



MEETINGS OUTLOOK™



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2021 FALL EDITION

IN SEARCH OF Equilibrium



MEETINGS
OUTLOOK™

I got my
COVID-19
vaccine



Optimism continues although slightly weaker than last quarter as the meeting and event business has been subjected to the highs and lows of SARS-CoV-2 factors such as massively expanded vaccination rates and the delta variant.

By Michael Pinchera

The surge of positivity that kicked off 2021, presumably guided by the growing distribution of effective SARS-CoV-2 vaccines, has seemingly been dialed back slightly as the virus' delta variant challenged the world and postponed a return to a greater sense of normal.

Across the board for most of Meetings Outlook's evergreen questions, the latest results show slight weakening or uncertainty compared to this summer—although the projections remain overwhelmingly positive. Better than spring 2021 metrics, not as glowingly wonderful as the summer edition.

A full 92% of respondents identified as being fully vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2. That's quite an uptick over the previous quarter, in which 84% were fully vaccinated. Related, the percentage of respondents claiming to not be eligible for vaccination has dropped from 1.6% to 0.2%, revealing progression in vaccine availability. There was also a slight decrease in the number of respondents who do not wish to receive a vaccine (down from 3.5% to 2.9%).

At this point, the vaccination rate among meeting professionals doesn't have much room for growth left. Now the vaccination debate is heading over to mandates for staff and/or attendees.

With the incredible international drive to distribute vaccines that has happened over the past six months, it's unsurprising that industry professionals have greater expectations for vaccination mandates for staff as well as attendees.

As more employers, event organizers and local municipalities continue to require proof of vaccination for many common activities—such as indoor dining and attending gatherings—it should not be surprising that many more meeting professionals expect vaccine mandates for staff and/or attendees, compared to the spring 2021 Meetings Outlook survey.

Nearly half of respondents (47%) say their organizations already or soon will require staff to be vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2. That's up significantly from the 19% who said the same in the spring. Roughly one-third (32%) of respondents say their organizations do not currently or plan to require vaccination for staff—down from 46% in the spring. The percentage of respondents indicating uncertainty about staff vaccination mandates also fell from 35% in the spring to 22%.

Expectations for vaccination mandates are also on the move when it comes to event attendees. Forty-one percent of respondents say their organizations currently or soon will require that

*“Now more than ever, **positive facts and experiences need to be showcased.** Many good things in our industry are at hand and happening now; why not share them...on a national basis.”*

MARK NITTI

MPI Southern California Chapter

in-person attendees be vaccinated—in the spring, only 12% said the same. In those six months, the number of respondents to answer they do not expect vaccination mandates for attendees dropped significantly—from 45% in the spring to 25% this fall.

While this doesn't mean that meeting pros are necessarily thrilled with the mandates, it does underscore their desire to get back to work, to get back to some semblance of normalcy.

“I believe that because our industry was one of the hardest hit during the pandemic, we see the opportunity to step up and lead by being part of the solution in getting vaccinated, and providing a safe environment to get back to business,” says Bonnie Carlson, CDME (MPI Minnesota Chapter), president and CEO, Destination Bloomington and 2022 chair of MPI's International Board of Directors.

In Canada, the province of Ontario is among those to have begun mandating vaccinations for guests across all indoor venues in late summer.

“Ninety-nine percent of my staff was vaccinated back in the spring when vaccines were widely available,” says Anita Carlyle, CMM, CMP, DES (MPI Toronto Chapter), managing partner, Moore Carlyle Consulting & MCC Destination Management. “Get vacci-

nated and start meeting and documenting positive events with vaccine mandates.

“We have managed an offsite dinner event for C-suite executives—all attendees had to be vaccinated to attend the conference, ride the shuttle and attend the offsite dinner. In addition to having vaccinated staff, we also conduct rapid COVID tests for our staff and sub-contractors the day of the event.”

