



MEETINGS OUTLOOK™



A balancing market reveals signs of positive things to come—such as growing budgets and anticipated live attendance—however, complications such as the shifting desires of humans emerging from various degrees of societal lockdown as well as a lack of qualified staff/applicants in many meeting and hospitality roles continue to challenge industry professionals.

2022 WINTER EDITION

Evolving Needs AND Challenges



By Michael Pinchera

This edition of the Meetings Outlook survey was in the field from Dec. 15-30, 2021. Similar to what was experienced in early 2021, responses began coming in immediately before many people first took note of the spread of a new, highly transmissible SARS-CoV-2 variant, and responses continued to come in as many locations reported record cases.

More than two years into the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, overall optimism continues with 82% of respondents to the latest Meetings Outlook survey projecting favorable business conditions over the next year—on par with projections from our spring 2021 survey. Of course, that's not an exact parallel as much has changed. In fact, 75% of respondents anticipate favorable live attendance numbers for the year ahead—only 59% said the same last spring.

Robert Kraus (MPI South Florida Chapter), operations director, Libertarian Party, says that his business is already back to pre-pandemic levels—a statement shared by 6% of respondents. While that percentage is low, it is notable and promising as meeting professionals grapple with the current landscape.

“We were an early adapter of various safety measures putting on a 400-plus in-person convention in summer 2020 with social distancing and masking,” Kraus said. “No [attendees] caught COVID-19 within 30 days of our meeting, to our knowledge. Since then, we are back to full capacity for meetings but have kept social distancing in place. People are eager to meet in person.”

Like most others, Kraus' meetings had to temporarily shift to virtual and hybrid; unlike most, his business has been able to rebound and return to in-person gatherings fairly quickly.

“We did a hybrid in fall of 2020,” said Kraus, who joined MPI around that time. “Since then, including all of last year, we were in person.”

He said in 2020, one in-person board meeting was moved to virtual and their presidential candidate selec-

“We previously have not offered a ton of activities other than attending the business of the convention, [but this year, we’re offering] different tours and outside activities.”

ROBERT KRAUS

MPI South Florida Chapter

tion took place online that May rather than the planned onsite event in Austin. Their August 2020 meeting in Orlando was hybrid. In addition to the board meetings, Kraus also put together eight regional training events last year, all in person.

“We expect our national convention this May to be really well attended,” Kraus said, noting that mid-term

U.S. political conventions typically have lower attendance than during presidential-election years. “We’re at 221 packages sold already and we’re still five months out. For an off-year convention...I expect we’ll be in excess of [recent mid-term convention attendance]. I think people are so eager to just attend anything at this point and get out.”

THE GREAT RESIGNATION?

The hiring landscape during the so-called and ongoing “great resignation” continues to deepen within the global meeting and event industry as 60% of respondents cite difficulty finding suitable staff—that’s up from 37% in Q3 2021 and 29% in Q2 2021.

“I think that all over western Europe and the U.S. the hospitality industry is struggling massively to attract and keep staff with the changing situation in the markets,” said Maarten Kruijff (MPI Netherlands Chapter), senior global account manager, healthcare industries for Radisson Hotel Group.

While that increase in hiring challenges is affecting most meeting professionals across the board, suppliers are being hit especially hard. A full 70% of suppliers say they’re finding it difficult to fill job vacancies, a statement to which 53% of planners also agreed. Kruijff noted that many left the hospitality industry during the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions of 2020 and simply haven’t returned because they found work in other industries.

“Many qualified staff left the industry during 2020 and never returned,” Kruijff said.

60%

of respondents cite difficulty finding suitable staff

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VACCINATION MANDATES?

With 92% of respondents to last quarter's Meetings Outlook survey claiming to be fully vaccinated, it's perhaps not a surprise to see an increase in vaccination mandates for staff, contractors and attendees. Notably, whether requiring vaccination or not, industry professionals are less unsure about their approach than previously.

Is your organization requiring (or do you think it will soon be requiring) proof of COVID-19 vaccination for staff and/or contractors?

