



PCMA CONVENE

**COVID-19 SURVEY**

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# How is COVID-19 changing the business events industry?

**Survey and analysis by PCMA *Convene* editors**

Charts and design by Point Five



PCMA CONVENE

# COVID-19 SURVEY

The COVID-19 pandemic has, as we all know, hit the business events industry with unprecedented force. To get a sense of how business events professionals are responding, PCMA sent out an email invitation on April 1 to its database of event planners and suppliers to participate in a survey on the coronavirus' effect on them, their organizations, and their events. The link to participate was also included in PCMA newsletters and on social media.

A total of 1,776 people responded to the survey over five days; 69 percent (1,230 individuals) identified as business event professionals. Their results can be found on pp. 2–8 of this report. Thirty-one percent of respondents (546 individuals) identified as suppliers serving business events professionals. You'll find supplier track responses on pp. 9–11.

While the survey results provide critical insights about the impact of the coronavirus on the business events industry, we are mindful that it doesn't accurately represent the ensuing heavy job loss. Since the email invitation to participate in the survey was sent to work email addresses PCMA has on file, it makes sense that the vast majority of those who responded said that they were still employed.

While there is no denying the toll COVID-19 has already taken on the industry, it is a testament to the resilience of the professionals who make up the business events industry that so many who responded to this survey were using this time as an opportunity to reset — to rethink a future in which digital events are an important part of the knowledge-sharing and connection-making mix, to plan for how in-person events can assuage concerns about the spread of germs in a post-pandemic world, and to redraw their value proposition.

## What best describes your profession?



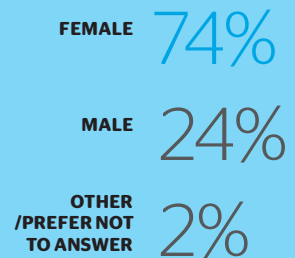
- 69%** Business events professional
- 31%** Supplier serving business events professionals

## What is your age?



- 8%** 20-29
- 25%** 30-39
- 26%** 40-49
- 28%** 50-59
- 13%** 60 or older

## What is your preferred gender identity?



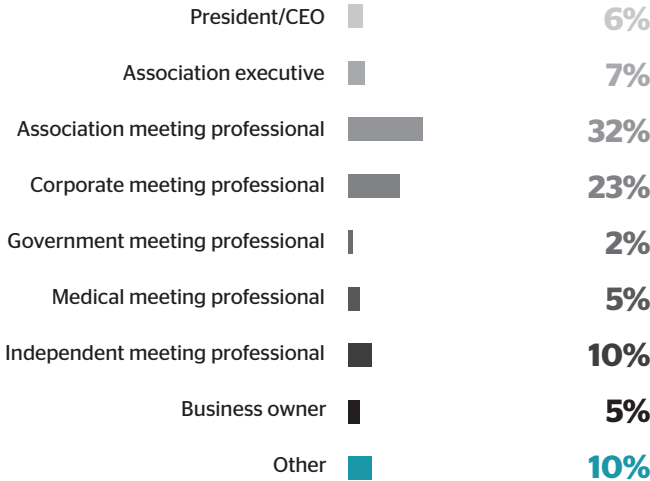
## How many years of business event management experience do you have?



- 11%** 1-5
- 17%** 6-10
- 31%** 11-20
- 41%** More than 20

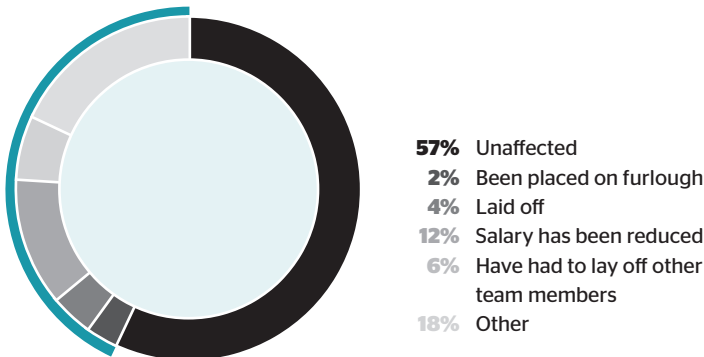


What best describes your current role?



