



7 Step Guide to Initiate a Strategic Meetings Management Program

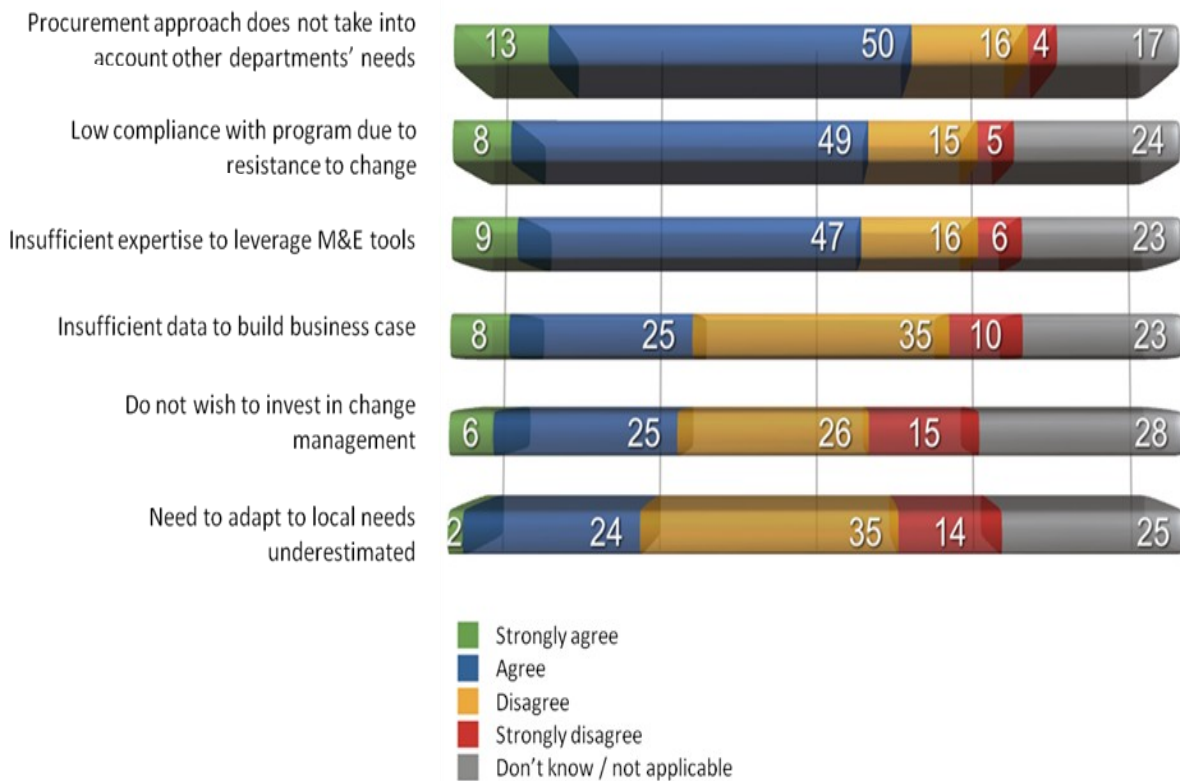


A meetings industry whitepaper

7 Step Guide to Initiate a Strategic Meetings Management Program

The concept of Strategic Meetings Management has come a long way since its inception. What started as a term to define the discipline of consolidating meetings and events has flourished to become an industry best practice with its own business case, individual components and levels of maturity. Economic pressures, world events, and overall increased risk have all driven increased focus on SMM today. Now more than ever, businesses are realizing the importance of SMM and how implementing a program is no longer a “nice to have” but a “must have”. More and more companies are learning about the importance of Strategic Meetings Management Programs and are seeking both tactical solutions and strategic end-to-end solutions, yet experts reveal that fewer than 20% of meetings are currently managed within SMM programs.

This paper serves as a concise yet high level overview for travel and meeting managers who are planning on initiating a SMMP in their company or are in the early stages of doing so. In most organizations, SMMP involves a significant change in the way a meeting planning department operates, but elevates meetings management to align with core business objectives.