Staff, Contractors	Fall 2021	Winter 2021/2022
Yes	47%	55%
No	32%	33%
Unsure	22%	20%

Attendees	Fall 2021	Winter 2021/2022
Yes	41%	51%
No	25%	31%
Unsure	34%	19%

HIRING CHALLENGES

The hiring landscape during the so-called "great resignation" continues to deepen within the global meeting and event industry.

Are you finding it difficult to fill job vacancies at your organization?

	Summer 2021	Fall 2021	Winter 2021/2022
Yes	29%	37%	60%
No	49%	41%	28%
Unsure	22%	22%	12%

That increase in hiring challenges is across the board, however, suppliers report being especially hard hit—70% of suppliers say they're finding it difficult to fill job vacancies, a statement also made by 53% of planners.

*“Many global clients I talk to are still (since 2020) **not allowing business travel in general** and that includes meetings.”*

MAARTEN KRUIJFF

MPI Netherlands Chapter

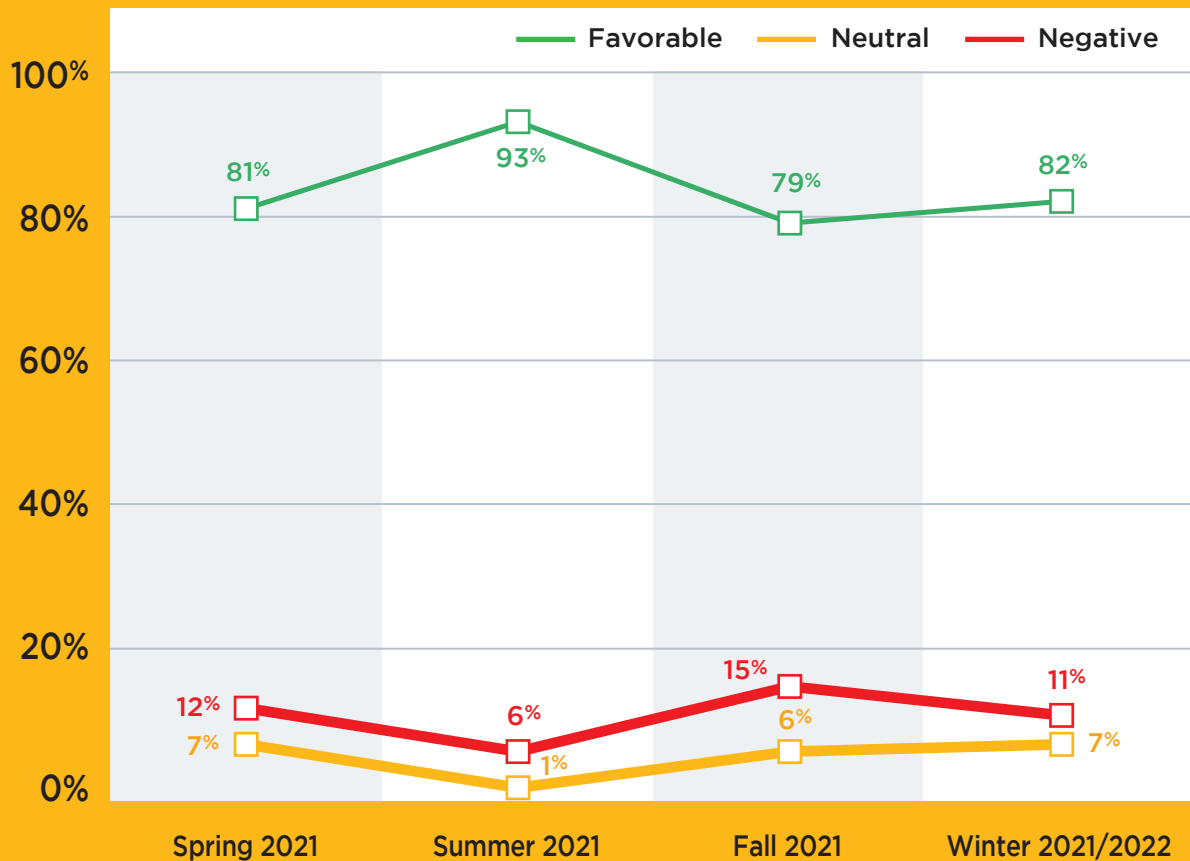
While Kraus said that his events are essentially back to pre-pandemic levels, that doesn't mean the planning process and various event components will remain the same as “before times.” That four-day convention he's planning in Reno, Nev., this May won't have a hybrid element, but it will benefit from the addition of planned

recreational and outdoor networking options for participants—such as river rafting and horseback riding.

