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BUSINESS TRAVEL NEWS

November 7, 2022

THE FUTURE OF MEETINGS

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EDITOR'S LETTER

Where People & Tech Intersect

Technology has never been more a part of our professional lives. That statement rings doubly true for travel and meeting professionals, whose day-to-day jobs were turned upside-down during the pandemic.

As we put the meetings puzzle back together, however, it looks as though we have more pieces than we did prior to the pandemic. In our newly digitized world, hybrid and virtual meeting options, which no one considered ideal during the travel hiatus, nevertheless proved valuable in ways that are difficult to deny.

Not only did they bring people together when travel could not, they expanded the reach of event interactions and content in a way that the industry had not ever truly embraced before. Event strategists could reach untapped, more distant audiences or cater to those who were reluctant to travel for health or other reasons.

In addition, event performance data was plentiful. There was more attendance and engagement data to track, sentiment could be gleaned from real-time messaging and chat exchanges; on the flip side, abandonment and dropout rates were crystal-clear.

The question now, particularly for meeting managers,

who are finally entering a world of more normalized planning and meeting patterns, is how to guide decision-making around travel and meetings. What innovations should the company keep? Which ones have served their purpose and need to be discarded? How do all these new elements fit into meetings policies, contracts and workflows? And what new skill sets or positions are needed to get the job done?

That's exactly the type of next-stage thinking this special issue of Business Travel News aims to support. While such questions still do not have definitive answers the data, interviews and case studies in this issue point to a future that perhaps has come a little bit sooner than anyone thought it would.

Enjoy the issue,



Elizabeth West
Editorial Director, BTN Group

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Dear Meetings & Travel Industry Partners,

In 2020, when the world stopped, it became abundantly clear that in-person experiences not only drive the travel industry—but our global economy. Case in point: pre-pandemic, business travelers accounted for up to 60% of all lodging and air revenue, while travel to meetings and events accounted for nearly 40% of all business travel.

Since then, like so many of you, we've adapted and evolved. The pandemic accelerated digital transformation across the industry; and the lessons we've learned, and the technologies we've adopted have ultimately proven that digitization isn't a barrier to success ... but a catalyst for it.

It's this spirit of digital transformation that best defines the theme of this fall's report: where people and tech intersect. In our 22 years, we've brought millions of people together through our innovative technology. Today, as we chart the future of meetings & events and corporate travel, we can no longer ignore that technology is here, it's accelerating, and it's now pervasive across the entire event and travel lifecycle.

We've helped tens of thousands of organizations around the world embrace technology as a core competency to help power their progress—and the insights from this month's report can help you do the same. For more details on how Cvent can help you, please see Page 17 in this issue.

Two years ago, I never could have guessed how transformative technology would truly be. In the darkest of times, it enabled us to keep the lights on—and today, technology has enabled us to get back to business and back to events. And no matter how or where you want to meet, Cvent's got you covered.

Reggie Aggarwal
CEO & Founder
Cvent

groups360



Dear Friends and Colleagues,

The business travel industry has come a long way in how we bring people together and connect across distances.

Twenty years ago, virtual meetings were growing in popularity thanks to more accessible video conferencing but were

limited in scope. A hybrid meeting used to mean a camera at the back of an auditorium with a one-angle view of the speaker onstage. And venues for in-person meetings were sourced using digital RFPs that had simply taken an already cumbersome process and put it online.

In recent years, we've gone from taking baby steps to advancing in leaps and bounds. I believe the future of meetings will be better processes and richer experiences made possible by more advanced technology. Like the innovators in this issue who are reinventing online meetings, Groups360 is reinventing the way we bring people together in person.

We built GroupSync to create a more efficient and effective process for online searching, sourcing and booking hotel rooms and meeting space. Planners have long said they want more choice and transparency, as well as the ability to purchase how and when they choose. Through more targeted RFPs and instant online booking, GroupSync simplifies workflows and saves valuable time—all the more necessary for organizers juggling programs with both in-person and virtual components.

While online meetings have expanded access and increased connections across the globe, businesses, planners and attendees alike are enthusiastic about gathering in person again. We look forward to partnering with BTN readers to help make that happen.

