



World PCO Alliance

Reimagining RFP Processes for
International Association
Meetings

**A Blueprint by the
World PCO Alliance**

World PCO Alliance White Paper

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In collaboration with



Reimagining RFP Processes for International Association Meetings

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Acknowledgement & Introduction

Special thanks go to the following individuals who have actively contributed to this discussion:

Alice Au - formerly Destination Toronto

Claire Smith - formerly Vancouver Convention Center

Ellen Kouwenburg - World Potato Congress

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Erika Kowalczyk - International Society for Stem Cell Research

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Joelle Verluyten - European AIDS Clinical Society

Juan Jose Garcia - Bco Congressos

Ksenija Polla - Talley Management Group

Liu Ping - China Star

Magdalena Holowinska - MTP Grupa

Maria Mariscal Escalera - Bco Congressos

Patranuch Sudasna - CDM-Conference & Destination Management

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Tara Miller - Destination DC

Thomas Fiks - Hamburg Messe

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The World PCO Alliance would also like to extend its sincere thanks to **ICCA – the International Congress and Convention Association** for providing the platform and support that enabled this initiative. At the **ICCA Congress 2025 in Porto**, ICCA invited the Alliance to host two working sessions dedicated to exploring the future of RFP processes for international association meetings. These conversations were open, dynamic, and grounded in real-world experience rather than theory.

Participants included association executives, PCOs, DMOs, venues, hotel groups, suppliers, policymakers, academics, sustainability experts, creatives, and community voices. ICCA's role in convening this diversity enabled us to hear challenges and opportunities from every angle of the global events ecosystem.

The World PCO Alliance is grateful to ICCA for championing an inclusive platform where all voices were heard, and where honesty, curiosity, and collaboration shaped the foundations of this blueprint.

This document outlines best practices and complements the existing ICCA white paper on Bidding and Decision Making.

Premise for the White Paper

The RFP models currently used across the international association sector were largely designed more than two decades ago, before the urgency of climate change, before sustainability and ESG reporting became standard practice, and before expectations expanded to include inclusion, belonging, and broader societal values. They also predate community-driven engagement models and the exponential rise of digital participation. As the world has changed, so have the needs of associations, destinations, members, and local communities. Yet the RFP process has not evolved at the same pace.

Recent analysis of association city-host RFPs issued in 2024 and 2025 highlights this gap between intent and execution. While values such as inclusion and sustainability are increasingly referenced in industry conversations, they are still applied inconsistently in formal RFP requirements and evaluation frameworks. In practice, many RFPs signal aspiration without clearly defining priority, weighting, or feasibility, leaving destinations and partners to interpret what truly matters.

(See: SFA Connect, ["Values vs Reality: Do Association RFPs Match Industry Expectations?"](#), Oct 2025.)

We heard loud and clear in Porto:

To stay relevant, responsible, and resilient, and for the best outcomes, RFP processes must evolve from procurement tools into strategic frameworks for mission-aligned, impact-driven partnerships.

This white paper proposes a new blueprint, one that moves beyond logistics and price to create a holistic, equitable, more future-ready RFP ecosystem. It emphasizes:

- the growing importance of greater mutual understanding and alignment between an association's mission and its event locations and destination partners,
- the long-term impact that events have the potential to generate for both associations, destinations, and solution partners,
- the opportunity for shared risk and shared value models,
- and the inclusion of local communities, SMEs, and the local solution partners from the very beginning of the bidding process.

1. Mission as the Anchor of the Future RFP

1.1 Mission alignment is no longer implicit; it must be demonstrated

During the ICCA 2025 discussions, the strongest consensus from associations was this:

"When a destination truly understands, supports, and aligns with our mission, it doesn't just host our event, but amplifies our impact and strengthens our relevance."

Associations have always had missions; they are the very reason these organizations exist. What has changed is the expectation that **where and how an association convenes must reinforce its mission, not sit alongside it.**

Associations today face increasing expectations from:

- internal boards asking for stronger risk mitigation and clearer outcomes, often with fewer resources,
- younger members seeking purpose-driven engagement,
- global audiences who increasingly place value on environmental and social responsibility.
- funders and sponsors demanding measurable outcomes,
- and policymakers requiring evidence of societal benefit,

Yet many RFPs still:

- do not articulate the association's mission clearly,
- fail to detail the short, medium, and long-term impact they hope the event will achieve,
- and treat mission alignment as secondary to logistics and cost.

A mission-aligned RFP:

- clarifies the association's purpose and priorities,
- defines what short, medium, and long-term impact they seek to create, and
- invites destinations and their local partners to come on the journey, enabling them to demonstrate how they will support, amplify, and advance the association's mission and create an impactful event.

