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# ASSOCIATION GLOBAL MATURITY: CRITICAL ACTIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERNATIONAL GROWTH

BY CHARLES COLBY



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## **about the author**

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*The authors have worked diligently to ensure that all information in this report is accurate as of the time of publication and consistent with standards of good practice in the general management community. As research and practice advance, however, standards may change. For this reason, it is recommended that readers evaluate the applicability of any recommendations in light of particular situations and changing standards.*

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**RESEARCH.  
LEADERSHIP.  
INNOVATION.**

## As technology makes the world smaller, association leaders in the United States increasingly heed the call to expand to new international markets.

Their motivation is twofold. First, as many sectors and professions become global, it becomes imperative for associations to offer international capabilities and incorporate a more global view in decision-making. A select group of associations has always operated on a global scale (even if headquartered in the United States), while others are for the first time facing these pressures. Second, international markets constitute the next frontier for expansion as association leaders realize the vast potential to increase membership and revenue from outside the United States.

To create global organizations, though, association leaders must become truly global in how they think and operate. Associations may be nationally focused and still operate with success in foreign markets, but many others struggle to break through in new markets. The associations that have integrated international perspectives and committed to global operations are best positioned to grow globally and expand into new markets when opportunities arise.

In order to help leaders understand the challenges and requirements for going global, the ASAE Foundation, with support from global consultancy MCI Group, commissioned a series of research projects to determine the state of success in the sector and identify the factors that lead to success. This report covers the third phase of this initiative, which specifically addresses the concept of global maturity. Global maturity is the state of readiness—culturally, managerially and operationally—to expand and thrive internationally.

To understand global maturity and how it connects to associations' success abroad, the project broke down association operations and strategic elements into seven assessable components:

- I.** Strategic and business planning
- II.** Management and organizational culture
- III.** Leadership engagement
- IV.** Market insight
- V.** Value proposition and engagement model
- VI.** Global organization, roles, and support
- VII.** Local operations and service delivery capacity

The research found that global maturity is a key driver of success in international development. As part of the project, researchers from Rockbridge Associates used the research data to validate a numerical global maturity scale. Participating associations averaged a score of 44 (out of 100) on the global maturity scale, rating at the developing/functional level of global maturity. While this is not bad, especially as the majority of respondents were still in the early stages of their global strategies, there is plenty of room for improvement. The associations that place in the higher maturity tiers of that scale reported more satisfied leadership, more satisfied international members and customers, faster growth, and fewer problems or hurdles.

Associations tend to have achieved a greater level of maturity in certain areas, notably in leadership engagement. This refers to the degree to which the leadership is committed to international operations and demonstrates it with resources and shares the commitment. Given the wide range of challenges in entering international markets, it is a necessary first step to get the support of senior leadership.

In contrast, several areas in which associations have considerable room for improvement are key success drivers, specifically market insight and local operations and service delivery capacity. Market insight consists of gathering critical data about members, customers, and the market environment. It involves investments such as market research and intelligence gathering that are costly in international markets but necessary to ensure that decision-making is based on legitimate information. Local operations and service delivery refers to the degree to which associations have planned the practical execution of their international operations and how they have adapted their approach to service delivery in those markets. This area is of utmost importance because it involves putting in place an efficient and scalable operation, addressing capacity, partners, channels and communication.

As associations seek to improve their global maturity, it is worth asking what the successful, mature associations do differently from the sector overall. The following are includes a list of attributes from each of the seven performance areas:

- They have a clear, understandable, and measurable global strategy
- Their boards include individuals with experience or are located in the international markets where the associations operate
- While associations in general have the support of their professional and elected leadership for international efforts, the most mature associations have this support from their boards who serve as champions of growth
- They have an informed product strategy that is based on input from local leaders, member/ customer feedback, market research, and intelligence

- They practice market segmentation in their most important local markets, customizing tactics for customer, member, and prospect segments
- Management in local markets is regularly involved in planning and strategy (instead of centralized planning with top-down execution)
- They ensure their local market capabilities complement the capabilities of headquarters without overlap or conflict

A note of caution: The research provides a profile of associations involved in international deployment, but the situation for each individual association is different. ASAE's Global Maturity Assessment, an online assessment tool developed from this study's research data, is a valuable resource that leaders can use to assess and diagnose their organization's maturity—and understand how to improve. The tool consists of 47 items that measure performance in seven areas. Assessment takers receive an overall global maturity score (on a scale of zero to 100), a score for each of the seven component areas, as well as benchmarks and recommendations for improvement. For association leaders looking for specific information on how to improve their association's global operations, the assessment's question-level feedback and resources can provide guidance on how to move forward.

That said, this report tells the story about the state of the association sector on the path to global maturity. It starts by creating a profile of associations engaged in or at least planning to engage in international markets, and then looks at their perspectives of their efforts' success. The report then dives deeper into global maturity and an examination of where the sector stands, a detailed summary of performance for individual maturity areas, and the choices that advance mature associations internationally. The report concludes with an examination of key priorities for associations looking to advance their global maturity.

## To pursue this research project, ASAE Foundation, with support from global consultancy MCI Group, contracted Rockbridge Associates to develop a scientific Global Maturity Assessment.

Associations can use this assessment to identify their own level of maturity, diagnose areas for improvement, and garner insights on how to succeed when deploying in international markets. This effort builds on earlier data gathering by the Foundation and MCI, and relied on a robust survey of 90 senior leaders from associations in various stages of international growth to establish the findings.

After developing the concept of global maturity to understand association success in foreign markets, this research study specifically sought to

- identify the success factors behind global maturity for an association
- develop a standardized tool—the Global Maturity Assessment—to allow associations to measure, diagnose and benchmark their own progress towards global maturity
- benchmark and report the state of global maturity among U.S. associations today.

The methodology for achieving these goals followed best practices for developing a scientifically valid assessment tool. Qualitative research by ASAE Foundation identified the component areas to be incorporated in an assessment of global maturity, with additional guidance provided by MCI and ASAE volunteers. Using this information, a team from Rockbridge Associates, Inc.

1. **developed a structured instrument** that captured the full range of factors behind global maturity.
2. **conducted cognitive interviews** with 11 association leaders of organizations with varying stages of global expansion. The results were used to refine the instrument to ensure greater clarity and relevance.
3. **gathered quantitative data** from a large, broad-based sample of associations that were members of ASAE. The survey/instrument was programmed to be completed online, and was administered to a total of 90 leaders recruited by email invitation or at a booth at the Great Ideas Conference. Because the study is intended to help U.S.-based associations expand internationally, the sample consists primarily of ASAE members headquartered in the United States; thus, “international” refers to markets outside the United States. The survey has a margin-of-error of plus or minus 10 percentage points and is sufficiently robust to profile the population of associations seeking international expansion.

**4. validated the instrument statistically.** This validation included tests to ensure the attributes in the assessment were reliable (stable) and valid (predicted success, such as satisfaction and growth). The validation process was also used to identify the best way to assign questions to categories and develop a weighting and scoring methodology.

The survey used 47 diagnostic questions to assess global maturity across seven component categories. The questions were designed to serve as a comprehensive inventory of what association leaders need to know and consider to increase their organization's global maturity. Each question raises salient issues that even the most mature associations may not have considered in their international efforts.

For each item in the survey, a global decision maker is presented with two situations—one that reflects an organization with no global maturity at all, and one that reflects the best practice for global maturity. To illustrate, one of the diagnostics is clarity of strategy. The least mature organization would indicate, “We do not have a formal global strategy,” while the most mature organization would indicate, “We have a formal global strategy that is clear, understandable, and allows us to measure progress.” Each answer is scored depending on where it falls on the continuum.

Table 1 lists each factor's overall weight in computing a global maturity score and the number of items included in the section. The weight is empirically based and reflects the relative degree to which the category drives leadership satisfaction with global operations or expansion. For example, the most important area of maturity is captured in the fourth section of the assessment tool, market insight, which refers to the degree to which an association gathers and relies on a range of information sources (e.g., customer feedback).

The survey served as the foundation for the Global Maturity Assessment, available from ASAE, which can be used by individual associations to assess their level of global maturity and the top priorities for increasing their maturity and improving their chances of success.

