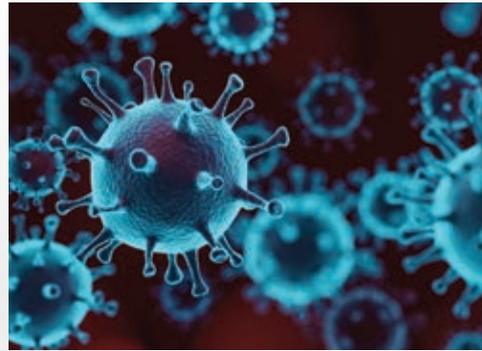




# MEETINGS OUTLOOK™



*The meeting and event industry has, along with much of the world's business, been put on hold by the coronavirus. Despite, or perhaps spurred on by, the negative turn in live attendance, hiring and overall business conditions, industry professionals are doing what they do best—strategically planning for the future.*

2020 SPRING EDITION

# STRATEGY IN UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

The meeting and event landscape has been shaken to its core by the coronavirus and is, in many instances, on hold. With so much in flux or simply unknown, meeting professionals are doing their best to pivot to be in a better position when normalcy returns.



By Elaine Pofeldt

**W**ith the coronavirus crisis bringing much of the meeting industry to a halt, Joe Guilderson (MPI WestField Chapter), president of Corporate Audio Visual Services, saw 60 events cancelled or postponed from March until the second week in May.

"The bulk of our business is in live events," said Guilderson, whose company has offices in Elmsford, N.Y., and New York City. "It's been pretty traumatic."

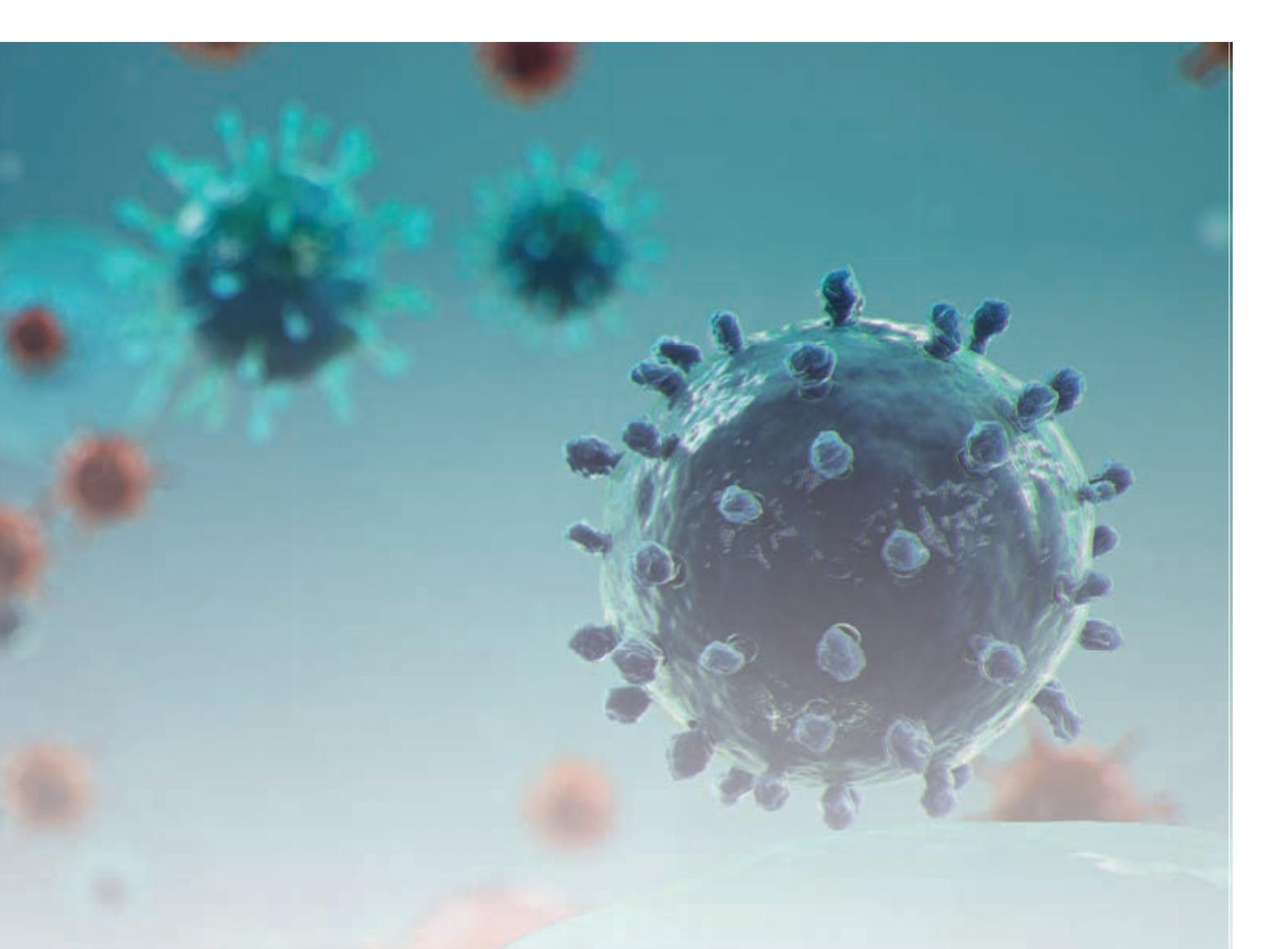
Guilderson had to lay off 14 of his 20 employees at the

