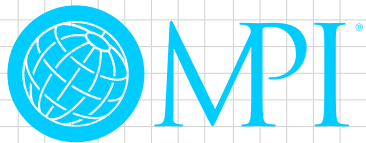




Meetings Outlook

Q3 2026: *Event professionals are more optimistic about business conditions and live attendance, even as staffing realities and premium-experience costs continue to shape planning decisions.*



Finding firmer footing

New Meetings Outlook data shows stronger business expectations, improved live attendance forecasts and a growing emphasis on intentional, cost-conscious event design.

BY **MICHAEL PINCHERA**

MPI'S Q3 2026 MEETINGS OUTLOOK data points to an industry that is regaining confidence, but doing so with a practical eye toward value, staffing realities and attendee expectations. The findings suggest a market that is moving forward with clearer momentum than earlier in the year, although constraints remain.

The strongest signal comes from overall business projections. Favorable expectations climbed to 60% in Q3, the highest level

in the past four quarters, while negative sentiment fell to 19%. That shift is meaningful because it follows a softer Q2, when negative projections reached 34%. This rebound may suggest that event professionals are seeing enough demand, booking activity or pipeline strength to feel more optimistic about the near-term outlook. For suppliers, this may point to continued opportunity, especially among clients ready to invest in programs that can

"More and more, attendees want to know, 'What's in it for me?' I think it's important to make sure every attendee feels seen and heard."

TARA ZERAVSKY, CMP
Senior Association and Conference Manager, Meeting Expectations
MPI Georgia Chapter

demonstrate measurable value. For planners, it reinforces the need to be prepared for renewed activity while still managing internal expectations around cost, staffing and outcomes.

Budget projections add stability to that picture. Favorable budget expectations have held consistently in the mid-50% range over the past 12 months, reaching 56% this quarter. While negative projections also ticked up slightly quarter over quarter, the larger trend is one of steadiness rather than volatility. This supports the finding that most event professionals expect business conditions to continue to improve.

Meanwhile, live attendance projections also reveal a positive outlook, with 61% expecting growth and only 20% expecting declines. That is a clear rebound from Q2 and reinforces the continued importance of in-person engagement. By contrast, virtual

attendance remains comparatively muted as positive projections slipped and nearly half of respondents shared flat projections. This indicates a market expectation that virtual participation is stable, settling into a more selective, purpose-driven role.

Current employment trends show a more cautious operating environment. Staffing levels remain unchanged for most respondents across full-time, part-time and contract roles. Still, there are some pockets of small movement, such as a greater percentage of respondents indicating growth in part-time hiring and a decline in the percentage of respondents seeing decreasing contract hiring. This suggests organizations may be adding flexibility rather than aggressively expanding permanent headcount. For planners and suppliers, that means capacity planning, vendor partnerships

“With rising costs of everything, we are exploring new partnerships to add more value while cutting costs. This means being creative and thinking outside the box!”

MORGANNA ELLIS

Senior Sales Manager, DoubleTree by
Hilton Chattanooga Downtown
MPI Tennessee Chapter

and freelance or contract support will remain important tools for meeting demand without overextending teams.

This quarter also explored trends relevant to event design. Respondents point to immersive attendee experiences and greater personalization as the leading forces shaping successful events. Seventy-three percent say intentional event design will be essential or very important to achieving business outcomes over the next two years. That finding helps solidify that design is no longer just a creative layer applied after logistics are set; it is increasingly central to how organizations prove value, engage participants and justify investment.

Cost again appears as a significant pressure point as a majority of respondents (71%) identify “creating a premium experience while controlling expenses” as the most difficult event design

“The biggest trend, by far, is pressure to control costs. My response has been to lean on AI for repetitive work so my lean team can do more. **We can now spend time on the relationships.**”

LINDSEY PRUIETT

Owner, Green Bridge Events

trade-off. That tension will continue to shape planning decisions, from venue and production choices to technology, food and beverage, sponsorship strategy and attendee engagement. While artificial intelligence (AI) can certainly help with that, respondents view AI primarily as an

operational efficiency tool rather than a transformative attendee-facing force.