Other responses include nonprofit event and engagement manager, higher education professional, event marketing professional, business development, project manager, incentive house, intermediary (site selection and contract negotiation), creative director, experiential agency, innovation strategy consultant, sponsorship and exhibitor sales.

If you work for an organization, how has your employment been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?



Since the email survey invitation was sent primarily to work addresses, the percentage of “laid off” responses skews very low. Most who answered “other” said that they are now working remotely, and a number mentioned financial impact in the form of pay cuts, reduced hours, and loss of commissions/annual salary increase/bonus/401K match. Others said that their job duties have changed.

### Independent and Third-Party Planners: Short-Term Expectations



**Three months:** Planners reported that events for the next three months are canceled or postponed, with the exception of a handful of events scheduled for late June or in July. And a majority of planners who were working were busy, juggling cancellations, insurance questions, and rebooking, and many were actively moving planned events online.



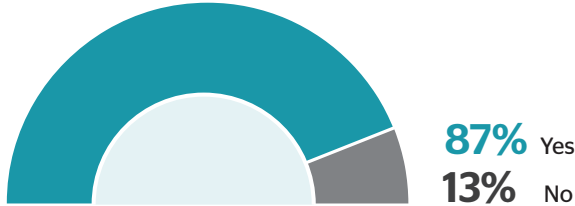
**Six months:** There was much less consensus about whether meetings would be canceled the further out planners looked. Some were optimistic that face-to-face events would begin picking up again, particularly in September and into the fall — many respondents reported plans to switch meetings to virtual formats. Estimates of the loss in business ranged widely, from near-total loss to predictions that business would rebound by 50 percent.



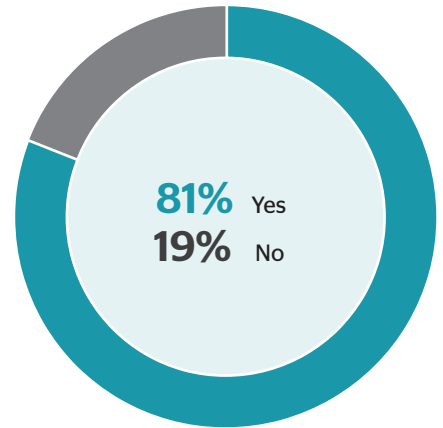
**Rest of 2020:** There was more optimism that events face-to-face events might be held in Q4, particularly small, domestic meetings, while others were looking toward 2021. There was a strong expectation from many that virtual elements would be part of planning going forward.



Have you canceled any events as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?



Has this pandemic changed the way you will handle contracts and insurance going forward?



### Timing of Cancellations



**When canceled events were scheduled:** Event cancellations as reported by respondents were minimal in February, but then exploded the following month, with events planned for March, April, May, and June seeing the largest numbers of cancellations. Through the rest of the year, cancellations — so far — drop off. However, several respondents said that their events — sometimes dozens of them — have been canceled through 2020, and some reported already canceling 2021 events.

**When canceled and why:** Again, March was the pivotal month, with respondents saying it was when they decided to cancel. Some respondents indicated that early in the month, clients had

still been hesitant to cancel or postpone.

**Reasons for canceling include:** Travel and gathering bans, social-distancing requirements, heavy attendee cancellations, attendee worry and fear, fear of putting employees at risk, hotel pressure about the room block, leadership directives, hotel closings, the decision by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, force majeure going into effect, employees being laid off, and the World Health Organization’s pandemic declaration. For an event canceled on March 12, the respondent said: “100 people dropped out of the meeting in one day.”