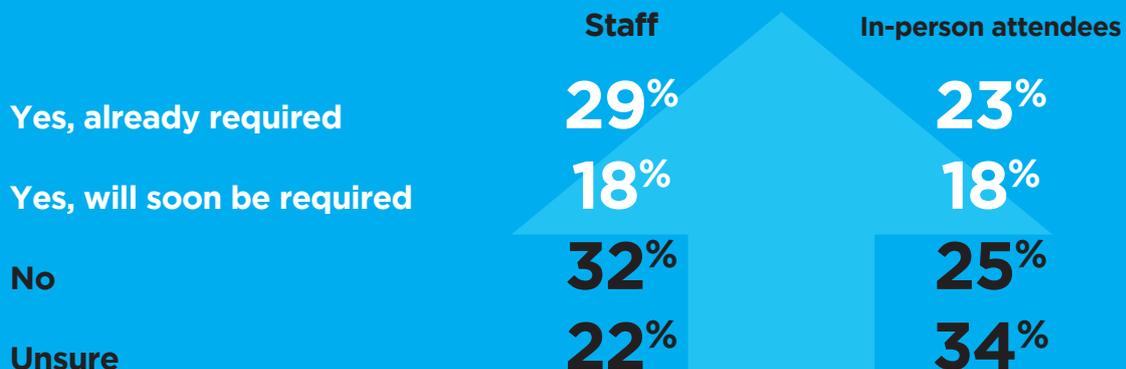
Brad Dean (MPI South Florida Chapter), CEO at Discover Puerto Rico, has also been involved with numerous events that were open exclusively to vaccinated participants—sit-down meetings, networking events and more.

“These events came off very well and as far as I know—there were only one or two breakthrough COVID infections, which represents a negligible percentage of attendees,” Dean says. “Overall, the attendance at these events was strong, the vibe was very positive and each came off without a hitch. The planners invested a lot of time and energy in verifications, validations, onsite testing and frequent communications. Two of these events hit their attendance limit very early, and, in each case, some attendees indicated the vaccination-only requirement was a key reason they attended. We've

VACCINATION MANDATES

Nearly half of respondents (47%) say their organizations already or soon will require staff to be vaccinated against COVID-19. That's up significantly from the 19% who said the same in the spring. Meanwhile, 41% of respondents say their organizations currently or soon will require that in-person attendees be vaccinated.

Is your organization currently or will it soon require proof of vaccination for staff and in-person attendees?



VACCINE ADOPTION

A full 92% of respondents identified as being fully vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2—an uptick over the previous quarter, in which 84% reported being fully vaccinated. At this point, the vaccination rate among meeting professionals doesn't have much room for growth left.

	Summer 2021	Fall 2021
Fully vaccinated	84%	92%
Partially vaccinated	7%	1%
Not yet eligible for vaccine	2%	<1%
Not vaccinated and don't want it	4%	3%
Prefer not to answer	4%	3%

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Chair, MPI International Board of Directors

proven we can meet safely simply by adhering to the right protocols and procedures, but for some planners, vax-only may be a necessary consideration to resume face-to-face meetings.”

All of this adds up to answer the question, “What can meeting professionals do to help with late- and post-pandemic industry recovery?” and the overwhelming answer: “Show real examples as to how we're meeting safely.”

“I believe we need to talk more about the successes of groups that do meet safely, and best practices for how they accomplished that,” Carlson says. “Hotels and facilities are doing an excellent job in demonstrating how they have raised their cleaning standards, and I also think talking about increased vaccination rates in your cities will become something that is promoted and supported.”

Indeed, this is one facet of the current situation for which some planners and suppliers agree. Mark Nitti (MPI Southern California Chapter), a sourcing sales executive and meetings expert with American Express Global Business Travel, says it's important that meeting pros share positive event experiences, but lobbying decisionmakers to restart safe in-person gatherings and supporting staff with incen-

tives and a living wage are also essential elements.

“Now more than ever, positive facts and experiences need to be showcased,” Nitti says. “Many good things in our industry are at hand and happening now; why not share them...on a national basis.”