**table 1**  
OVERVIEW OF GLOBAL MATURITY METRICS

Source: Global Maturity Study

SECTION	CATEGORY WEIGHT	NUMBER OF ATTRIBUTES
I. Strategic and Business Planning	16%	11
II. Management and Organizational Culture	13%	5
III. Leadership Engagement	16%	4
IV. Market Insight	17%	11
V. Value Proposition and Engagement Model	10%	4
VI. Global Organization, Roles, and Support	12%	5
VII. Local Operations and Service Delivery Capacity	16%	7



**The study profiled the characteristics of associations that are operating internationally or are involved in planning to enter international markets.**

At a minimum, the associations included in this study must have had aspirations to enter international markets. The spectrum of participants, from the aspirational to the actively working globally, reflects the types of associations that would benefit from completing ASAE's Global Maturity Assessment.

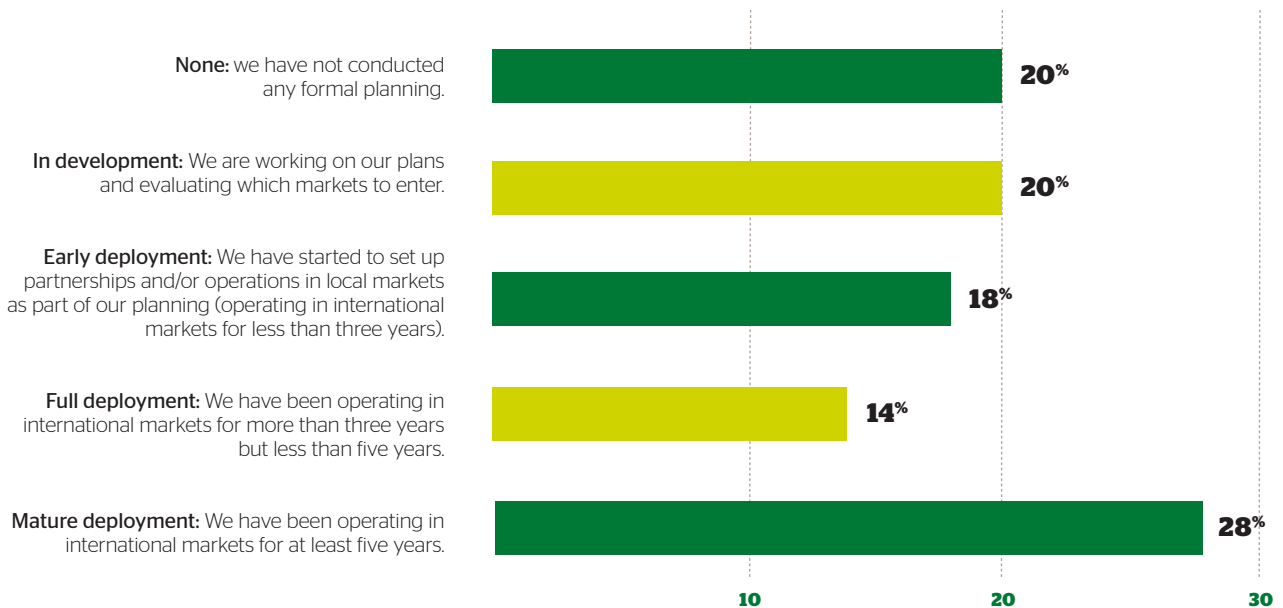
A closer look at the participant pool finds associations at every level of global maturity—from early to developing to mature stages. As shown in Figure 1, 40 percent of participating associations are not yet operating abroad. These associations have either not conducted any formal planning or are working on plans for which markets to enter but have not deployed their strategy.

At the other end of the spectrum, 14 percent of participating associations are in “full deployment,” meaning they have been in international markets for three to five years, while 28 percent are in “mature deployment,” meaning they have deployed internationally for at least five years.

**figure 1**

**STUDY PARTICIPANT OPERATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL MARKETS {BASE: ALL (90)}**

Source: Global Maturity Study



Most of the associations that participated in the study have individual members, although many have business or corporate members and a number include nonprofits and governments. A full two thirds (66 percent) consider their primary member types to be professionals, while a fifth (22 percent) consider business entities their primary members.

These associations represent a wide range of member sizes. About one third (35 percent) have fewer than 5,000 individual members worldwide, another 50 percent have 5,000 or more individual members, and 16 percent have no individual members at all. Only 19 percent have 500 or more corporate members worldwide.

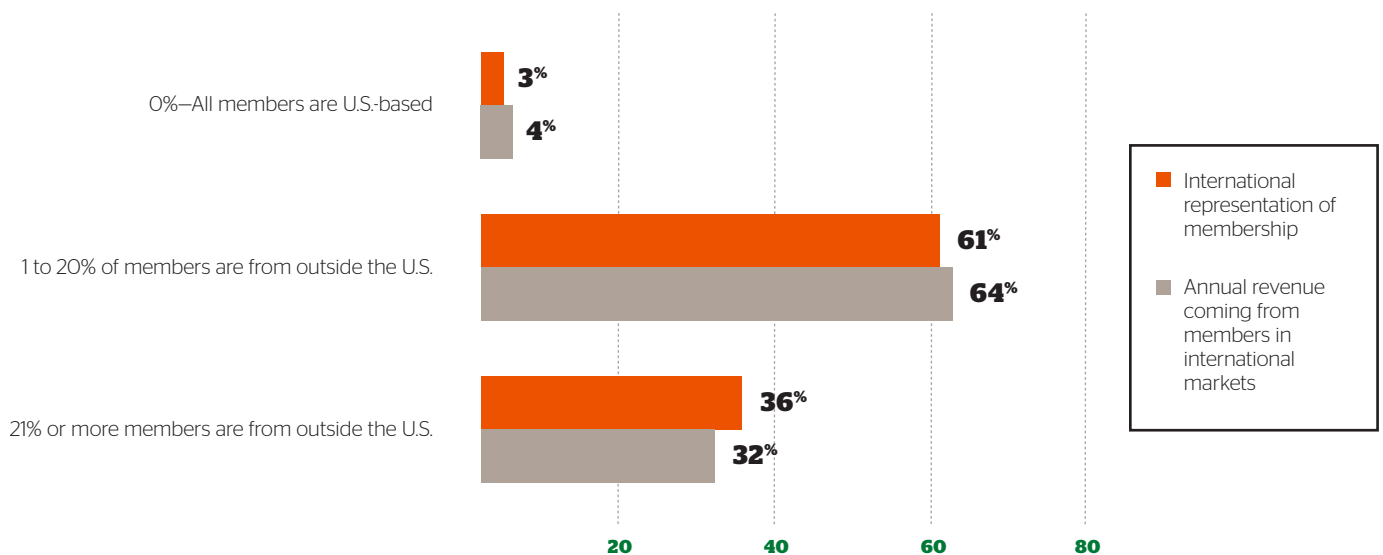
Nearly all of the association leaders who participated in the study reported already having members in other countries, which may explain why global strategy has become a priority for them. Among respondents, it was most common for international members to join a U.S.-based association, whether it is a global or a national association. Only seven percent have international members join through a local affiliate, division, chapter, or similar entity. Another nine percent have some other arrangement for joining, like a global charter.

Associations do appear to see a return on recruiting members in foreign markets. The percentage of annual revenue the associations received from international markets closely mirrored the percentage of members from international markets (Figure 2).