The vast majority of those who answered “yes” indicated that they will be more specific with the wording of their contract language in the future — specifically, surrounding cancellations and what unforeseen circumstances the force majeure clause covers. One respondent noted that they will make sure the force majeure clause considers not only where the event takes place, but also where attendees are coming from to attend the event.

“Everything will be read with the COVID-19 pandemic in mind. I’ll remember that things can change quickly,” one respondent said.

A few respondents mentioned that they will consider reducing room blocks in the future to prevent losses. “Either lower room blocks or more allowable slippage being offered — at least 30-percent allowable or I won’t book the hotel,” one respondent said.

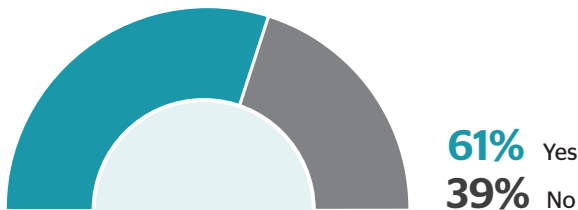




Have you postponed any events as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?



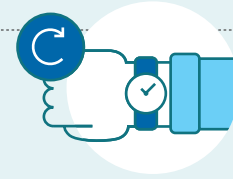
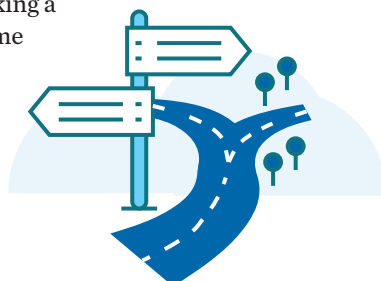
Are you in the midst of deciding whether to cancel or postpone an upcoming event?



What is the date it is scheduled to be held and when are you planning to make a final decision?

Most of the respondents who were in the midst of deciding had an event scheduled in June, followed by July. There were 53 events still in the balance for May, and dozens were deciding about events in August, September, and even October. Twenty-five respondents were unsure about their events in November and December.

The majority of respondents said they would be deciding the fate of those events this month, and more than a dozen said “ASAP.” Respondents were almost evenly split between not knowing when they would be making a decision and calling it in May. Some said they were waiting until they could find new workable dates to announce postponing the event.



### Timing of Postponed Events

**When postponed events were scheduled:** Most of the events postponed were scheduled in March, April, and May — 75 percent of postponed events were to be held during those months. Far fewer June events — less than 10 percent — were postponed. Fifteen percent of respondents postponed events scheduled from June through the end of the year.

**When events were postponed:** Most survey respondents who postponed events did so in of March, with a large number making the decision in mid-March.

**Timing for rescheduled events:** More than 25 percent have yet to determine dates for scheduled meetings. “We are waiting to see when things will come back to normal,” one respondent said.

Of those who had rebooked, fall was the most-often reported new meeting timeframe — more than 25 percent of respondents have rescheduled their events in September or later. Fifteen respondents reported rebooking events in 2021.



### Making Meetings Virtual

Twenty-two percent of respondents added or planned elements to their virtual events that were not listed in the survey. Most common was a virtual expo or exhibit – dozens of respondents reported already incorporating that feature or actively looking for a virtual expo platform.