Sincerely,

Kemp Gallineau
CEO
Groups360

THE FUTURE OF MEETINGS

Embracing a Hybrid and Virtual Meetings Future

A WAVE OF IN-PERSON EVENTS HAVE RETURNED, BUT TECH NEEDS ENDURE

BY CHRIS DAVIS

The corporate meetings industry at the end of 2022 has turned back the clock. For many, it's pretty close to 2019 again: live, in-person meetings have returned. Most locations outside of Asia have dropped any and all Covid-19 restrictions, and many organizations have restarted their live event engines. Networking, luncheons and schmoozing on the trade show floor are in; masks, social distancing and staying at home are out, more or less.

But like most embraces of the past, this nostalgic reboot, however welcomed, isn't quite the same as it was. First, the willingness to travel to in-person meetings isn't yet universal: A September poll of travel buyers by the Global Business Travel Association showed 84 percent of respondents considered their organization's employees "willing" to travel for business, a significant majority but not unanimous.

And organizations also must consider whether and how to apply the technological lessons learned during the pandemic shutdowns to a world of permitted in-person meetings of eager attendees. Most companies in 2020 forbade travel for internal business and canceled all planned live events, replacing them with remote conferencing technologies from simple Zoom calls to elaborate broadcast-quality audiovisual platforms, all in an attempt to replicate the marketing, edu-

cation and camaraderie that in-person meeting can provide.

Those options worked, for some meetings. Most employees have become accustomed to holding small, short meetings over Zoom or Teams or another such platform. But opinions differ on whether larger events—trade shows, citywides, annual meetings—could be replicated virtually in any constructive way.

Employers, certainly, have noticed the cost savings that virtual events could offer from their live counterparts—at least theoretically, because that cost difference has turned out for many to be smaller than anticipated. And employers concerned about the carbon footprint of their meetings travel can look to virtual as an earth-friendlier alternative than a flight to a meetings venue.

These tech options, once positioned as the future of meetings, aren't going away now that in-person meetings have returned. It will be up to every organization to determine how best to employ virtual and hybrid meetings technology to complement live events. And as yesterday's future blends with today's past, BTN set out to assess how companies have approached the use and deployment of meetings technology, the ways it fits in with their live meeting plans, the skills their meeting managers might need to learn to manage these

Innovate Champ Troop Readies Next Step

Meetings management platform Troop in October at The BTN Group's annual Innovate conference was named 2022 Business Travel Innovator of the Year by a panel of industry judges. Troop, which last year raised \$8 million in Series A funding and this year partnered with business travel technology provider Spotnana, uses data analysis and an algorithm to help users find the optimal location and time for meetings and events. Troop CEO Dennis Vilovic spoke with BTN's Michael Baker about the trajectories of Troop and corporate meetings. An edited transcript follows.

WHAT LEVEL OF CLIENT GROWTH ARE YOU SEEING?

Dennis Vilovic: 2019 was the first year where we had revenues and our first customers. Then in 2020, the pandemic started, and we all know what happened in the industry, but we had managed to triple

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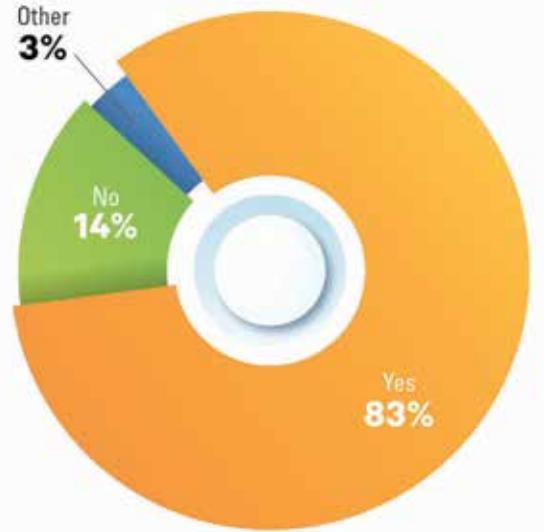
Corbin Ball, page 11

"One benefit of virtual meetings is unprecedented data. The challenge is in the analytics."