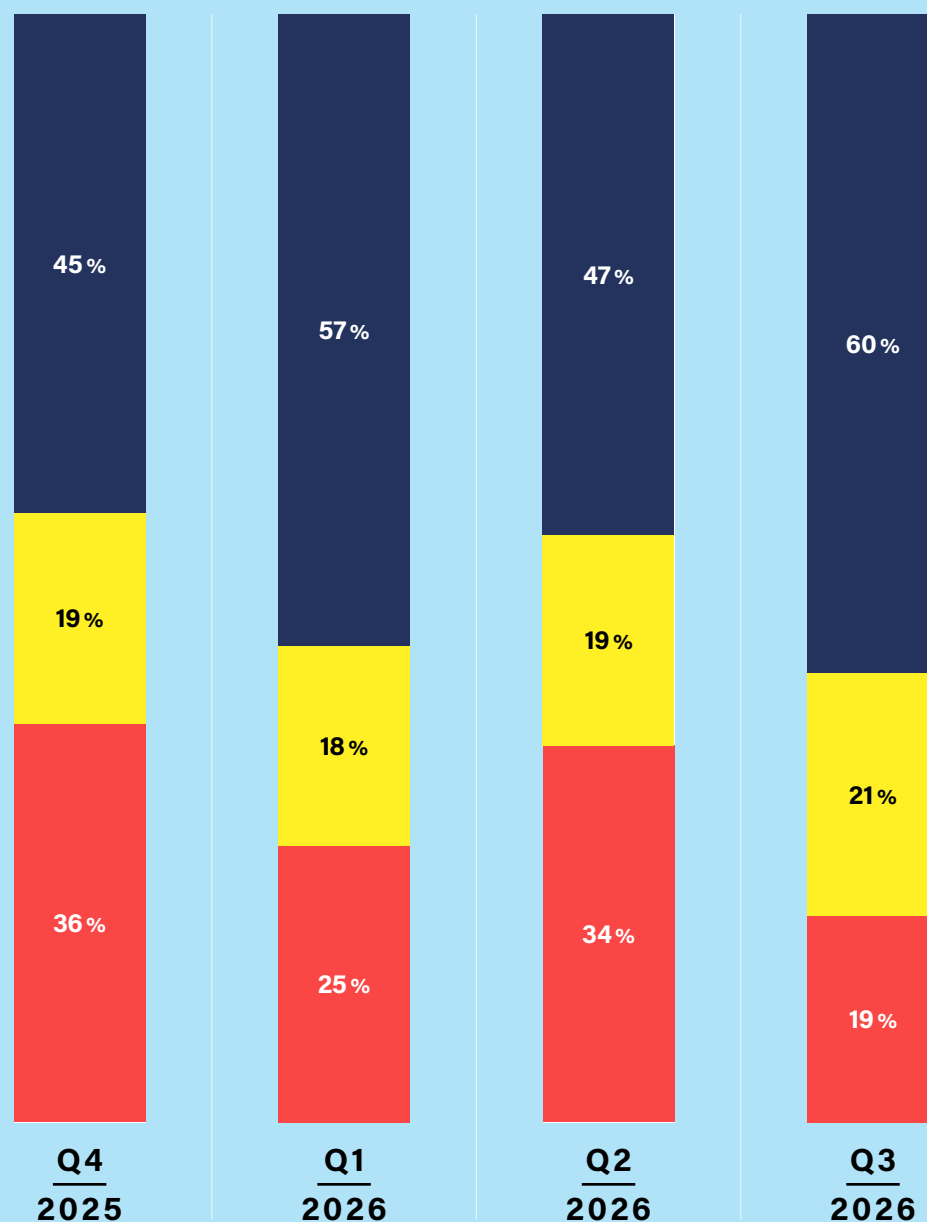
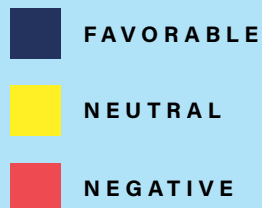
The Q3 2026 Meetings Outlook survey was open July 6-20 and received a total of 483 unique responses.



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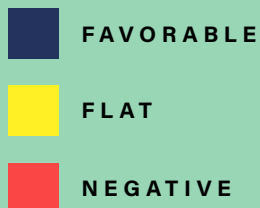
BUSINESS CONDITIONS

The business outlook over the next 12 months improved sharply in Q3 2026, **with favorable projections reaching 60%, the highest level since Q1 2025**. Negative sentiment fell to 19%, down substantially from 34% in Q2, suggesting renewed confidence.



BUDGET PROJECTIONS

Budget expectations remained consistently positive, **with favorable projections holding in the mid-50% range** for the past four quarters and edging up slightly this time. Negative budget projections rose slightly quarter over quarter, but the overall picture remains stable.



