you'll often hear the same refrain; that "the business won't sign it off."

Whether it's robust team development, bold new formats, AI pilots or deeper measurement, the root problem is often the same - insufficient stakeholder buy-in. Senior executives can often be fixated on cost; legacy processes resist change and cross-functional partners hesitate to back something they don't fully understand (or see the value in). The result? Good ideas stall, teams stay tactical, programs stop evolving and events rarely reach their strategic potential.

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

Stakeholder resistance is a recurring thread woven through almost every challenge faced by event leaders today.

Across ELX interviews, the phrase "getting internal support for innovation" surfaced repeatedly - not as a minor frustration, but as a core blocker to progress. Many of the most pressing barriers, including slow AI adoption, lack of team development, low innovation levels and gaps in measurement, were traced directly back to limited stakeholder buy-in.

VALIDATING THE NEED TO ADDRESS STAKEHOLDER BUY-IN

This data is supported by the latest InVision report, which tells us that 57% of experiential marketers say their event content is driven primarily by internal executive expectations and behaviors, while only 9% say it is driven by audience desires and needs. This highlights a significant disconnect where senior leadership priorities often outweigh attendee needs in event design; validating the need to address stakeholder buy-in as an event leadership priority in order to truly drive change.

In fact, according to Prosci's 12th Best Practice Study, initiatives with "excellent" change management, or strong stakeholder engagement, are up to 7x more likely to meet or exceed objectives than those with poor engagement.

And buy-in isn't just missing at the board level. ELX members also face resistance from internal teams hesitant to change the status quo - resulting in innovation being talked about, but very rarely executed. This mismatch between strategic ambition and internal alignment is one of the biggest friction points limiting event progress today.

Event content drivers:

	Internal expectations	Audience desires
60%		
50%		
40%		
30%		
20%		
10%		
0%		
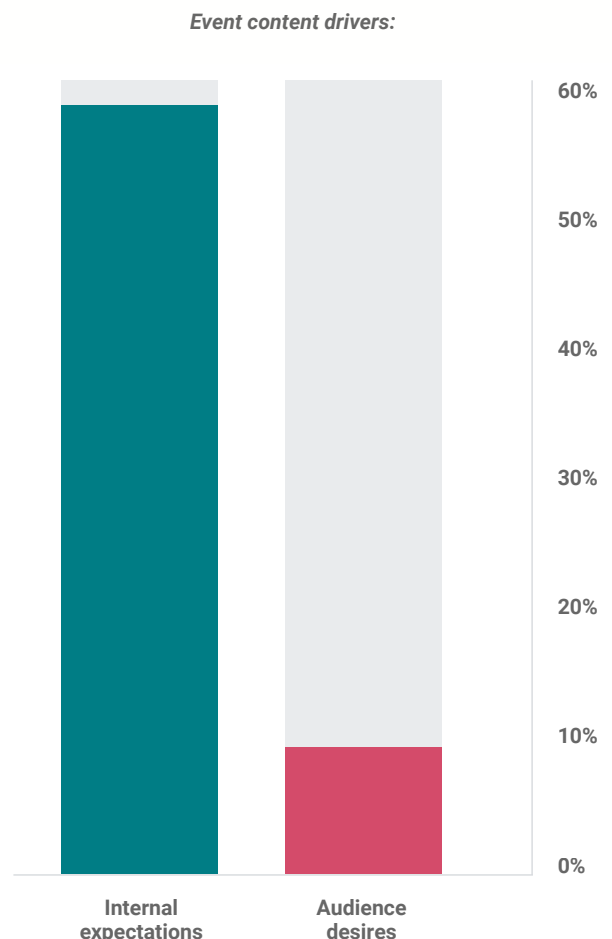
WHAT CHALLENGES DO THESE FINDINGS PRESENT THE FUTURE READINESS OF EVENT TEAMS?

1 Strategic misalignment is stalling progress

Event leaders may have bold plans, but without stakeholder alignment, those plans rarely see the light of day. New formats, tools or strategies get deprioritized or diluted when they can't be directly tied to business KPIs.

The results:

- **Strategic ideas get watered down or blocked altogether, wasting valuable event team time.**

- **Internal credibility suffers when event leaders can't "speak the language" of the business, further hindering the event professional's position as a strategic business partner.**

- **Momentum slows and teams get stuck delivering the same safe, approved formats over and over, impacting the attendee experience.**

- **Event functions risk being seen as tactical cost centers, not strategic growth drivers.**

2 Innovation is treated as risky, not necessary

Without buy-in, innovation feels much more like a gamble. Even low-cost experiments are scrutinized when stakeholders don't understand the value or urgency.

The results:

- **Event leaders second-guess themselves or avoid pushing new ideas forward.**

- **Teams play it safe, even when attendee needs are evolving, which could lose their events the competitive edge required in 2025.**

- **Vendor relationships suffer when platform decisions are reversed or delayed due to internal politics.**

- **Event programs fall behind audience and industry expectations.**

3 New technology requires old-school justification

AI, measurement tools, data platforms; so many things this paper touches on require investment. But when stakeholders are focused on short-term budget efficiency, it's hard to justify long-term gains.

