

Australian Association Sector

COVID-19 Impact Survey

‘Demonstrating the Value of Associations’

November 2021



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Foreword

In June 2020, Survey Matters conducted its first COVID-19 State of the Sector research project, examining the effects of the pandemic on associations and their members in Australia and New Zealand.

At that time, when faced with uncertainty and confusion about the health and economic ramifications of the pandemic, associations were grappling with the effects on their staff, members, industries, and professions. However, they were also rapidly transitioning their operations to continue to support, protect and advocate for their members as the crisis unfolded. They were working tirelessly to collect, curate and disseminate information, advocate to government, and provide support and assistance for the professions and industries they represent.

At the end of 2020, hopes were high that the effects of restrictions, lockdowns and other regulations had worked. There was some level of confidence that COVID-19 was at least under control, and that 2021 would be a return, if not to 'normal', to some ability to live with the pandemic with vaccination.

Those hopes were dashed with the emergence of the highly contagious Delta variant in early 2021. With snap lockdowns and disruption continuing, in September 2021, we decided to again consult with association executives to understand the impacts the prolonged effects were having on them, their staff, and members.

Associations remain confident about the future. Their value and worth to their professions, industries and to government have been proven beyond doubt during the pandemic.

Survey Matters is proud to support the vital work that associations do. We are indebted to the Association Executives who took the time to contribute. Their participation provides all associations the opportunity to learn how their peers and colleagues are managing, and insights into the strategies being adopted to support and assist members.

We hope this report offers greater understanding of the prolonged effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that it provides guidance as we look towards 2022.

We expect that the aftermath of the last two years will expose more challenges, and we will continue to check-in with associations to monitor their experiences and how they are supporting members in 2022.

Brenda Mainland
Managing Director
Survey Matters

Executive Summary

Associations were pivotal during COVID-19 in helping to support the industries and professions they represent, through essential advocacy, timely and accurate information and ongoing professional development. Many industries and members would have suffered significantly without the intercession of their associations.

In June 2020, Survey Matters conducted the first **Associations Matter COVID-19 Sector Impact Survey**. The aim was to understand the effects of the pandemic on associations, how they were coping financially, how they were supporting members and what had needed to change to maintain engagement. In September 2021, we decided to check in again with association executives about the ongoing effects of COVID-19 on the sector.

At the time this survey was conducted in September 2021, 60% of the Australian population was under strict lockdown. Melbourne was in its sixth “two week” snap lockdown (that lasted four months!) and NSW and the ACT were in similar circumstances. The remaining states, although relatively COVID-19 free, were still dealing with border closures and in some cases restrictions on large gatherings of people.

Having endured what most thought was the ‘worst’ of the pandemic in 2020, few were prepared for the continuation of the health crisis, and its effects on the economy and our lives, throughout most of 2021.

Associations remain hopeful for their economic future, despite suffering financially over the last two years.

Following a significant decrease in revenue between March and June 2020, over half of the associations surveyed are still dealing with falling revenues.

While half expect that revenue will be negatively impacted again this financial year (2021-22), largely as a result of not being able to hold major events, nearly a third remain optimistic that revenues will increase. Those expecting higher revenue believe it will come from an increase in membership or training and professional development income.

Positively, most associations remain confident about their economic future. Not surprisingly, associations based in NSW and Victoria have lower confidence about the prospects for economic recovery than those in other states and territories. However, with most restrictions having eased now, and internal borders opening, hopefully 2022 will bring the return of in-person major events across Australia.

Although there has been little impact on association staffing levels over the last 18 months, there have been significant job losses in some industries and professions.

A little under half of the associations surveyed indicated there had been no impact on employment in their association between July 2020 and the time of the survey. A quarter had grown their workforce over the same time period.

Positively, the withdrawal of JobKeeper, relied on by a majority of associations, had had no effect on staffing levels for nearly four in five respondents.

While most respondents indicated that there had been little impact on staffing levels within their associations, that was not necessarily the case for the industries they represent. Around 40% of respondents indicated that pandemic restrictions had led to job losses within their industry or profession, although there were also some sectors that experienced substantial job growth.

Despite the challenging times for most industries, many associations found their membership numbers increased over COVID-19.

While in 2020 many felt it was too early to tell what would happen to membership numbers, the reality of COVID-19 highlighted the pivotal role that associations play. Subsequently, the outlook over the next 12 months is more positive than it was last year. While a slightly larger proportion of respondents still believe it will be more difficult to attract and retain members, there has been an increase in those feeling it will be slightly easier in 2022.

Many noted that as the value of their advocacy role became more apparent, they had “proven our worth to our members”. Members became more supportive, and “membership increased ... as the value proposition became better known through advocacy.

Financially, associations also assisted members, offering discounts to members in hardship, or periods of free or discounted membership fees to support retention and acquisition.

The experience of 2020 made it easier for associations to conduct events online this year, albeit with some financial impacts.

The initial shock of COVID-19 forced many associations to cancel their in-person events in 2020, with only the most agile (or those with the longest lead times) able to move to online event delivery.

This year, with the experiences of 2020 behind them, a far higher proportion of associations were able to shift their annual event online in 2021. Despite the widespread and protracted lockdowns in Victoria and NSW, only a quarter of respondents reported cancelling their planned major event.

Despite this, many associations noted that cancelling and/or changing events from a face-to-face to virtual format incurred financial costs. Many associations lost revenue either from having to refund (wholly or in part) conference tickets. There was also “lower sponsor/partner revenue” and “lost sponsorship opportunities” and many were unable to recoup sunk costs.

However, in many instances costs for other expenses, such as travel, accommodation, and hospitality were reduced. This meant that for some associations there was “significant loss of revenue, but equally significantly reduced expenses”. In these cases, the overall impact of cancelled or changed events was far less than it otherwise may have been.

Despite difficulties maintaining engagement, virtual events were mostly deemed successful.

Most associations believe their virtual events have been successful. They are able to reach a wider audience than previously and many gained attendees and reach by moving online.

However, many respondents also reported that attendees are also starting to experience “zoom fatigue” and lamented the decreased ability for members to network effectively with others. This has led to some members being “disappointed” that they are “unable to truly connect and network with peers”. There have also been implications for staff, with the “upskilling to move to digital platforms” meaning an “increase in workload”.

Despite this, after nearly two years offering virtual conferences, most associations say they will convene ‘hybrid’ events in the future, with both in-person and virtual elements included.

Associations continued their intense advocacy for their industries, and increased their profiles in the media.

As a result of ongoing government mandated restrictions, the need for strong and effective advocacy became vital for the survival of many industries.

In the face of the challenges, associations drew on their strong government contacts to enact positive change, either by ensuring that their industry remained “open” during lockdowns by “bringing to light our members' roles in providing essential services” or obtaining “access to business support grants that were initially not available to members”.

There is little doubt that association efforts in advocacy to government benefitted their members, industries and professions during the last two years. Some spoke of “being very active in the areas of modernising business legislation” to assist their members, while others joined “working groups” to “provide guidance on managing the return to work of our membership/industry”.

Many also used the media to increase their profile and highlight the importance of the industry or profession they represent. This promotion and visibility in mainstream media has “showed our members the real purpose of their association”.

Conflicting challenges and prolonged increased demands on staff is leading to exhaustion.

Right now, associations are faced with conflicting challenges. They need to be able to balance the increasing demand for information and advocacy from members, with a need to maintain the wellbeing, engagement and productivity of their employees.

In an increasingly uncertain world, members are looking more to their associations for guidance and support. Government rules have not only differed between states, but also changed regularly, and this has placed additional demand on association employees, who are trying to “learn to take every day as it comes”, however as a result “morale is low, people are feeling drained and tired”

This extra pressure, coupled with the continued need to transition events, training and working methods to online, is leading to burnout and exhaustion for some association employees.

Associations are looking forward to the easing of restrictions and opening up of borders to provide needed relief for both members and employees alike.

Associations have become more innovative, and are looking to each other for additional ways to improve.

A majority (89%) of associations noted that they have become more innovative (89%) and efficient (75%) as a result of COVID-19. Investments in virtual tools and online learning systems led to “increased efficiencies” allowing staff to focus on important activities.

Board effectiveness has also improved for four in 10 associations, who believe their board is more effective at governing and leading their association than prior to COVID-19. A similar proportion have also been more willing to take risks in order to support members, although others are maintaining the status quo, preferring not to change their risk appetite.

Looking to the future, associations want to collaborate more with their peers for support and ideas on how to best assist their members and each other into the future. They want to “learn from other peak bodies about their cases in supporting members, reorienting their strategies, and renewing revenue through innovations” and would appreciate “good case studies ... about business planning or strategic goal reviews in light of COVID”.

They also called for “collective advocacy as we need to band together to make any impact” and to help “government to recognise the importance of events to business and the economy”.

Demonstrating value.

In the past two years associations have “stepped up” to support their members, although it has not been without significant challenges. As many have noted, members and non-members now realise the value of associations, and of membership.

These results show that associations have been able to weather the storm, and they are now on the way to setting themselves up for a brighter future.

Key Findings

1

Despite losing revenue over 2020-2021, a majority of associations are positive about the economic outlook for 2022.

Although 54% of associations reported lower revenue over 2020 and 2021, many associations have been continuing to grow, adapt and learn from their experiences. Thirty percent have seen revenue increase over the last 12 months. Over half (57%) now have a positive economic outlook, believing that they are in a strong position to not only help their industries, but to recover themselves.

2

While staffing levels have held up, COVID-19 has increased workloads and stress on association staff.

Despite three quarters of respondents receiving some form of JobKeeper payments, the withdrawal of financial support had little effect on staffing levels. However, the pandemic has significantly increased workloads. Demands for advocacy, information and support has increased, and the need to rearrange events has led to extra work for staff.

3

Associations played a pivotal role in advocacy and keeping members up to date, leading to increasing membership

Almost all associations had significantly increased their advocacy efforts over COVID-19, responding to members' need to have a strong voice representing their needs to government. This has improved the profile of many associations, and led to increased membership at 47% of associations as non-members began to appreciate the value of belonging.