#### Other additions included:

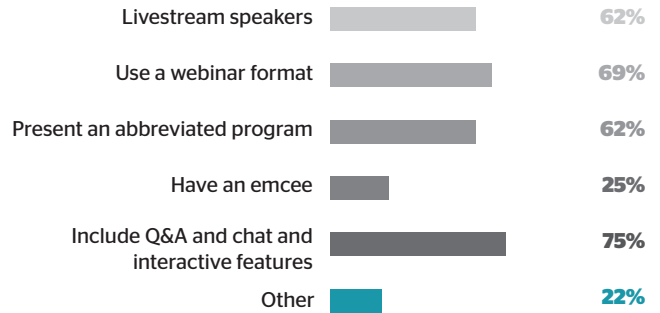
- Peer coaching – enabling attendees to chat in small groups over a number of weeks.
- Sending gift bags to all registrants – including a dessert to be consumed en masse to end an event
- Creating a closed Facebook group – to create a sense of community
- Virtual networking lounge – as well as happy hours and round tables.
- Podcasts featuring speakers
- A virtual poster library on the event website – including the Kubify ePoster platform
- KUDO for simultaneous translation, and adding language subtitles on existing online education
- Spreading event content out over a longer period of time
- Combining different platforms for different types of educational content
- A virtual awards ceremony
- A quiz with instant results for certification



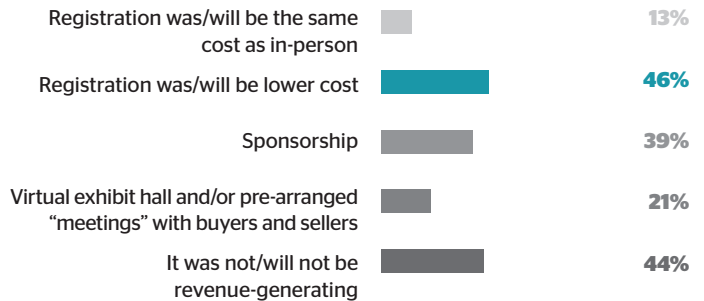
Did you or will you move your face-to-face event to a virtual platform?



For this virtual event, did you or will you: (check all that apply)

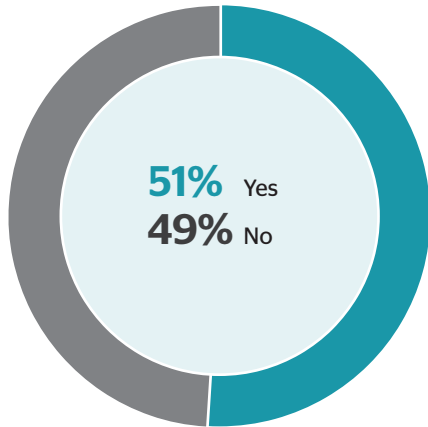


How did you or will you monetize the virtual event? (check all that apply)

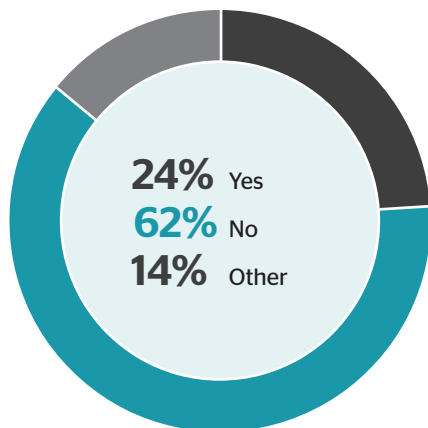




Were you or will you be able to collect data from your virtual attendees that you're not able to collect on site?



Do you worry that digital events will cannibalize face-to-face events in the future?



### Will Virtual Events Cannibalize F2F? It's Complicated.

Respondents said no, by a wide margin, when asked if virtual events would cannibalize face to face. But 14 percent saw it as something other than a yes-or-no question. Here's what they had to say:

*"We know historically digital events do not, but in 2020, we are worried our digital event will cannibalize our October F2F citywide, because of lingering fear and doubt."*

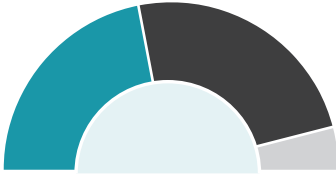
*"F2F will return, but with a need to better incorporate digital in what were previously F2F only events."*

*"I think the explosion of online events will make associations think about what other types of education they might offer in this format, or how they may supplement their in-person events with online content."*

*"Virtual conferences are here to stay. Expos no. The tech isn't there yet."*



Have you revised your event budget/revenue projections for 2020?