For associations, great alignment leads to:

- clear and shared goals, strengthening support for the association's mission and impact,
- stronger buy-in and a more collaborative partnership approach across destination stakeholders,
- more successful and impactful events overall,
- richer learning and insight for future decision-making,
- more meaningful and measurable legacy initiatives,
- higher relevance,
- more sustainable growth, and
- increased financial stability through deeper engagement and stronger attendance.

For destinations and local stakeholders, mission alignment:

- creates a clearer understanding of the ROI, beginning at the bidding stage
- provides greater clarity on key success factors, both for winning the bid and delivering a successful meeting, and helps destinations clearly articulate and align their value proposition.
- enables earlier and more focused proposal development, increasing the likelihood of success,
- supports long-term strategic growth areas (health, innovation, sustainability, education, tourism),
- attracts aligned sponsors and partners, and
- strengthens community support and local buy-in.

Emerging Good Practice Addition for RFPs: Mission Alignment Section

Associations should be clear about the following:

1. Mission statement (if not already included)
2. The short, medium, and long-term impact goals for the event
3. Key sectors or communities they aim to impact
4. Social, cultural, and/or ecological outcomes they wish to advance (if any)
5. Legacy indicators - for example, the kinds of lasting benefits the association wants to help create (such as new jobs, skills development, sustainability progress, educational uplift, research collaboration, or innovation pathways). *These indicators help destinations and partners understand what "success over time" means for the association.*

Importantly, RFPs should also indicate the relative importance of each of these elements within the decision-making process.

This allows associations to signal which factors are essential, aspirational, and contextual, creating clarity without imposing a one-size-fits-all model.

By giving destinations and partners visibility into **what truly matters, and how much it matters**, associations enable more focused proposals, better-aligned partnerships, a better chance to make the right decisions, and ultimately a higher likelihood of short-medium- and long-term success.

Destinations are invited to demonstrate:

1. How the city/country and wider destination ecosystem align with and can amplify the association's mission and event goals,
2. Which community stakeholders and partners could best support and enrich the event?
3. The local expertise, assets, and networks that are directly linked to the association's mission and event goals,
4. Examples of and potential legacy programs or community partnerships that could be developed together, and
5. A shared vision for how the event could create lasting benefits beyond its duration.

2. A New Vision for Value: Beyond Logistics and Cost

2.1 Cultural, Social, Ecological, and Collaborative Value

The business events industry is shifting its emphasis from primarily transactional relationships around meetings toward more purpose-driven ecosystems of engagement and impact.

This blueprint proposes four pillars that expand how value can be defined, delivered, and sustained.

Cultural Value

Incorporating local context, stories, traditions, and creative expression in ways that help events connect meaningfully with the host community.

Social Value

Considering how events can strengthen community connections, broaden access to opportunities, and support inclusive participation.

Ecological Value

Exploring opportunities to reduce environmental impact and, where appropriate, adopt more regenerative and responsible practices.

Collaborative Value

Identifying ways to engage stakeholders across sectors to support shared outcomes and longer-term impact.

Rather than being treated as an add-on, these value areas can be invited into the RFP process, with associations indicating if, how, and to what level of priority each is relevant to their event.

Industry data suggests that while social and inclusion-related considerations are gaining traction in association RFPs, environmental sustainability and long-term legacy outcomes are far less consistently embedded or weighted. This uneven application reinforces the need for clearer prioritization within RFPs, not more requirements, but greater transparency around which values are material to the decision and which are contextual. Without this clarity, destinations and partners risk over-investing in areas that are rhetorically important but operationally secondary. Based on analysis of 180 association RFPs issued in 2024–2025.

(See: SFA Connect, *"Values vs Reality: Do Association RFPs Match Industry Expectations?"*, Oct 2025.)

3. A New Multi-Phase RFP Model

Introducing an RFI / RFQ Phase

Developing, issuing, analyzing, and ultimately awarding meetings is a significant task and responsibility for both the associations and the destinations and solution partners who bid for events. Clarity on the process and decision-making process is critical to making the best decisions and ultimately the success of an event. Introducing new elements into the process could yield immense benefits for both organizations and bidding destinations.

Request for Interest & Qualification

Before launching a full bidding cycle, both associations and destinations can benefit from an early-stage step that helps determine whether a formal bid is appropriate and worthwhile.

This phase is not intended to replace the full RFP, nor to assess detailed impact or legacy plans. Instead, it focuses on qualification, feasibility, and readiness, including core criteria, governance considerations, and indicative availability, before committing significant time and resources.