4

Most associations believe virtual events have been successful, despite falling engagement.

While virtual events allow many more participants to attend, enhancing the reach and diversity of membership participation, the limited ability for informal networking in a virtual event leaves many dissatisfied, and events need to be much shorter to maintain engagement.

5

Associations have become more efficient, innovative and engaged with members.

The need to rapidly transition products and services to be 'fit for purpose' because of COVID-19 has seen many associations becoming more innovative and efficient. Two in five made investments in tools, products and services, with increased member engagement another key benefit of these investments.



Economic Outlook

Despite losing revenue over the last two years, a majority of associations are confident about their economic future.

Widespread lockdowns and restrictions were an ongoing feature of 2021, with resulting in continued impact on association revenues. Unsurprisingly, associations in New South Wales and Victoria are more likely to have experienced lower revenues than their other state counterparts.

Despite this, 57% of associations remain confident about their economic future. Many predict income from membership fees and professional development and training will increase, and some believe revenue from sponsorships will grow, in the 2021-22 financial year.

Fewer associations believe they, and the industries they represent, will be severely impacted by COVID-19 in 2022.

The COVID-19 impact survey conducted in 2020 occurred at a time when association’s were still unsure of the overall impact on their industries and associations. It was prior to membership renewal cycles or financial year end, and there was still great uncertainty about the future. Positively, 18 months later, with most associations having completed at least one membership renewal cycle, there is a much more optimistic outlook.

While there has been an increase in the proportion of respondents who feel that the national economy will be significantly impacted by COVID-19 next year (69%, up from 61%), there were quite substantial declines in the proportion who believe that their association or the profession or industry they represent will suffer adverse consequences from the pandemic.

Down from 57% in June 2020, only 44% of respondents believe that their industry will be impacted in some way by COVID-19. Similarly, down from 51% last year, only 37% of respondents believe their association will be impacted.

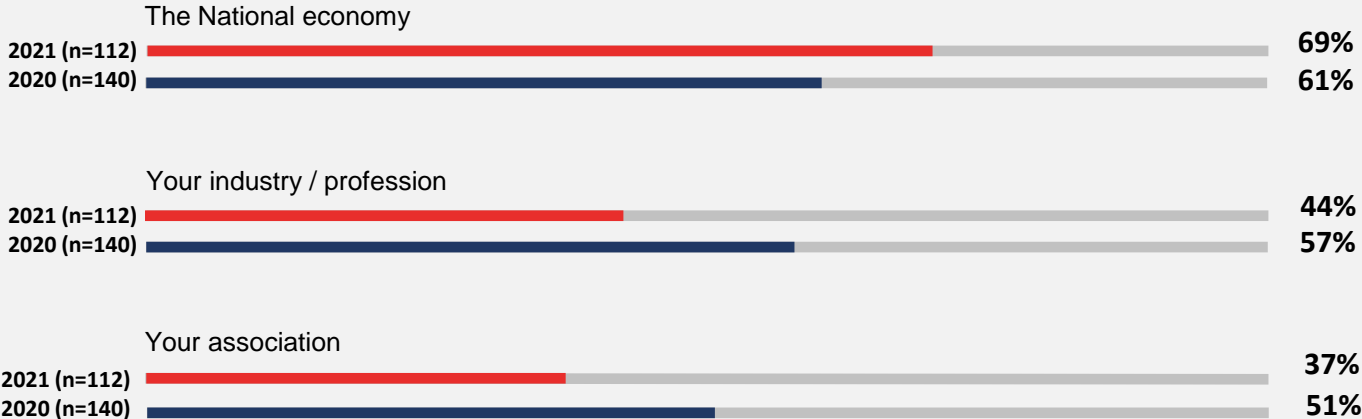
Of interest, the expectations on the potential impact of the pandemic on associations also differed markedly depending on their size. Around a third (32%) of associations with annual revenues of less than \$1 million expect to be significantly impacted by COVID-19 (down from 60% in 2020). This rises to 44% of associations with revenues of over \$5 million, up substantially from approximately a quarter in 2020.

Associations representing education (36%) or professional industries (33%) are generally less likely to anticipate a negative impact on their sector than those in health (47%) or construction (54%).



What level of impact do you think COVID-19 will have on?

% High / Very High



While financially the last twelve months was better than expected, half of responding associations reported lower revenues.

In June 2020, 78% of associations indicated they had experienced a fall in revenue in the period between March and June 2020 as a result of COVID-19.

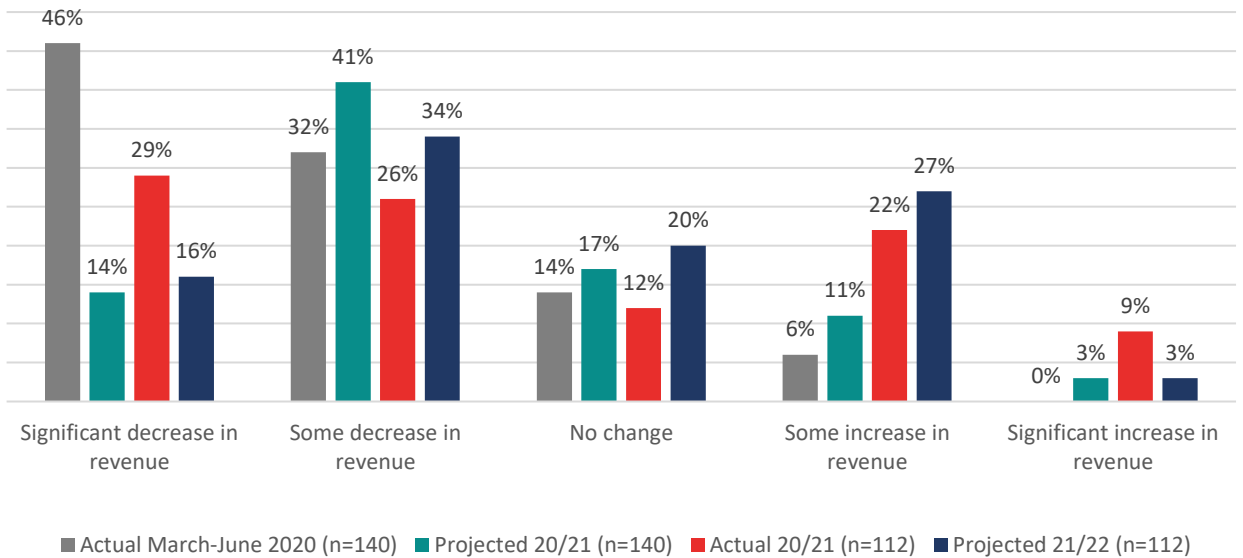
This reduced to around half (54%) for the 2020-21 financial year. Three in five associations indicated that they had lost up to 25% of their revenue, while a further 30% had lost between 25% and 50% of their projected revenue.

Positively, however, 31% of associations experienced an increase in revenue over the 2020-21 financial year. This is significantly higher than anticipated last year, when only 14% of associations projected that their revenues would increase over 2020-21. Of those who reported higher revenues, four in five indicated an increase of up to 25% in revenue.

Industry bodies (47%) and larger associations (44% of those with a revenue of over \$5million) are more likely to have reported an increase in revenue than professional associations (30%) and those with a revenue under \$1 million (32%). This is somewhat unsurprising, given that individuals are largely responsible for membership fees of professional associations, and many would have been impacted harder than the businesses they work for.

Higher revenues were also more likely to have been reported by associations based in states that were less impacted by COVID, with Victoria and NSW the most likely to record decreases in revenue.

Impact of COVID-19 on associations' revenue

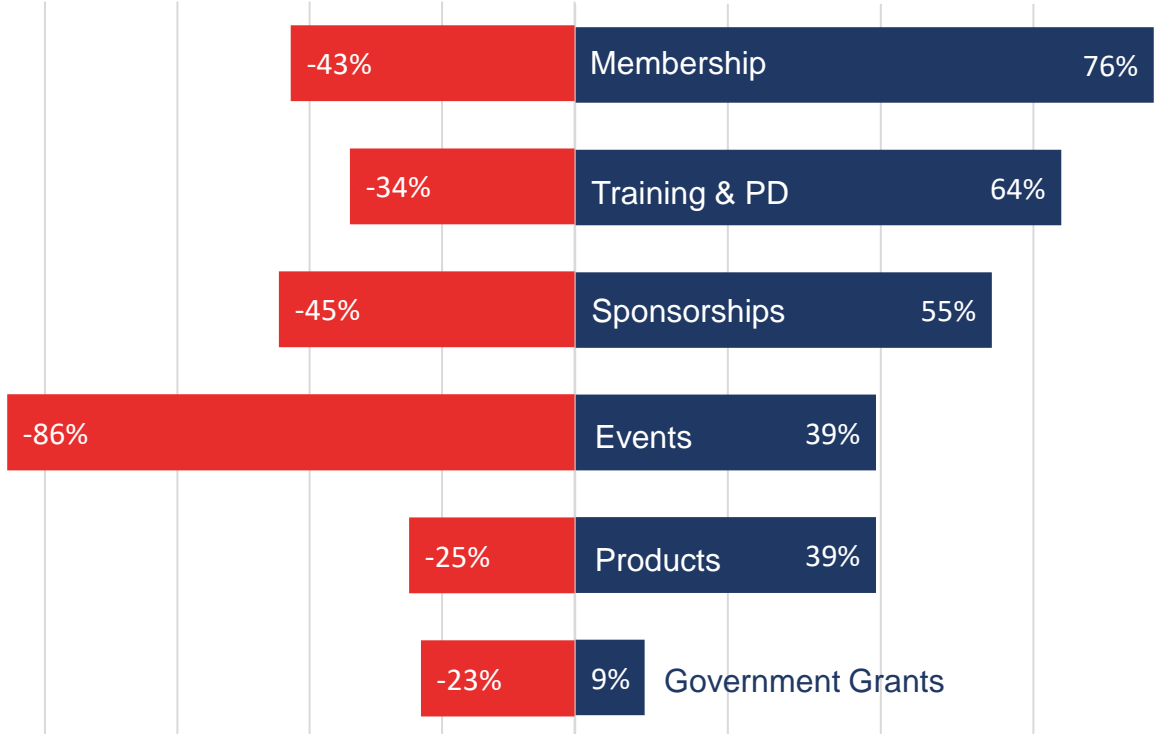


ACTUAL REVENUE IMPACT 2020 - 2021

	0%-10%	11%-25%	26%-50%	51%-75%	76%-100%
Revenue decreased	21%	39%	30%	5%	5%
Revenue increased	43%	37%	17%	0%	3%



In which areas do you expect your organisation's revenue to increase/decrease over the 2021-2022 financial year?