Another influential industry voice expanded on ways that suppliers and destinations can help drive recovery.

“First, we cannot let up; we must maintain the highest standards of health, safety and cleanliness,” Dean says. “Second, we must be attentive to each and every need of the professional planners and their attendees. What worked pre-pandemic may simply not be good enough for today. Third, we should recognize that meetings and events today require an unprecedented level of planning, communication and orchestration, and we must shoulder some of the responsibility for this by over-delivering on service and support. Don't wait for a planner to ask—anticipate their needs and do more than is required. Finally, we need to evangelize the importance of face-to-face meetings, and set the example. How can we expect others to start traveling and meeting when those of us in the industry have not fully embraced this?”

“Ultimately, it all comes down to recognizing that meetings and events are incredibly important but it’s not about us (i.e. suppliers), it’s about the privilege and potential of hosting face-to-face gatherings that nurture relationships, make connections and deliver progress.”

Continuing optimism

While still very positive, the results from Meetings Outlook respondents reveal a slight pullback in optimism compared to the previous quarter, reflecting, at least in part, concern surrounding the SARS-CoV-2 delta variant. But what’s still guiding the significant optimism seen in the survey?

“The recent upticks in infections due to COVID-19 variants stole some of our industry’s momentum, but in our conversations with professional planners, they are as resilient and determined as ever to emerge from this current environment,” Dean says. “We’ve tapped into that desire and continue to sell the advantages of meeting in Puerto Rico while maintaining a high level of flexibility, patience and

a laser-like focus on exceeding the planners’ expectations. As a result, our pipeline is exceeding pre-pandemic levels and the projected attendance of future business is actually increasing, not decreasing.”

Lindsay Plath, CMP (MPI Chicago Area Chapter), meetings and professional development manager, Illinois Association of School Business Officials, says the fact that so many meetings and events have showcased how to meet safely during the pandemic is helping to drive that optimism.

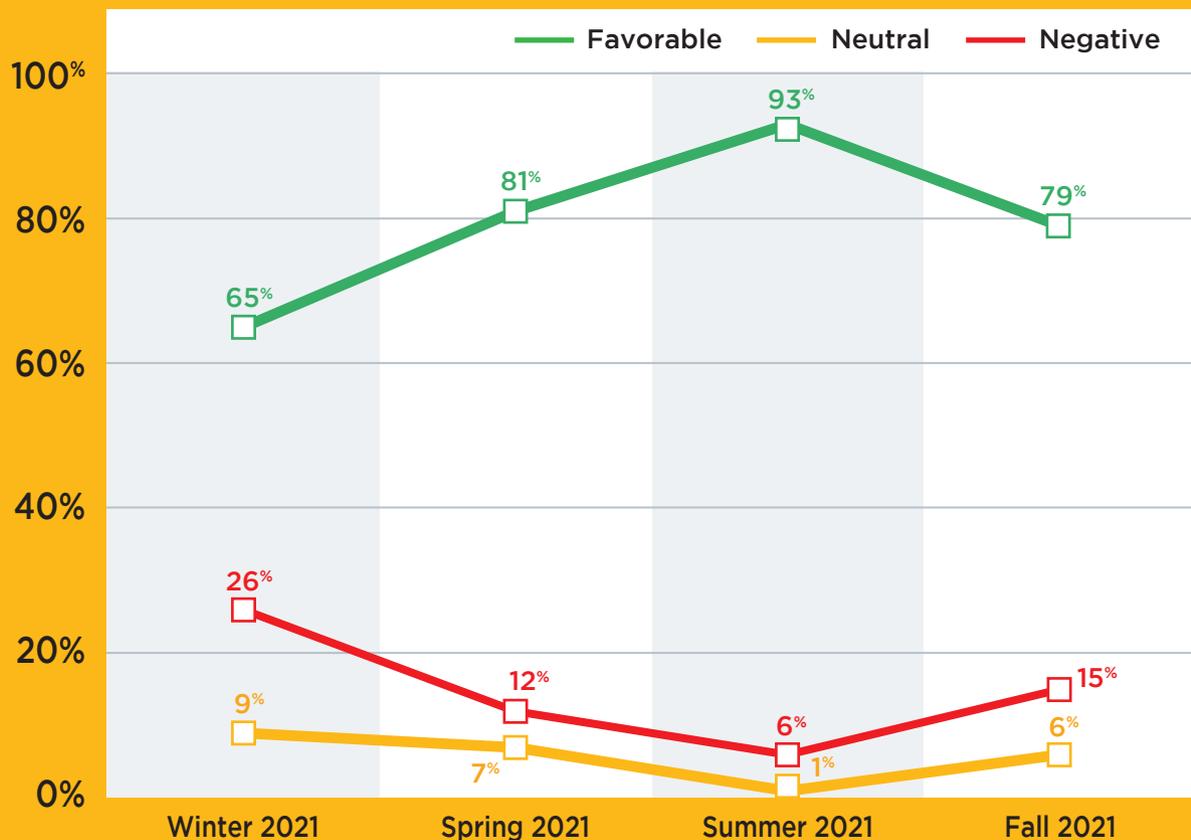
“We have the tools now to assess risk in regard to COVID-19 and put protocols in place, based on our audience, to ensure a successful event,” she says. “Prices for COVID compliance officers are decreasing, as well as [the cost for] COVID-19 tests. Planning a safe meeting is becoming more affordable.”