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LIVE EVENTS BACK ON THE AGENDA

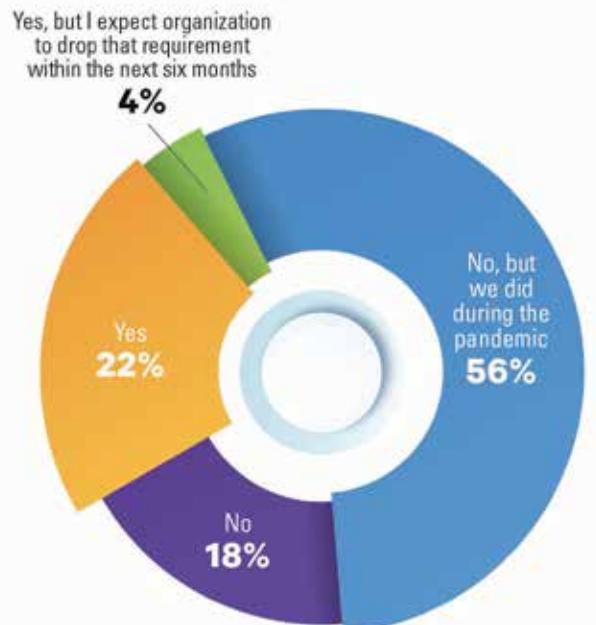
Has your organization returned to hosting in-person meetings in external venues?



Source: BTN October 2022 survey of 185 respondents

VIRTUAL MEETING MANDATES WANE

Does your company have a policy that requires virtual meetings instead of in-person meetings in certain situations?



Source: BTN October 2022 survey of travel and meetings buyers and managers

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4Sight

How have the rise in virtual and hybrid meetings changed the skill sets required for corporate meeting managers to successfully execute events?

Focus on Production

Professional planners have always had a collaborative mindset as they plan in-person events but adding hybrid to the mix has added a new dimension. This new dimension requires an understanding how each audience consumes information, similar to televised sporting events. As part of this skill set; planners have had to be even more collaborative, learning how to produce virtual events when they don't have a production team or finding partners to help them produce the event; rehearsing often and having a variety of back up plans in the event there are technical issues. Meetings management teams skill set is more of an executive producer to tie in all the elements of the events as it relates to considering whether an event should be in-person, hybrid or virtual.

BRENDA CROCKER-PIERCE
Senior Manager of Operations,
GE SmartMeetings



Seek Out Innovators

Hybrid meeting is the most difficult meeting to present. You have all the aspects of an in-person meeting but need to figure out how it will translate virtually. You need to have tools to help not only with the conferencing aspect [but the] logistics to put the hybrid event together. It adds a much more complex layer of planning to the meeting planner's job. Planners have to lean on their partners and innovators in their world.

CHAD SEYBOLD
SVP of Strategic Partnerships, Gant Travel Management



Be Nimble and Adaptive

Technological skills are more important than ever when it comes to the recruitment of event planners. Understanding the basics of the major event platforms can only get you so far. You must be willing to dive deep into the platforms and build your skills to become the expert. No one event has the same technology requirements. Event professionals have always needed to be adaptable, resilient, multi-taskers and quick thinkers. When planning hybrid and virtual events, those traits are more critical than ever as you are often concurrently planning for multiple different event formats, experiences and contingency plans at the same time.



KATE MCMAHON
Business Leader,
FCM Meetings & Events
North America

Rely on Internal Resources

Every department is using hybrid or virtual in one way or another from small staff meetings to larger regional events. I don't know if the strategic meetings management program objectives have really changed, but meeting managers now need to have a much better working knowledge of technology, and the requirement of working and collaborating across the organizational groups, including IT, human resources, various business units, et cetera. Organizational and project management skills are required like never before. Today a meeting manager has to work with more internal support shareholders and experts as compared with three to five years ago.



GEORGE ODOM
President, Strategic Travel and Meetings Group

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Innovate Champ Troop Readies Next Step

the business. 2021 we almost tripled again, and this year, we have doubled so far. We are growing on the people side. That's where we used the investment we raised last year.

WHAT GROWTH ARE YOU SEEING WITH SME CLIENTS?

We are getting great traction there as well as well as in the nonprofit world. We have a few nonprofits utilizing the technology. We always say what we do is relevant for any type of company. We are a small company, 40 people, but we are fully remote, so we use our own technology to figure out where should we have our in-person events. We built this product in the end for us, and it must work for us, then it will work as well for everyone else.

WHERE ON YOU IN LAUNCHING THE BOOKING SIDE OF TROOP?

We initiated that earlier this year. We have a live connection with Spotnana today where we can facilitate hotel bookings. We are finalizing the flight bookings there as well. We are bringing the expense piece in right away, through [corporate card and expense platform provider] Center, and that will be the first version of being able to offer an end-to-end solution. We built this open ecosystem, so we will add more partners into those different areas as we grow, but at least we started with some strong partners.