The results:

- **Leaders spend more (valuable!) time defending spend than delivering value.**

- **Technology investments get delayed until it's too late to meaningfully integrate them, pushing back progress and innovation across the program.**

- **Opportunities to capture deeper insight or automate effectively are missed.**

- **Teams are forced to work harder, not smarter.**

4 Event team culture is negatively impacted

Many are tasked with evolving the program, but without the internal support or authority to do it.

The results:

- **Leaders feel stuck between expectation and execution, with little senior-level sponsorship.**

- **Teams become cynical, feeling like suggesting ideas that go nowhere are pointless and a waste of time.**

- **Culture suffers as ambition becomes frustration.**

- **The business continues to undervalue the events function, seeing it as executional rather than innovative.**

WHAT CAN WE DO TO CHANGE THIS?

TRANSLATE CREATIVITY INTO BUSINESS LANGUAGE

Many event leaders hit resistance when pitching new formats, tools or technologies, not because they lack merit, but because they aren't framed in terms stakeholders understand. Creative ideas often stall when they're positioned as "exciting" or "engaging" rather than essential to business performance. Tie every initiative to a measurable commercial outcome, and use familiar language from sales, marketing, or finance, as when event leaders speak business fluently, their ideas don't just get heard - they also get approved.

ELX's tactical tools:

- **Pipeline velocity - dollar value of influenced pipeline per $1 event spend**

- **Net-new revenue and time-to-decision for deals touched by event leads**

- **Employee retention for SKOs or incentives, and how much money that saves the business**

"We wanted to review the available platforms on the market and our CEO wanted to be closely involved in the process"

Fiona Richardson
Altair

COMMUNICATE STRATEGIC VALUE BY LEADING WITH DATA

Following on from the above, skip the "cool new idea" pitch, and instead lead with data around the business pain your stakeholder already experiences (including pipeline velocity, net-new revenue, employee stickiness) and present the value your initiative will bring to the business. Help stakeholders understand that within specific event design, we need to find a balance of attendee and stakeholder needs.

As an example of where data can make a difference, according to the latest Freeman research, many executives think a celebrity speaker will be a draw to drive registration, but the data shows that less than 1% of attendees say it actually makes a difference in their decision to attend. Make sure you use this data, and others like it, to prove what really makes a difference and get the buy- in of your stakeholders.

ELX's tactical tools:

For your stakeholder value framework, use the VALUE model when presenting any new event format, tool or investment opportunity:

V   **Vision connection:** Clearly link your idea to the company's wider goals.

A   **Asset at risk:** Show what's at stake if nothing changes .

L   **Lever you'll pull:** Identify what you'll change or introduce to protect that asset.

U   **Uptake metric:** Define how you'll track early adoption, traction or impact.

E   **Expected payoff:** Estimate the total business impact, which can be qualitative or quantitative, and may range from higher lead conversation to employee satisfaction, and many things in between.

CO-CREATE THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Invite senior level stakeholders to a 30-minute scoping workshop before you lock the concept to engage them early in the process. Have them collaborate to define KPIs and risk thresholds, so they become co-creators. Shared ownership equals shared success, and your stakeholders will have much more of a vested interest if they've been a co-creator in the strategy.

CHAPTER FIVE SUMMARY

WANT TO MOVE FASTER?

SECURE SUPPORT TO PROGRESS, RIGHT FROM THE START.

The evidence is clear: Alignment isn't a soft skill; it's a leading indicator of success. Without stakeholder buy-in, we cannot possibly be future-ready teams and leaders, so we must master the translation between creative ambition and commercial logic, bringing stakeholders along with us from day one.

FINAL WORD

In a global event environment where transformation is constant and predictability is an unprecedented, the concept of being "future-ready" can feel elusive at the very least, if not sometimes even out of reach. But that's exactly the point - future-readiness isn't a fixed state; it's a mindset. A leadership expectation. A commitment to ongoing evolution in the face of complexity, whatever it may look like.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

What this study reveals is not just a list of gaps in training, innovation, AI adoption, measurement or stakeholder alignment, but a deeper insight that tells us event teams are ready to progress, but the systems around them must allow for it. Those that are investing in technology and training for measurement and innovation, even modestly, seem to report stronger outcomes across the board.

It's no longer enough to focus on flawless delivery. To lead future-ready event teams, leaders must champion cultures of growth, experimentation and accountability, from how development is structured, innovation is supported, technology is strategic, data is trusted, and internal alignment is earned, not assumed.

"I've found that knowing how a solution will drive revenue for the wider business is essential for success"

Ashley Claborn
Lennox Residential

"We've built a 5-7 year roadmap for our flagship events. Just one new innovation per year. That's how I get buy-in without disruption"

Anonymous

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THE CHALLENGE ISN'T CAPABILITY.

IT'S CAPACITY, CLARITY AND SUPPORT.

But there truly is justification for optimism. Across every conversation and data point in this research, a consistent thread emerged; the ambition and drive are there. Event leaders know what needs to change. So, what's required now, is the organizational resolve and leadership confidence to act on it.

As we move forward, we must try to:

- **Build space for teams to grow, not just execute.**

- **Equip events with insight, not just instinct.**

- **Shift innovation from aspiration to a reality.**

- **Position events not as cost centers, but drivers of real business impact.**

Because the events function has never mattered more - but to secure its future, we must be ready to lead it there.