And while Plath doesn’t anticipate COVID-19 going away anytime soon, she notes that our industry is simply not going to go away.

Carlson also feels that people are ready to get back to business—and that the related safety components, such as rising vaccination rates, will help instill confidence for safely meeting in person.

BUSINESS CONDITIONS

Across the board for most of Meetings Outlook’s evergreen questions, the latest results show slight weakening or uncertainty compared to this summer—although the projections remain overwhelmingly positive and are better than spring 2021 metrics. Notably, 79% of respondents project favorable business conditions over the next year, notably higher than results from last fall when 58% of respondents projected a positive future.



“The uptick in travel over the summer gives us hope that people are getting more comfortable and learning to live with this virus and want to get on with life,” Carlson explains. “As humans, we need to interact and be together—and travel makes that possible.”

Like so many challenges the meeting and event industry has faced over the decades, the undying import remains: People want and need to gather.

“[It’s] pure demand,” Nitti says. “Just by the need and level of business growth the group and individual markets will grow. [And there’s] the basic need for people to be with each other. Humans are creatures of habit and need to socialize in person.”

Possible reasons for the slight pullback in optimism this quarter go beyond the delta variant, according to Dean. For one, he notes that travel restrictions still abound—notwithstanding the very recent decision for the U.S. to allow fully vaccinated foreign visitors to enter.

“There are still a sizable number of C-suite leaders who are holding the purse strings and limiting travel,” he says. “And as much as it’s been proven over and over that we can meet safely using the right

protocols and standards, there’s still a push-pull effect of the fearless vs. the fearful: While most are eager to resume face-to-face meetings, the vaccination rate and infection rate still worry some people. None of these factors will last forever but they combine to make it feel like we’re ‘riding the brakes’ on this recovery.”