By introducing a concise RFI/RFQ (Request for Information/Request for Qualifications), associations can refine and focus their subsequent RFPs, while destinations can assess fit early and decide whether proceeding to a full bid is feasible.

This approach reduces unnecessary workload, improves clarity for all parties, and increases the overall quality and relevance of final proposals.

Why Introduce an RFI / RFQ Phase?

1. It reduces wasted effort

Destinations often invest significant time preparing full bids only to discover late in the process that key priorities, constraints, or non-negotiables were misaligned. An RFI / RFQ provides early visibility, allowing both sides to assess fit before committing substantial resources.

2. It identifies viable candidates early

Rather than signaling interest alone, the RFI / RFQ helps confirm that destinations can realistically meet core requirements, including capacity, availability, governance structures, and essential criteria, enabling associations to focus on qualified partners.

3. It lowers barriers for smaller and emerging destinations

A lighter, early-stage process allows destinations with fewer resources to participate meaningfully, assess feasibility, and decide whether a full bid is viable, without reputational risk or disproportionate workload.

4. It establishes mission awareness without overburdening the process

At this stage, the RFI / RFQ does not require detailed impact or legacy plans. Instead, it ensures destinations understand the association's mission, purpose, and expectations at a high level, creating a shared baseline before deeper engagement.

5. It supports a more equitable and transparent ecosystem

Clear criteria enable destinations to self-select in or out based on fit and feasibility, reducing unnecessary competition and avoiding processes that unintentionally favor scale over strategic alignment.

How the RFI/RFQ Works

The RFI / RFQ is deliberately concise, typically **2 to 3 pages**, and focused on **qualification, feasibility, and readiness**.

It provides associations with enough information to determine which destinations should be invited to submit a full RFP, while keeping the burden on destinations proportionate and manageable.

Destinations respond only to **defined, high-level criteria**, rather than preparing a full narrative bid.

What the RFI/RFQ Typically Includes:

From the Association (2-3 pages):

1. Purpose and context of the event
 - o Why this event exists
 - o The professional, scientific, economic, or societal value it creates
 - o The high-level role a host destination is expected to play

2. Core requirements and “dealbreakers.”
 - o Dates, seasonality, and rotation considerations
 - o Capacity thresholds (venues, hotels, infrastructure)
 - o Accessibility requirements
 - o Legal, regulatory, political, fiscal, or compliance considerations that may affect feasibility
3. High-level event specifications
 - o Estimated attendance
 - o Space and format ranges and configurations, including logistical “dealbreakers” and/or where flexibility exists
 - o Indicative program structure
 - o Key logistical assumptions or constraints
4. Financial framework and business model
 - o Indicative budget parameters and cost sensitivities
 - o Subvention, support, or financial contribution expectations, if applicable
5. Governance and local hosting expectations
 - o Requirement for and roles of local host, chapter, or representative (if applicable)
6. Sustainability and community considerations (if relevant)
 - o Environmental, social, or community-related priorities only where these are genuinely important to the association’s goals
 - o An indication of whether and how these aspects will be considered in shortlisting and decision-making.

(Including this section is optional and should reflect true priorities, rather than aspirational statements.)

7. Timeline, engagement, and decision-making framework – it is advisable that associations develop a response form so that the destinations can provide as precise a response as possible, and make the comparison easier!
 - o RFI/RFQ submission window
 - o The opportunity for destinations to ask clarifying questions and engage in dialogue is not often done, but can be highly valuable
 - o Shortlisting timeline
 - o Anticipated release of the full RFP and submission deadline
 - o Indicative timing for site inspections or further due diligence
 - o Decision-making process, including:
 - Who is involved in the decision
 - Key criteria and relative priorities or weighting, where possible

From the Destination (RFI/RFQ Response Guidelines):

To support an efficient and focused RFI / RFQ process, destinations are encouraged to:

- remain concise, factual, and proportionate to the information requested
- focus on confirming eligibility, feasibility, and availability
- follow the structure and criteria outlined by the association
- avoid promotional narratives or speculative concepts at this early stage
- be limited to **2-3 pages**, unless otherwise indicated

As best practice, destinations are encouraged to address **only the criteria requested**, providing high-level confirmation of:

- ability to meet core requirements and dealbreakers
- identify where flexibility may exist for organizations
- capacity, availability, and initial feasibility
- governance and local hosting readiness, where applicable
- indicative financial positioning, if requested

Any additional context or detail can be more appropriately explored during the full RFP phase, if and when a destination is shortlisted.