35-year-old company.

"There was no end in sight for us to point to," he said in late March. "People could at least collect unemployment."

Guilderson was keeping an eye on the aid for small businesses in the U.S. federal stimulus package to see if his business would qualify for a loan or other aid.

Although January and February were two of the best months in the company's history, he didn't expect all of those sales to translate to immediate revenue, given the pain customers were



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**STEVE O’MALLEY**  
Maritz Travel

likely to be experiencing.

“We’re expecting past-due amounts are going to take longer to receive,” Guilderson said.

Against that backdrop, he had already reached out to the landlords of his two offices to share the company’s situation.

“One of the two was very open to discussions,” he said. “They’re both private businesses, as well. They’re going through the same thing we’re going through.”

Guilderson’s experience is emblematic of what many orga-

nizations in the meeting and event industry reported in the latest *Meetings Outlook* survey. The survey was out in the field as the coronavirus was becoming a clear-and-present threat to the meetings community, as countries started banning large events (and then small events) and hard-hit areas went into quarantine or shelter-in-place mode with the pandemic spreading. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of respondent comments noted that the virus is *the* issue impacting business.

“This is a tragedy,” said Steve O’Malley, division president of

# ESSENTIAL SKILLS

Asked to identify the skills most necessary to learn or expand upon during this widespread shutdown to be set up for success as the industry recovers, respondents selected the following.



**19%** Creativity, originality and initiative



**14%** Analytical thinking and innovation

**14%** Technology design/programming



**13%** Leadership and social influence



**8%** Critical thinking and analysis

The MPI Academy ([mpi.org/academy](https://mpi.org/academy)) has numerous resources to help keep you up-to-date and educated in this stressful and uncertain time. There, you'll find on-demand professional development related to the above topics and much more. For coronavirus-specific information, head over to [mpi.org/TrustedResource](https://mpi.org/TrustedResource).

Maritz Travel and chair of the MPI International Board of Directors. "We've never experienced anything like this before."

Pointing to the U.S. Travel Association's projection that nearly 6 million jobs would be lost by the end of April, O'Malley said, "When you put that into perspective, in terms of how quickly it's happening and the human toll, it's dramatic."

In the data from this latest survey there was a 12 percent increase in respondents who projected negative business conditions. Of note: There was also a 7 percent increase in those predicting that business would dip by more than 10 percent.

With uncertainty tied to the economy and upcoming U.S. national elections adding to a challenging environment, there

was a massively quick market shift away from a strong seller's market to one where buyers had an edge and some hotels were temporarily closing their doors.

The American Hotel and Lodging Association reported that, amidst a historic drop in room demand, nearly 3.9 million jobs were eliminated or would be eliminated in the next few weeks, as of late March. Marriott International, for instance, planned to furlough tens of thousands of its 174,000 workers, which meant not paying their salaries while they were not working but continuing their healthcare benefits.

At the time of the survey, it appeared there would be a shift back to a seller's market by the end of the year. However, that will depend on how quickly the pandemic peaks and countries can get back to business safely.

"I'm confident the travel industry will come back," O'Malley said. "We are a people business. People need face-to-face connection. At MPI, we say, 'When we meet, we change the world.' At some point, when this virus is defeated, there will be a greater need to get together. There's going to be a greater need for the effect meetings and events share for building community and making human connections when we come out of this."

However, O'Malley said it was essential for the federal government to provide aid quickly.

"When you look at so many businesses in the meeting and event industry, many

*"We can tap into this market by doing Zoom calls and by helping people with their marketing and social media. In times like these, people can't hide. They have to be out in social media and be a resource to each other."*

**CHERESE JERVIS HILL**  
Events to Remember

are small businesses,” he said. “We need to get money to them until activity starts to come back.”

### Pivot, Network and Learn

In the meantime, many meeting professionals are doing their best to stay afloat.