Data source: CWT Travel Management Institute
Based on a survey of M&E planners and requestors (107 respondents)

Most managers understand the relevance of Strategic Meetings Management Programs (SMMPs) to their own situation, and even recognize the need for such a program, but are unsure of how to get started or are fearful of tackling what is perceived to be a large-scale, complex project. Fortunately, as SMMP has evolved across industries, no one “right way” has emerged, and companies can start in phases or deploy a global roll out, depending on the needs and requirements of the organization.



The steps outlined here are based on our observation of SMM programs at our client organizations, where we have helped hundreds of companies successfully implement SMMPs including 7 of the top 10 pharmaceutical companies, 8 of the top 10 technology companies, and 7 of the top 10 financial companies. They comprise a comprehensive, seven step guide that managers can use to ensure that they avoid common pitfalls and start with the program on firm footing.

1) Project Leader and Core Team

For the Strategic Meetings Management Program to have any chance of success in today's corporate environment, it will need a project leader whose primary responsibility will be to take ownership of the SMMP initiative within the organization. Such a person should have a good knowledge of meeting planning and procurement and sufficient influence over the various planning groups in order to effect changes. While in most instances, the person is an employee of the organization, in some cases this role is shared with an outside consultant or outsourced completely. To assist the project leader, there needs to be a core team that helps coordinate efforts across the organization. This team consists of representatives from all departments impacted by the SMMP. Typically this includes all meeting planning organizations, travel, finance, procurement, IT, legal, and in some industries, compliance. The Groups & Meetings Committee of the GBTA has published a white paper on the subject of SMM stakeholders; this is an excellent resource for understanding all the constituencies involved and deciding just who in your organization should be included in the core team.

2) Management Buy-In

Building the business case to apprise upper management of the program and its goals facilitates access to necessary resources. It may also be important to have an "executive champion" who will not only lobby other senior personnel but who can also be counted upon to remove obstacles that you encounter during program execution. Yet another reason for management buy-in is for the support that may be needed to effect change management. In any large or midsized organization, fundamental process changes impacting an entire department are not easy to execute. Convincing executives of the benefits of SMM and having them sign-off on the resulting changes can make it easier to counter any resistance to change, which is why a value analysis is a critical step in this process. The value analysis is a collaborative approach to developing a strategic path forward that will drive business value from a meetings program, and is based upon a foundation of understanding current business environment and processes within an organization. The value analysis will establish visibility into meetings spend and activity and call attention to areas that need improvement or have room for growth. In quite a few companies, the strategic meetings management program has been a major part of an overall corporate efficiency or cost-cutting initiative.

3) Situation Assessment

Before any work may begin, it is important to determine the scope of the project. To do this, the core team needs to carry out a situation assessment to understand the current state of affairs. This situation assessment will not only indicate the current business climate of the organization, but it will also lend itself to the value analysis that will determine the potential ROI an SMMP can bring to the company by establishing a baseline for what areas could be improved and where progress can be made. It will also ensure that all areas are covered and the entire team, as well as other stakeholders, are on the same page.



“Companies need to take steps now to ensure that they have systems in place to capture and consolidate this data on an ongoing basis. There’s just no way that they will be able to backtrack and put this reporting together after the meetings have been held.”

Meeting Planner, Global 1000
Pharmaceutical Company

Situation Analysis Considerations	
Structure of the organization (meeting sourcing and planning)	Are sourcing and planning centralized? How many different groups [business units, geographies] are engaged in these activities? How many people are involved in each of these groups and what are their roles?
Processes	How are meetings sourced and planned? What, if any, are the approval processes? How are contracts reviewed and approved? Are standardized contracts utilized? How are meeting tasks such as registration completed?
Policies	What policies are currently in place? Are they mandated? How effective are they? Are planners (professional and otherwise) aware and compliant? What are the potential risk factors and what is being done to mitigate them?
Meeting Spend Data	What is the best estimate of total meeting spend? How reliable is the estimate and how was it calculated? If the existing estimate cannot be relied on, can a revised estimate be arrived at? What are the major categories of meeting spend? With which vendors is the spend most significant?

