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Predictions 2026

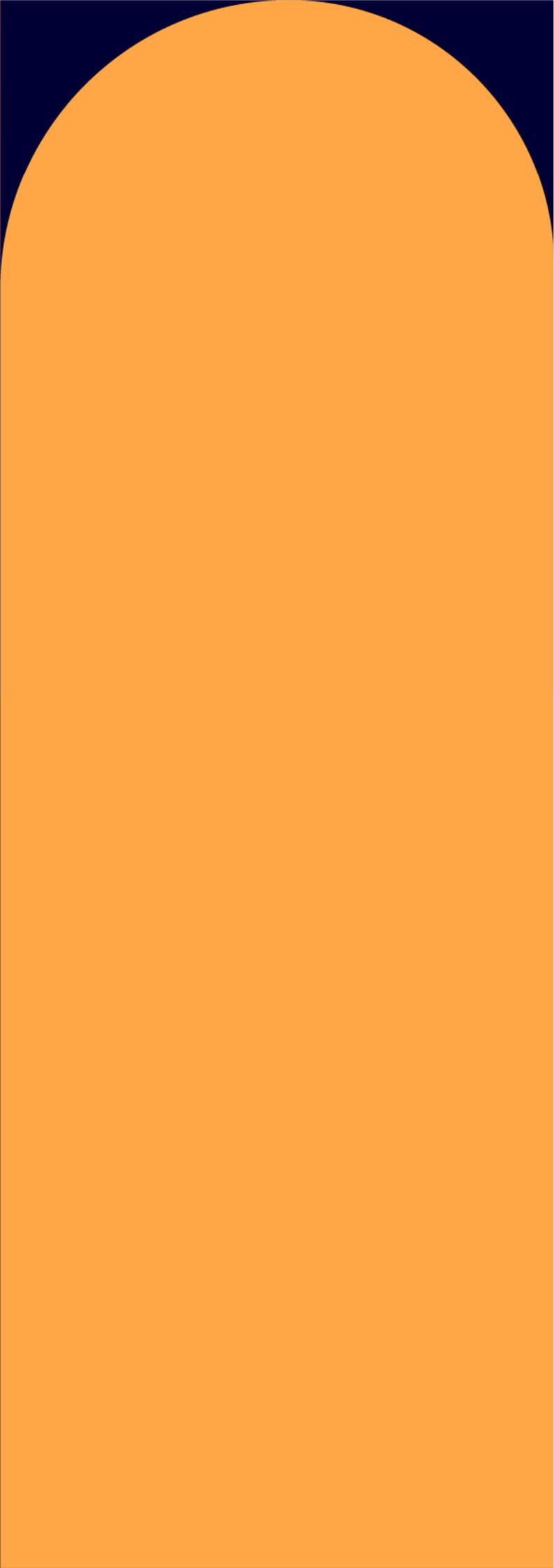
The Future of Associations: Predictions for 2026

As the Australian association sector moves toward 2026, it faces a period of accelerated change driven by regulation, technology, shifting member expectations, and broader societal pressures.

Associations are being asked to do more with less, to demonstrate clear value for membership fees, ensure the psychological safety and cyber security of their people, and modernise operations without losing the human connection that underpins trust and engagement.

This white paper outlines the key predictions shaping Australian associations in 2026. It highlights rising regulatory expectations around psychosocial wellbeing and cyber resilience, the need for more creative and authentic member engagement, and the growing opportunity to streamline operations through AI and emerging technologies.

Ultimately, the associations that thrive will be those that balance innovation with empathy, efficiency with authenticity, and automation with meaningful human connection.



“Your life does not get better by chance, it gets better by change.” — Jim Rohn

The Value Imperative: Proving Membership Worth in a Cost-Conscious Environment

Australian association members are becoming more discerning. Rising costs of living and increased professional demands mean members are questioning where they invest their time and money more than ever.

By 2026, associations and conferences will face heightened pressure to clearly articulate and demonstrate value.