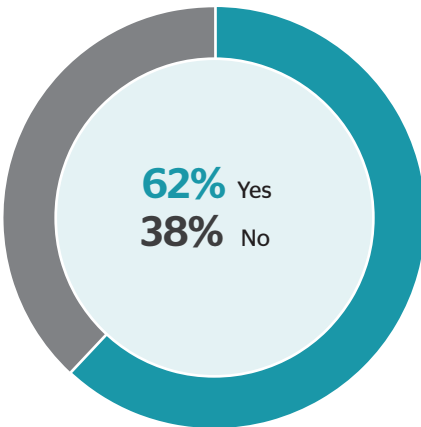
**9%** No, we do not plan to change our budget/revenue projections.

**48%** No, we have not yet made changes to our budget/revenue projections but plan to do so.

**43%** Yes, we have decreased our budget/revenue projections by X percent.

Revised event budget and revenue projections for 2020 go from less than 10 percent to 100 percent, with the biggest number of reported cuts in the 20- to 50-percent range.

Have you considered or have you started reskilling (developing other skill sets) as a result of this unprecedented business disruption?



**Eleven percent more planners than suppliers** said that they were thinking or had already begun developing other skills (see p. 10).

### 'This May Allow/Force Me to Reconsider My Career Choices'

The majority of planners answered "yes" to this question: **Have you considered or have you started re-skilling as a result of this unprecedented business disruption?**

Nearly 300 of 490 respondents said that relevance starts with mastering virtual meetings and digital technologies and they are currently re-skilling by studying digital events and online engagement strategies.

Other respondents mentioned crisis management, legal expertise with contracts, and marketing skills are areas where they would like to expand their knowledge. Some

respondents expressed concerns about their long-term prospects. Worries about when a return to meetings will happen have some considering leaving the events industry altogether. Independent business owners are feeling the most stress right now, with one writing in: "I will have to find a way to make some income, and I don't think there will be much work available in 2020."

One respondent wrote: "This may allow/force me to reconsider my career choices." Another was further along that path, "trying to see what other industries my skill set can be applied to."

### Uncertain Territory

Answers to the question **What has been your biggest challenge professionally and at your organization during the pandemic?** fell into the following main buckets: dealing with the loss of income or revenue; uncertainty preventing their ability to plan "intelligently"; communication issues; difficulty convincing leadership of the need to pivot to digital; canceling events and managing contracts, damages, and payments; getting a handle on producing a virtual event; managing their teams, particularly during this time of stress and uncertainty; and navigating the possibility of having to change their own roles in the wake of event cancellations.





### Time to Reset

We asked event organizers: **If you were to think of this pause-on-events period as a chance to reset/rethink/reboot your next event, what would you do differently or how would you start fresh?**

Not surprisingly, an overwhelming majority of respondents said they would be focusing more on virtual events. That included online-only events going forward and planning a virtual component or hybrid program at their face-to-face events. As one respondent said: “I’d incorporate a virtual component from the beginning. Don’t play catch up — refocus energy to something you’ve already built rather than scramble to reinvent the wheel.”

The next most-popular response went in the opposite direction: to start from scratch and really dig in to the in-person event to make it more interactive, experiential, relevant, and to provide stronger content and rethink the format. One respondent shared that they were starting to think in terms of “If I were to create a brand-new event to compete against my event, what would that event look like?”

Considering how respondents were reeling from recent world events, a large number said that it was too soon for them to figure out what comes next. Many, however, dealing with the ramifications of canceled and postponed events, said they would be revisiting their organization’s event insurance,

contracts, and room block agreements, as well as their crisis, contingency, and risk-assessment plans.