4) Goals and Prioritization

As with any project plan, there needs to be a set of goals that are clearly defined, realistic and attainable. Organizations differ widely on how these goals are set. In some instances these may be decided at the top – i.e a mandate for cutting costs can come from the CFO or CEO’s office. Goals can result from organization-wide programs like Six Sigma or be a part of the meeting or travel department’s own desire to improve the way it operates and the value it provides to internal clients.

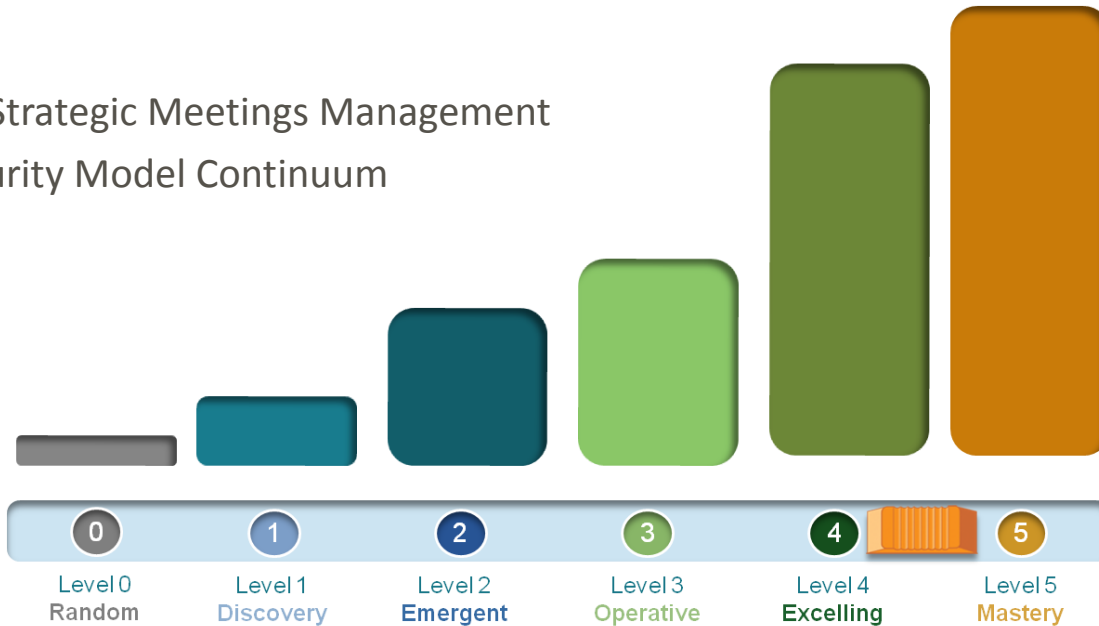
Whatever the origin, cost reduction and efficiencies are almost always the desired outcome. How these goals are achieved will differ in each instance as will the priorities. For instance, if meeting planning and sourcing is a centralized activity, conducted by a small group of five planners, establishing meeting policies is not likely to be a big priority. On the other hand, moving to online RFPs to track spending and optimize sourcing may be more relevant.

That being said, the GBTA is in the process of creating a gauge of where a company should focus their attention when implementing this kind of program. This guide, called The Strategic Meetings Management Maturity Model, helps companies identify where they stand in the implementation process and how to progress successfully to the next level. The SMM Maturity Model supports companies as they develop their SMMPs by providing information on best practices and case studies at each level, along with benchmarking data from companies in similar industries.

An additional asset of the Maturity Model is that it illustrates for companies which components of a SMMP would be most valuable for their own requirements, whether they be basic or advanced, simple or complex, small scale or global. As previously mentioned, not every company will follow the same path to a successful roll out and can start at any level across the meetings management spectrum.



The Strategic Meetings Management Maturity Model Continuum



No matter what level a company determines is best to begin developing their SMMP, some of the common areas that organizations look to for achieving savings include strategic sourcing, approvals and other policies, closer coordination with travel and the establishment of standardized processes.

The SMM Maturity model and other industry best practices are a good source of reference for someone looking to establish goals for their own organization. Companies that are well into their SMMPs can offer useful guidance to those who are just starting. The end note of this paper lists resources for industry best practices and case studies.

