



MEETINGS OUTLOOK™



By and large, many measurable aspects of the current and short-term events business are at record lows, and meeting professionals are struggling to cope with that. Their dedication and proven track record of innovation, however, gives reason to be optimistic.

2020 SUMMER EDITION

Beaten Down But Eyeing

INNOVATION



By Michael Pinchera

This is the first *Meetings Outlook* survey conducted entirely amidst the widespread coronavirus pandemic—the previous survey was out in the field just as the impact of the virus was beginning to become visible to the masses. As the pandemic continues and most in-person meetings and events have been, at the very least, paused for months, the data reveals the most significantly negative results the survey has ever seen for face-to-face events and the industry as a whole.

Business Impact

Although not a surprise, it is shocking to visualize how significantly and quickly hiring as well as projections for overall business, in-person attendance and budgets turned negative.

One positive data point is the massive growth in expected

attendance for virtual events. Over the years, the anticipated measure of growth for in-person attendance versus virtual attendance has been similar, often with a slightly larger prediction of growth for virtual events—but just by a couple of percentage points. The latest data clearly show how the massive attendance decline expected for in-person events (86 percent of respondents anticipate a negative growth) is directly impacting—in a positive way—that of virtual events, for which 87 percent of respondents envision a positive growth.

“In late March/early April, our team had high hopes that a valid solution for dealing with the pandemic was to move our conferences to the fourth quarter of 2020,” says Monica Grinage-Prince, CMP, CMM (MPI Houston Area Chapter), conference manager, industry events for the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. “Now, we are in the process of transitioning those



1011

“Going back too soon is not an option. Who wants to be in charge of an event that spreads this disease?”

JOE MCKEOWN
MPI At Large

same conferences that we hoped to still bring to the market in 2020 to 2021 and we’ll be offering virtual summits for the remainder of the year.”

Joe McKeown (MPI At Large), with demand generation for Thomson Reuters, says his group has shifted all of its major events to a virtual equivalent, while also taking a hard look at ROI, sometimes cancelling their participation, sometimes expanding it.

“Our central events team published a virtual event playbook for our segment events planners to help develop the skills they need and the resources available to move to virtual platforms for their field marketing programs,” he says. “You can’t just take an agenda from an in-person event and slap it into a virtual one.”

The varying level of comfort with numerous common meeting professional activities is similarly startling. A separate June survey by *The Meeting Professional* asked about 12 similar types

of activities, focusing on when respondents expected to be comfortable with them again. Of those, a majority of respondents said they don’t anticipate feeling comfortable with international air travel, cruise travel, attending events with more than 100 people, buffet dining, hiring additional staff or visiting a theme park or casino until 2021 or later.

“The most difficult thing I think is the uncertainty. Science will prevail and our industry will enter the next phase, but not knowing when is a big concern,” McKeown says. “Work from home will be fine for the foreseeable future, but at some point we have to go back to work. But going back too soon is not an option. Who wants to be in charge of an event that spreads this disease?”

The Human Impact

Julie Branstrom (MPI Rocky Mountain Chapter), a 30-plus-year

FEELING SAFE

Many meeting professionals don't currently feel comfortable with a wide variety of industry-related activities. We looked at 16 different components to gauge comfort levels.

	Comfortable	Uncomfortable	Neither Comfortable nor Uncomfortable
Domestic air travel	31%	60%	9%
International air travel	13%	79%	8%
Domestic rail travel	21%	53%	26%
International rail travel	11%	65%	9%
Cruise ship travel	3%	93%	4%
Staying in a hotel	45%	42%	13%
Attending large outdoor events	29%	60%	11%
Attending large indoor events	12%	83%	5%
Attending small (<100 pax) outdoor events	52%	37%	11%
Attending small (<100 pax) indoor events	31%	60%	9%
Dining at a buffet	11%	81%	8%
Dining at a made-to-order restaurant	55%	32%	13%
Walking a trade show floor	28%	58%	14%
Attending a hosted buyer event	27%	50%	22%
Shaking hands	7%	85%	8%
Attending a networking reception	22%	63%	15%

TRACKING THE MARKET'S SHIFT

The market landscape has completely flipped over the past year and is now the strongest buyer's market *Meetings Outlook* has ever seen. It's a great time for planners to shop around, however, with the sharp decline in face-to-face meetings and events that led to this situation, very few planners are able to take advantage of the current landscape.

	Fall 2019	Winter 2020	Spring 2020	Summer 2020
Strong Seller's Market	18%	16%	14%	4%
Slight Seller's Market	34%	30%	26%	7%
Balanced Market	20%	21%	28%	14%
Slight Buyer's Market	21%	26%	24%	38%
Strong Buyer's Market	8%	7%	8%	37%

“We are all trying to process and understand how to adjust in our new norm...but I’m certain that when we (finally) meet, we’ll change the world.”