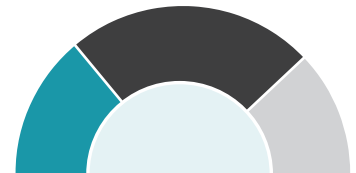
Another repeated response was that they were using this time to focus on internal improvements, specifically on collaborating with other teams and making processes more efficient and streamlining expenses.

For future events, a good number of respondents said they would be more stringent about sanitary practices at venues, especially for F&B. Others said that they would be looking at how to make attending their events more affordable.

The sentiment of using this as a time to reset resonated. “This will force our organization to limit and prioritize the most needed content and do away with the idea that attendees just ‘have to come’ to our conference. It will reorient us all to the needs of attendees and to deliver content and create community and networking in new ways.”

Said another: “A silver lining to all of this is that it forced my whole organization to rethink our event design. I didn’t have to sell anyone on a new tool, because everyone is open to tech now. Professionally, I’m going to position myself as a project manager who can pull together in-person, hybrid, and virtual events because the principles are the same.”

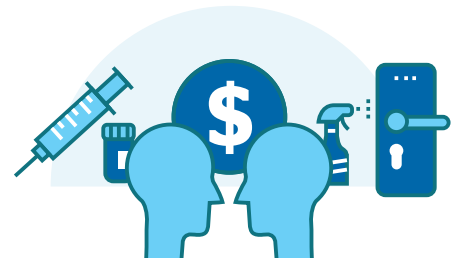
Do you anticipate that there will be a pent-up demand to meet face-to-face once the pandemic is behind us, or do you worry that people will still be concerned about close contact and the spread of germs and opt not to travel?



- 27%** There will be a pent-up demand to meet.
- 48%** People will be hesitant to travel.
- 25%** Other

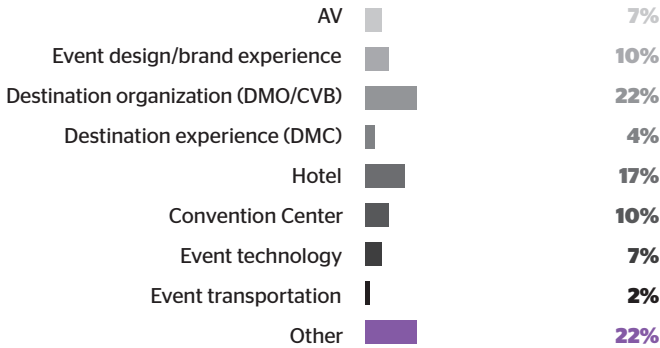
On this, planners and suppliers share very similar expectations – **28 percent of suppliers believe there will be a pent-up demand to meet and 44 percent think people will be hesitant to travel** (p. 11).

The vast majority of those who marked “other” said “both.” They cited economic issues impacting whether people could attend events, that it depended on if/when there is a vaccine, and that people would only feel comfortable if major changes were made to venues in terms of sanitary practices. “I have received emails from members saying they will not travel for a long time,” said one respondent, “and I have received emails literally saying they have never wanted to connect face-to-face with follow industry members more in their lives.”



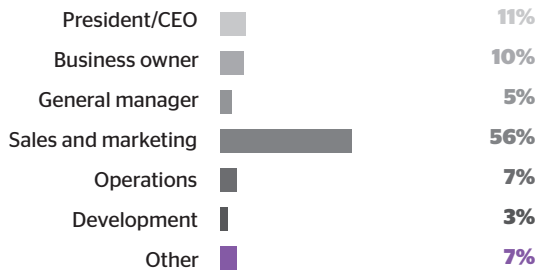


### What best describes your sector?



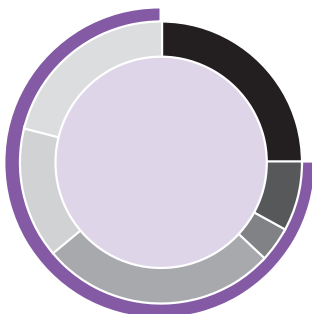
Respondents who checked “other” worked for non-hotel or non-convention center event venues, as general service contractors, for photography and videography companies, as speakers or entertainers, and in F&B.

