



# MEETINGS OUTLOOK™



*Industry professionals express growing optimism for 2021, along with acceptance of virtual/hybrid technology and its permanent place in the meeting landscape.*

2020 FALL EDITION

# In the **MIDST** of a **RECOVER**



## MEETINGS OUTLOOK™

By Michael Pinchera

**L**ast quarter saw the most negative business projections in the history of the *Meetings Outlook* survey. The saving grace then was hope, optimism and the knowledge that meeting professionals excel at thinking on their feet.

The latest survey results, however, actually show a sizable shift in business projections over the next year, suggesting a perception, at least, that the industry has or will soon be turning a corner (albeit, with some major medical developments necessary before business can truly take off again). More than 58 percent of respondents expect favorable business conditions over the next year, with 34 percent anticipating a negative landscape. Compare that to the results from last quarter's survey (36 percent favorable, 59 percent negative) and we clearly see a polar shift.

"I believe that 2021 will start out pretty much virtual with some hybrid events. Hopefully, a vaccine will be tested and widely distributed by the end of 2020 or early next year," says Timothy Neill (MPI Oregon Chapter), sales manager, AV Rental Services. "Even when this happens, there will be reluctance to resume meeting in person, especially in large groups. Based on this, I believe all of 2021 will be hybrid, with the ratio of in-person versus virtual attendees slowly transitioning to more in-person."

"It will be better than 2020, but nowhere close to returning to

pre-pandemic levels," Neill believes. "Things will pick up throughout the year and I'm predicting back to 75-80 percent of pre-pandemic levels by the end of the year."

Despite the promising projections, the majority of respondents (65 percent) believe business won't return to pre-coronavirus levels until 2022 or 2023.

Lest you think this data means everything is guaranteed to soon get back to whatever you think normal looks like, understand that the trajectory of this pandemic has vexed even top virologists. Respondents admit that through the ups and downs of 2020, they, too, expected the situation would have already started to improve.

"Back in March, I felt that we would have it under control and be back to normal events by the beginning of 2021," Neill says.

Similarly, Hans Ravnkjær Larsen (MPI Scandinavia Chapter), head of conferences, Dansk IT, says, "Looking back (in early October), I actually still believed that the worst part of COVID-19 was over, and the fall would show us a 'new normal' relatively quickly. Alas, the development since August has proven things to be different."

Despite the misdirected projections we've all had in these confusing times, optimism remains.

"I am optimistic about the meeting/event business for 2021,"



# WHY?

*“I believe all of 2021 will be hybrid, with the ratio of in-person versus virtual attendees slowly transitioning to more in-person.”*

**TIMOTHY NEILL**  
MPI Oregon Chapter

says Toncie Roberson, CMP (MPI Texas Hill Country Chapter), president and owner of T.L. Roberson Event Consultants, whose business practically came to a halt during the pandemic. “I feel that the industry will have a slow recovery but will come back. I also think some small face-to-face regional meetings will become the norm.”

Meanwhile, Greg Elmhirst (MPI Toronto Chapter), general manager of Elmhirst’s Resort, is neither overly optimistic nor pessimistic, though his property has been focusing on developing more and better recreation, team building and dining experiences.

“I’m exactly in the middle,” he says. “The bulk of our events transferred dates from 2020 to 2021. Contracting of new business is at a standstill for now. We think some sales outreach might be possible in Q1 of 2021 contingent on evolution in the public health situation. We should recover quickly when public health guidance allows it. Leisure business is replacing group business [for us] so far.”

It’s worth noting here that 88 percent of Canadian respondents are satisfied with their country’s response to the coronavirus pandemic. This is especially remarkable considering that only 15 percent of U.S. respondents say the same (see the MPI blog for more details).

#### **Virtual is Here to Stay**

While it’s certain that live, face-to-face events will come back, 63 percent of respondents are concerned that the proliferation of virtual/hybrid events during the pandemic will permanently affect the desire for face-to-face gatherings in the future. Some respondents even commented that face-to-face meetings/events will never return to pre-COVID levels.