MONICA GRINAGE-PRINCE, CMP, CMM
MPI Houston Area Chapter

hospitality industry veteran and owner/planner at Vista Meetings & Incentives, who regularly worked from home prior to the pandemic, says even though live events are on hold, she finds that she’s now putting in more hours of work each day—her time is just spent differently.

“Prior to the pandemic, I was busy planning, sourcing and working on meetings with clients,” Branstrom says. “Now most of my time is spent on marketing, more administrative work, learning and joining on webinars to stay connected.”

In fact, the vast majority (92 percent) of respondents have been able to work remotely during the pandemic, with 42 percent claiming to be more productive as a result. Only 30 percent of respondents believe they’re less productive working from home (27 percent say their productivity is unchanged).

“Planning my days is more crucial than ever,” Branstrom says. “Before, I would have tasks that naturally came with the work I was doing, and the hours would fly by. Now, I have to be diligent about how I spend my time and not get too distracted with ‘busy’ work.”

Branstrom says the isolation has been difficult for her—a self-described outgoing and social person.

“Also, having to get accustomed to having my two teenage daughters and my husband home 24 hours a day is difficult when you are trying to be productive,” she says. “You kind of lose your identity in the commotion of this lifestyle, but at the same time, I appreciate being able to spend more time with my family.”

McKeown was based in his company’s office prior to the pandemic. He’s been working from home since March, which hasn’t shaken up his productivity as he’s used to the travelling event professional life.

“Since much of my workflow was done on airplanes, hotel rooms and event offices around the country, not much is different for me from a remote work perspective,” he says. “I did enjoy going to the office, however, and miss some of the social interactions and drop-in meetings that made working events a collaboration.”

That said, he finds that, like Branstrom, he’s also putting in more hours while working from home—but he views the lack of travel as a sort of offset.

“Since the pivot to virtual events in our organization, it’s busier than ever, [and] without event and conference travel it seems like there should be more time available, but I’m putting in a lot more time coordinating all the changes,” he says.

While the vast majority of comments to this survey related to the business impact of the pandemic, one insightful respondent, who wished to remain anonymous, brought home the more per-

Business Conditions

Meetings Outlook’s most straightforward indicator, projection of business conditions over the next year, is the least favorable and most negative in the survey’s history. Here’s a snapshot of results over the past year.

Fall 2019

45% of respondents predict **FAVORABLE** business conditions

22% of respondents predict **NEUTRAL** business conditions

33% of respondents predict **NEGATIVE** business conditions

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

ATTENDANCE FORECASTS

WHEREAS PROJECTED ATTENDANCE GROWTH HAS OFTEN BEEN SIMILAR BETWEEN LIVE AND VIRTUAL NUMBERS, THE RESULTS LOOKING AT EVENTS OVER THE NEXT YEAR ARE NOW HEAVILY LOPSIDED, WITH THE ADVANTAGE CLEARLY IN VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE.



Projected Live Attendance

11%
POSITIVE

3%
FLAT

86%
NEGATIVE

sonal effects they've seen with industry peers struggling with the quarantine/lockdown situation: underlying emotional fatigue.

"People are distracted with 'other' outside noise, but they themselves are hurting and it's easier to focus on what's going on OUTSIDE of yourself than INSIDE yourself," they said. "There's envy that some still have jobs and they don't; many are struggling at home alone with their cat or dog or their drink. It's all underneath; Zoom webinars keep you numb and distracted, but people are struggling and pretending."

Further discussion with this supplier respondent revealed a genuine concern for much more than simple work-life balance, but the need for peers to help each other emotionally, understanding this is a difficult situation the likes of which no one alive has ever encountered, in an industry that's been especially hard hit. A focus on overall wellbeing is key to ensuring that the business landscape of the future includes the bright minds and smiles that have made the meeting and event industry the joyous success evidenced a mere six months ago.

"For the most part, everyone I am in contact with seems to appreciate that we are all in the same boat, and can sympathize

"We try to maintain a positive attitude and hope for a better future, realizing at the same time, it's very uncertain and life as we knew it is over."