■ Associations expecting revenue to decrease (n=56)

■ Associations expecting revenue to increase (n=33)

Despite forecasting lower revenue, associations are maintaining a positive outlook.

Half of all responding associations expect their revenue will continue to decrease next year, with only three in ten expecting their revenue to increase. This is largely consistent across both professional associations and industry bodies.

Those who anticipate an increase in revenue over the 2021-22 financial year expect this will come from an increase in membership (76%) or training and professional development (64%). A little over half anticipate an increase in or return of sponsors and partnerships (55%).

Those forecasting reduced revenues expect it will largely be due to the continued impact to events, with 86% predicting lower income from conferences or other major events.

Fewer associations expect losses in 2021-22 from a loss of sponsors (45%) or decreased income from training and professional development (34%) compared to 2020-21 (56% and 49% respectively).

Despite expecting revenue impacts to continue in the 2021-22 financial year, when asked about their confidence in the overall economic outlook almost three in five responding associations (57%) feel some degree of optimism. Only one in eight (12%) are pessimistic about their economic future.

Unsurprisingly, those in the states that were subjected to more frequent and extended lockdown conditions are generally less likely to be confident. Fifty three percent (53%) of those in Victoria and NSW are confident about their economic outlook over the next 12 months, compared to 69% of those in other states.

2022 ECONOMIC OUTLOOK



Expect revenue to decrease

50%



Expect no change to revenue

20%



Expect revenue to increase

30%

Over half (57%) of the associations surveyed are confident about the economic outlook for their associations over the next 12 months.





“COVID has had a devastating impact on the sector we represent; however, it has been an opportunity to show the need for a well resourced, connected and influential advocate for the sector...”

James Goodwin, CEO, Australian Airports Association



Employment

Maintaining a productive and motivated workforce during times of uncertainty and increased workload.

In an increasingly uncertain world, members are looking more to their associations for guidance and support. With government rules not only differing between states, but also changing quite regularly, this has placed a lot of demand on association employees.

As a result, right now, associations are faced with conflicting challenges. They need to be able to balance the increasing demand for information and advocacy from their members with tighter finances and the need to maintain the wellbeing, engagement and productivity of their employees.

While associations have managed to withstand the financial pressures and maintain most of their staff, this additional pressure, coupled with needing to transition events, training and working methods to online, is leading to burnout and exhaustion among some association employees.



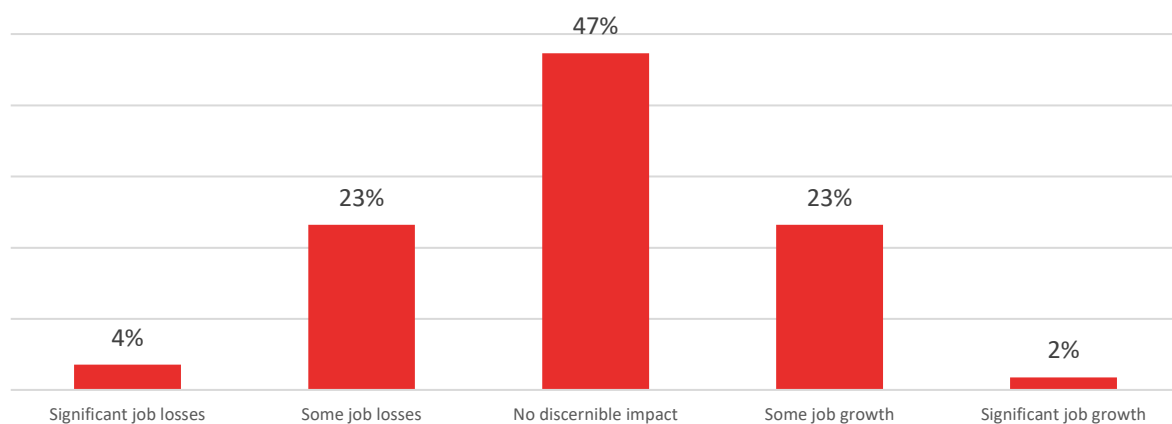
Most associations have been able to retain their staff during the pandemic.

A little under half of the associations surveyed (47%) indicated there had been no impact on employment in their association between July 2020 and the time of this survey (September 2021). The remaining respondents were split between those that had increased their workforce (25%) and those that had lost staff (27%).

Of those who had experienced a change in employment, staffing levels have changed by an average of 4 employees (either up or down) over the same time period.

Job losses were most likely to have occurred in mid-sized associations, with 22% employing between 11 and 25 employees in July 2020 compared to 16% now. Conversely, 16% of associations employed between 6 and 10 staff in July 2020, up to 21% now.

What has been the impact on employment in your association since July 2020?



n=112

	0-5 employees	6-10 employees	11-25 employees	26-50 employees	51 or more employees
Employed BEFORE the pandemic	40%	16%	22%	16%	5%
Employed NOW	40%	21%	16%	18%	5%

The withdrawal of JobKeeper payments had no effect on staffing levels.

On 30 March 2020, the Federal Government announced the introduction of the JobKeeper payment scheme. This scheme was a wage subsidy paid by the Government to businesses significantly impacted by COVID-19. JobKeeper was available to eligible businesses and not-for-profits until 28 March 2021. The initial subsidies were \$1,500 per eligible employee per fortnight. This amount was slowly lowered from September 2020 until it was phased out in March 2021.

Of the associations surveyed in September 2021, nearly half were able to claim Job Keeper for all their staff (45%) and one in three received the payment for some (29%) of their employees. Approximately a quarter (23%) did not receive any JobKeeper payments.

Associations with both individual and organisational members (75%) were significantly more likely to receive JobKeeper payments for all of their staff than either industry bodies (47%) or professional associations (26%).

Positively, even though three-quarters of respondents had received some form of JobKeeper payments when it was available, the majority indicated that the withdrawal of JobKeeper payments had no effect on their staffing levels.

This suggests that the JobKeeper payments provided enough financial support to associations to allow them to cover costs until they either found a new way of generating revenue or could return to normal activities and again cover their own costs.

JOBKEEPER



45%

Of respondents received JobKeeper for ALL of their staff



29%

Of respondents received JobKeeper for SOME of their staff



79%

The withdrawal of JobKeeper had no effect on staffing levels at 79% of responding associations.

While staffing levels held up, COVID-19 led to increased workloads, and often increased stress, for association staff.

Keeping members informed and up to date about the ever-changing regulations, more intense and immediate advocacy requirements and re-arranging events saw associations busier than ever.

Scheduled face-to-face events needed to be cancelled, rescheduled or converted to an online format, leading to “stress on the team having to do so much extra work: moving the event, going virtual, trying to keep sponsors and participants.”

Advocacy efforts also intensified as staff were lobbying government for “changes to restrictions as a result of COVID lockdowns” or to ensure their profession remained an “essential service”.

For many associations, advocacy efforts were made harder because of the different rules in place for each state. Being seen as an essential service in one state did not guarantee it would be so for another.

Similarly, restrictions and regulations were also different in each state, which meant that any communication which went out to members needed to be tailored to ensure it was “state specific”, which led to “double the workload” for some employees.

Associations are working hard to maintain employee wellbeing.

Association employees have, and continue to, work very hard to ensure members are kept up to date on all changes and relevant information. The “workload is tiring without getting ahead” and the strain is being felt as “business-as-usual became a constant state of disruption and responsiveness.”

Countless research papers conducted over the last two years have shown that many businesses worked hard to maintain employee wellbeing, motivation and engagement while staff were working from home. It was no different for associations.

Comments throughout the survey spoke about providing “mental health and wellbeing support” to employees and members to help manage not only impacts of COVID-19, but also “...the other natural disasters happening in recent years all over Australia.”

COVID-19 increased association workloads through a combination of intensified advocacy, rearranged events, and expanded member communication and support services.





Membership

Despite the significant economic impact of COVID-19, membership numbers continue to climb.

While last year many associations felt it was too early to predict the impact on membership growth, the prolonged reality of COVID-19 has highlighted the fundamental role that associations play. As a result, many associations reported membership growth over the 12 months to June 2021.

A majority also reported an increased demand for services, with webinars, information updates and online professional development and virtual events among the services that associations have been offering digitally to compensate for the inability to hold in-person gatherings.

Positively, the increased visibility of associations' support for their industries has led many to believe it will also be slightly easier to attract and retain members throughout 2022.

Greater recognition of the importance of associations has driven an increase in membership over 2021.

A little under half of the associations surveyed (47%) indicated membership numbers had increased in the 2020-21 financial year. This is a much more positive outcome than anticipated in June last year when only 22% of associations surveyed expected it would be easier to attract new members.

A little over a quarter (26%) of associations experienced a decrease in membership over this time. A similar proportion (27%) say membership numbers have not changed over the 12 months to June 2021.

Growth in membership tended to increase with the size of the association, ranging from 32% for those with a turnover of less than \$1 million, to 74% of those with a turnover of over \$5 million.

In order to support member acquisition and retention over the pandemic, three in ten associations offered discounts to members in financial hardship (31%). A further 18% offered discounted membership across the board, or a period of free membership (17%).

