

# How Associations Can Meet the Moment

Associations NOW | Mark Athitakis | January 23, 2026

Around the world, CEOs are skeptical about what the next year will bring. Associations have an opportunity to support them.



The bears are stirring.

That seems to be the main takeaway from the latest edition of PwC's latest Global CEO Survey. The release of the survey is usually timed to the Davos Global Economic Forum, which most years is a staid gathering of world leaders. This year, though, the mood was more, er, fraught, and that geopolitical anxiety is reflected in the survey findings. And there are some good lessons for association leaders in it.

Bad news first: The survey found that only 30 percent of CEOs express confidence in revenue growth in the next year. Maybe AI will fix it? There's bad news there too: More than half (56 percent) say AI hasn't delivered any benefits in terms of revenue or cost savings.

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Plainly something needs to change, but organizational change is slow too: Though half of the CEOs surveyed said that innovation is important, only 30 percent say they "test new ideas rapidly."

So now is a good time for, as the report puts it, “frank discussions among CEOs, their top teams, and boards about whether innovation is more than a rhetorical priority.” This is a place where leaders can turn to their industry associations for support or guidance, so association leaders should be thinking about what they can offer. That may involve connecting companies with partners that can help create innovation initiatives, offer guidance around risk tolerance for new projects, and offer other best practices.

Associations have found that members are asking them to take on this role; trade organizations, recognizing the need, have moved beyond their typical focus on advocacy to provide more support around innovation.

And if associations aren’t doing things to provide direct support around innovation, they can do some of the small-bore things that give leaders more time to think big. Opportunities to think beyond the short-term are scarce, according to the PwC report: “CEOs globally say that, on average, they dedicate about half (47 percent) of their time to activities with time horizons of less than one year. They spend more than a third (37 percent) of their time on activities with horizons of one to five years, with the remainder (16 percent) devoted to longer-term issues.”

That’s not a bad breakdown, and it’s not hard to argue that long-term strategy is a hard thing to focus on in the current environment; Uber CEO Kora Khosrowshahi recently said, “if you think you’re planning five years into the future, you’re kidding yourself.” But as the PwC report notes, the “tyranny of the urgent” can keep leaders from looking at threats and opportunities at the far horizon. An association can play a meaningful role in providing the foresight tools that help members see likely trendlines, so they don’t have to do that research themselves.

There’s no easy prediction for what the next year will look like—except that associations can be fairly confident that their members will be feeling a lot of anxiety around uncertainty. This is the moment where associations can prove their worth, then—providing the resources, community, and foresight tools that will help them navigate the emerging challenges.