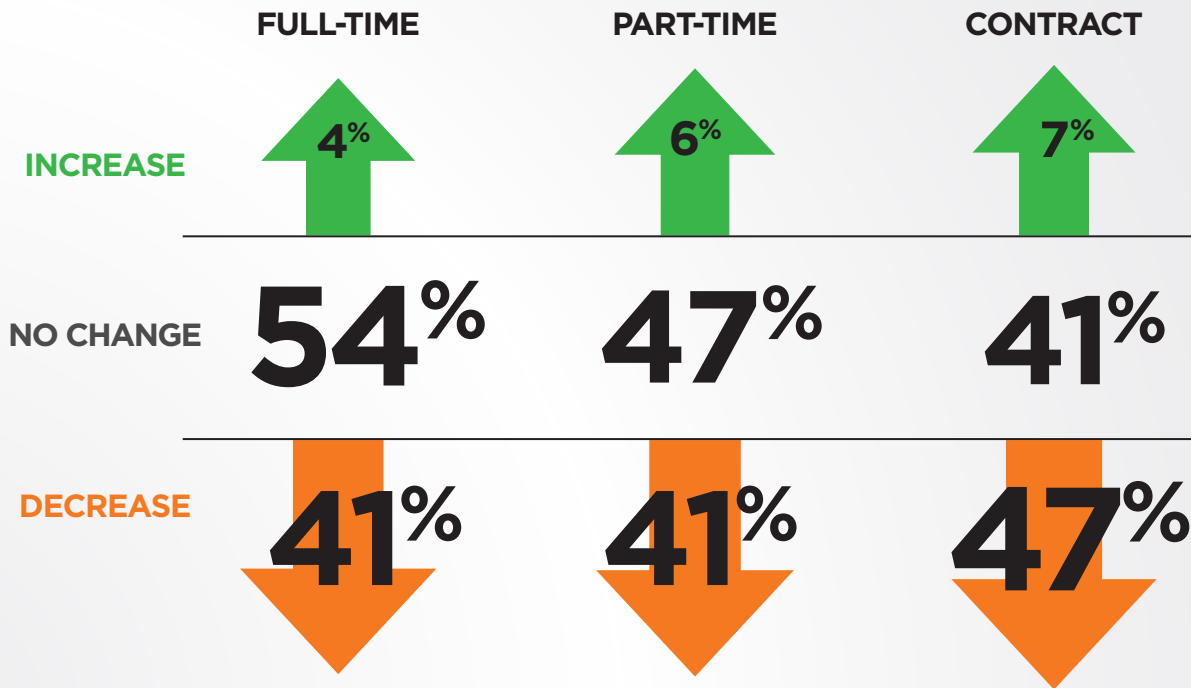
JULIE BRANSTROM
MPI Rocky Mountain Chapter

with each other," Branstrom says. "We try to maintain a positive attitude and hope for a better future, realizing at the same time, it's very uncertain and life as we knew it is over. We do grieve over that fact, but I'm seeing some unique things come out of this, a lot of pivoting and improvising, doing what we can to survive and thrive."

While noting the pandemic's "heartbreaking" screeching halt to much of the meeting industry, Grinage-Prince says many may now have a unique opportunity to "press pause and re-examine ourselves." To that end, she shares five important recommendations, based on how she's responded thus far, for meeting professionals who may be struggling in this stressful

GLIMPSE AT CURRENT EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

WITH THE DECLINE IN THE NUMBER AND VOLUME OF EVENTS, EMPLOYMENT HAS, CORRESPONDINGLY, TAKEN A SHARP TURN.



and uncertain time.

"1) Practice mindfulness meditation and/or prayer and wellness.

"2) Write. Keep a journal documenting your thoughts, feelings, experiences and expressions. One day, hopefully soon, you or your family will look back reading it in disbelief or comic relief.

"3) Tool and re-tool your skills by becoming a student of your craft, again. Take advantage of the countless free opportunities to elevate your skillset.

"4) Seek opportunities to give your time and talent back, leading efforts that trailblaze the future for our industry.

"5) Scale. If money is tight and unemployment is running out (or already over), seek opportunities to temporarily shift your skills to another industry. As meeting professionals, we are natural project managers."

Grinage-Prince says she's been in deep thought trying to envision what meetings will look like, post-COVID—thoughts that lead to the need to innovate, an eventuality she's optimistic about.

"We are all trying to process and understand how to adjust in our new norm," she says. "I personally have colleagues that I work on projects with daily and we've never met, only Zoomed. In these times, even with live video, it can be difficult to make the personal connections that face to face affords you, but I'm certain that when we (finally) meet, we'll change the world."

An Optimistic View

On first blush, the data may seem like a lot of doom and gloom,

but this industry is, above all else, one that thrives due to the innovative people in the community.

"I'm most optimistic about the future. I've been in the event industry for a long time and can remember SARS, Legionnaires, 9/11 and the great recession of 2008," McKeown says. "We'll make it through this if we do the right thing as a community, as a country and as an industry."

Noting the unprecedented nature of the pandemic and the uncertainty as to when life will be more like the normal we all knew previously, Branstrom is confident that travel as well as face-to-face meetings will rebound.

"It's an essential part of our curious nature as human beings to explore and spend time together sharing ideas and adventures," she says. "I can't wait to see how it unfolds and what innovations will come out of this for the meeting and travel industry."

Visit the MPI blog for a few additional findings from this survey. ■



Meetings Outlook is supported in partnership with IMEX Group.

© 2020 Meeting Professionals International