“Hybrid meetings are here to stay and will be a major portion of all events moving forward,” Neill says. “The pandemic has irreversibly changed how meetings will look. Despite the early fears that virtual events would supplant in-person events, it never happened. Now with the measures we needed to take to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, the virtual element has become an integral part of our events. When in-person events open up to more attendees, there will still be a large portion of attendees who will prefer to attend virtually, whether from fear of contracting a virus, security fears, travel constraints or time commitments. Hybrid and virtual have been slowly increasing their share of the market for years. The pandemic has greatly increased that share and I don’t foresee it ever returning to pre-COVID levels.”

Rachel Sheerin, CPBA (MPI Carolinas Chapter), keynote speaker and trainer, founder of **RachelSheerin.com**, doesn’t envision virtual or hybrid replacing face-to-face events in the long

# WHEN DO YOU ANTICIPATE YOUR BUSINESS WILL BE COMPLETELY BACK TO PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS?

Q4 2020.....	1.1%
Q1 2021.....	1.3%
Q2 2021.....	4.4%
Q3 2021.....	9.6%
Q4 2021.....	9.8%
2022.....	38.1%
2023.....	26.4%
2024 or later.....	9.2%

## VIRTUAL CANNIBALISM?

The pandemic is giving rise to concerns we saw during the initial rise of virtual event technology as 63% of respondents are currently worried that the proliferation of virtual/hybrid will permanently affect the desire or support for face-to-face gatherings in the future.

**16%**

**EXTREMELY  
CONCERNED**

**47%**

**SOMEWHAT  
CONCERNED**

**35%**

**NOT  
CONCERNED**

**2%**

**UNSURE**

*“I think there’s always going to be a place for virtual but until technology can simulate hugs, create magic kismet meetings in the lobby or feel like a family reunion then it won’t replace all.”*

**RACHEL SHEERIN**  
MPI Carolinas Chapter

run. Instead, she sees a temporary boost in online gatherings—she’s spoken at more than 100 this year—which she calls “a great thing, both for participants who benefit from the gatherings and the meeting and event partners. The more we meet virtually right now, the more we’re learning and growing.”

“I think there’s always going to be a place for virtual but until technology can simulate hugs, create magic kismet meetings in the lobby or feel like a family reunion then it won’t replace all—though hybrid is a stellar, job-creating option that I hope is here to stay,” she says.

The data suggesting a fuller return to live, face-to-face events is reinforced in the survey’s attendance projections, even though respondents overwhelmingly report that virtual technology options are indeed here to stay and will be leveraged in place of some events that, pre-pandemic, would have been in-person.

Live attendance projections are creeping back up from an all-time low, as 27 percent of respondents now envision favorable in-person numbers next year (last quarter, only 11 percent said the same). At the same time, projected virtual attendance remains incredibly strong, with 83 percent of respondents expecting favorable remote numbers over the next year.

“For meetings that are informal or are about decision-making, I do foresee that virtual or hybrid meetings will remain widely used,” Larsen says. “Why should we actually spend the time to travel, if we may fulfill the meeting’s desired outcome by virtual means instead, saving time and CO<sub>2</sub>? For other purposes, face-to-face meetings will and should remain our preferred format, as it will and should be when we bring together people who don’t know each other beforehand.”

#### **Pivot Rather than Yearning for the ‘Good ol’ Days’**

Still, some meeting professionals feel there’s too strong of a push in the industry to return to live, face-to-face gatherings—that some are focusing too much on seeking a return to the “good ol’ days,” rather than examining how to innovate and strategize in the new normal.

“There are tons of reasons to meet physically and onsite, but our raison d’être as a meeting industry has never been to have onsite meetings, but to optimize the outcomes from such meetings whether online, hybrid or onsite,” Larsen says. “I mean, this damned COVID-19 has harmed many good people and businesses, but also accelerated and forced into pivoting an industry which has been for far too long unable to rethink its own purpose and value-offerings. My concern is not so much towards whether face-

## **Business Conditions**

Overall business condition projections took a great, positive leap up from last quarter’s dire outlook. Looking at these results in a silo could give the impression that the industry is almost back to normal—it’s not, but this is promising.