Associations with both individual and organisational members were the most likely to have provided a period of free membership (39%).

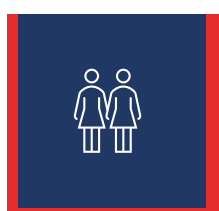
Consistent with 2020, around a quarter (24%) did not adopt any particular strategy for retaining or acquiring members.

Expectations for member attraction and retention are more positive than earlier in the pandemic.

One in four associations (25%) believe it will be easier to retain members over the next 12 months. This is highest among industry bodies, at 42%. Remaining associations are equally split in the belief that it will be either harder to retain members (38%), or there will be no change in retention (37%) than at present. This is much more positive than in 2020, when 57% of associations believed it would be harder to retain members.

Similarly, more associations believe it will be easier to attract new members over the next 12 months than last year, (33% compared to 22%). Despite this, two in five still believe recruiting new members will be more difficult over the next 12 months – although this is down from 53% last year.

Impact Of COVID-19 On Membership in the 12 Months to June 2021



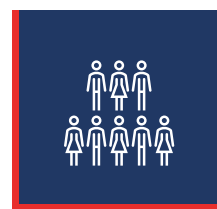
26%

Decrease in Membership



27%

No Change in Membership



47%

Increase in Membership

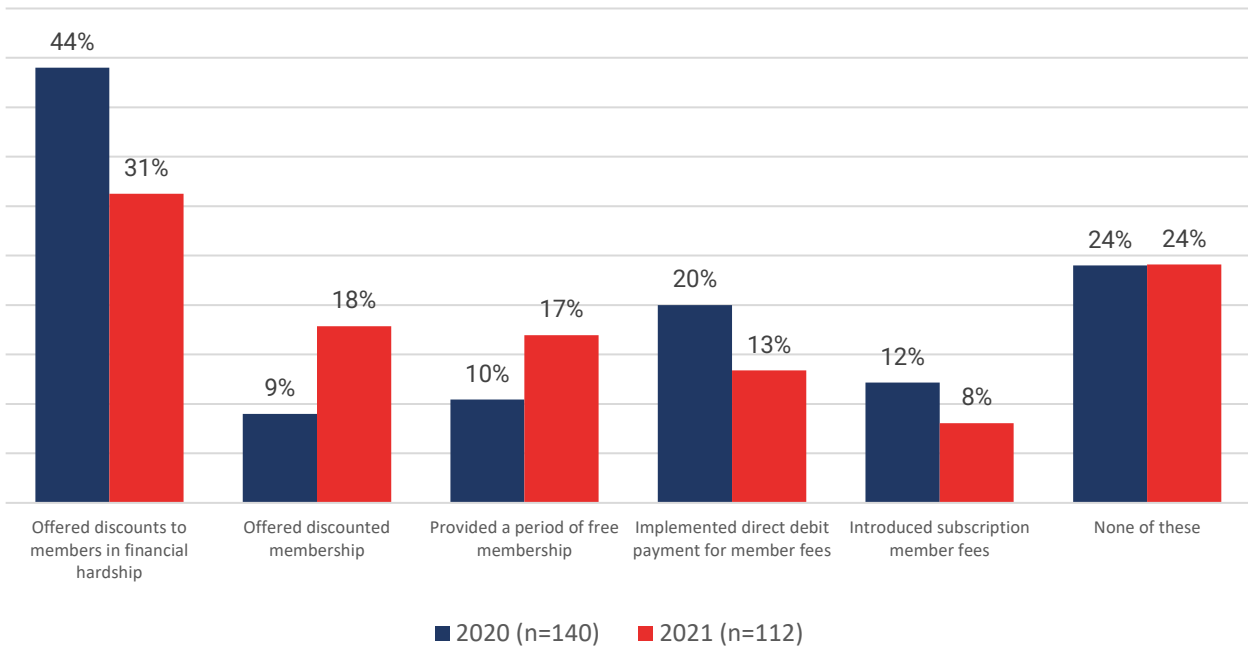
		More Difficult	No impact	Easier
Retain existing members	2021 (n=112)	38%	37%	25%
	2020 (n=140)	57%	21%	15%
Attract new members	2021 (n=112)	40%	24%	33%
	2020 (n=140)	53%	16%	22%



Discounted membership, particularly for those in financial hardship, was a key strategy employed by associations to support member acquisition and retention.



What strategies have you adopted to support member acquisition and retention as a result of the continuing impacts of covid-19?





“As an association, it has proven our worth to our members, especially the younger generation who we were seeing a lot of churn, they now understand the role of policy and advocacy and the importance to have an association fighting their corner. We grew our membership last year and we improved our retention rates too.”

Marissa Hankinson, COO, Master Builders SA

As a result of COVID-19, associations have seen a rise in demand for online services, information and advocacy.

With restrictions making face-to-face events almost impossible for many associations across Australia, professional development and networking opportunities had to be restructured for delivery in a different format.

As a result, nearly nine in 10 respondents (86%) note there has been an increased demand for webinars. In addition, around two in three indicate there has been increased demand for online professional development (68%) and online conferences (66%).

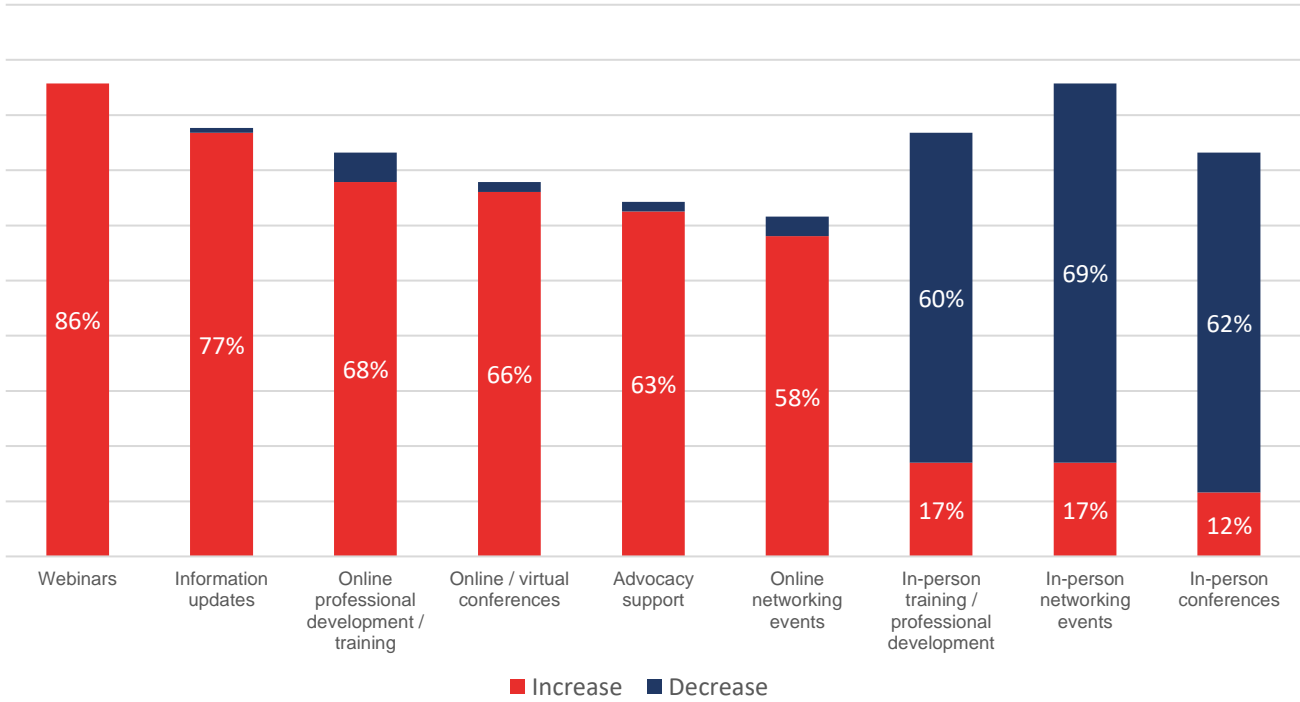
A further 58% note that their members want more online networking opportunities.

Members also want associations to provide more information (77%) and advocacy (63%) to help navigate the many government regulations and changes.

Unsurprisingly, there has been a considerable drop in demand for in-person networking (69%), conferences (62%) and professional development (60%).

Interestingly, associations representing members in professional services were significantly less likely to see increased demand from members for more information updates (50%). Similarly, only 29% of associations representing the building or construction industries indicate that their members want more online conferences.

MEMBER SERVICE DEMAND





HOW ASSOCIATIONS HAVE SUPPORTED MEMBERS THROUGH COVID-19.

1

Virtual events and education

One of the biggest changes in member engagement since the start of the pandemic has been a reduction in face-to-face connection, with a corresponding shift to online communication, education and engagement with members. As a result, surveyed associations spoke about moving their usual training and education courses online to ensure that members still have the chance to connect with others in their profession. Some also indicated they have supplemented their usual training with additional topics of relevance, offering “webinars on a wider range of topics including mental health and general well-being”.


Of interest, however, there were many comments suggesting that associations are noticing “member engagement in online events has reduced over time - likely due to online fatigue.”

2

Keeping members up to date

In an increasingly uncertain world, members are turning to their associations more often for guidance and support interpreting government regulations. Comments that “we’ve been providing regular updates about government rules and changes, in some cases daily” were frequent. Some associations have also taken the communication and connection with their members even further. One association mentioned they had been making “personal member outreach phone calls to members in impacted areas”, while others had set up call centres to provide support to members.

Positively, comments also suggest this has led to “much higher engagement with almost every member - even those we never hear from.” One respondent noted that their members had become so much more engaged they had actively encouraged non-members to join.



Member engagement has largely increased since the start of COVID-19, with associations providing increased information, advocacy and online services to meet demand.