Chereese Jarvis Hill, president and founder of Events to Remember, a full-service event management company in Mt. Kisco, N.Y., said she was trying not to lay off any of her five-member team and had instead furloughed them.

“I cut everyone’s hours,” she said. “We’re going to try to ride this out as long as we can without laying people off.”

After attending several webinars about the event industry, she realized that a furlough was better for her firm than terminating anyone, a more permanent step.

Instead, she was redirecting the team into doing more public relations, a service the firm introduced about four years ago.

“With all that’s happening, I’m going to push that piece of my business,” she said. “We can tap into this market by doing Zoom calls and by helping people with their marketing and social media. In times like these, people can’t hide. They have to be out in social media and be a resource to each other.”

Karen Shackman, founder of Shackman Associates New York, a DMC, has found that many in the industry are being challenged to bring creativity to their businesses.

“We’re all having to think and reinvent ourselves with the hope that live conferences will come back,” Shackman said. “Everybody is trying to make do.”

Like many in the industry, Shackman had been anticipating a very busy second quarter until the virus upended the industry.

“The buzzwords in the industry are ‘Postpone, don’t cancel,’” she said. “It’s a big deliberation now as to who is going to have the bandwidth and finances and as to when they are supposed to take place—the second quarter? The third quarter? There are a lot of considerations to that. All of us in the industry are trying hard to figure out a way of making things happen.”

By March, with fees from clients slowly trickling in and her team of eight working remotely, Shackman had redirected everyone’s energies.

“We are working on strengthening our systems, writing proposals and all of the things we never have time to do because we are so busy,” she said.

They were also focused on connecting with other members of the industry.

“We are trying to be part of the community and reaching out to vendors and clients to see how everyone is faring,” Shackman said. “It’s hard to know—a lot of our contacts are either furloughed or laid off.”

Tracy Stuckrath (MPI Carolinas Chapter), senior event planner at Thrive! Meetings and Events, was also making the most of a slow period.

“One event I was supposed to leave for on Saturday got postponed until September,” she said in late March. “One that was next week was postponed until the end of June/beginning of July.”

But some business was still coming in, for later in the year.

“I did get a contract for a program in August,” Stuckrath said.

She was using the time left in her schedule for business devel-

## Business Conditions

This data is a representative snapshot of the time this survey was in the field (late February/early March)—when responses first started coming in, for example, there was not yet a confirmed coronavirus death in the U.S. As confirmed cases and deaths increased, the landscape predictions became increasingly negative. Of note: There was a 12 percent increase in respondents who projected negative business conditions, and a 7 percent increase in those predicting that business would dip by more than 10 percent.

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

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

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

## Snapshot of a Market in Flux

This data point went through some quick changes over the course of the *Meetings Outlook* survey being in the field—from a seller’s market to a buyer’s market. It’s expected that if we’re all back in business later this summer and fall, it’ll once again be a seller’s market as rescheduled events compete for space with new events.

**14%** Strong Seller’s Market  
**26%** Slight Seller’s Market  
**28%** Balanced Market  
**24%** Slight Buyer’s Market  
**8%** Strong Buyer’s Market

## Driving Wellness

Most respondents (79%) are experiencing an increased interest in the incorporation of wellness elements at meetings and events. From whom is this demanding coming? The results are quite clear.

**50%** Attendees  
**32%** Planning Staff  
**11%** C-suite or Board of Directors  
**2%** Hotels/Venues  
**1%** Sponsors  
**<1%** CVBs  
**<1%** Non-Sponsor Partners

# ATTENDANCE FORECASTS

UNDERSTANDABLY, LIVE ATTENDANCE PREDICTIONS ARE THE WEAKEST WE'VE SEEN, WHILE VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE IS EXPECTED TO SEE A SLIGHT INCREASE.



## Projected Live Attendance

42%  
POSITIVE

17%  
FLAT

42%  
NEGATIVE

opment efforts, such as networking by email.

"I'm pivoting a little and focusing on food safety," Stuckrath said.

Another focus was reaching out to potential clients in her community.

"I was on the road so much I never got my business established in my little town in North Carolina," she said, noting that she's also focusing on promotional activities.

But with cash flow a concern, Stuckrath devoted some time to collecting accounts receivable. At one hotel where she called to inquire about a commission check that was due to her, she was told that corporate was shut down because of the crisis. But when she tried calling again, she found the hotel was not closed.

"Instead of waiting for them, I calculated what my commission should be and sent them an invoice," she said.

Topaz Smith, managing director of EN-NOBLE, found that the sudden slowdown opened some time for networking.