Determining which areas need to be tackled first is closely linked to the situation assessment. Two factors most commonly guide the prioritization effort – magnitude of impact and perceived speed/ease of achieving the goals. Another consideration that project leaders will find useful to keep in mind is the willingness on the part of the people involved to make the change.

5) Technology Requirements

Technology is not a component of SMM, rather it is an enabler. Most organizations find that without technology they are unable to gather enterprise-wide data, collaborate with stakeholders, implement policies across the company, or have the tools to coordinate the requirements of a true end-to-end process. Part of the SMM planning process includes determining the functionality that the technology will deliver in order to achieve the goals that have been set.






When selecting a technology solution, the following need to be considered:

- **Alignment with business objectives:** Depending on what components of an SMMP are to be launched, different solutions will cater more to different elements of the program; however most any solution will help to automate and centralize processes. Pre-configured industry-specific solutions are now available that will help organizations hone in on the particular meetings needs of their industry.
- **Flexibility:** It is important to select a solution that can be adapted to meet both current and future needs and accommodate the development of the program as it strategically expands scope and incremental value over time, particularly in regards to any global requirements the company might undertake in the future. A services-based architecture is essential for accommodating the unique needs of an organization as it develops and expands- instead of locking it into a rigid framework with no room for adaptability.
- **Support Services:** A SMMP software package may have dozens of users with varying levels of support needs, which should match the capabilities of the technology provider. In addition, expertise in implementing technology in organizations of similar, size, structure, and scope can prove to be very useful.

6) Writing a Business Case

In order to make a compelling argument to the management team that a Strategic Meetings Management program is worth their buy-in and support, it is essential to engage in a strategic value analysis to identify who the key internal partners are, the areas in which your company can most improve and grow, and how SMM can benefit your bottom line.

The graphic below tracks the value delivered at over 40 clients and has created a very sophisticated model that enables us to accurately predict the savings opportunity for clients. This model is used to build iron clad business cases for a strategic meetings management investment, and to establish quarterly and annual goals for our clients, which ultimately ensures that they achieve their goals.

Benchmark	Meeting Program Impact	
Process Automation	3.0% - 6.5%	Costs 
Sourcing and Procurement	4.8% - 8.0%	Costs 
Visibility and Control	2.4% - 5.5%	Costs 
Compliance and Risk	1.6% - 5.0%	Costs 
Meetings Effectiveness	0.5% - 5.0%	Revenue/Benefit 

Situation analysis and best practices are both essential to building a good business case, which will clearly identify how a SMMP will bring value to an organization and achieve its goals. Yet the most important function of a business case is to demonstrate a positive ROI, or it will have little chance of gaining executive support.

7) Action Plan and Timeline

Once the goals are set and priorities determined, the team needs to develop a timeline and an action plan:

- Divide priorities into achievable milestones
- Identify tasks associated with each milestone and assign primary and secondary responsibilities to team members
- Document progress frequently
- Project leader will need to drive the efforts of others – clearly defined due dates with frequent reminders are recommended
- When setting due dates, be sure to take into account stakeholders' travel and workload commitments
- Start measuring achievements immediately – starting with progress reports and developing into success measurements

It is also important to choose an implementation plan and follow accordingly to achieve the objectives set during the goals and prioritization phase of the project. Depending on the resources available as well as the size and scope of the program, different approaches can be taken for implementation. For example:

- Phased approach by organizational structure
- Geographic segmentation approach
- Segment approach by SMMP component
- Large scale, all encompassing roll out

As mentioned at the start of this paper, SMM has taken hold within the industry as its benefits and positive outcomes are touted and revered as industry best practices. For those companies just getting started, there are now a number of resources available that range from news articles on successful global implementations to whitepapers that cover the steps to building a business case. No matter where a company is on their way to SMM implementation, any progress made in this area is likely to result in tangible positive results for the organization.



Acknowledgements

“Framework for Success: Building a Strategic Meetings Management Program,” Groups & Meetings Committee of the NBTA

“Mobilizing Internal Stakeholders,” Groups and Meetings Committee of the NBTA

“Meetings and Events: Where Savings Meet Success,” Carlson Wagonlit Travel