3

Increased advocacy to government

Many associations indicated they increased their advocacy efforts to government during COVID-19. For some, this included “advocating for the industry as an essential service”. For others, it was “advocacy about how restrictions and lockdowns affect members - state by state”.

As a result of their advocacy work, associations have increased their support, providing “up to date information, representation of important issues, daily up dates from jurisdictional departments ...”. Again, there have been positive outcomes from this work with some noting that “members have engaged more frequently with the additional comms going out about restrictions impacting our industry”.

4

Business and other support

Additionally, a number of associations indicated that they have focused on providing business or other support over this time. This includes providing assistance with “professional support and mentoring services”, “leveraging partners for member benefits and discounts”, “talent pipeline development” and “provision of IR/employment advice”.

Other associations indicated that they have tried to make things easier for their members by building out more resources, providing “templates, guides, HR support, industry updates” on their website, and providing “... resources relating to how to manage risks of working remotely and “complimentary webinars on responding to the pandemic”.



"Our advocacy has resulted in changes to restrictions during periods of lockdown that have enabled members to return to work earlier than otherwise expected. It has also provided access to business support grants that were initially not available to members and helped members to navigate some of the complex rules that have resulted from lockdowns (i.e., cross-border bubbles)."

Matthew Hopcraft, CEO, ADA VIC



Events

The experiences of 2020 enabled associations to be better prepared to hold events online in 2021.

The initial shock of COVID-19 led to many associations cancelling their events, with only the most agile (or those with the longest lead times) able to restructure these into successful virtual events.

Positively, moving conferences online in 2020 and 2021 showed that virtual events could reach a broader audience, with people who were traditionally unable to attend in-person conferences (either due to location, timing or costs) now able to take part.

However, there was also an element of “zoom fatigue” and a sense that online events decreased the ability to network effectively with others.

Conferences were more likely to have been converted to an online event than cancelled in 2021.

In 2020, over two in five (44%) associations cancelled their annual events, while a further 34% converted their major conference or meeting to a virtual event.

By contrast, in 2021, despite widespread and protracted lockdowns in Victoria and New South Wales in 2021, only one in four associations (24%) had to cancel their annual event.

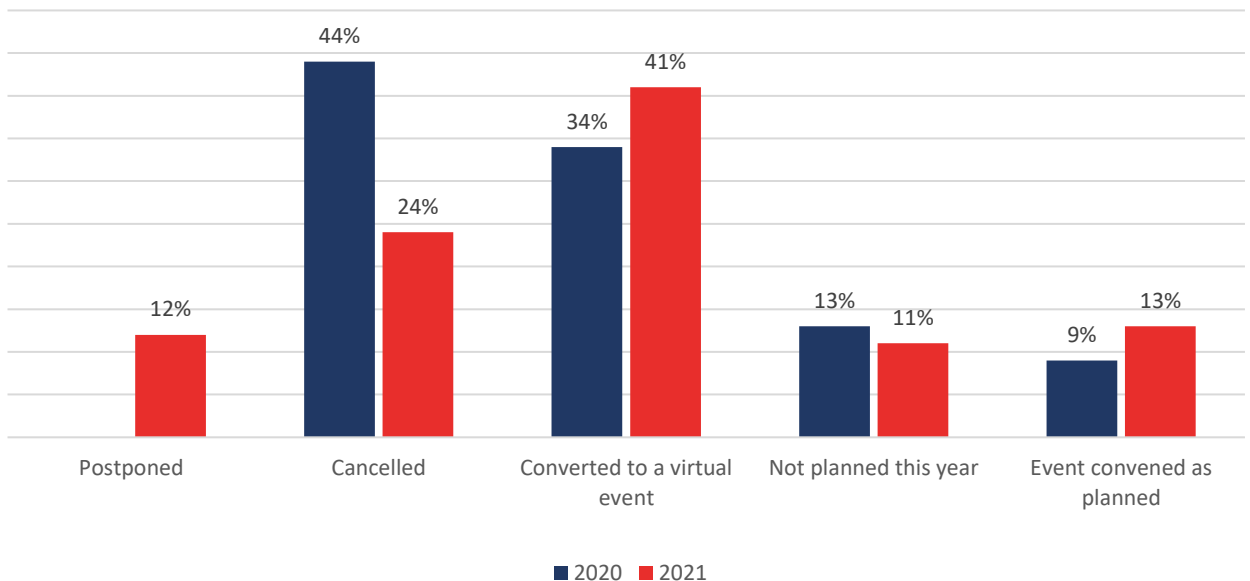
Further, and possibly due to having expanded their virtual expertise over the past year, a higher proportion of associations were able to convert their annual conference from face to face to online (41%).

At the time of this survey, 12% of respondents were still unsure whether their 2021 event would be able to run as planned.

Positively, 13% of associations were able to run their event as planned.



Have you cancelled or rearranged your associations' conference or major event in 2021?



Despite many moving events online, a quarter of associations lost revenue due to event cancellation or restructure.

A little over two in five associations (44%) lost revenue when cancelling or rearranging events, however they had been able to recover their costs. Around three in 10 associations (31%) lost revenue, and were unable to recoup the costs they incurred.

Almost all associations lost revenue due to having to refund attendance fees (either in part or in whole). Where cancellations were required with short notice, additional losses included being unable to recoup the costs of venue hire.

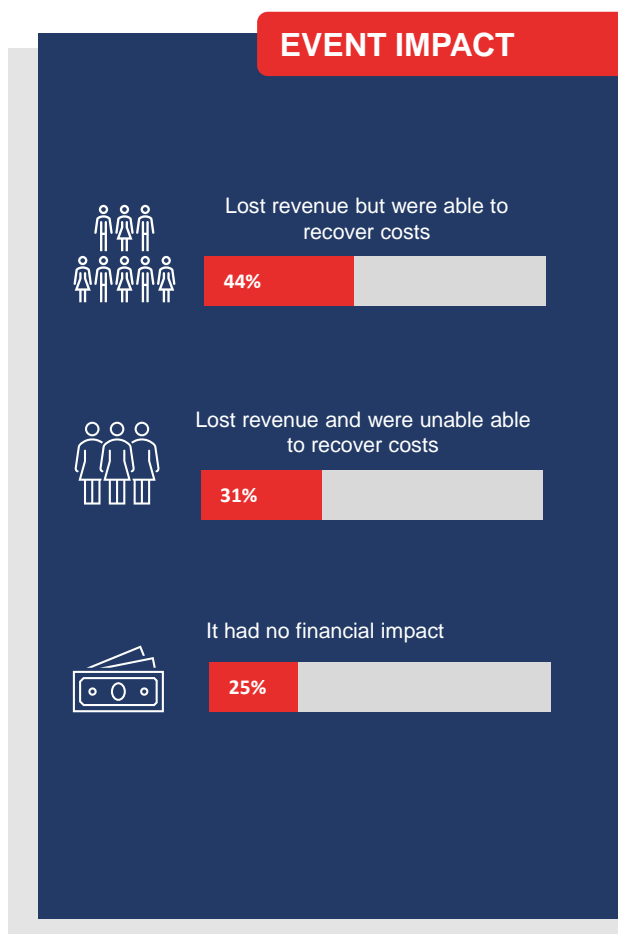
However, in many instances other expenses, such as travel, accommodation, and hospitality were reduced. This meant that the overall impact of cancelled or changed events was far less than it otherwise may have been.

On average, associations lost around 23% of their annual revenue due to cancelling or rearranging their events.

A little under half (47%) lost 10% or less —including 12% who lost no revenue. A further 40% lost up to a quarter (20%) or half (22%) of their revenue.

Queensland based associations were the least likely to have lost revenue, with an average loss of 9% of their revenue due to event changes.

One quarter indicated that there had been no financial impact on their association due to event cancellations. Comments suggests that this was largely due to a balance of “significant loss of revenue but equally significant reduced expenses” due to not having to pay for some higher cost elements including travel, food or venue hire.



Proportion of annual revenue lost due to event cancellation or re-arrangement.

0%	1-10%	11-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%
12%	35%	20%	22%	5%	6%



Associations were able to reach a broader audience with online events.

Moving conferences online in 2020 and 2021 highlighted that virtual events enabled associations to reach a wider audience than ever before, with people who were traditionally unable to attend in-person conferences now able to attend.

“Has enabled our global members to attend more events due to online or hybrid format. Has increased our audience size. Has made us think differently about event delivery to ensure a positive online delegate experience.”

“By going online and reducing the registration fees were able to attract an increase in international attendees that would not normally be able to attend a face-to-face event.”

“We gained attendees and reach by moving online”

Virtual events are less effective for networking, and online fatigue is increasing.

Others commented on how it is hard for sponsors and attendees to engage with online events, and they generally have fewer attendees to online events. Many associate the decreased attendance with a mixture of “zoom fatigue” and a “preference for face to face”.

“Decreased the ability to engage with and deliver sponsor value”

“Lost engagement opportunity with members”



While online events provide access to a wider audience, one of the biggest impacts of cancelling or changing events was an increased workload for staff.

Uncertainty around events created stress for association staff.

However, while there are benefits there are also additional non-financial costs associated with moving events online. Respondents indicate that one of the biggest impacts of event changes is the increased workload associated with “processing refunds”, “reorganising events” and communicating with attendees, sponsors and venues.

“Stress on the team having to do so much extra work: moving the event, going virtual, trying to keep sponsors and participants. And the event is just not the same for participants, sponsors & exhibitors all around.”

“Double workload. Disappointing for committee and delegates. Decreased engagement and virtual fatigue”

“In addition to the financial impact it was the significant time spent by staff organising, reorganising and cancelling the conference”.