### What best describes your role?



Respondents who checked “other” worked at the C-suite level and in managerial roles, or in event and client services.

### If you work for an organization, how has your employment been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?



- 25% Unaffected
- 8% Been placed on furlough
- 4% Laid off
- 27% Salary has been reduced
- 15% Have had to lay off other team members
- 21% Other

Since the email survey invitation was sent primarily to work addresses, the percentage of “laid off” responses skews very low.

### Suppliers' Short-Term Expectations

**Three months:** The near-term outlook is bleak. “All major meetings will be canceled,” one respondent wrote. Another expected to “reschedule and refund events and reduce marketing spend until market confidence increases.”

**Six months:** Suppliers are hopeful that business begins to return in this timeframe, but many remain cautious about what the landscape will look like. Here’s a handful of responses:

“Events and exhibitions start taking place, but at a smaller scale with emphasis on health checks at entrance points and cleaning hygiene.”

“Slowly and respectfully starting soft conversations and inspiring content; no hard sales.”

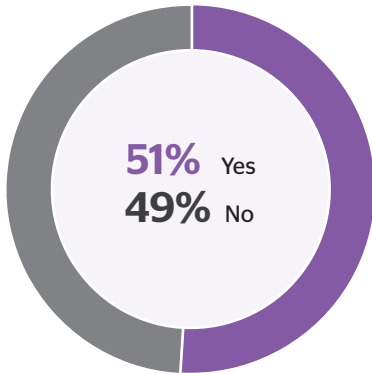
“Hopeful for return to events, assuming new distancing practices and food service standards will need to be implemented.”

“Fair amount of rebookings, but still fear in early fall.”

**Rest of 2020:** Mixed bag of predictions, but many respondents indicated that they are focused on the ability to begin to reengage event clients by Q4. Some hope that they can lay the groundwork for a successful 2021. There will be a “permanent change in contracts, attrition,” wrote one supplier, “and a complete change for how meetings are conducted.”

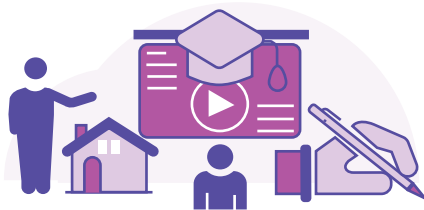


Have you considered or have you started reskilling (developing other skill sets) as a result of this unprecedented business disruption?



The need to develop other skill sets was emphasized by one supplier, who wrote: “We all need to be thinking about this topic. Live events as we know it has changed, indefinitely.”

Many said that they were spending time learning about new technology, particularly virtual and hybrid events. Some were using this time to study for the CMP, to brush up on contract and negotiation skills, and taking advantage of many available webinars to help provide direction. Several said that they are having to learn new jobs at their organizations to cover for their colleagues who have been laid off or furloughed. One respondent was looking for jobs outside of the industry “as this one takes the hardest hit always.”



### Suppliers’ Biggest Challenges Professionally, and Organization-Wide



The overwhelming majority of the nearly 400 responses to this question pointed to the loss of revenue or income — and expressed their concern for staff members, clients, partners, and industry colleagues who also are facing hard times. Two things stood out as particularly tough: planning for the future when so much is uncertain, and the difficulty in finding ways to support struggling clients, team members, and association members.

#### Some comments:

“It’s painful to see so many economically vulnerable people suffering doubly — being laid off/furloughed, unemployed, and being isolated and distanced from their professional and social networks.”

“It’s been very hard to see an industry I love and believe in becoming non-existent in a matter of weeks.”

“There’s obviously the complete loss of revenue from live events. But as we’ve pivoted, the big challenge (albeit an exciting one) is managing the extremely fast development and rollout of our new offerings.”