**figure 2**

**MEMBERSHIP AND MEMBER REVENUE OUTSIDE OF THE UNITED STATES {BASE: ALL (90)}**

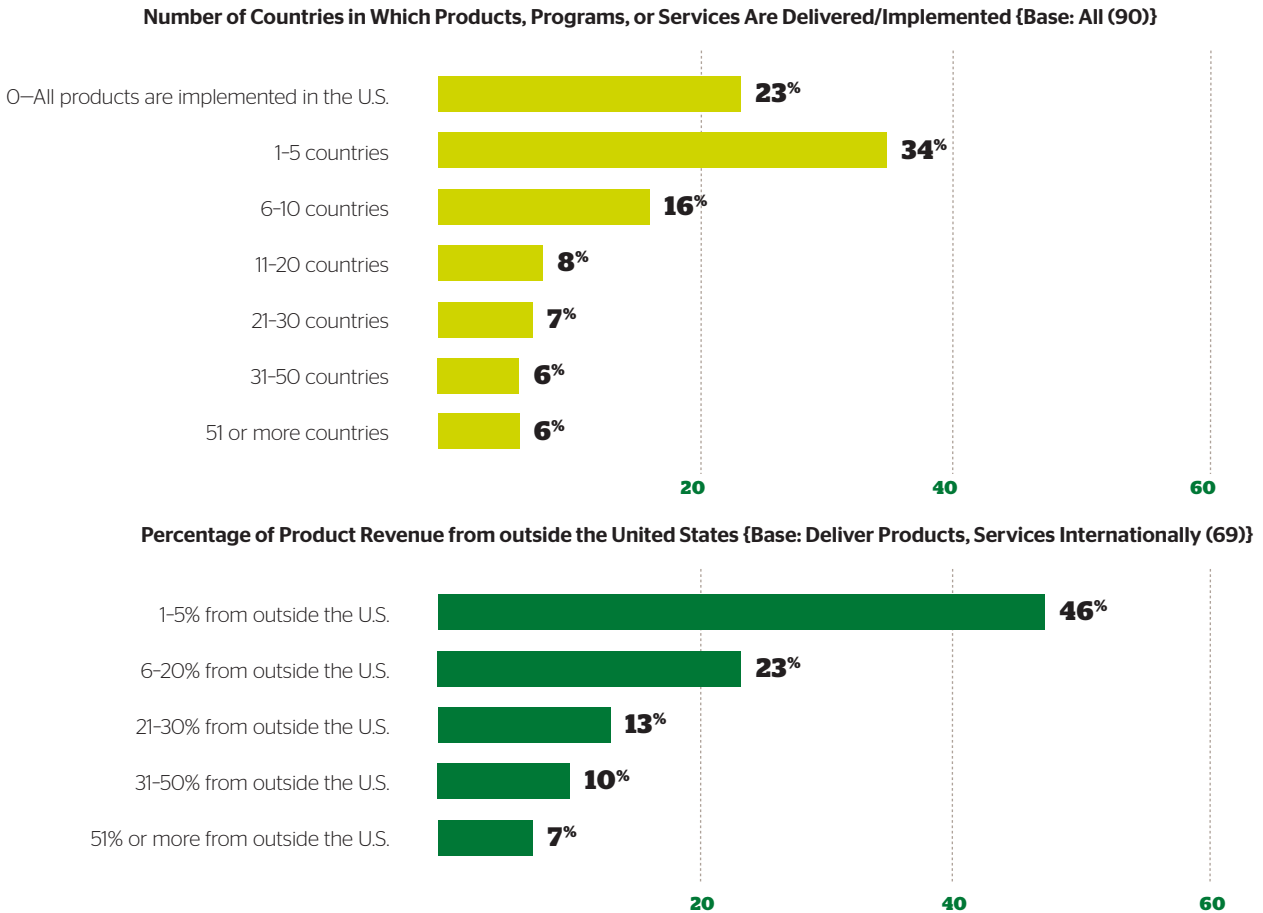
Source: Global Maturity Study



Of the participating associations that do have international members, most tend to reach into many markets. More than half of respondents with international members (52 percent) have members in more than 20 countries. This may reflect the effect of technology on global business, with prospects in international markets finding it easy to join and receive benefits even when the association does not have a local presence in the market.

Those benefits may not include products and services. Associations have a much smaller reach in delivering and implementing products and services abroad (defined as activities such as conferences, training programs, certifications, etc., but not book or publication shipments). Nearly a quarter (23 percent) of respondents implemented or provided all products within the United States, while only 19 percent provided products and services in more than 20 countries (Figure 3). Of those that derive revenue from outside the United States, nearly half (46 percent) indicated that the total share of product revenue from international markets is five percent or less.

**figure 3**  
**INTERNATIONAL PRODUCT REACH AND REVENUE SHARE**  
 Source: Global Maturity Study



The majority of participating associations have member groups outside the United States—68 percent have groups in at least one country, compared to 32 percent in none. However, 25 percent of respondents have groups in more than 10 countries. The representation of professional staff abroad is even less common: Only a third have staff outside the United States, and only 14 percent have staff in five or more markets.

In summary, nearly all responding associations—associations with at least some stake in going global—have members outside of the United States, with the majority having members in over 20 countries. But given that a large portion of these respondents are still at the strategy planning stages of their global development, international membership may not be driven by concerted effort on the part of the association as much as it is the motivator to make that effort. The successful recruitment of members in international markets, in the absence of even a strategy, may be a factor that motivates associations to get serious about international expansion.

But, despite the interest in foreign markets, the respondent data indicates that few American associations are truly global. The delivery of products and services to new markets is limited, and most respondent associations are still primarily based and staffed in the United States.

## If associations are growing internationally without a strategy, do they feel those potentially haphazard efforts are successful?

Participating respondents were asked to assess both their organizational leadership's satisfaction with their global efforts and their international members and customers' satisfaction with the association. Across all levels of global maturity, respondents generally believed their leadership is satisfied with their progress, though they did find room for improvement. Most respondents believed their leadership is moderately satisfied, while twenty-eight percent believed their leadership is highly satisfied with their progress, and only 21 percent believed leadership is dissatisfied with efforts (Figure 4).

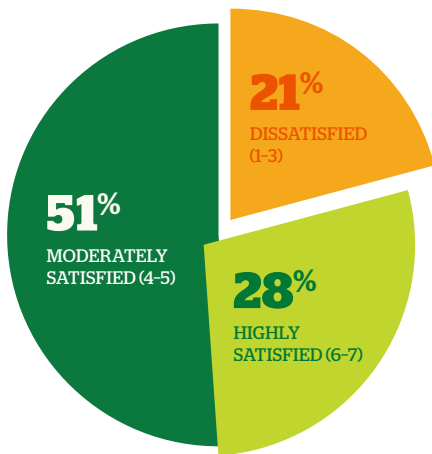
Respondents' belief in the satisfaction of international members and customers is slightly stronger. When asked to assess their international members' satisfaction, most respondents believed these groups are moderately satisfied with the association. A little more than a quarter believed international members and customers are highly satisfied, while the majority believed the level of satisfaction is moderate.

**figure 4**

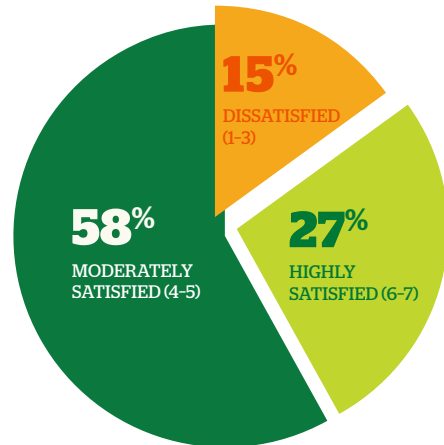
### SATISFACTION OF LEADERSHIP AND INTERNATIONAL CONSTITUENTS

Source: Global Maturity Study

**Leadership Satisfaction with Entering/Operating in International Markets**  
{Base: All (90)}



**Satisfaction of Members and Customers in International Markets**  
{Base: Excludes "Not Sure," N/A (73)}



Another broad success indicator is the degree to which international growth meets expectations. The majority of respondents reported that their international growth matches or exceeds expectations, with nine percent indicating growth that is faster than anticipated and 43 percent indicating their growth meets expectations (Figure 5). Unfortunately, nearly half reported that they are growing more slowly than expected. Expectations around global growth are extremely challenging to set, and accurate expectations typically develop from experience. Organizations that received higher global maturity scores were more likely to understand that global expansion is a long-term proposition and that it takes time to recognize tangible returns.

Just as many associations experienced slower international growth than expected, a substantial share—40 percent—have encountered significant problems in entering and operating in international markets. Smaller associations (fewer than 5,000 members) are more likely to report these problems. Problems are inherent to global expansion due to the plethora of challenges in managing culture, strategy and operations across diverse markets, and made even more complicated by the fact that the typical association has members in over 20 countries.

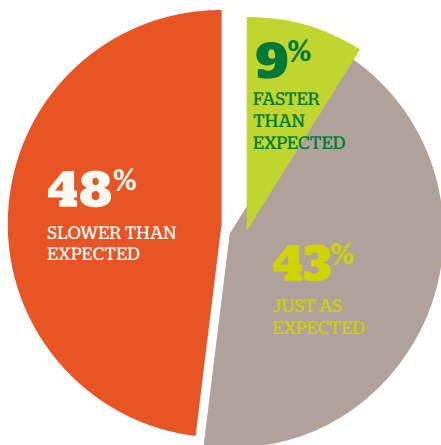
It is clear that associations have room to be more satisfied, and many experience slower than expected growth and extensive hurdles. The key to ensuring satisfied leadership and meeting expectations is to improve organizational global maturity, a concept that has a close relationship with success abroad.