Q4 | 2025



Q1 | 2026



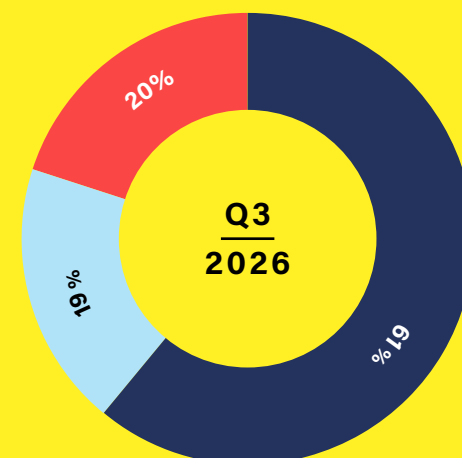
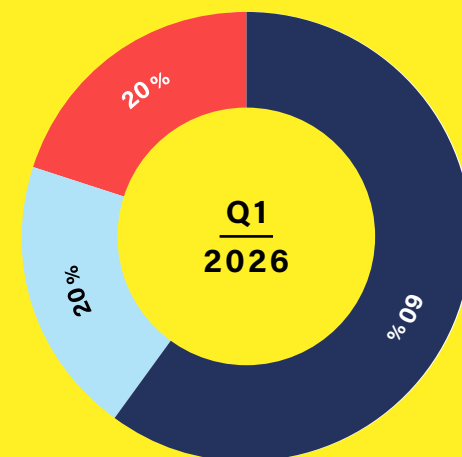
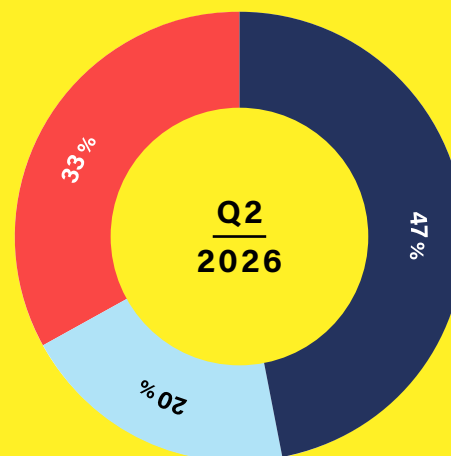
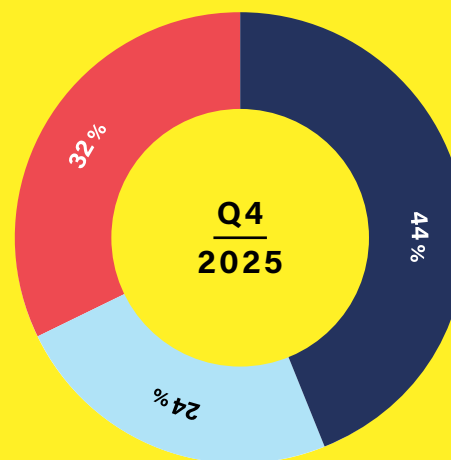
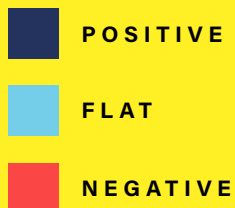
Q2 | 2026



Q3 | 2026

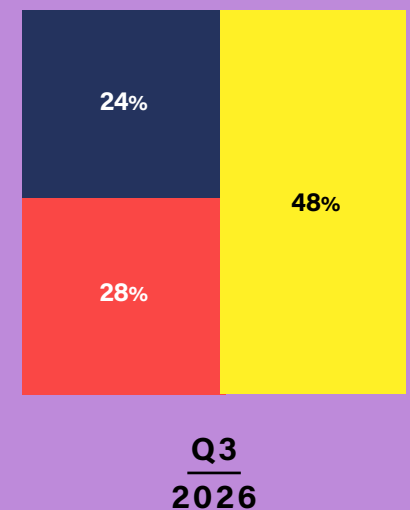
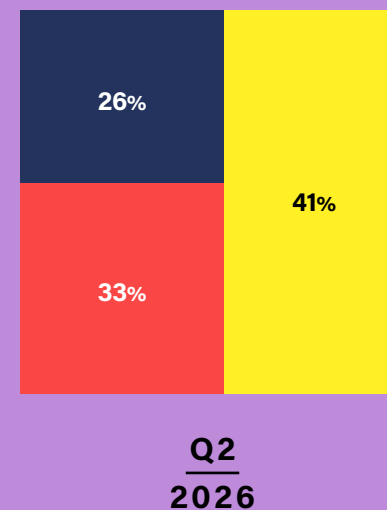
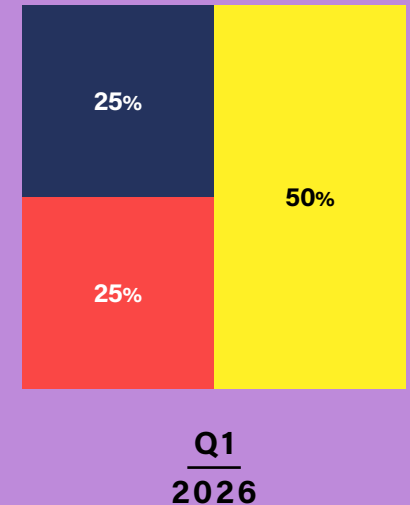
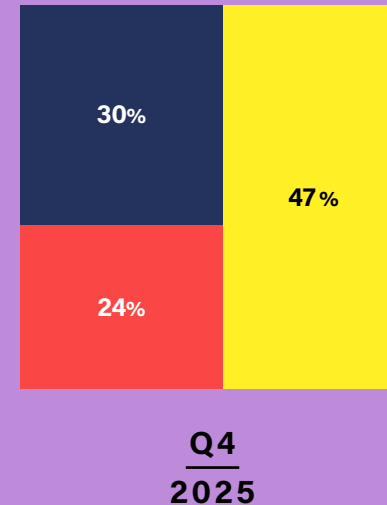
ATTENDANCE FORECAST