### **Winter 2020**

**52%** of respondents predict **FAVORABLE** business conditions

**25%** of respondents predict **NEUTRAL** business conditions

**23%** of respondents predict **NEGATIVE** business conditions

### **Spring 2020**

**47%** of respondents predict **FAVORABLE** business conditions

**18%** of respondents predict **NEUTRAL** business conditions

**35%** of respondents predict **NEGATIVE** business conditions

### **Summer 2020**

**36%** of respondents predict **FAVORABLE** business conditions

**5%** of respondents predict **NEUTRAL** business conditions

**59%** of respondents predict **NEGATIVE** business conditions

### **Fall 2020**

**58%** of respondents predict **FAVORABLE** business conditions

**8%** of respondents predict **NEUTRAL** business conditions

**34%** of respondents predict **NEGATIVE** business conditions

# ATTENDANCE FORECASTS

LIVE ATTENDANCE PROJECTIONS ARE CREEPING BACK UP FROM AN ALL-TIME LOW: 27 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS NOW ENVISION FAVORABLE IN-PERSON NUMBERS OVER THE NEXT YEAR (LAST QUARTER, ONLY 11 PERCENT SAID THE SAME). AT THE SAME TIME, PROJECTED VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE REMAINS INCREDIBLY STRONG.



## Projected Live Attendance

27%  
POSITIVE

4%  
FLAT

69%  
NEGATIVE

to-face gatherings decrease by number, but how to ensure an optimal outcome from any single meeting, gathering or assembly.

“Let me be clear: I cry for all the good people losing their business in these crazy times, as I do hope everybody will get back to meeting face-to-face when it makes any sense, optimizing the outcome of the time they spend together. What I do not approve of is the ongoing *klagesang* (lamentation, sorrow, mourning) in which people in the industry claim that the only way to meet is face-to-face. It is not, and I think that attitude only underlines a weak value-proposition in the first place. We should be so much more.”

Larsen expresses both optimism and pessimism for the near future—but it comes down to how each individual approached the unique challenges.

“I am pessimistic on behalf of all those locked-in by limited innovative capabilities or being part of a weak eco-system in which the parties have a hard time imagining or inventing new value-offerings to their clients,” he says. “And I feel optimistic on behalf of all who may recreate and reinforce their staid eco-systems, facilitating meetings in onsite, hybrid or online formats

*“Why should we actually spend the time to travel, if we may fulfill the meeting’s desired outcome by virtual means instead, saving time and CO<sub>2</sub>?”*

**HANS RAVNKJÆR LARSEN**  
MPI Scandinavia Chapter

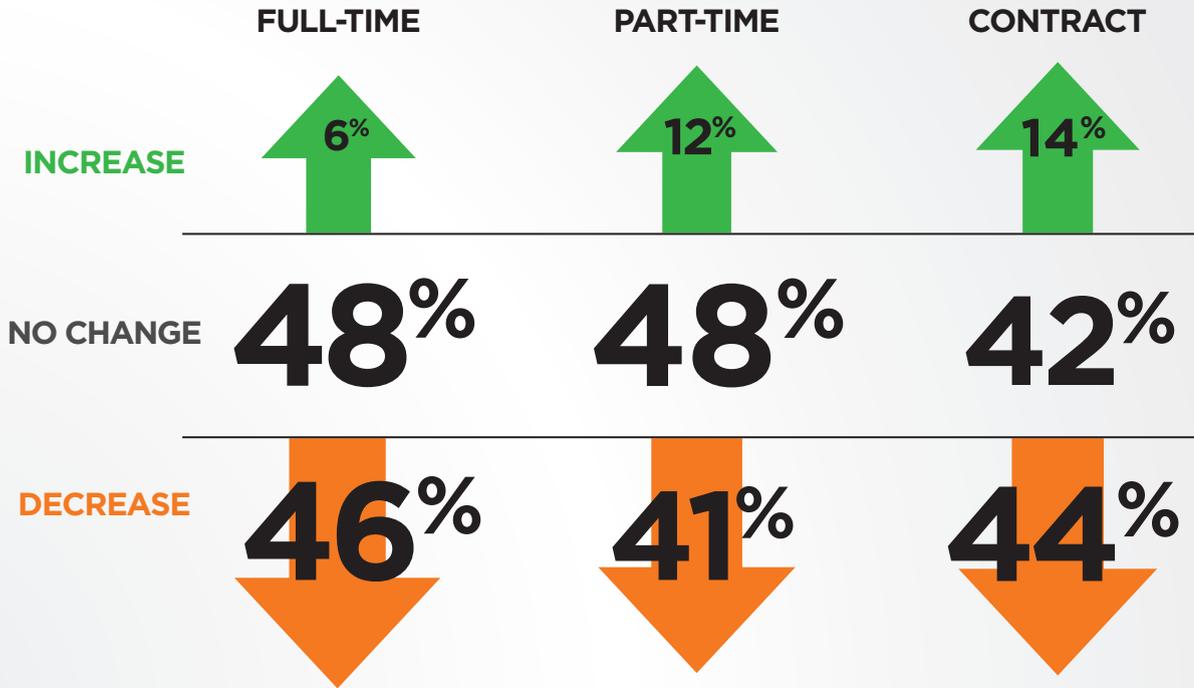
when and where it fits their clients.”