**figure 5**

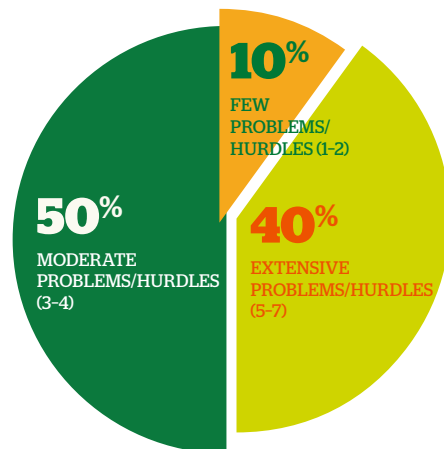
**INTERNATIONAL GROWTH AND EXTENT OF PROBLEMS**

Source: Global Maturity Study

**Progress Made in Entering and Growing in International Markets**  
{Base: All (90)}



**Extent of Encountering Problems in Entering/Operating in International Markets (scale of 1-7)**  
{Base: All (90)}



## Global maturity refers to the degree to which an association has aligned its mindset, strategy, and resources to ensure long-term success and sustainable growth internationally.

Global maturity spans a spectrum from absolutely no readiness to effective and mature. Associations at the lower end of the spectrum are either just beginning the process of planning for international growth or have been slow to establish the components for success. At the opposite end of the spectrum are associations that have been operating globally with success for a long time and/or associations that have worked diligently to organize and strategize for success.

Associations may fall into one of four distinct tiers of global maturity along the spectrum:

- **No readiness:** Associations with no international operations in place or global strategy implemented in their association.
- **Nascent/ineffective:** Associations that might have started planning or are in early development in international markets, but haven't successfully implemented this yet throughout their association.
- **Developing/functional:** Associations that have started their international operations, but show room for improvement in their maturity.
- **Mature/effective:** Associations that have entered international markets and with mature operations globally, meaning they adhere closely to best practices to achieve success on a global scale.

This research project validated a numerical scale to define where associations that operate (or aspire to operate) in international markets fall in their overall maturity. Specifically, a score of less than 20 equates to no readiness, scores of 20 to 39.99 fall into nascent/ineffective, scores of 40 to 59.99 rank as developing/functional, and scores of 60 to 100 are defined as mature/effective.

The average level of association global maturity among study participants was 44 out of 100, which equates to being in the early stage of developing/functional. As illustrated in Table 2, slightly more than a quarter of participants were assessed as fully mature/effective and 24 percent were developing/functional. Only 14 percent were classified as having no readiness, indicating they are at the onset of international expansion or have yet to take the steps most likely to lead to success. Associations with 5,000 or more members tended to have higher global maturity scores and were more likely to be in the mature/effective tier, while their smaller counterparts were more likely to be in the no readiness tier.

**table 2**

**SUCCESS INDICATORS BY MATURITY LEVEL**

Source: Global Maturity Study

GLOBAL READINESS SCORE	MATURITY LEVEL	% OF ASSOCIATIONS	INTERNATIONAL CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	LEADERSHIP SATISFACTION	GROWTH FASTER THAN EXPECTED (SLOWER)	MANY PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED
60-100	Mature/Effective	27%	48%	63%	17% (29%)	25%
40-59.99	Developing/Functional	24%	33%	32%	14% (46%)	27%
20-39.99	Nascent/Ineffective	34%	13%	10%	0% (69%)	45%
<20	No Readiness	14%	0%	0%	8% (36%)	69%

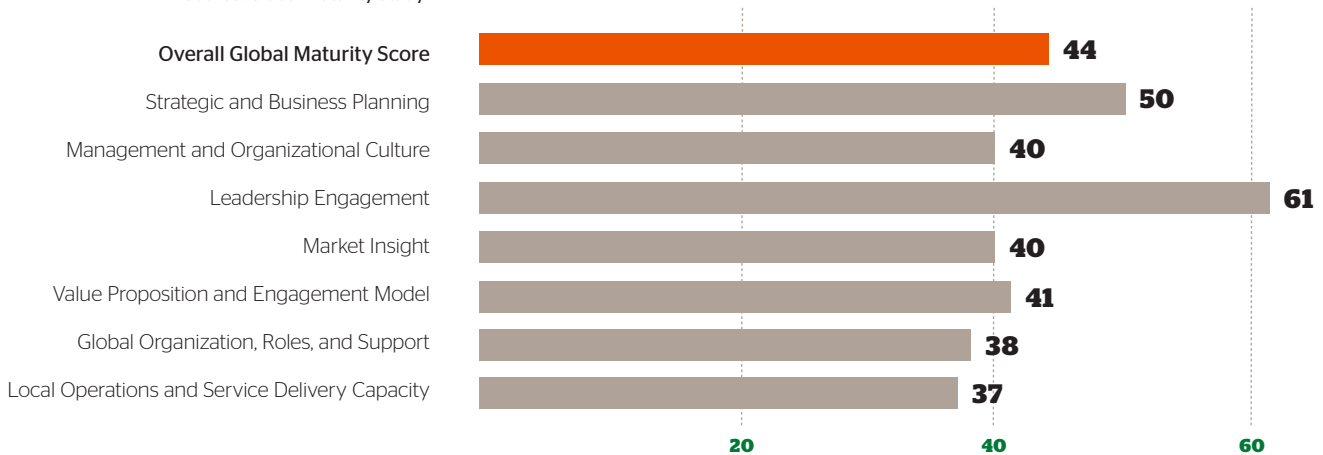
The maturity level matters because it correlates closely with other measures of success. The more mature participating associations have more satisfied international members/customers, higher satisfaction among leadership with their international success, growth rates that are more likely to meet or exceed expectations, and fewer problems. Association leaders can complete ASAE Foundation’s Global Maturity Assessment to determine their organization’s overall maturity score and category.

Performance varies considerably across the seven areas, as shown in Figure 6. The participating associations tend to be most mature in the area of leadership engagement, which has a mean maturity score of 61—mature/effective based on definitions provided earlier. On the other hand, the associations only averaged a score of 37 in their local operations and service delivery capacity, which equates to a nascent/ineffective level of maturity. This discrepancy no doubt reflects that it is much easier to garner support from leadership to embark on entering or expanding international presence, but it is much harder to implement the hands-on resource decisions needed to actually operate in the markets.

**figure 6**

**GLOBAL MATURITY SCORES OVERALL AND BY SECTION**

Source: Global Maturity Study





## The seven component sections of global maturity each identify an important set of related success factors that not only define global maturity, but also suggest a broad area to consider in global planning.

The average scores of participating associations for each section suggest where the association sector as a whole may fall in each area. This section defines and examines the strengths and weaknesses of the study participant pool for each of the component sections.

### **Strategic and Business Planning**

The first component of the Global Maturity Study examined how associations approach strategic and business planning at a global level, assessing the degree to which association leaders have embarked on the necessary steps to formulate long-range strategy, planning, and risk analysis. The research found that global strategic and business planning is the second most developed area for associations, with a mean maturity score of 50 that reflects the association sector's developing maturity. Associations are most mature in aligning their global strategy with their association strategy, perhaps because leaders recognize the importance of alignment once they make a commitment to global growth, or else because this sort of planning does not require an investment of resources. Overall, the participants scored as developing in a range of planning areas related to time frames, reliance on data, brand and property protection, and risk analysis.

The least mature area for participants was in formulating a clear and differentiated value proposition to address local competition. Other relatively weak areas include formulating a market entry strategy that relies on the best local market tactics and planning financial investments in global strategy several years into the future. It is understandable that associations are less mature in these areas because they require the bandwidth to finalize detailed aspects of the global strategy, which not all associations are able to spare. In addition, many may not realize the importance of assessing and responding to the unique competitive environment in the markets they enter.

### **Management and Organizational Culture**

In relation to global development, an association's management and organizational culture must reflect readiness of an association to operate in a diverse global environment. Surveyed associations had a mean maturity score of 40 for management and organizational culture, which reflects a developing level of maturity in this area. A key high scoring area: Most associations are successfully leveraging the diversity of

the varying cultural perspectives throughout their extended organization. Association leaders may instinctively engage in this behavior because they rely on their management, staff, and partners in other markets or with different backgrounds to educate them on how to expand.