Changing Member Expectations

Members will increasingly expect:

- Practical, immediately applicable benefits
- Personalised experiences that reflect their career stage, interests, and availability.
- Flexibility in how and when they engage.
- A streamlined and easy to access membership sign up and renewal process.
- Increased investment into learning and development platforms to give members value they can apply to their professional development from the comfort of their own homes.
- **Mentoring and Coaching Programs** establishing robust mentoring systems, where seasoned leaders guide emerging talent to ensuring continuity and sustained growth. Coaching initiatives will help younger members develop essential leadership skills in areas such as decision-making, communication, and strategic planning. This applies to general membership networks and to boards encouraging future board members from the next generation of association leaders.
- **Addressing Global Challenges:** Issues like energy transition, sustainability, climate change, and social justice will drive associations to form international coalitions and invest more actively in strong advocacy and sustainable practices. Associations in sectors such as energy, environment, and technology will play an essential role in shaping the global response to these challenges.
- **ESG and Sustainability:** Associations will be expected to integrate ESG criteria into their governance structures, operations, and strategies. There will be growing pressure for associations to demonstrate their commitment to environmental sustainability, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Traditional value propositions, such as annual conferences, static newsletters, or generic benefits, will no longer be sufficient on their own.

TAS are encouraging their associations to take a long-term view on conference and association strategies to form multi-year programs to drive value and build momentum.

Creative Engagement and Demonstrating ROI

To remain relevant, associations will need to get creative in how they engage members and communicate value. This may include:

- Storytelling that clearly links membership to career progression, impact, or influence.
- Micro-engagement opportunities that fit into busy schedules.
- Tiered or modular membership models that allow members to pay for what they value most.

Clear communication around outcomes, not just activities, will be critical in justifying membership fees.

Differentiation through Clarity, Storytelling and Brand Trust

As competition for attention continues to intensify, associations will need to invest in crystallising their message and clearly articulating the value they deliver to stakeholders. Simple, authentic and consistent storytelling will be essential to cutting through noise and building connection with existing and future audiences. This will be particularly important as associations increasingly step into leadership roles across industry representation and policy reform. Advocating effectively for a cause and championing positive change relies on having a credible voice supported by a trusted brand, a visible presence and professional execution.

As visibility and influence grow, so will the need for strong governance, robust internal reporting and operational maturity to underpin confidence, credibility and long-term impact.

Communication Challenges: Reaching Members in a Crowded Digital World

Standard forms of communication are becoming less effective. Email fatigue, tighter spam regulations, and declining open rates will continue to challenge associations.

By 2026, associations will need to rethink how they connect with members.

Moving Beyond Email-Only Strategies

Successful associations will diversify their communication channels, incorporating:

- Member portals and apps with personalised dashboards.
- Community platforms that encourage peer-to-peer interaction.
- Short-form audio or video content for on-the-go engagement and communication of value.
- Utilisation of other forms of communication such as SMS.

Data-Informed, Ethical Communication

With increased use of data and AI to personalise communication, associations must balance insight with trust. Whilst production of communications will continue to get easier, members will be looking for authentic communication that is relevant and to the point. We encourage all associations to make every word count. Whilst working with content creation AI tools can be helpful, be critical and not abdicate connection with members.

Transparency about how member data is used will be essential, particularly in an environment of heightened cyber awareness.

2026 is the opportune time to reflect on internal policies to make sure these are current and adequate for changing operations.

Streamlining Operations Through AI and Technology

The continued introduction of AI and emerging technologies presents a significant opportunity for Australian associations to improve efficiency and sustainability.

Operational Efficiency and Automation

In 2026, AI will be commonly used for:

- Automating routine administrative tasks such as renewals, registrations, and reporting.
- Support member service through chatbots and self-service tools.
- Provide insights through data analysis and predictive modelling.

This will allow lean association teams to focus on strategy, engagement, and value creation rather than manual processes.

Having said this, whilst there will be a growing expectation of increased automation, these innovations can be costly so associations should think about broader strategic questions and partnership arrangements to ensure they are gaining as much value as economically as possible.

In addition, whilst some of the operations of associations can be streamlined, it will inevitably create other works for people to manage and co-ordinate which should also be considered when resource planning.

Capitalising on Innovation Without Losing the Human Touch

While technology will enable efficiency, associations must be careful not to over-automate. Members will still value:

- Authentic human interaction.
- Trusted relationships with association staff and leaders.
- Spaces for meaningful conversation and connection.
- Consolidation of good quality information to help members cut through noise from a trusted source with like-minded interests.