HAVE YOU SECURED ANY TRAVEL MANAGEMENT COMPANY PARTNERS?

We are working with one TMC in Germany, a small one, and we are going into a partnership deal with another one. We always said there are massive opportunities, and we have been in contact with TMCs from the very beginning, but it's difficult to bring these technology innovations into those TMCs at times.

IN A POST-COVID WORLD, HAS YOUR STRATEGY CHANGED?

This is what leadership is thinking about right now: How can we build a culture with this hybrid workforce? From my own experience,



Dennis Vilovic

"We built this product in the end for us, and it must work for us, then it will work as well for everyone else."

building a culture in a fully remote company is very difficult, [but] we need this connection, so we have to facilitate it. Everything in the end is related to the way we are connecting today, and that is where we are helping out. We have this technology that supports all these business units and satisfies all their requirements and allows you as a company to be in this hybrid workforce while building the culture and achieving your sustainability goals. That's what companies are thinking about today, and that's where our big opportunity is. We couldn't see Covid coming, but we started with this concept a few years before Covid emerged, and today we are still doing the same core as we started in 2017. That gives us a technology advantage, and we have to make sure that we are increasing the rate of innovation in order to cover this whole product, which we want to build.

WHAT NEW SKILLS DOES THIS REQUIRE FROM PLANNERS?

It's uplifting the profession, to be honest. Meeting planners are becoming senior consultants. You go to these people because they have specific knowledge in specific areas. You don't go to them to book a hotel and flight. Technology can do that. ... It's a great opportunity because your work becomes very strategic. Previously, travel and meetings was always seen as a support service, and it's not, so as an industry, it's a great moment for us.

WHAT EFFECTS WOULD CHALLENGING ECONOMIC TIMES HAVE ON THE INDUSTRY?

It impacts travel in general, but I don't think it impacts meetings as such, because I really believe there is no substitution to meeting in person. You have to meet in person when you want to bring people together to work toward the same vision, basically, and this is what companies are all about. ... You don't need these big offices anymore, so people use these budgets to have unique experiences, and people become very flexible on considering alternative destinations. Before the pandemic, when we were pitching to customers that we can help them figure out where to meet, they'd say, "We always meet there. We know where we're going." Today people want to have an idea of where would be a good place to meet, and not only on cost: on ease of travel, on efficiency, on maximizing the facetime of these people in the destination. People want to come together. □

Corbin Ball Assesses the Virtual Horizon

Meetings industry consultant and speaker Corbin Ball, founder and principal of Corbin Ball & Co., for decades has explored and analyzed the development of all manner of meeting and event technology. Shortly after returning from the IMEX America 2022 conference and trade show in Las Vegas last month, Ball spoke with BTN's Chris Davis about his assessment of the state of virtual and hybrid events. Edited excerpts follow.

WHERE ARE WE RIGHT NOW? ARE YOU SEEING MEETINGS RETURN TO EXTERNAL FACILITIES?

Corbin Ball: I think so. The overarching trend that's happened is that the pandemic has seen an unprecedented explosion of innovation, especially in virtual meeting technology. And society in general has been pushed forward in terms of digitization. Everybody from grade school kids to grandparents has had extensive Zoom training now. As we reemerge, we are much more digitized, much more capable of virtual technology and people are working from home much more so than in the past. That leads to some interesting combinations for corporate meetings, and where people are going to get together is going to be at meetings. That's going to be the time where you bring your teams together in to meet each other as well as meeting everybody else.

ARE COMPANIES STILL INCORPORATING HYBRID OR VIRTUAL TECH INTO LIVE EVENTS?

I think it's dawned on people that you don't need to fly across the country for a four-hour business meeting. Zoom calls have really become a natural way to do it and I think it'll remain that way. For meetings in general, virtual meetings will have a significantly larger portion of the event pie as it is, but the other thing that the pandemic highlighted is the real need for face-to-face at times.

Virtual meetings are great for information exchange, but it's been terrible for commerce and networking and schmoozing and getting to know people. The virtual trade show has just



Corbin Ball

"It's dawned on many that you have to plan for two entirely different audiences, and the remote audience has high expectations

not worked out almost ever. That's where you see things like IMEX come through and you bring people together. Nobody's wearing a mask, and it was like it was all back to normal. I think there's been some pent-up demand for that.

DID THEY HAVE ANY SORT OF A VIRTUAL ELEMENT OR A HYBRID ELEMENT?

