

The role of the PCO

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Congrex is often asked the question 'what is a PCO and why should we hire one?'. This Whitepaper will try to answer these questions and will explain the role of a PCO when organising a meeting, event or conference.

What is a PCO?

PCO is the commonly used acronym for the term Professional Conference Organiser.

A PCO is a company which specialises in the planning of events, meetings and conferences.

Conference and event management is their core business activity rather than a secondary service.

Why appoint a PCO?

Many professionals who take on the responsibility of hosting and planning a conference, do so over and above their "day job" as an academic, medic, or professional in their field of speciality. Therefore, there may be a knowledge gap, manpower or time shortage, or a combination of all of these factors. This is where a PCO can help. Most PCO's will offer a wide range of service and skill support and will offer these as a complete service, if this is the level of support required, or alternatively, offer their services individually to manage specific aspects of the event that the committee or association headquarters' team wish to outsource. Most PCO's will be happy to manage as much or as little of the conference that the client requires.

It's important to remember that the organising committee or the headquarters' team will ultimately retain control of the event and have the final decision making say. The PCO will provide consultancy, expertise and advice to their clients as well as project manage and co-ordinate operational delivery, but the ultimate decision making generally is retained by the committee or headquarters team, unless they wish otherwise.

PCO services

What service can a PCO provide? This can vary depending on the level of experience, size of organisation, and global coverage that a PCO has to offer. In general most PCO's will offer:

1. Bid Support

2. Venue Sourcing

- Venue research and evaluation
- Venue negotiation management

3. Conference Delivery

Conference Logistical Management

- Consultancy and advice on structure of the event
- Supplier contract negotiation
- Event consultancy and business planning
- Timeline management
- 3rd party supplier sourcing and management
- Secretariat function for committees – meeting coordination, minute taking and general admin
- On-site staffing
- Event evaluation and delegate surveying including accreditation administration for CPD /CME (if required)

Registration Services

- Registration handling
- VIP handling

Programme Management

- Speaker liaison and management
- Scientific Programme support and coordination
- Abstract submission and review management
- Poster Session design and management
- Session room coordination including staging and décor

Financial Management

- Financial management – including budgeting, bank account reconciliation, taxation guidance, book keeping

Social Event Services

- Social Event planning and management
- Audio visual and production coordination
- Accompanying persons programme planning and management
- Optional Tour programme planning and management

4. Conference Promotion

- Marketing and promotion – including e-tools e.g. social media and internet resources
- Website design and maintenance
- Print and e-marketing design, production and distribution

5. Exhibition Management and Sponsorship

- Exhibition and Sponsorship management
- Exhibition and Sponsorship sales

6. Travel and Accommodation

- Transportation and accommodation management

However, some PCO's can also provide additional extended and specialised services.

Congrex, for example, have dedicated experts that provide association management consultancy and strategic planning services, as well as association membership administration. Congrex are also one of very few PCO's who have an IATA accredited travel company as part of their group, meaning that delegates, speakers and committees can be offered an online flight ticketing service as part of the overall service offering.

You may find certain PCO's have a higher degree of expertise working in specific venues, destinations or within a specific subject area and this has generally been gathered through managing previous events. This you may find is an additional asset that a client can gain added value from.

When to appoint a PCO?

You can really decide to appoint a PCO at any stage during the planning process, it really will depend on the type of support or services you feel you need from a PCO. If for example you simply want a PCO to assist with management of abstracts and delegate registrations then you may feel that bringing a PCO on board part way through planning is suitable.

It may have been your intention to manage all aspects of planning yourself within the committee or academic establishment using fellow colleagues and support staff but after embarking on the planning process, the scale of what is required has exceeded the resources you have available or the event scope has changed and grown. Most PCO's will be happy to become involved part way through the planning process.

Engaging with a PCO right at the very outset of planning is wise

However, Congrex would advise those considering embarking on a bid and hosting a congress to engage with a PCO right at the very outset of planning, before you have even considered a venue or location to hold your event. At the very earliest stages of planning the PCO, with their extensive experience, can offer advice, help and expertise in many areas including destination pros and cons, venue feasibility, as well as advising on financial aspects relating to the proposed event. The PCO can also assist with reviewing and interpreting a bid tender and make recommendations. It might be helpful for the PCO to carry out a "needs analysis" of what might be beneficial to include within the bid materials.