“We previously have not offered a ton of activities other than attending the business of the convention, so this is going to be new to us to actually offer all of these different tours and outside activities,” he said.

BUSINESS CONDITIONS

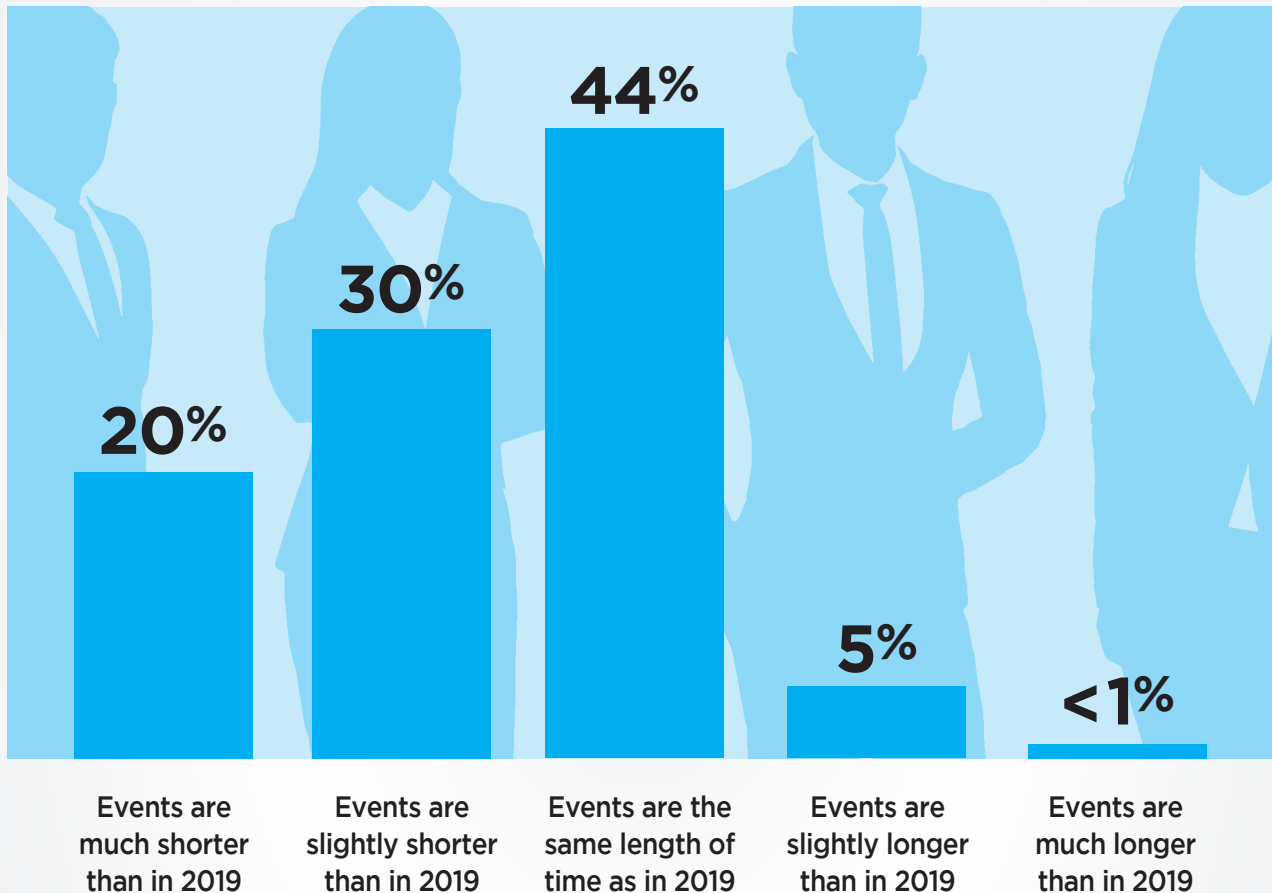
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EVENT LENGTH AND FREQUENCY