During March, she found that travel restrictions were affecting her New York City-based business, which curates immersive experiences for travelers interested in unique cultural

*"We're all having to think and reinvent ourselves with the hope that live conferences will come back. Everybody is trying to make do."*

**KAREN SHACKMAN**  
Shackman Associates New York

experiences. With few people able to travel, she had just cancelled plans to go to Peru for the Miss Afro Peru beauty pageant.

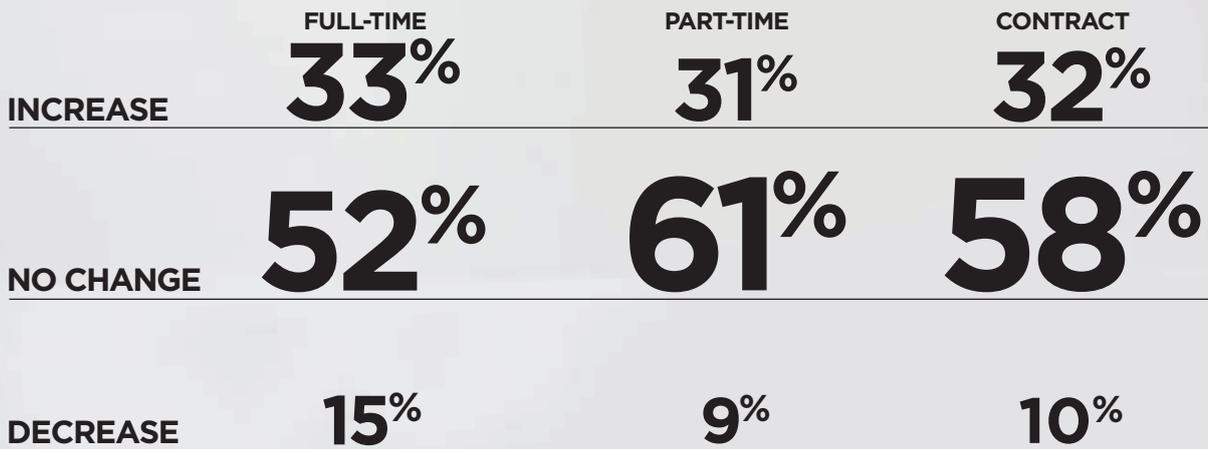
Smith made the most of the time she had available by attending events such as the Bootstrappers Breakfast, usually an in-person event for entrepreneurs that meets at local restaurants in New York City. It had temporarily transitioned to an online event during the crisis.

The group talked about trends they had been seeing since the crisis and ran ideas past each other.

"People are looking for nature-based travel," Smith said. "They don't want to be around people right now. They don't want to be in hubs where people flock. They are looking for innovative ways to get out."

## GLIMPSE AT CURRENT EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

PLEASE NOTE: THIS DATA IS FOR EMPLOYMENT TRENDS CURRENT AT THE TIME OF THE SURVEY (LATE FEBRUARY/EARLY MARCH). ONE SHOULD EXPECT MORE OF A DOWNTURN IN THE COMING MONTHS. IN THE U.S. ALONE, THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY WAS EXPECTED TO LOSE 5.9 MILLION JOBS (PER U.S. TRAVEL) BY THE END OF LAST MONTH.



Some who've found more time in their scheduling are turning to continuing education. To aid that, the MPI Academy ([mpi.org/academy](http://mpi.org/academy)) is offering free course work.

"Professionals can take advantage of it and get better trained to serve customers," said O'Malley, who predicts that the virus will ultimately bring new approaches to the industry.

"There will be an opportunity to look at how the industry is set up and what kind of innovations can be set up to enable ecommerce and get messages across effectively," he said. "There's never going to be a substitute for certain types of gatherings that have to be face to face, but we're going to push the limits on what can be done virtually."

Meeting planner Alicia Schiro, owner of Aced It Events in New York City, shifted her attention to virtual meetings when many of the live events she is involved with were postponed.

"I was able to quickly create some digital experiences using different partners and vendors," she said. "We came up with a bunch of different things we can add onto the webinars clients are already doing—cooking experiences, mixology. It's exciting."

Schiro found that adding a keynote from a celebrity, who calls into a company's existing Zoom calls, is also popular for

gatherings such as quarterly meetings. Or a company might do a 20-minute Q&A on best practices for its clients, then bring in the entertainer.

"Everything they are doing is a webinar now," she said. "How many can you do before you're bored to tears?"

Schiro found that celebrities are charging about half of what they'd normally charge for a live event.

"There's no risk to the talent," she said. "They're not flying. They're not traveling. They're definitely available."

In addition to digital innovation, the crisis is likely to usher in changes to contracts.

"Insurance doesn't [typically] cover viruses yet," Shackman said. "I'm sure that will change going forward." ■



Meetings Outlook is supported in partnership with IMEX Group.