On average, associations are less successful in creating a truly global orientation, in which resources across markets are objectively prioritized. An association headquartered in the United States may tend to overemphasize investing resources in the domestic market even when opportunities in other markets invite greater attention. This lack of global orientation perhaps stems from the American roots of many associations that have only recently aspired to go global. The shift to global requires a significant cultural change and extensive resources in staff training and change management.

## **Leadership Engagement**

Leadership engagement refers to the degree to which the leadership of the association is committed to international operations and shares this commitment. This component section was the most developed of the seven evaluation areas for the surveyed associations—participants averaged a score of 61, indicating maturity in this area.

Associations are most mature in securing buy-in from their leadership and in sharing this commitment to association staff. Most study participants—64 percent—indicated that their professional and elected leadership are completely or mostly supportive of their international efforts, while 100 percent of mature associations reported at least mostly having this support. Association leaders realize they cannot begin any serious effort to expand internationally without the support of their organizational leadership and a commitment of resources.

The least mature area in this section, sharing commitment to international growth with membership, still has a relatively high score compared to the lowest performing attributes in other sections. Association leaders seem to understand the necessity of communicating with staff and empowering resources, but not necessarily the importance of communicating their international priorities to membership.

## **Market Insight**

No association leader will plan activities in a new country without some data. Market insight refers to the degree to which associations invest in gathering insight and information across different areas surrounding international markets and operations. This area is the top driver of leadership satisfaction and is important because it reflects an informed, data-driven approach that is needed to minimize risk and optimally align resources.

The surveyed associations earned a mean maturity score of 40 in market insight, indicating a developing level of maturity. Larger associations (5,000 or more members) tend to perform better in this area, which may be due to the level of resources required to engage in global data gathering. Participating associations received boosts to their maturity levels by having a data-driven strategy in place for entering and growing in international markets, leveraging internal customer data to drive decisions, and possessing thorough information on international member and customer satisfaction.

The strongest attribute on average in the market insight section was informed product strategy. This refers to the degree to which associations formulate their strategy for entering and growing in international markets based on information gathered from in-market sources (including local leaders, members/customers, market research and intelligence). Association leaders know that some level of insight and research in their international markets is necessary for effective strategy, as opposed to making blind decisions. While this attribute earned higher scores than others in this section, only 37 percent agreed that the ideal describes them “completely” or “mostly,” earning it a low average maturity for all surveyed associations overall.

The participants’ least mature area was related to their commitment to the ongoing gathering of insight in local markets. It is understandable that associations are less mature on this attribute, as local intelligence can be costly to collect (especially if operating in several markets), making it difficult for associations to secure the necessary funds and resources for ongoing tracking.

## **Value Proposition and Engagement Model**

The study section on value proposition and engagement models examined the degree to which associations have planned for how to deliver their services, how to segment members/customers in international markets, and how to price their services accordingly. This area is important to long-term success because it shows that an association recognizes and responds to the great diversity that exists from one international market to another, and within individual markets; just as a “one size fits all” approach does not work in the United States, the need for differentiation is even greater when operating in multiple countries. Association efforts around global value propositions and engagement models made this the third most developed area for participants, with a mean maturity score of 41 that reflects a developing stage of maturity.

The participating associations were most mature in their efforts to define their processes for international markets to make it easy for members and customers to use their services. In ensuring the ease of doing business in foreign markets, associations ensure that all current and potential members/customers are able to easily join, renew their membership, buy products, and interact with the association. Associations may be most

mature in this area because they recognize the criticality of ensuring members and customers can transact. While ease of doing business is the most mature area overall for associations, with 41 percent agreeing that it describes them “completely” or “mostly,” 71 percent of mature associations reported operating at this stage.

The area with the lowest level of maturity concerns having a tailored pricing strategy for the international markets in which the association operates; in this area, the associations are at the nascent stage, on average. Many associations may decide to introduce domestic pricing structures in international markets when first launching products and services, viewing this as a leaner approach that saves them resources in the moment. Developing a tailored pricing strategy for each international market also requires conducting research on how the association should tailor their pricing, which can be difficult for some associations to finance. In the end, associations can maximize market penetration and revenue if they take the time to adapt their pricing to account for differences in price sensitivity, which may include tailored bundles and packages.

## **Global Organization, Roles, and Support**

Key to any global effort is ensuring that activities are properly supported, either internally by staff or externally through partnerships. The section on global organization, roles, and support assessed the degree to which participating associations planned their strategies for operating internationally, and whether they empower their partners and/or staff in local markets by involving them in decision making and planning. Management of the global organization, including roles and support is the second least developed area for associations, with study participants earning a mean maturity score of 38 that reflects a nascent stage of maturity.

Of the five attributes under this section, participating associations were most mature in their engagement strategy differentiation. This encapsulates the degree to which associations tailor their strategy for engaging members/customers in international markets. Association leaders realize that in order to successfully enter and grow in international markets, their engagement strategy has to be relevant to the unique norms, culture, and business conditions of new markets. For example, some markets may require a high level of personal interaction, even when peers in the United States prefer more hands-off modes. While engagement strategy differentiation is the most mature area overall for participating associations, with 34 percent agreeing that it describes them “completely” or “mostly,” 67 percent of the mature associations are at this level of maturity in this area.

The least mature area for participants was empowerment of local management. Associations that are new to international operations might struggle to define when management in local markets could and should make executive decisions. Some

associations might also strategically choose to filter all decision through headquarters to ensure continuity. However, this approach can be detrimental, as there is a risk of members/customers not receiving enough timely local support and for decisions from headquarters not being relevant or customized enough for local market needs.

## **Local Operations and Service Delivery Capacity**

Local operations and service delivery capacity refers to the degree to which associations have planned their practical execution of their international operations and how they have adapted their approach to service delivery in those markets. While the previous sections relate to mindset, culture, and strategy, this area is of utmost importance because it involves putting in place an efficient and scalable operation, addressing capacity, partners, channels and communication. This was the worst performance area for participating associations, with a mean maturity score of 37 that reflects a nascent stage of maturity.

Within this area, associations were most mature in their market access through partners and in minimizing redundancy between local market and headquarters capabilities. Strong partnerships, which could include other associations, governments, vendors, etc., are an efficient tool for entering new markets and provide valuable knowledge and access. While market access through partners is the most mature area overall for associations, with 43 percent agreeing that it describes them “completely,” or “mostly,” 67 percent of mature associations are at this level of maturity on this attribute.

The least mature area is in the degree to which marketing communications are customized to international markets. Initially, an association might decide to deploy their communications directly from the headquarters to all of their international markets as a strategic decision to free up resources that could be used in other areas such as hiring local staff. However, this approach to communication risks alienating audiences in international markets with messaging that lacks relevancy and fails to meet the degree of customization local audiences would expect in content, delivery and language.

### **To achieve global maturity, organizations must be advancing toward maturity in each of the seven component sections.**

Not every association is at full maturity in every attribute—each association has different priorities and missions, and few associations are fully mature across all seven sections. However, the research pointed to a number of key characteristics of mature associations. Across all seven component sections, certain attributes stood out as those most commonly pursued by mature associations. In the section below, definitions of how mature associations operate in each component section are included alongside particularly common attributes of mature associations from the research study. These examples provide a peek at how globally mature associations are making strides in foreign markets and insight as to how others can achieve greater success.