A majority of respondents say their in-person events are trending shorter than in 2019. In fact, 20% say events are trending *much* shorter. As expected, in-person events are still taking place less frequently than before the pandemic, according to 64% of respondents.

How is the duration of your in-person events and/or in-person events at which you work trending?



“People have been asking for that, so we want to try. We’ll have a number of different tours that people can choose from.”

By limiting the excursions and activities to relatively small groups (six to 24 participants), Kraus believes participants will feel comfortable and appreciate the additional opportunities to spend time with one another.

Augmenting the event offerings in this way is in line with what many in our industry are experiencing. In fact, 37% of respondents to the Meetings Outlook survey report more of a focus on and desire for networking opportunities while on site, compared to a focus on

and desire for in-person education. Education is still sought after (33% of respondents say the desire for that is about equal to the desire for networking), but only 15% of respondents indicate the desire for education on site is greater than the same for in-person networking.

“There is a focus on networking and less on CEU education,” according to Diane Schroder (MPI Tampa Bay Area Chapter), director, global accounts, ConferenceDirect. “One of the biggest challenges coming out of the pandemic is that people feel isolated. We have had the ability to see each other and speak to each other over the last two years, but technology cannot

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DIANE SCHRODER

MPI Tampa Bay Area Chapter

mask the feeling of human connections—a handshake, a hug, that closeness you feel when you are a few feet from someone. Inherently, I believe that attendees are going to skip a session or two just to continue speaking to another attendee during a break. As planners, we need to revisit our conference agendas and make breaks longer and meal functions less structured. We need to now look at human behavior and act accordingly.”

Schroder anticipates her business getting back to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2022. While that expectation is shared by 33% of survey respondents, 42% don't anticipate a return to “normal” amounts of business until sometime in 2023.

“Talk to anyone you know, they want to have family gatherings, get back to their volunteer work and just be able to speak to someone face to face,” Schroder said. “It is like the saying, ‘If you build it, they will come’—as an industry, we just have to collaborate more and see how we can start holding conferences/trade shows, but now we have to bring in the medical professionals who can help us plan these events and put procedures in place to help keep people safe while meeting. Once we all see successful conferences/trade shows happening, the cautiousness we see in the industry will start to lessen and I see an eventual increase of the number of meetings we all have on our calendars.”

In Europe, Maarten Kruijff (MPI Netherlands Chapter), senior global account manager, healthcare industries for Radisson Hotel Group, similarly sees the

booming desire for networking and human interaction.

“More focus on networking, quality over quantity—and a focus on face-to-face meetings during spring and summer and digital during autumn and winter due to lockdowns and higher COVID-19 risk,” Kruijff wrote in his survey trend comments.

With 64% of respondents saying that meetings are happening less frequently than before the pandemic and 50% saying the meetings that are happening are shorter in duration (only 6% report holding longer meetings), Kruijff anticipates organizers becoming much more discerning as far as what they want to achieve onsite—opting to “use this precious time more to network and engage than to push a message” since many basic messages can be easily pushed out digitally.

Through such changes, however, Kruijff envisions overall business conditions, attendance (in-person and virtual), budgets and hiring all worsening slightly during 2022.

“My knowledge is on meetings and events and business travel on a global, chainwide scale,” he explained. “And both will be hit hard during Q1 of this year and also possibly Q2. Many global clients I talk to are still (since 2020) not allowing business travel in general and that includes meetings. With these being the most profitable sides for hotels and the lack of government support in a lot of countries, the situation is not better than in 2020 or 2021 if we keep being hit with COVID variant after COVID variant.” ■



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