The most successful associations will use AI as an enabler, not a replacement for human connection.

Creating a Digital Legacy

At TAS, we are encouraging associations to take a long-term view of their digital infrastructure, what we call their **“digital legacy.”** This means building simple, secure, and effective technology stacks that support the long-term storage, organisation, and accessibility of information. The aim is not only to support those currently operating the association, but also to enhance the attractiveness of board and leadership roles for future generations.

As people become busier and associations increasingly rely on tomorrow’s leaders to step into governance roles, those individuals will be more disciplined and protective of how they invest their time.

By professionalising digital infrastructure, associations can reduce operational friction, improve security and continuity, and move away from an over-reliance on goodwill and volunteer effort for day-to-day operations. Investing in digital simplicity and sustainability ensures associations are resilient, well-governed, and positioned for long-term success.

Leadership, Culture, and Authenticity in a Changing Landscape

Leadership expectations within associations are also evolving. Moving forward, leaders will be expected to balance commercial realities with empathy, transparency, and purpose.

Key leadership priorities will include:

- Building cultures that prioritise wellbeing, inclusion, and trust.
- Leading digital and AI transformation with confidence and ethical awareness.
- Remaining authentic and values-driven in an increasingly automated environment.

Members and staff alike will look to association leaders for clarity, reassurance, and integrity during periods of change.

Empowering the Leaders of Tomorrow

Preparing for the next generation of leaders also requires associations to modernise the very frameworks that govern them. Simplified, operator-friendly constitutions can significantly reduce red tape, remove unnecessary complexity, and better reflect the realities of how associations operate today.

By updating legacy governance documents, associations can become more agile, open-minded, and responsive to evolving member needs, while maintaining strong accountability.

Letting go of outdated constraints enables future leaders to focus less on navigating procedural hurdles and more on delivering impact, innovation, and value in a modern association environment.

Rising Regulation and Expectations: Psychosocial Wellbeing and Cyber Security

Boards are facing heightened scrutiny around duty of care to members, sponsors, staff and the wider community, making proactive governance no longer optional but essential.

This includes the ongoing development and enforcement of clear policies covering whistleblowing, fraud prevention, anti-money laundering and financial controls, alongside stronger safeguards against growing cyber security threats.

As associations become more visible and influential, confidence and trust will increasingly be built not just on purpose and advocacy, but on demonstrable professionalism, transparency and risk management embedded across day-to-day operations.

Regulatory bodies, members, sponsors, and partners will expect associations to lead by example.

Psychosocial Wellbeing in the Workplace

Recent changes to Australian workplace health and safety frameworks have elevated psychosocial risk to the same level of importance as physical safety. In 2026, associations will be expected to:

- Proactively manage psychosocial hazards such as burnout, workload pressure, bullying, and remote work isolation.
- Embed wellbeing into governance, leadership training, and operational decision-making.
- Demonstrate genuine care for staff, volunteers, and members, not just compliance.

For associations, this means wellbeing can no longer be treated as a “nice to have” initiative. Boards and executives will be held accountable for creating psychologically safe environments, particularly in sectors reliant on small teams, volunteers, and emotionally demanding work.

Cyber Security as a Core Responsibility

Alongside wellbeing, cyber security expectations will intensify. Associations manage significant volumes of member data, payment information, and intellectual property, making them increasingly attractive targets for cyber threats.

Moving forward associations will face:

- Higher expectations from regulators and insurers regarding cyber maturity.
- Increased scrutiny from members around how their data is stored, protected, and used.
- Greater reputational risk in the event of a cyber incident.

Cyber security will shift from being an IT issue to a whole-of-organisation responsibility, requiring board oversight, regular training, and clear incident response planning.

Balancing Innovation and Humanity

The future of associations in 2026 is one marked by transformation, adaptability, and a heightened focus on value. As members expect more from their associations, leaders will need to be proactive in addressing these demands through innovative learning opportunities, streamlined communication, and robust leadership development programs. International collaboration and a commitment to sustainability will also be critical as associations seek to tackle global challenges and create lasting impact.

By embracing these trends, associations will be well-positioned to thrive in an increasingly dynamic, interconnected world - delivering tangible value to members and contributing meaningfully to society. The road ahead may be complex, but the opportunities for growth and transformation are immense.



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