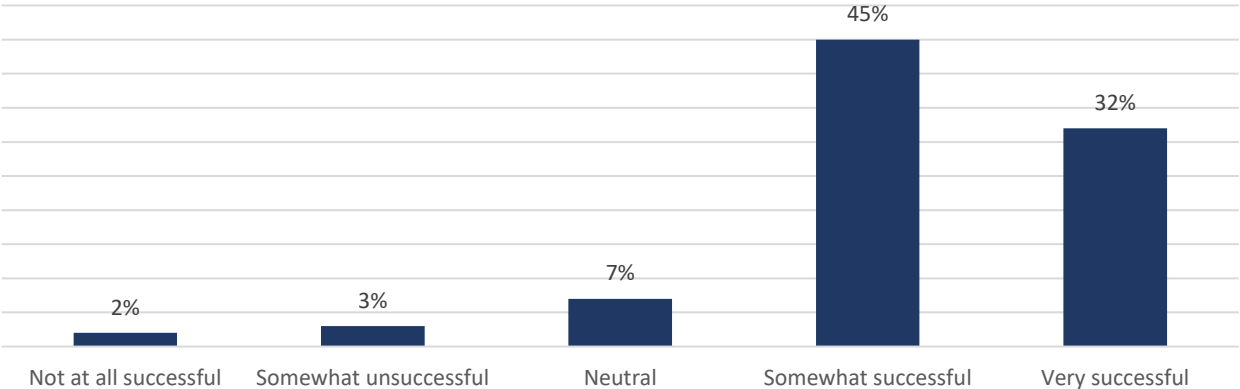
Virtual events were largely seen as successful, despite the additional workload and decrease in engagement resulting from the move to online.

Of those respondents who had run virtual events in either 2020 or 2021, over three-quarters felt these were successful (77%).

Despite this, many respondents note that attendees and sponsors are less engaged with online events. In addition, moving conferences online requires significant additional work for many association.

This suggests that the overall success of virtual events may be mixed. While they provide “greater access for those who can't travel”, and enabled “broader participation” there were “lost sponsorship opportunities” and “increased workload and costs”.

How successful would you say your virtual event or conference was?



77%
believe their online events were somewhat or very successful





“In 2020, we planned a face-to-face conference and converted to online. This required us to invest in an online event platform, completely re-work our program to suit an online format and change our social activities to those suited to an online format... It was a lot of additional work but resulted in a successful online conference. In 2021, we planned for a hybrid conference so that we were prepared and had all infrastructure and support ready ...This was a good decision, as only four weeks prior restrictions came into effect, and we had to go online...”

Susan Davidson, CEO
Australian Diabetes Educators Association



While confidence that future events will be able to be face-to-face is high, most associations think events will continue to be run as a combination of in-person and virtual formats.

At the time of the survey around two-thirds of respondents (67%) were confident that their association will be able to hold a face-to-face conference or major event in 2022. With the double vaccinations rates increasing around Australia every day, this is looking more and more promising every week.

Less than one in five (18%) have lower confidence, with 5% of associations indicating they have no events planned for 2022 at this stage.

Despite this, two thirds of associations expect that their major conference or event will be a hybrid face to face and online event in 2022. Nearly one in five expect it will be a face to face only event, while 4% expect to convene their major conference online only next year.

2022 EVENT EXPECTATIONS



64%

Of associations expect that their major conference or event will be a hybrid face-to-face and online event in 2022.



18%

Of associations expect that their major conference will be face-to-face only in 2022.



4%

Of associations expect that their major conference or event will be virtual only in 2022.



Advocacy

Associations drew on strong government contacts to lobby for their industries and professions throughout COVID-19.

Associations have worked hard to advocate for their industries over the last 18 months. They have lobbied to ensure they can remain open during the pandemic, or worked to obtain financial concessions to help keep the industry afloat during lockdowns. And, as noted earlier, it appears their efforts have paid off, with many seeing an increase in membership this year,

As well as 'behind the scenes' advocacy to government, many associations were called on to speak in the media. This further enhanced the profile of associations, as the increased coverage highlighted the relevance and importance of the industries they represent.

A majority of associations reported that their advocacy on behalf of their profession increased over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For many associations, COVID-19 saw an increase in their advocacy efforts (65%), with three in ten (29%) significantly increasing their advocacy efforts.

Increased advocacy was particularly evident within building and construction industry associations. By contrast, only 38% of those representing professional and scientific industries had increased their advocacy efforts.

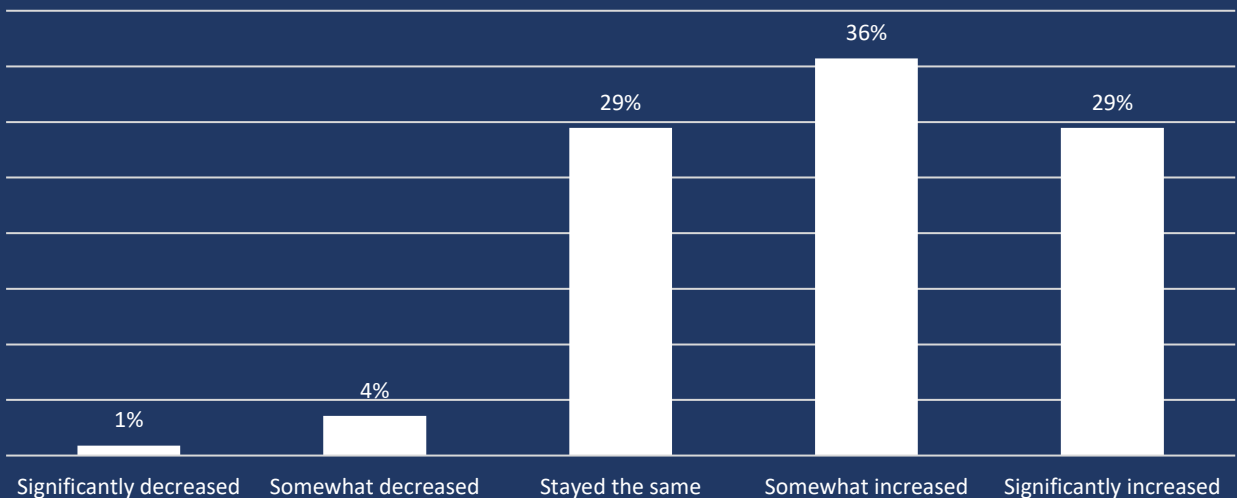
Positively, over three in five associations (62%) believe that they have, and maintain, strong government contacts they can use to influence policy outcomes in their favour.

This was significantly higher for larger associations, at almost nine in ten (89%) of associations with a turnover of over \$5million.

In general, industry bodies (75%) and associations representing the building and construction sector (86%) were more likely to feel this was the case than were professional associations (59%) or those representing people in professional and scientific industries (46%).

ADVOCACY

Would you say that the advocacy activity your association has undertaken as a result of the pandemic has:



In general, larger associations were more likely to have been called on to speak to media about the impacts of COVID-19 on their industry or profession – potentially giving them a stronger voice.

Over half of respondents (52%) indicated that their association has been called on to speak to media about the impacts of COVID-19 on their industry or profession at some point. One in five (19%) had often done so.

The likelihood of having spoken to media tended to increase with association size, with associations with a turnover of less than \$1 million least likely to have spoken to media (32%). This compares with 52% of those with a turnover between \$1 million and \$5 million, and 78% of those with a turnover of over \$5 million per annum.

MEDIA ENGAGEMENT



Have not been involved in media reports about the industry

46%



Have occasionally spoken to the media

33%



Have often been interviewed by the media

19%

52%

Indicate that their association has been called on to talk to the media about the impact of COVID-19 on their industry or profession.



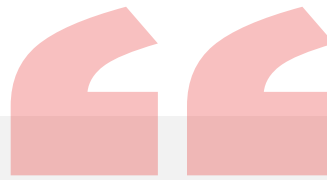
Advocacy has been particularly effective at helping industries navigate COVID-19 lockdown rules.

Around three in five associations (63%) feel that their advocacy efforts during COVID-19 have been effective. Associations based in Victoria, the most impacted state, are significantly more likely than others to feel that their efforts are effective (79%).

Ratings of effectiveness also increase with association size, with only 39% of associations with a turnover of less than \$1 million believing they are effective, compared with 65% of those with a turnover between \$1 million and \$5 million and 85% of those with a turnover of over \$5 million.

Most commonly, associations feel that their advocacy efforts “provided a voice” for their industry or profession. They supported members by ensuring that industries were included on the “essential worker” lists, or by helping to explain lockdown rules to their members.

The few associations who indicated their efforts were not as effective believe that the pandemic has overtaken the usual advocacy issues, meaning other topics are less urgent to government.



“Intervening early in the pandemic to allow click and collect to operate during Victoria’s extended lockdown.”

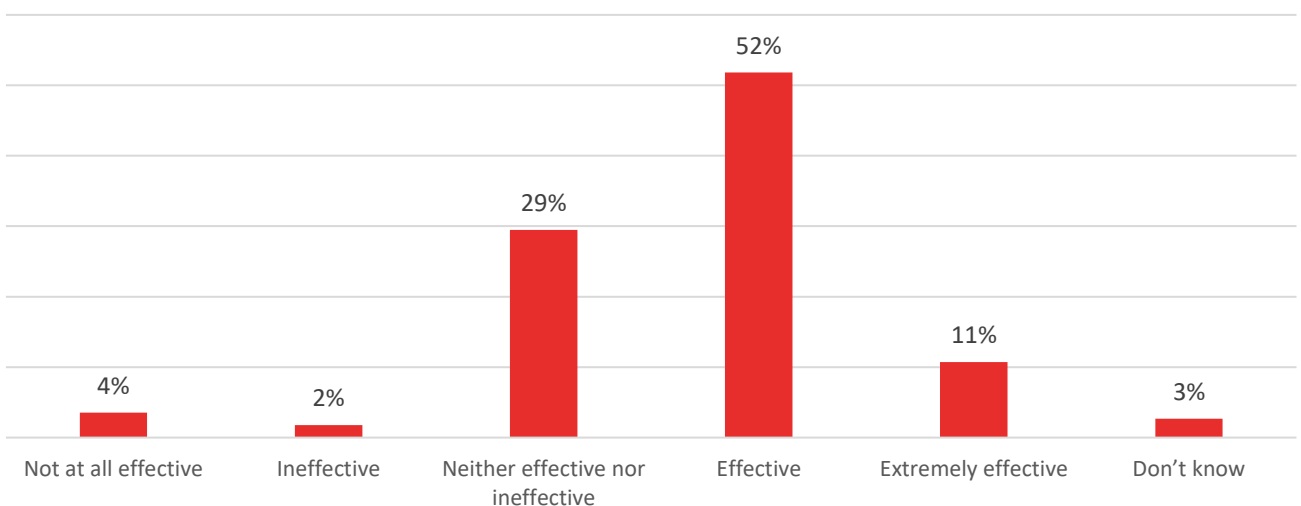
“Keeping our industry open during lockdowns. Getting telehealth rebates approved to ensure they can still offer these services affordably. Achieving status of ‘essential service’. Including our profession within the eligibility criteria for Government support funding.”