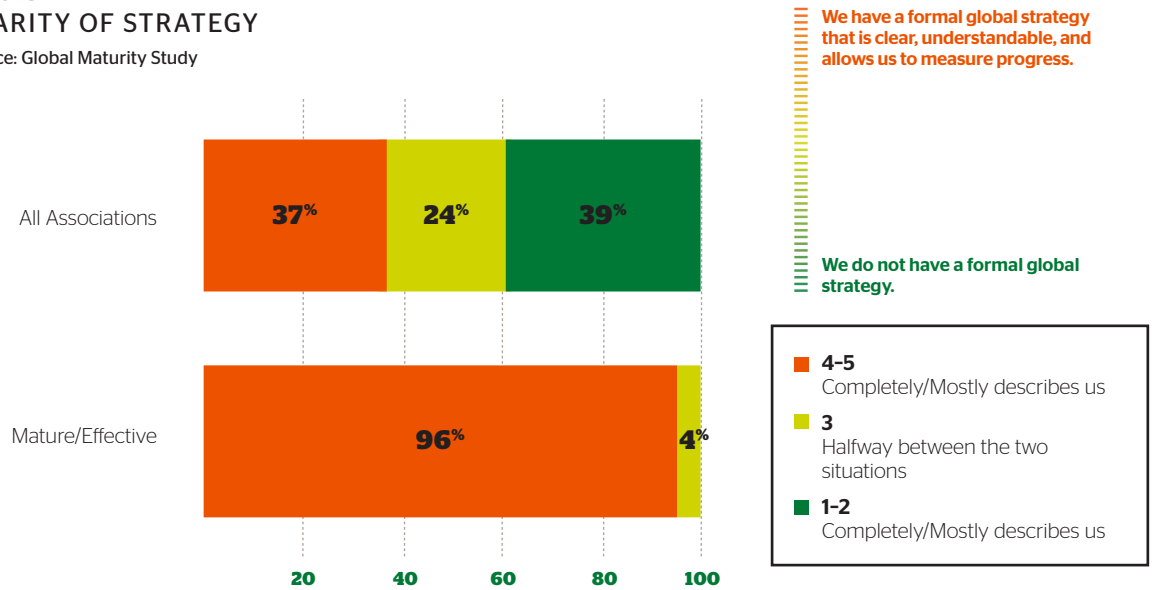
#### **Strategic and Business Planning**

To be considered mature in global strategic and business planning, associations must have a clear global strategy that aligns with the mission and values of their association as a whole. Their leaders make strategic decisions that are proactive, data-driven, and involve methodical financial and risk analysis. They also have realistic expectations about the time horizon to achieve global success and financial viability.

A clear and measurable strategy is key to global success because it is a prerequisite to effective execution and necessary for gauging progress, so it is no surprise that the mature associations in the study excelled in the clarity of their global strategy. These associations indicated they have a clear, understandable, formal global strategy that allows the association to measure progress. Almost all mature associations said that they have such a strategy (96 percent), while only 37 percent of all respondents reported being at this level of maturity (Figure 7).

**figure 7**  
CLARITY OF STRATEGY

Source: Global Maturity Study



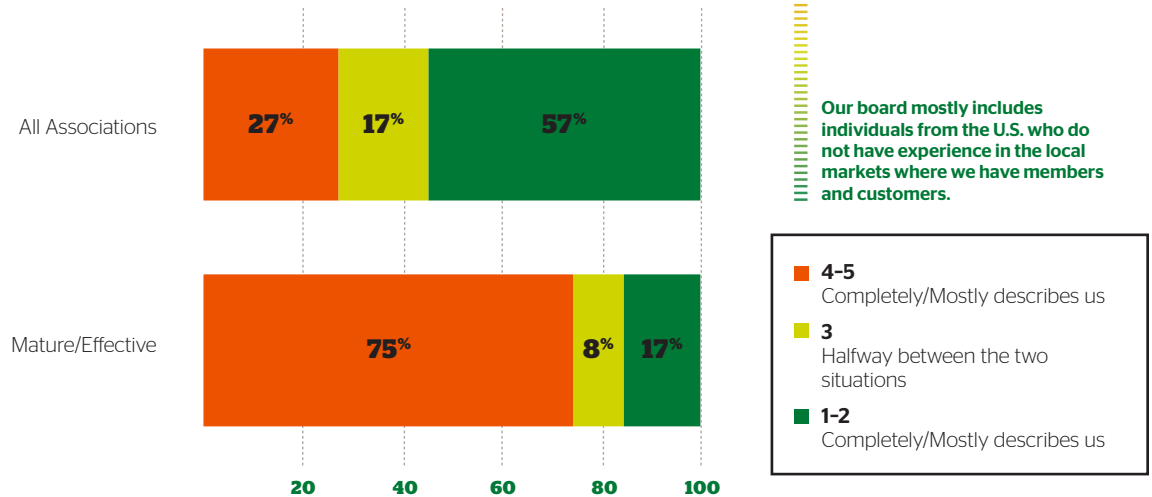
## Management and Organizational Culture

Associations mature in management and organizational culture have paid staff at all levels with experience doing business in an international, multicultural context. These associations exhibit readiness at the top, with boards that have broad-based international experience, formal requirements on international experience for their boards, and a culture that is inclusive to global perspectives and avoids excessive focus on a single market. Such organizations leverage diversity as a strength rather than allowing differences to inhibit growth and problem solving.

Having board members who can draw upon experience in local markets ensures a global perspective in decision-making, while avoiding the risk of poor decisions due to a bias toward one specific market. According to the study, mature associations were particularly likely to have leaders with a global perspective. Board members at these associations have experience in local markets or are based in local markets where the association operates. Seventy-five percent of mature associations tend to have or be close to having this representation in their board, compared to only 27 percent of associations in general (Figure 8).

**figure 8**  
LEADERSHIP GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Source: Global Maturity Study



## Leadership Engagement

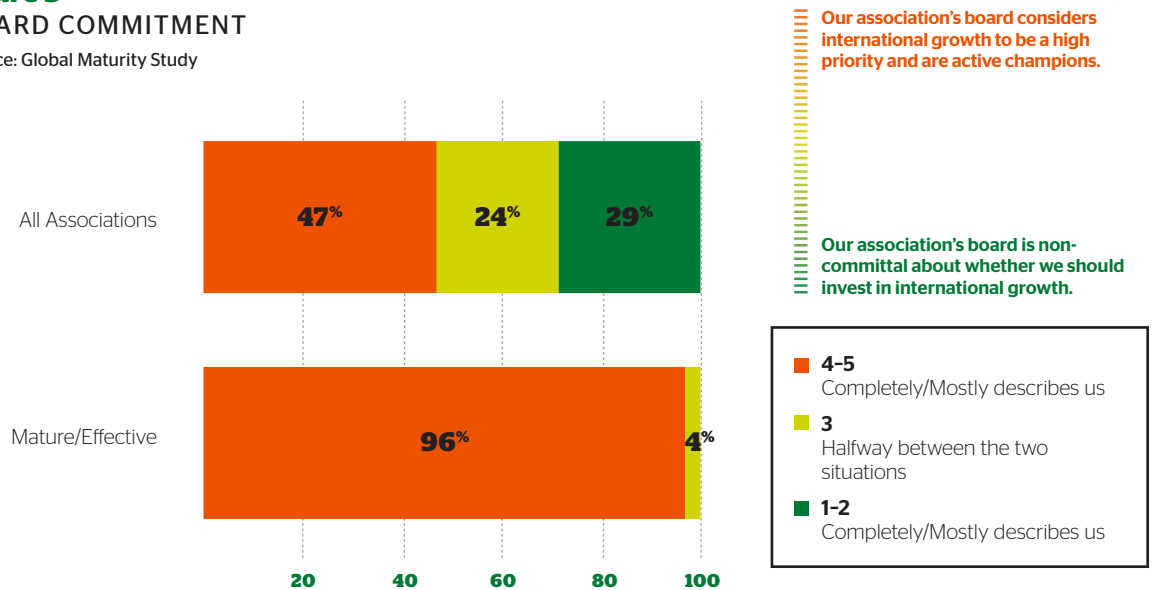
Associations mature in leadership engagement have secured buy-in and support for global development from their leadership, specifically the board. Leaders from these associations are able to communicate this commitment to the association staff and membership effectively, and in fact serve as champions for global growth and development.

Board commitment is key to securing consistent support for global operations across the association and ensuring continuous investment in global growth. In the study findings, mature associations were particularly successful in fostering or building boards that consider international growth a high priority. Almost all mature associations have secured this commitment from their board (96 percent mostly or completely agree), while only 47 percent of associations in general report this level of maturity (Figure 9).