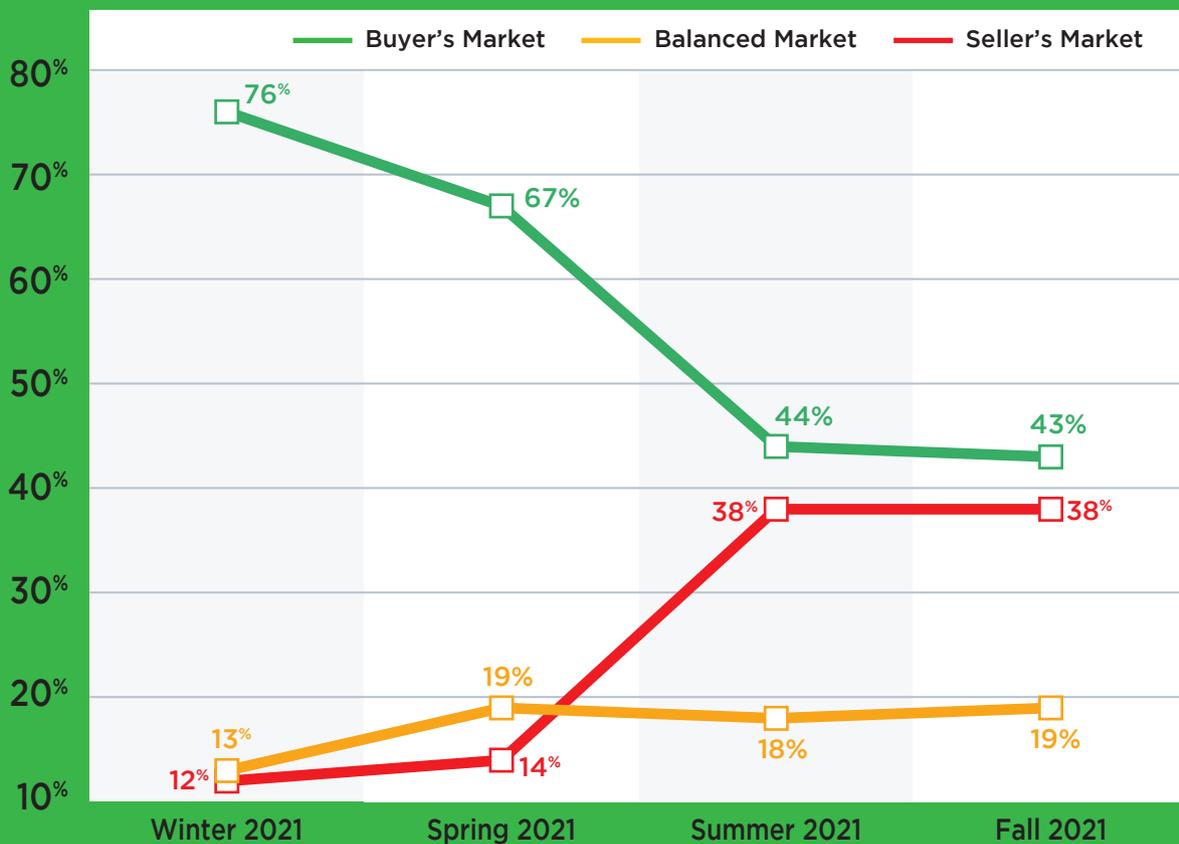
Incoming market shift?

An important question that needs to be considered as meeting professionals and organizations prepare for business in the next stage of recovery: Is a big market shift looming?

Fear not, no one thinks you’ll wake up January 1 with a totally flipped business landscape. But that doesn’t mean the unique balanced market that many are experiencing will continue. As has been explored in Meetings Outlook reports over the past two years, a strong seller’s market pre-pandemic quickly transformed into a strong buyer’s market. Now we’re back in the middle, waiting to see if, when and how it’ll tip—most do indeed see it shifting to a seller’s market sometime next year.

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“I think buyers should be careful and not wait too long to book their events, because I think there is pent-up demand in the meetings market and space will go quickly, therefore, first balancing the market and then possibly shifting to the sellers’ advantage,” Carlson says. “I think our industry has done a good job of managing hotel rates during this crisis, however, as it relates to groups, I do think there still will be concessions made to attract customers, and I do think the buyer’s market will continue into early 2022.”

Similarly, in Toronto, Carlyle sees indications the market will bend back to sellers’ advantage.

“With venues rebooking events that have existing credits from COVID cancellations, space is limited for offsite venues and prime weekend dates are scarce,” Carlyle says. “Also, we have run into vendors not wanting to take groups but focus on individual reservations and bookings so they can manage their staffing needs more efficiently.”

Compounding the situation, she says, there are simply fewer venues than prior to the pandemic with many having closed permanently due to the unprecedented economic challenge.