“Bringing to light our members’ roles in providing essential services. And identifying the important ways in which customers are supported.”

“...getting government to understand the impact on the public and the economy of not allowing our members to operate, and in so doing achieving some concessions during successive lockdowns...”

“In NSW we were able to get into some key meetings with the government to ensure our members were supported through the most recent Delta lockdowns ...”

How effective has your association’s advocacy efforts been during COVID-19?





Investing in a brighter future

Although associations still face a number of challenges, many are more efficient and innovative, and have made investments that will provide value for many years to come.

There is no doubt COVID-19 has significantly impacted on almost every element of an association's role. However, it has also made them more agile, more efficient, and more innovative as they have navigated the rapid transition to online service delivery, managed increased demand for information and intensified advocacy activities to ensure the industries or professions they represent are as well equipped as they can be to withstand the effects of the pandemic.

Moving into 2022, with vaccination rates in Australia high, an easing of border restrictions imminent and the ability to come together in greater numbers once again allowed, associations will be able to capitalise on their experiences and investments.

Having survived the greatest economic and health crisis of a lifetime, associations have more than proved their worth to members, government and industries.

And, as these results show, they will remain strong and relevant long into the future.

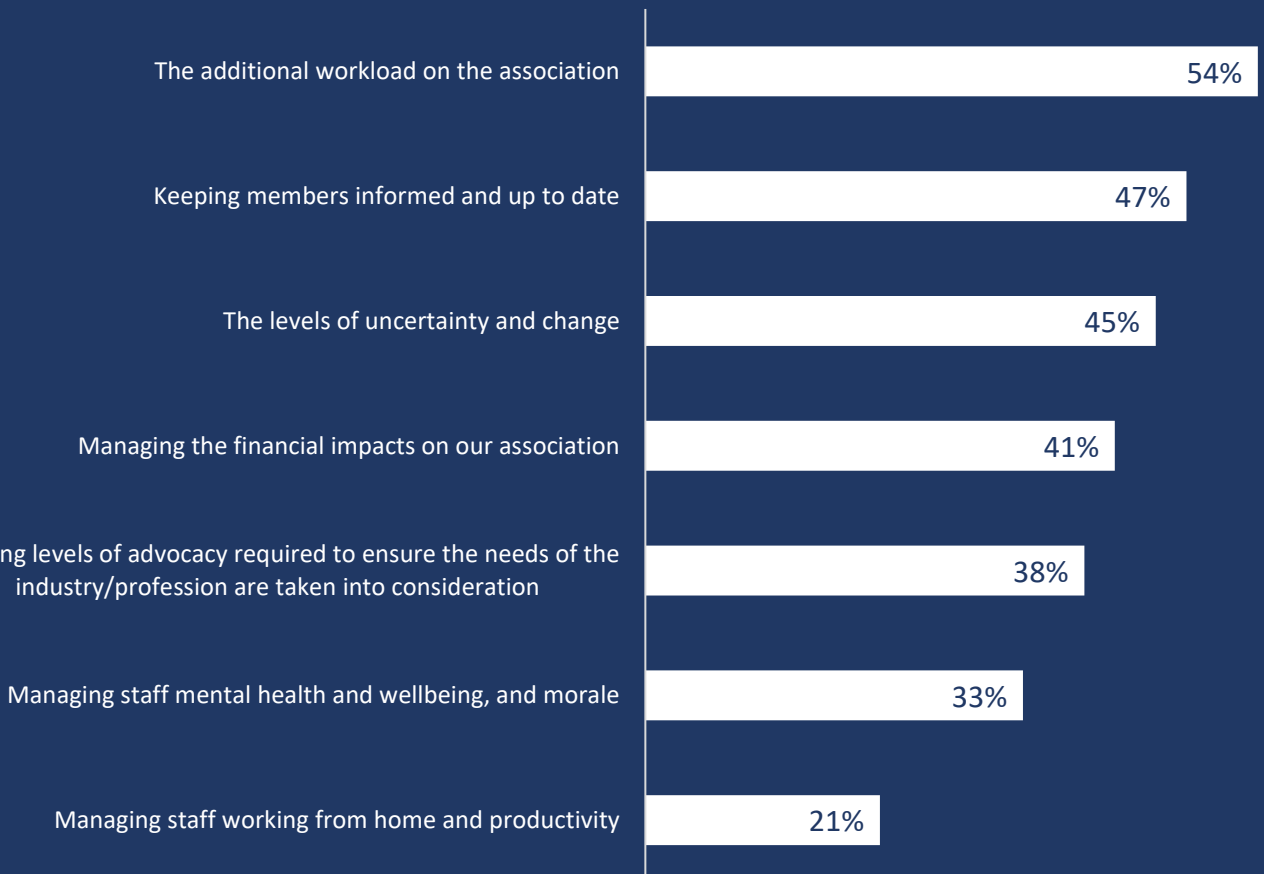
Keeping up with the additional workload caused by the pandemic is the most challenging aspect of dealing with the impact of COVID-19 for associations.

In 2020 we asked associations to identify the factors that had made the biggest impact on them as a result of COVID-19. Inability to provide their usual services face to face, keeping up with demand for information and managing declining income and cash flow shortages were most challenging at that time.

Now, 18 months on, the ongoing challenges largely relate to additional workloads, with over half indicating this is one of the most challenging aspects of dealing with COVID-19. Keeping members up to date (47%), enduring the high level of uncertainty and change (45%) and managing the financial impact of the pandemic on their association (41%) also challenging for over two in five associations.

Staff management issues are also having some impact, with 33% concerned about the need to manage staff mental health, wellbeing and morale and 21% finding it challenging to manage the productivity of staff working from home.

MOST CHALLENGING ASPECTS OF DEALING WITH THE IMPACT OF COVID-19





“(COVID) took away the ability for the association to strategically forward plan. Business-as-usual became a constant state of disruption and responsiveness to covid changes (trading restrictions, lockdowns etc.) taking time away from strategic thinking...”

Joanne Phillips, Director, Member Services,
Australian Retailers Association



While 43% of the associations surveyed reduced their spending to help deal with the continuing effects of the pandemic, the same proportion also made investments in tools, products or services.

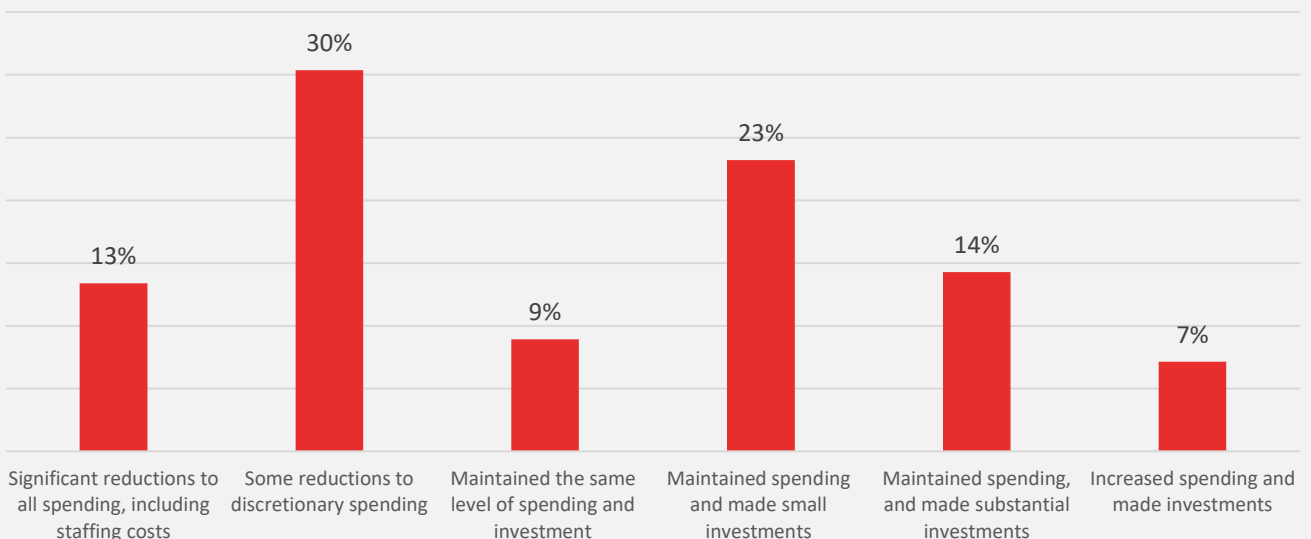
To deal with the challenges of the pandemic, around two in five associations (43%) reduced their spending. Most of these had only reduced discretionary costs, but 13% indicated a need to reduce staffing costs as well.

Similar proportions (46%) were able to maintain their spending while also making some investments in tools, products and services.

Around one-quarter made small investments in tools or products to assist their association and members. One in seven (14%) made substantial investments.

Only 7% of responding associations indicated that they increased their overall spending, as well as making investments in new products.

Strategies adopted to deal with the continuing effects of the pandemic



Of those association who had made improvements or investments during this time, most had invested in virtual tools to connect with their members (70%). While generally lower in cost, virtual tools support the core services provided by associations, including important information sharing, networking and general communication with members.