**figure 9**  
**BOARD COMMITMENT**

Source: Global Maturity Study



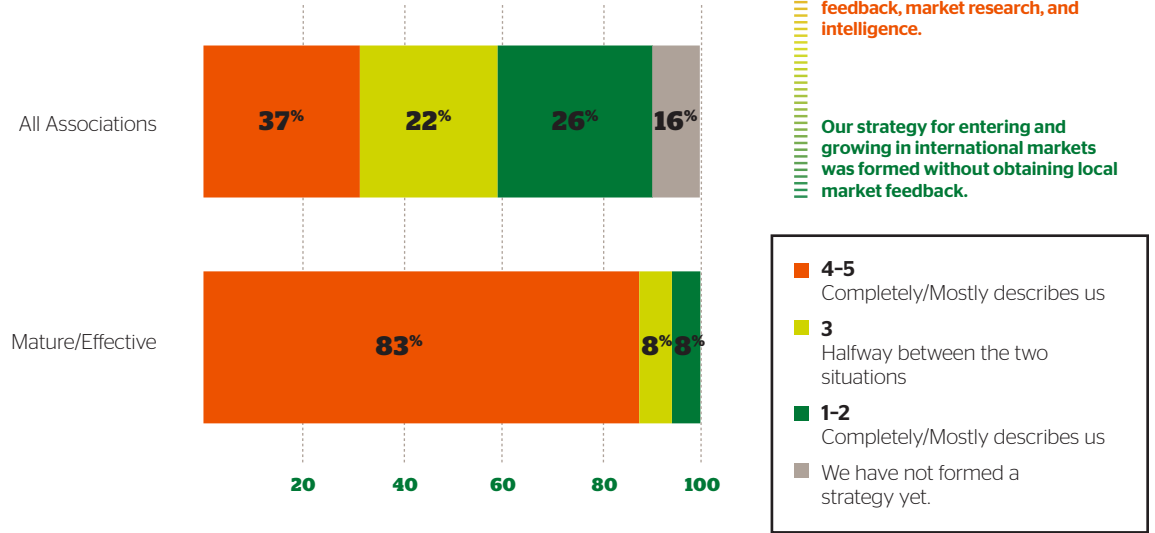
## Market Insight

Associations that are mature in market insight are committed gathering and analyzing data about customers and collecting insights from member/customer audiences and local leaders to understand their international markets. They also customize their approach to foreign markets to ensure local relevance, relying on data to inform these decisions.

Understanding the markets you plan to enter is a key first step regardless of how far along you are in your planning. The creation and maintenance of an informed product strategy was the highest ranked attribute for all associations under market insight, and this attribute happens to be the one where the mature associations excel the most compared to associations in general. Eighty-three percent of mature associations rating themselves highly in this area (Figure 10). Mature associations are most likely to have a strategy but also to have ensured that it builds on data from the ground.

**figure 10**  
**INFORMED PRODUCT STRATEGY**

Source: Global Maturity Study



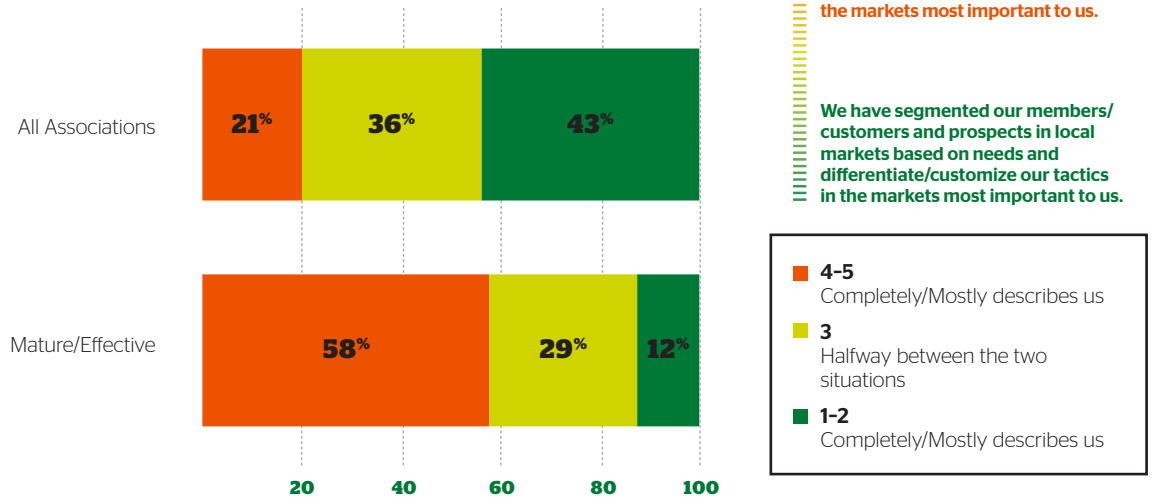
## Value Proposition and Engagement Model

Associations with mature value propositions and engagement models have customized their services and pricing to be relevant to the conditions of the international markets in which they operate. That is, they know their markets and adjust products, services, and pricing to those markets.

Compared to the other survey participants, mature associations are much more tuned in to market segmentation within local markets to develop accurate value propositions and engagement models. These organizations invest time and energy to segment international members and customers and use this segmentation to customize tactics in the most important markets. More than half of mature associations have this capability (58 percent), while only 21 percent of all participants would agree (Figure 11). It is understandable that more mature associations are more equipped with segmentation as the groundwork can be costly, especially for associations in the beginning stages of international expansion.

**figure 11**  
**MARKET SEGMENTATION WITHIN LOCAL MARKETS**

Source: Global Maturity Study



We have segmented our members/ customers and prospects in local markets based on needs and differentiate/customize our tactics in the markets most important to us.

We have segmented our members/ customers and prospects in local markets based on needs and differentiate/customize our tactics in the markets most important to us.

## Global Operations, Roles, and Support

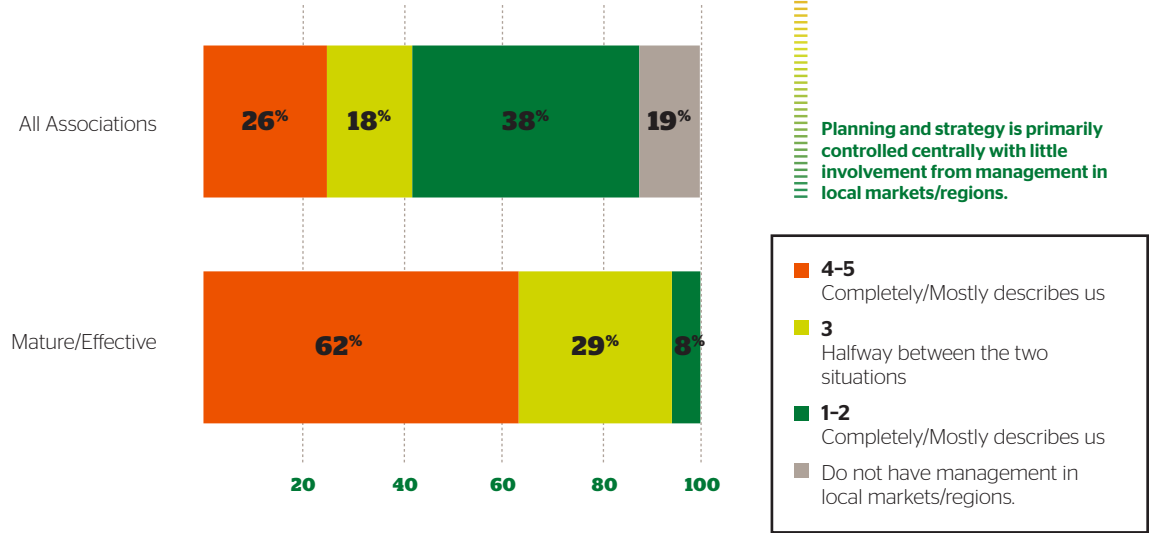
Associations that are mature in global operations, roles, and support have clear roles for their international staff, partners, and volunteers, a tailored engagement strategy for each market they operate in, and involve their in-country staff and partners in planning and decision making. Mature organizations avoid a centralized, top-down approach to decisions, strategy and engagement, since such an approach in an international environment would hinder the quality of decisions, support, and implementation inside markets.

Within the study, mature associations were more likely than other participants to maintain centralization in their planning, ensuring that their management in international markets is involved in planning and strategy. Nearly two thirds of mature associations regularly involve management from international markets in planning and strategy (62 percent), while only 26 percent of associations in general agree with this statement (Figure 12). This step might be particularly challenging for associations that were previously national in focus. Leaders of associations that were previously U.S.-based but now striving to become truly “global” will need to implement significant change. This change would include internal restructuring and changes in management culture in order to involve international market management in planning and strategy.