Live attendance projections strengthened notably, **with positive expectations climbing to the highest point over the past 12 months.** Negative expectations declined to 20%, suggesting a quarterly rebound in confidence for in-person participation.



PROJECTED VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE

Virtual attendance projections appear comparatively muted, with positive expectations slipping slightly. The reported 48% flat projection, **underscores the perception that virtual attendance will largely hold steady rather than grow.**



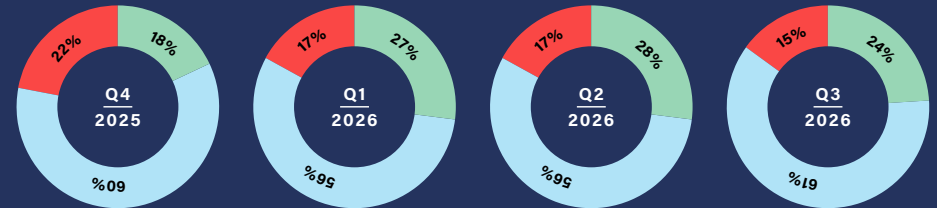
EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

Employment remains largely stable across full-time, part-time and contract roles.

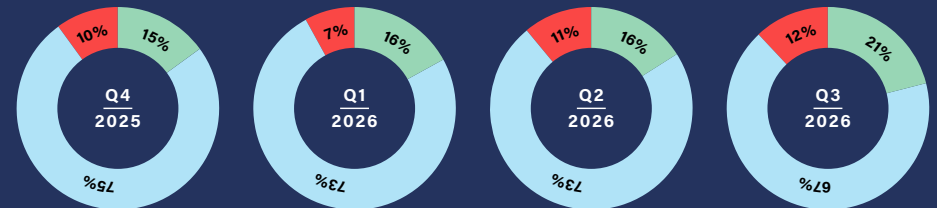
Most respondents indicate no change in staffing levels, especially for full-time roles and part-time roles. Still, part-time hiring shows some upward momentum.



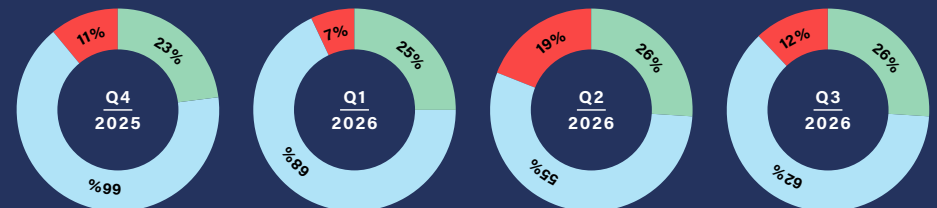
Full-Time



Part-Time



Contract



EVENT DESIGN

Event design priorities point strongly toward richer, more intentional attendee experiences.

Respondents identify immersive, personalized experiences as the leading forces shaping future event design. Combined, 73% of respondents say intentional design will be “essential” or “very important” to achieving business outcomes, with the dominant challenge being delivering premium experiences while controlling costs.

How important will intentional event design be to achieving business outcomes over the next two years?

Essential—it will be central to proving event value	30 %
Very important, but one of several key factors	43 %
Somewhat important, depending on the event	18 %
Not very important compared with cost and logistics	3 %
Unsure	6 %

Looking ahead, which single element do you believe will have the greatest influence on successful event design?

More immersive attendee experiences	45 %
Greater personalization for attendees	28 %
More flexible meeting formats	15 %
Stronger data and measurement strategies	10 %
More visible sustainability practices	3 %

AI IMPACT ON EVENT DESIGN

Respondents believe the way in which artificial intelligence will impact events the most is as an operational efficiency tool.

How do you expect AI to most affect event design over the next few years?

It will improve planning efficiency behind the scenes	45 %
It will help generate more creative content and session formats	20 %
It will improve matchmaking, networking and recommendations	13 %
It will significantly personalize the attendee journey	9 %
Its impact is likely to be limited or overhyped	9 %
None of the above	3 %