PHASE 1: Clarity and Alignment

1.1 Publish a Full Transparency “RFP Pack”

Includes:

- Consider including a short video outlining the association’s mission and objectives for the event.
- A “dealbreakers list.”
- A “flexibility index” – consider adding a section outlining where flexibility may exist (e.g., dates, format, pricing, partnerships), creating space for collaborative and innovative solutions, and enabling a broader range of destinations, including emerging or lesser-known ones, to compete on strategic fit, not scale alone.
- Minimum and desirable specs
- Governance and decision-making details
- Post-event reports for benchmarking
- Attendance history
- Community and sustainability goals

1.2 The Dealbreakers Matrix (Appendix) I

This spreadsheet includes columns for:

- Indication of the association’s openness to alternative, innovative, or collaborative approaches to meeting the requirement (e.g. phased delivery, partnerships, in-kind support, or non-traditional solutions)
- Mandatory requirements
- Preferred requirements
- Nice-to-have features
- Clarifications
- Notes on flexibility
- Negotiation options
- Risks and interdependencies

Destinations use this to build realistic, tailored proposals, saving both sides time.

PHASE 2: Submission and Co-Creation

2.1 Clarification & Alignment Calls

Once the shortlist is confirmed, the association may offer **individual, confidential** clarification calls with shortlisted destinations, venues, and/or local association partners. These one-to-one conversations provide space to seek clarification, test assumptions, and explore feasibility without requiring group workshops or revealing competitive positioning.

As a matter of good practice, associations are encouraged to also consider offering **brief feedback conversations** to non-shortlisted destinations that demonstrate longer-term potential. While not part of the formal bid process, these touchpoints can provide valuable insights, help destinations understand future suitability, and strengthen the pipeline for other events.

To support fairness and informed decision-making, associations often **summarize and share responses to broader, commonly raised questions** arising from clarification calls with all bidders. This ensures consistent information across participants and helps the association reach the strongest possible outcome.

Why Individual Clarification Calls Matter

Individual clarification calls support informed decision-making while preserving confidentiality. They allow destinations to ask strategic questions openly, help associations reduce assumptions and unrealistic proposals, and maintain discretion around competing bids. They also allow associations to gauge how professional, prepared, and willing to collaborate destinations are. Where involved, PCOs can support these conversations to ensure consistency, neutrality, and equal access to information.

It should be noted that incorporating clarification calls and additional alignment touchpoints may lengthen the overall process timeline. Associations are therefore encouraged to build in sufficient time for these steps early, as delayed timelines can often lead to rushed bid responses and create avoidable pressure for bidders and internal decision-makers.

2.1a “Office Hours” or “Clarification Window”

As an additional option, associations may offer a defined clarification window during which bidders can submit written questions. Responses can then be shared consistently with all bidders, without identifying the source of the question. This approach supports transparency and equal access to information while preserving competitive confidentiality.

2.2 Impact & Sustainability Proposal

Associations are encouraged to clearly articulate the vision they hold for their event’s potential impact and sustainability ambitions, at a level appropriate to the RFI/RFQ stage. As best practice, this includes indicating:

- the role these considerations play in the overall decision-making process
- whether they are core requirements, differentiators, or aspirational elements
- any standards or certifications that are required versus desirable
- the degree of experimentation or innovation the association is open to exploring

Where impact or sustainability considerations are included, associations are strongly encouraged to be transparent about their relative priority and weighting, helping destinations respond proportionately and meaningfully.

Destinations, in alignment with the association’s stated priorities and invitation, may then share how their community, values, and local strengths could support meaningful outcomes before, during, and after the event. Where relevant, this may include high-level references to circular economic approaches, carbon reduction efforts, or existing local programs that create social or environmental benefit, as well as opportunities to connect the event with local communities, research, innovation, or sustainability initiatives, without developing detailed concepts at this stage

PHASE 3: Evaluation & Selection

3.1 Transparent and Value-Based Evaluation

Beyond logistics and cost alone, associations are encouraged to adopt a **transparent, value-based approach** to evaluation, one that clearly communicates **what will be considered, how decisions will be made, and by whom.**

Rather than applying a single, standardized scoring model, best practice is for associations to outline:

- the detailed evaluation criteria being considered
- the relative importance or priority of each criterion (e.g., core requirement, differentiator, or secondary consideration)
- the decision-making process, including:
 - the bodies or stakeholders involved
 - key stages of review
 - how recommendations are formed and final decisions approved

This clarity helps destinations respond proportionately and supports a fair, credible selection process.