**figure 12**

**CENTRALIZATION OF PLANNING**

Source: Global Maturity Study



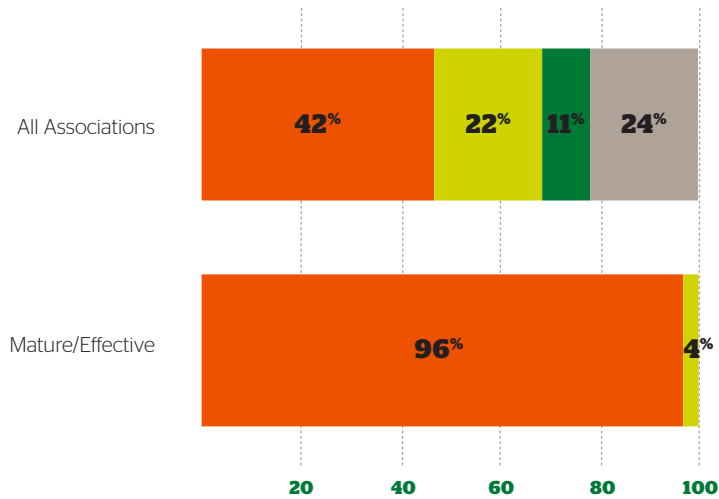
**Local Operations and Service Delivery Capacity**

Associations that are mature in local operations and service delivery capacity have resources to research, analyze, and plan how they should adapt their operations in the markets they operate. These associations have also customized their approach to fit each market.

One standout statistic from this section: Mature associations excel compared to other study participants in local resource redundancy. Nearly all mature associations' local market capabilities complement the operations of their headquarters (96 percent), while only 42 percent of associations in general agree that they are at a similar state of maturity (Figure 13). Success in this area may come from experience, though. Organizations that have been making global efforts for several years or more would have had more time to see how markets respond, products and services develop, and harmonize how their local markets and headquarters work together to avoid overlap and conflict.

**figure 13**  
**LOCAL RESOURCE REDUNDANCY**

Source: Global Maturity Study



Our local market capabilities (e.g., volunteers, partners, paid staff) complement the capabilities of our headquarters without overlap or conflict.

Our local market capabilities (e.g., volunteers, partners, paid staff) overlap or conflict with our headquarters capabilities (or we are uncertain).

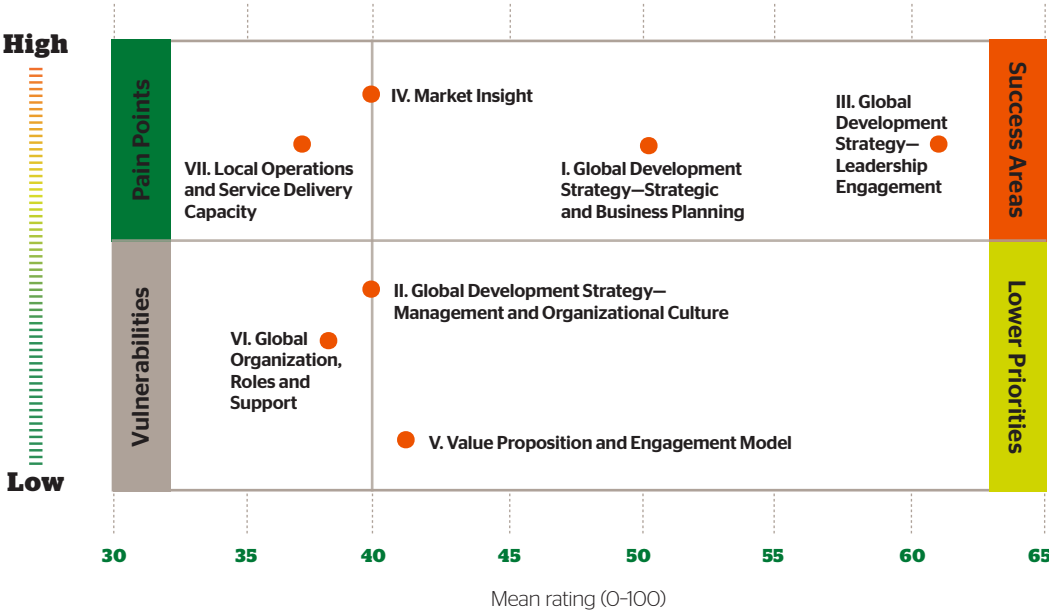
- **4-5**  
Completely/Mostly describes us
- **3**  
Halfway between the two situations
- **1-2**  
Completely/Mostly describes us
- We have no local market capabilities.

Ultimately, the Global Maturity Study shed light on key areas of improvement for those in the association sector who wish to improve their organization’s global maturity.

Figure 14 reveals how organizations might prioritize the different component sections by plotting the seven global maturity areas according to overall maturity score and importance to driving success. These priorities were determined by comparing the importance of that section (reflective of the relative degree to which the category drives leadership satisfaction with global operations or expansion, used for developing the weight of each category noted in Figure 1) to the mean maturity score for that section.

Some areas are relative strengths for the sector because they are both important and exhibit a high level of performance. Leadership engagement is a notable example of this. However, two areas can be classified as pain points because performance is lower but they are high in importance: market insight and local operations and service capacity. Even though these are important drivers of satisfaction, they are challenging for associations because of the extensive commitments required to collect information and to establish on the ground capacity.

**figure 14**  
**IMPORTANCE AND SECTOR-WIDE SUCCESS OF GLOBAL MATURITY ASSESSMENT AREAS**  
 Source: Global Maturity Study



While every association will have different needs, association leaders should give the highest priority to shoring up local operations and service delivery capacity and market insight. These are typically weak areas across the sector but have strong influence on satisfaction with global efforts.

In the area of local operations and service delivery capacity, top challenges include building member and customer engagement, focusing on local business operations, and cultivating business development capacity. Associations with mature member and customer engagement maintain marketing and communications processes that are appropriately decentralized to ensure local relevance. These approaches include use of local language and preferred local communication tools and practices. Local business operations maturity proceeds from hands-on details such as revenue collection and taxes in local international markets. Business development capacity becomes mature by installing international sales and business development resources locally and regionally.

Market insight is another challenging area. Associations particularly struggle to maintain an ongoing (continuing) commitment to insights gathering. Leaders looking to tackle this area should understand that important data collection could take many forms, including competitive intelligence, market research, market scans, and partner analysis. Another area of opportunity is member/customer insight gathering in key global markets. Between the two, a “continual” commitment is more challenging because it requires investing resources in an ongoing fashion.

In addition to the top priorities, association leaders should be aware of other less urgent but no less important challenges for global organizations. Chief among these might be the building of a management and organizational culture that supports global expansion, an area that will affect an organization's ability to tackle every other concern. Leaders should consider cultivating a global orientation, meaning the association leverages its presence across its various international markets, building a true synergy from its diversity and not biased towards certain markets—even the American market. Another area that will affect the association's efforts across the board is strategic and business planning and, in particular, the formulation of clear and differentiated value propositions for each market that addresses the competition in each market.

## **The association sector has arrived at an exciting moment.**

While associations remain a vital part of American professional and business culture, interest in association membership, products, and services across the globe are creating new opportunities. Even associations with long histories as specifically American organizations are compelled to respond to opportunities and requests for their offerings abroad.

Such a moment also invites reflection. The associations that participated in the Global Maturity Study created a portrait of a group that is developing global reach but is not yet established, at least not to the extent that it wishes to be. While leaders and members are perceived to be satisfied with organizational progress, key areas of opportunity remain. In particular, defining and differentiating new markets and customizing approaches in them will be a challenge for association leaders as they look to turn such markets from opportunities to bases.

Associations are headed in the right direction, however, and leaders are prioritizing smart first steps. Perhaps the most telling statistic is the relatively high performance of associations with regard to leadership engagement. Association leaders have gotten their staff and elected leaders bought in to their organizations' international efforts. That is the first hurdle to any international effort and, once it is cleared, the road becomes open to every other step.

It is never a bad time to take stock of one's progress. Even leaders of organizations that have operated successfully on a global scale for years should routinely examine their state of global maturity to identify additional opportunities or areas of potential improvement. For the many others who have been working internationally for only a few years or are just beginning the journey, international expansion offers many challenges but also exciting possibilities for transforming the culture, shoring up resources, and increasing the value for members in all markets, including the United States.

For more in-depth guidance, ASAE's Global Maturity Assessment takes assessment purchasers through the Global Maturity Study survey. Purchasers then receive a customized report that breaks down organizational performance compared to the study participant pool for each of the seven component sections, providing the organization with specific direction toward global maturity.