Over half of associations have also implemented online learning and professional development systems (57%), which often require a much heavier financial investment. However, these investments provided “more world-leading professional development opportunities, accessible anywhere and anytime”.

A lower proportion of respondents indicated that they had invested in online membership renewal (38%), e-commerce (30%), or member only sections of their website (26%). These lower numbers may indicate that associations have already implemented these types of products prior to COVID-19, thereby reducing the need for further investments.

However, they may also reflect the fact that these aspects are costly to implement and may not provide value commensurate to the investment at the moment.

INVESTMENTS



70% Virtual tools to connect with members



57% Online learning systems



38% Online membership renewal



30% E-commerce



26% Member only section on the website



26% New CRM system



25% Board portal

To deal with the new environment, associations have invested in virtual tools and online learning platforms to help connect with and educate their members during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Increased member engagement has been one of the key benefits of the investments made in new tools, products and services over the last 18 months.

When asked to detail the advantages or benefits of the tools they had deployed, many respondents said it had improved engagement with their members.

Comments that they had “enabled ongoing and greater engagement with a wider number of members” and provided “a higher level of anywhere-anytime engagement” were common.

Respondents spoke about how their investments “increase engagement” with existing members through a combination of increased information, advocacy and professional development.

In addition, with investment in technology they are now able to reach and engage with a “broader” audience than ever before.

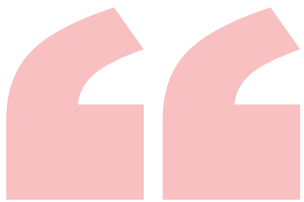
Often, members have been so impressed with their associations’ efforts that they have been expounding benefits to non-members. Subsequently, not only have associations been able to “raise their profile” they have also been able to “increase reach into the profession beyond members”.

Three quarters of respondents believe COVID-19 driven investments have also made them more efficient.

Respondents included increased internal “efficiencies” as another benefit of the investments they have made. Many noted that they can complete administrative tasks much faster than before, giving association staff more time to “focus on important activities and member service.”

Finally, investments allow associations to provide information, resources and support to their members “anytime, anywhere”. They can “connect people with information more easily and quickly”.

They are also able to more easily “provide improved resources for members” and deliver “greater product offerings at no extra cost to members”.



“Communication with members improved and members told other organisations who are now members...”



Despite all the uncertainty and change, just over half of the participating associations have increased their strategic focus over the course of the pandemic.

As a result of the ongoing effects of the pandemic across Australia, around half of respondents (52%) feel that their association is more focused on strategic priorities. A third have been able to maintain their strategic focus, despite the disruption and uncertainty wrought by the pandemic.

However, it should be noted that 16% indicated the ongoing effects of the coronavirus pandemic has made their association less focused on strategic priorities with many forced to constantly change priorities to deal with government mandated priorities for their industry.

Nearly nine in ten associations believe they are more innovative, although fewer are more likely to take risks.

Most associations (89%) also feel they are more innovative than before. This likely stems from the requirement to adapt quickly to changes and embrace new technologies to remain connected with members.

When asked about willingness to take risks, however, only four in 10 said they were more likely to take risks, with only 9% much more likely to take risks as a result of the pandemic. Forty percent (40%) had not changed their risk profile, and 20% are less likely to take risks.

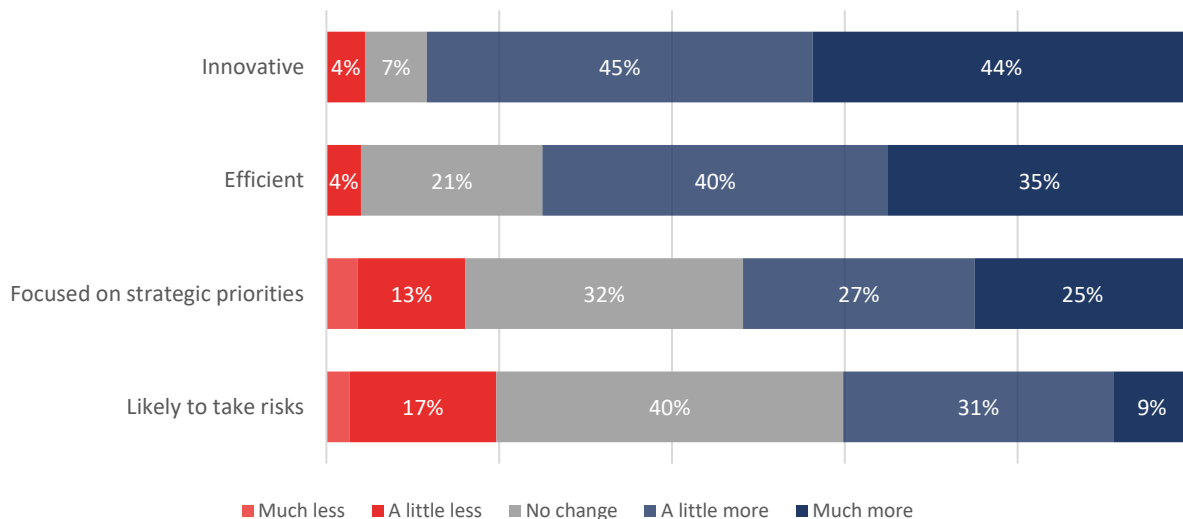
These differences possibly reflect the interaction between risk appetite and the different ways in which industries have been impacted by COVID-19. In some instances, associations representing the hardest hit industries may be more willing to take risks to try and recover faster. Others may be more risk averse to try and avoid further disruption to staff and members.

Two in five associations indicate COVID-19 has driven more effective Board governance and leadership.

While around half of respondents feel that COVID-19 had no impact on the effectiveness of their board's governance, two in five (41%) believe their board is now more effective at governing and leading their association.

Industry bodies (50%) are more likely than professional associations (32%) to say that governance has improved at their association. Associations from the least effected states (SA, NT and WA) are more likely than others to believe Board governance has improved (62%).

Would you say the ongoing effects of the coronavirus pandemic across Australia has made your association:





SUPPORTING ASSOCIATIONS

Associations care deeply about their members and the industries and professions they represent. They want to learn from and collaborate with each other to make a better future for not only their members, but for everyone in their industry. And they want government support to help them meet their members needs and work towards not just a 'new normal' but a better, more collegiate future.

The ongoing and often unexpected changes in rules during the pandemic highlighted the importance of getting accurate information out to members in a timely fashion. For many associations, there was a noticeable appreciation of their efforts during the pandemic, with many increasing their membership as a result.

This is a positive outcome, however not without its challenges. Member expectations are now higher, creating a new baseline which associations must to continue to meet.

As a result, associations are now looking to government and their industry and professional association counterparts for support and ideas on how to continue to support members through the remaining days of the pandemic and transition to a new normal.

Many associations indicated that they need short-term funding to help improve their technology and support services so that they can build up their capabilities for members. Some also suggested that associations need short-term support to allow them to cover costs while providing members who have been severely financially disadvantaged time to recover before having to pay their membership fees.

Other associations want to work in collaboration with others. They want to talk to other industry bodies to learn what's worked for them, and how they can work together to continue to lobby government for the best outcomes. They see other associations as allies and want to see more collaboration into the future.

The also want support with training (particularly on digital technology platforms) to ensure that they are delivering best-in-class services and programs to their members. They want to know what works elsewhere, and what they can look to implement.

While squarely focused on serving the needs of their industry, it is not just the wellbeing of members that is of concern to associations. Many respondents indicated that they also want to know how to best support their staff. They want to know what others have done and what has worked to support employee mental health and wellbeing.



Appendix

Methodology

This report is based on research conducted by Survey Matters in September 2021. The project consisted of a quantitative online survey of association executives distributed by Survey Matters.

Overall, a total of 112 responses were received to the survey. Of these, 44 were leaders of a professional association, 36 of an industry body and 28 lead an organisation that serves both individuals and organisations.

The results provide 95% confidence that the results are within a 10% confidence interval.

Rather than present the results to every question in detail, we have tried to draw out all of the main findings and key themes. We have drawn heavily on the free text comments to help us interpret the data. These provide richness to the quantitative results.

To provide context, we have also compared the survey data with information provided by association leaders in the COVID-19 impact study conducted in early 2020. This data provides a snapshot of where associations were, their performance, challenges and trajectory prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. Where relevant, we have also drawn on external sources to provide wider context to the data.

Having conducted a large range of COVID-19 Impact Studies with association members over the last two years, we have also made reference to the needs and experiences of association members where relevant.

A more detailed breakdown of the quantitative sample and data tables can be provided on request.



Sample

	%	N
Organisation Type		
Professional Association	39%	44
Industry Body	32%	36
Mix of Individual & Company Members	25%	28
Other	4%	4
Total	100%	112
Organisation Size		
<\$500,000	19%	21
\$500,000 - \$1 million	15%	17
\$1 million - \$5 million	33%	37
\$5 – 10 million	13%	14
\$10 - \$50 million	12%	13
Prefer not to say	9%	10
Total	100%	112
Industry		
Health	28%	31
Financial, Legal & Professional Services	21%	24
Building, Construction, Engineering & Design	11%	12
Education	10%	11
Energy / Water / Utility	4%	5
Retail / consumer	3%	3
Real Estate	3%	3
Tourism / Hospitality	2%	2
Manufacturing	2%	2
Transport / Logistics	2%	2
Other	15%	17
Total	100%	112

About Survey Matters

Survey Matters work exclusively in the association and for purpose sector. Specialising in providing strategic research led services to membership and not-for-profit organisations, we have helped a wide range of organisations understand their value proposition.

We also work with the sector to generate and build industry data and knowledge to support advocacy, promotion, industry development and marketing activities.

Experts in all aspects of the research process, we use sophisticated software and keep up to date with the latest research trends from around the world, to bring practical information that informs strategy and advocacy.

If you would like to know more about this report or the work we do, please get in touch.

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