Indicative Evaluation Considerations

Depending on the association's goals and context, evaluation criteria may include some or all of the following:

- Mission and strategic alignment
How well the destination supports the association's purpose and long-term objectives.
- Specific event goals and success factors
How well the destination supports the event's short- and medium-term goals and success factors
- Logistical feasibility
The ability to deliver the event reliably across venues, accommodation, access, and infrastructure is aligned with the association's needs. This includes aspects such as risk management and safety considerations.
- Business environment, tax, legal, regulatory, and other considerations
The ability and ease of conducting business (particularly, and potentially, as a foreign entity) in a country/city, and the legal, fiscal, regulatory, and other considerations that impact the organizers, attendees, exhibitors/sponsors, and other stakeholders.
- Financial realism and sustainability
A credible and workable financial environment that supports the association's event business model.
- Sustainability considerations (where prioritized)
Environmental or social practices that align with the association's stated ambitions, where these are genuinely material to the decision.
- Legacy, community, and cultural connection (where relevant)
The potential for the event to engage local people, institutions, or knowledge ecosystems in ways that create shared benefit.

- Innovation potential
The capacity to introduce fresh thinking, creative problem-solving, or new approaches that enhance the event experience, whether through digital tools, participation formats, accessibility, or forward-looking ideas.
- Trust, experience, and stakeholder collaboration
Confidence in the destination's partners, governance, and ability to collaborate with stakeholders.

Additional RFP Considerations (Optional)

Where legacy or community connection is a stated priority, associations may wish to invite proportionate input, for example:

"Where relevant, please indicate how local organizations, institutions, or initiatives (such as academic bodies, industry partners, community groups, or innovation ecosystems) could engage with or benefit from the event, in alignment with our stated priorities."

PHASE 4: Contracting & Shared Risk

4.1 The Fair Contracting Approach

Rather than proposing a single contractual model, this blueprint advocates for **a fair contracting approach** that emphasizes clarity, proportionality, and shared accountability.

As a matter of good practice, contracts are encouraged to:

- remain proportionate in length and complexity (typically 10–12 pages)
- use clear, plain language wherever possible
- outline mutual obligations and dependencies
- explicitly identify areas of **shared risk and shared benefit**
- include provisions that allow for flexibility and renegotiation where circumstances materially change

The objective is not to eliminate risk, but to **make risk visible, understood, and shared** across partners.

It also seeks to identify opportunities for benefit/success sharing.

4.2 Shared Risk: Principles and Illustrative Examples

Discussions during the working sessions highlighted that shared risk-and-reward models are rarely standardized and are often inconsistently addressed across contracts. Rather than prescribing fixed clauses, the following **illustrative approaches** are offered to support more balanced outcomes.

Examples of how shared risk can be addressed include:

- **Scenario-based clauses** outlining responses to defined disruptions (e.g., force majeure, regulatory change, major market shifts), with agreed flexibilities rather than automatic penalties

- **Graduated response mechanisms**, where obligations or financial commitments adjust based on timing, scale, or cause of disruption
- **Mutual mitigation responsibilities**, clarifying what each party will do to minimize impact before invoking remedies
- **Renegotiation triggers**, identifying specific conditions under which terms may be revisited in good faith
- **Shared-risk clauses** that recognize external factors beyond any single party's control and commit partners to collaborative problem-solving

Where possible, these principles can be reflected in existing mechanisms in venue or hotel contracts, thereby better balancing risk across all stakeholders.

This phase reflects the **direction of travel**, not a final contractual solution. Further work, testing, and legal input will be required to translate these principles into standardized language across different jurisdictions and contract types.

5. Conclusion

By elevating mission, embedding transparency, expanding value creation, integrating communities, simplifying contracts, and strengthening collaboration across sectors, the global association and stakeholders in the business events community can reshape the RFP process to meet the future.

This blueprint is intended as a starting point.

The World PCO Alliance invites associations, destinations, PCOs, venues, and industry partners to share what works, what could be improved, and how this framework can evolve in practice. Insights, experiences, and suggestions are warmly welcomed as we continue to refine and build on this work following ICCA Congress 2025.

Contributions can be shared directly with Ksenija Polla at kpolla@talley.com

Appendix 1

Dealbreaker/Flexibility Matrix:

This matrix is provided as a practical tool to support clarity and dialogue. Associations may adapt or simplify it based on their governance model and event complexity.

Requirement
Category (Mandatory/Preferred/Nice-to-have)
Mandatory (Yes/No)
Flexibility Level/Openness to Alternatives (High/Medium/Low)
Rationale
Risks & Interdependencies If Not Met
Negotiation Options
Clarifications
Notes