Sheerin is concerned that too many meeting professionals are overly pessimistic about virtual events and paint the virtual-versus-in-person discussion as being either/or instead of accepting the middle ground and that they’re simply different means to the same end.

“With that attitude and outlook, they’re projecting their feelings onto clients,” she says. “We know that what we love, our clients get excited about, so the inverse is true, too. The second you love, embrace and get excited about virtual meetings and events is the moment your clients will also become excited about them.”

# GLIMPSE AT CURRENT EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

HIRING REMAINS SLIM WITH POSITIVE, ALTHOUGH VERY SLIGHT, GROWTH OVER THE LAST QUARTER. IF EXISTING, OPTIMISTIC TRENDS HOLD, EXPECT TO SEE NOTABLE CHANGES HERE IN EARLY 2021.



## Prepping for Excellence in Virtual

Following seemingly endless months of a pandemic, the impending return of more face-to-face events as well as an impressive expansion in the virtual landscape has helped make Sheerin become more excited and creative.

“Where some see limitations and restrictions, I see a push to get more creative and level up my engagement and entertainment skills while being more grateful than ever that I get to work in the meeting and event industry,” she says.

Roberson says that while some individuals are leaving the meeting industry due to pandemic-injected hardships, those who are staying in the industry need to develop additional skills.

“We’ll need to accept this, educate ourselves and prepare to harness the new way of life,” Roberson says, noting that she does not yet feel completely prepared for virtual or hybrid events to occupy more of her business—but she’s aware of that challenge and how to overcome it. “If we learn and understand this ‘new’ way of meeting, we can use this education to help meet the needs of our customers. We may find new business offerings that are not being met at this time.”

Even though education and infrastructure are absolutely necessary, meeting professionals must pay attention to their mindset and perception in order to excel during recovery and the increasingly virtual future, according to respondents.

“One trend we need to see more of is a positive love for virtual and the future—a positive attitude and mindset that welcomes blissful challenges as an opportunity to grow,” says Sheerin, who recommends mourning what we feel we may have lost, while

looking to a more robust future that’s better than today.

That feeling was shared by other respondents who spoke out, with Larsen saying that such a positive mindset is paramount.

“From where I stand, I feel lucky to have a team ready to follow through and continuously learn, adjust and improve how to facilitate better meeting experiences,” he says, elaborating on how virtual isn’t necessarily all that different from face-to-face gatherings.

“All the things that people claim is difficult in virtual and hybrid meetings, attendees checking/logging out in the middle of a session to name one, is in no way a new thing,” Larsen says. “On the contrary, we have become used to horrible meetings all over, where people check out quickly, only, they do so by letting their minds start wandering, turning to their phone, etc. It is in no way a new thing to design and conduct meetings that should be engaging and purpose-driven by focusing on the desired outcome.” ■



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