There was no broadcast and there were no cameras in the room in their keynote. It's dawned on many that you have to plan for two entirely different audiences, and the remote audience has high expectations in terms of production quality. They have the expectations of what they see on TV. A hybrid event can be twice as expensive and twice as complex as running a face-to-face event. There are some cases where it makes sense that you want a much broader audience and you can track, but in a lot of cases, that's not going to be the method that they're going to use.

DOES THIS CHANGE THE SKILL SETS PLANNERS NEED OR THAT COMPANIES MIGHT LOOK FOR?

I think so, in a couple of ways. The event technologist position has arrived. Someone that is an on-site expert from the event planner side, is becoming a much more common position right now. You need a tech-savvy person. Also, the data analytics person: that is an area that virtual meetings have brought up. One benefit of virtual meetings is unprecedented data. The challenge is in the analytics part of it: to have a data person there that knows that, is familiar with that, who can make sense of that data.

WHAT COMES NEXT, IN TERMS OF NEW FORMS OF TECH?

There's been a lot of talk about the Metaverse. I think that in some cases, that's going to take some shape, parts of the Metaverse, components of the blockchain and smart contracts, and advances in augmented reality. There's a real place for this kind of immersive reality, especially if you layer it on to existing reality. The real challenge is going to be, which I don't see being met for probably even a decade, is the business meeting. To have to strap on a headset means that you're going to have to be an avatar. And until that avatar looks as good as I'm sitting here talking to you, I don't want to do business with a cartoon. I want to do business with a person. It's going to be a while before we get to that point, if ever. □

THE FUTURE OF MEETINGS

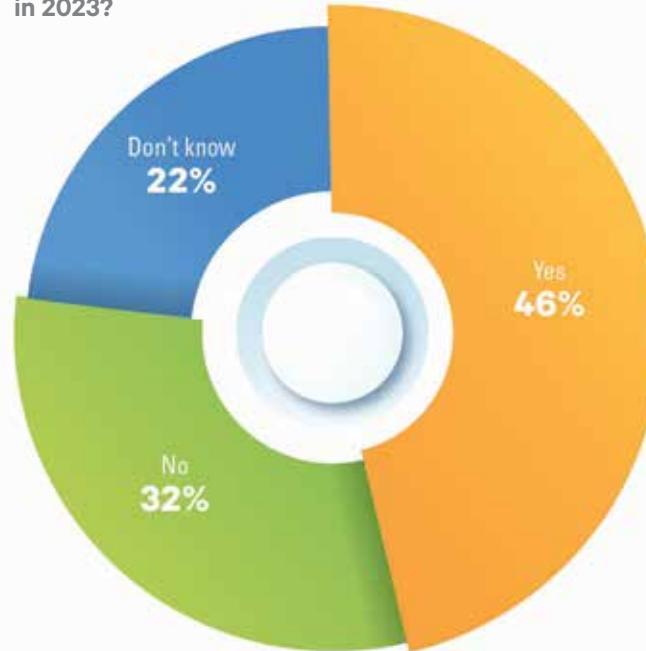
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tual is going to remain a mainstream option," Patrick Smith, SVP and chief marketing officer of venue sourcing and meetings technology company Cvent, told BTN. "A lot of organizations are going to continue to do virtual, not for every event but certainly for the big marquee events especially in the tech sector."

Cvent offers virtual and hybrid meetings management

HYBRID SCORES SOME 2023 INTEREST

Does your organization plan to hold any hybrid events in 2023?



Source: BTN October 2022 survey of travel and meetings buyers and managers

services alongside its live event services, and Smith suggested that the strong return to in-person events in 2022, a phenomenon demonstrated through request-for-proposals data via Cvent's Supplier Network, doesn't thwart organizations' desire to employ a hybrid element to attract as much attention as possible.

"People really want to go hybrid because they realize that is the superior model," Smith said. "It comes back to all the blood, sweat, tears and time it takes to create a great event. You want to show that to as many people as possible."

That prospect did attract some of BTN's respondents. About 46 percent of those surveyed expect their organizations to stage at least one hybrid event in 2023, and another 22 percent weren't sure. Less than one-third of respondents didn't project any.

Smith cited Cvent data to further support the interest in hybrid.

"In our recent planner sourcing surveys, hybrid support was the third biggest influence on a planner's decision to

submit an RFP to a hotel," he said. "They are thinking about hybrid up front and are not adding it on in the back. In the same report, 42 percent said they expect hotels to offer event space designed for streaming."