“It’s still a buyer’s market and likely will be for most of 2022,” Dean says, suggesting buyers will experience a greater beneficial window. “Until supply and demand are in sync, it’s likely to remain a buyer’s market.”

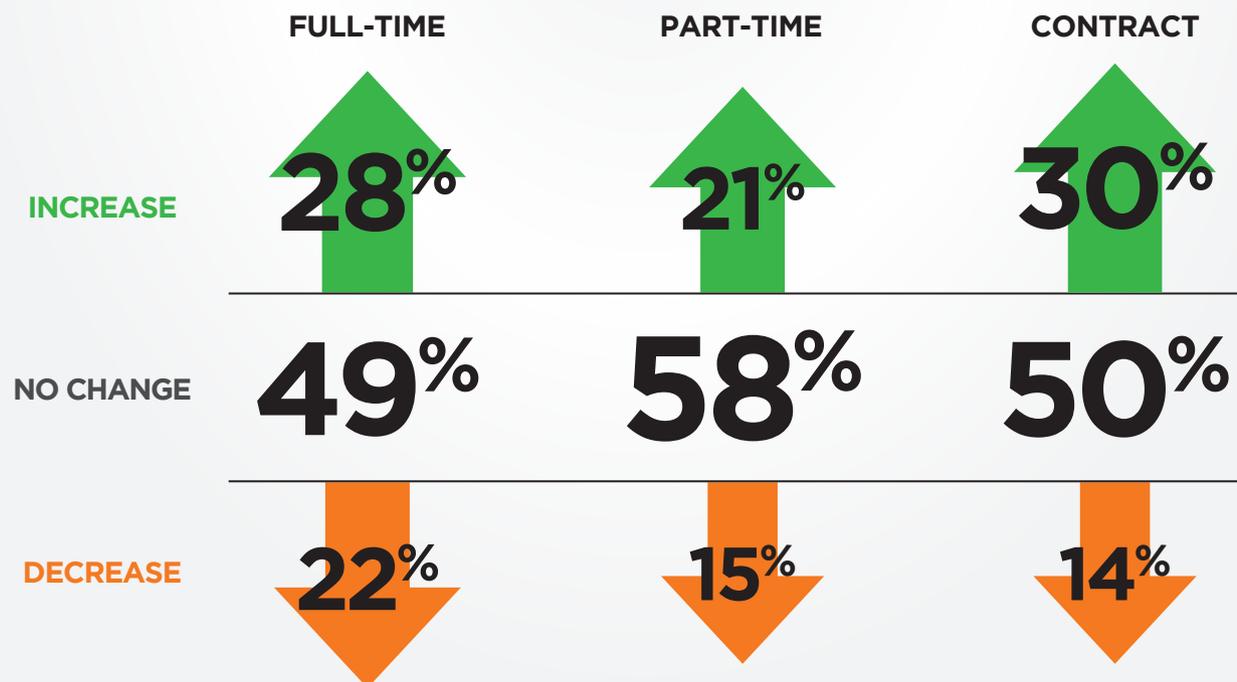
Meanwhile, just as Carlson and Nitti noted in relation to the essential need for people to get together, Plath brings up another evergreen topic that’s often discussed, but for which many in our industry could still benefit with a gentle reminder:

“[Buyers and sellers] have always been partners and we always will be,” she says. “When we approach the relationship as a partnership and work together to form mutually agreed upon contracts, we all win.” ■

GLIMPSE AT CURRENT EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

The staffing landscape remains troubled, with 37% of respondents finding it difficult to fill job vacancies at their organizations. That’s up from 29% reporting the same in the previous quarter. This comes at a time when the phrase “the great resignation” is being thrown about because so many people have seemingly left the workforce.

The reality, though, is likely worse than those numbers suggest considering that there’s also less hiring going on. Over the past quarter, 3% fewer respondents reported increases in hiring for full- or part-time positions. Of specific note, there was a 7% drop in respondents indicating increases in hiring for contract roles.



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