Bidding for events can be a complicated and daunting task for subject specialists to take on and bidding to host conferences is getting an ever competing market with new destinations and emerging markets eager to host their association's flagship event. In Congrex's experience the most successful bids have been those where there has been close interaction at the outset from the bidding hosts, destination representatives (CVB), the venue and the PCO. Roger Coates, Chairman of IRPA 13 Congress, explains: "We have relied greatly on Congrex to ensure we presented a truly professional Congress Bid. The overwhelming success we had is testimony to the fact that you did indeed deliver what you promised – a winning bid!"

How do PCO's charge for their services?

Their generally isn't one fixed model and will often depend on the level of service support that the organising committee require the PCO to provide. Commonly used pricing structures include:

- A fixed management fee
- A management fee per delegate
- A management fee per abstract / paper handled
- A management fee (fixed or percentage) per square metre of exhibition space sold
- A management fee (fixed or percentage) for sponsorship sold
- A percentage of budget
- Profit sharing

Often it is a combination of more than one of these pricing structures and it is recommended that you discuss and establish what structure best meets your needs. Most PCO's will be flexible in adjusting their pricing model to reflect the needs of each specific event and reflects the services the PCO is being asked to manage.

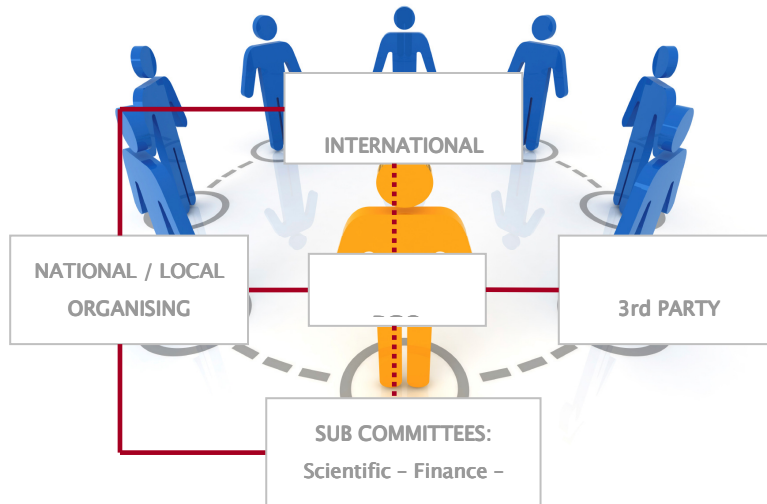
Some services such as bid support or initial needs analysis consultancy a PCO will offer free of charge as part of their willingness to "share the risk" with the other parties who are also giving their time as part of the bid team.

Other services such as social and tour programme planning, PCO's will support at no cost to the budget as their administration costs are covered either in commission revenue from the supplier or built into the ticket price being sold to the delegate.

It is our advice to talk to the PCO and have open dialogue to ensure both parties have a clear understanding of each other's needs so the most appropriate transparent pricing structure can be established.

In summary

A PCO is an organisation whose core business is providing congress and consultancy and management services. They provide expert knowledge, experience and operational resources to plan and deliver successful events of vastly varying sizes, geographical locations and subject matter.



They can be a valuable resource to organising committees who do not have the time or other resources to take on the hosting of a major event without external support.

The PCO should very much act as the “glue” that brings all the many parties involved in creating a successful congress together and ensures clear dialogue across these groups.

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Caroline Mackenzie has over 19 years of experience in the meetings and events industry, beginning her career in hotel management with a boutique country house chain in the UK. Since then she has worked within various sectors of the meeting and events industry including international meeting and event management within the medical communications sector providing meeting and event management support to major pharmaceutical and healthcare clients. She has also spent a significant time working within the Professional Conference Organiser agency environment providing logistics management support to predominantly national and international Associations in the UK and internationally. She has managed a vast range of meetings worldwide, across a variety of topics and professions, ranging from 10 – 8,000 delegates. Caroline has worked for Concorde Services for 7 years and is currently the Regional Director Business Development, UK & Benelux.

About Congrex

Congrex provide a tailored offering for our clients' needs when organising meetings, events and conferences, and also deliver association management and travel & accommodations services. Established in 1982, we serve a variety of industries from our many offices, utilising our network of partners globally. Our extensive client base includes national and international associations, governmental organisations and corporations.

Clients' success is what drives Congrex. We believe the best part of our work is the close relationship we establish with our clients, which allows us to address their challenges and deliver exciting projects.

Let's meet, visit www.congrex.com

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