“Trying to keep afloat. Manage cash flow. [We] let almost 900 people go to protect the assets of the company.”

“Ensuring we will be able to reopen ... and grieving what was and the people no longer working with us.”

“Professionally, we have been trying to figure out the right messaging to support both our venue partners and clients during this difficult time in the events industry. Finding the right way to provide value and content without adding any clutter to the inboxes of our venue partners and clients.”

“Fear of coming to work, fear of not working, the uncertainties. Comforting staff and keeping them busy for as long as we can while practicing CDC guidelines.”

“Connecting with venues that have been shuttered. No way to support clients you can’t connect with.”

“Dealing with long-term clients that are also friends, that have paid deposits and their event canceled, and we are not in a position to refund deposits already paid and stay in business. All cash on hand has to be used to keep our doors open so we can get through this.”

“Instilling confidence in event organizers that virtual events can be as successful and meaningful as physical events.”



### 'Now That Complacency Has Been Disturbed'

The answers to this question — **If you were to think of this pause-on-business period as a chance to reset/rethink/reboot your role or your organization's strategy as it relates to the business events industry, what would you do differently or how would you start fresh?** — reflected the diversity of roles that supplier respondents play, ranging from event design to sustainability services to technology to convention center staff. Some suppliers said it was too early to plot a strategy, but the majority were adjusting their paths.

There was a common thread in many of their answers — the most often-cited place where they planned to make a strategic shift was in technology, adding or relying more heavily on digital tools, including videoconferencing AV, social-media marketing, and digital presentation skills. Additionally, many were planning to shift their focus to maintaining only high-quality personal and business relationships.

#### Here are some of their comments:

"Double down on the importance of digital engagement now that complacency has been disturbed."

"I hope it's not so important anymore that the congresses get bigger and bigger with live participants — most convention centers have their limits anyway — but

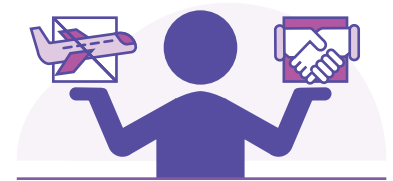
they rather grow in digital participants. Most important, let us all be human again, respect everyone, no one wants to harm anyone."

"Take an opportunity to sketch out the customer needs as they've evolved in the past five to 10 years, taking into account the changing global landscape."

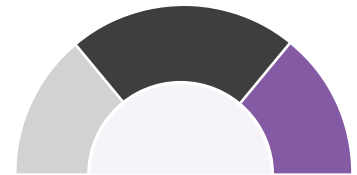
"Improved environmental sustainability, in the process of providing services."

"The hotel environment will change. It is time for organizers to understand there are actual costs to the value of services provided to them by suppliers. For years, supplier costs have been covered by receipt of hotel commissions. By doing this, the organizers have no true knowledge of the cost of these services."

"We are constantly trying to evolve as an industry, often big ideas are only slowed by the fact that we are operating daily. This is a time to reevaluate big ideas and if they are important, move fast to be ready to launch when the industry returns."



Based on what you know now, how do you foresee demand for face-to-face business events evolving over the next nine months?



- 28%** There will be a pent-up demand to meet.
- 44%** People will be hesitant to travel.
- 28%** Other

Most responses said a mix or both; a good number said that most will be hesitant initially but travel and attendance will pick up — some said in six to nine months, and others said 12-18 months. A handful said people will not feel comfortable traveling to events until there is a vaccine for COVID-19. Others said that while people may have a desire to travel, economic realities will make that difficult. "I foresee/hope," wrote one respondent, "that as the pandemic subsides people (organizers and attendees) will look forward to a resumption of business as usual. I do not think that there will be more meetings as a result of pent-up demand but from a social behavior perspective, I think the self-quarantine has reminded us that we are social animals and crave face-to-face communication. Live meetings will continue just as they always have alongside virtual meeting technology."

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