Keeping hybrid elements at the forefront of meeting planning and procurement requires an organizational commitment to the concept. Given the cost and technological requirements of hybrid production, organizations need a clear-eyed strategy to ensure an effective process.

BTN asked respondents to rate their organizations' commitment to integrating technology for virtual or hybrid meetings on an ascending scale from one to five. About 17 percent rated their organizations' commitment a five, the highest score, and the average score was a 3.57, generally demonstrating something short of an impenetrable commitment to the concept but still demonstrating appeal. About 16 percent of respondents scored their organizations' commitment a one or two, indicating disinterest.

SEARCHING AND BUYING

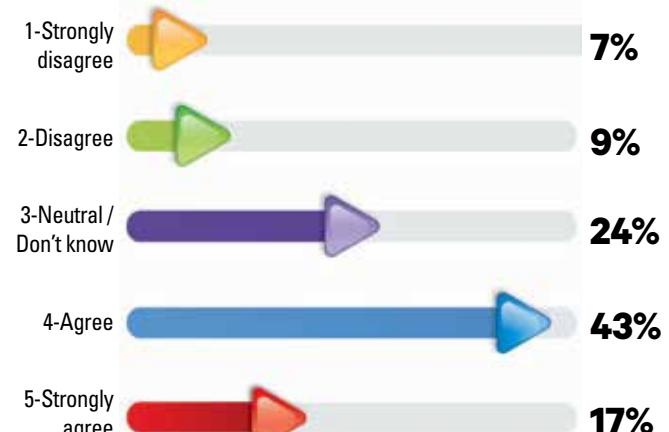
The roster of tech companies that developed and brought hybrid and virtual solutions to the market during the pandemic proliferated, and many of BTN's respondents availed themselves of those services. About 46 percent of those surveyed indicated their organizations purchased or otherwise incorporated external hybrid or virtual tech after 2019, and another one-third indicated their companies had done so beforehand.

Kevin Iwamoto, chief customer officer for meetings technology company Bizly, said virtual and hybrid technology

VIRTUAL COMMITMENT NOT IRONCLAD

On an ascending scale of 1 to 5, do you agree that your organization is committed to integrating technology to further virtual or hybrid meetings?

AVERAGE: 3.57



Source: BTN October 2022 survey of travel and meetings buyers and managers

would endure in corporate programs.

"The hybrid and virtual format is not going to go away," said Iwamoto, once a travel buyer with Hewlett-Packard. "It might come down a little but nothing replaces a face-to-face meeting. People still want to get together."

The maturation of meetings tech tools has helped them solidify their standing within corporate programs, he said.

"Adding a virtual component has become the norm, and you now have a multitude of excellent tools. I think the breakthrough has been the reliability of the technology," Iwamoto said. "I have seen some amazing data [for] annual conferences that used to attract 10,000 people, and those numbers have doubled. When companies see that attending a conference is not as disruptive and cost-prohibitive as it used to be, they will keep that option."

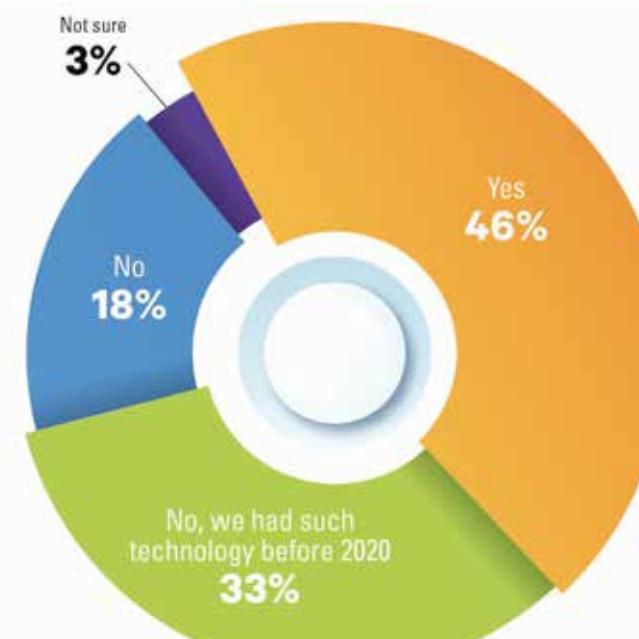
Iwamoto sees platforms like Teams and Zoom as "daily, utilitarian tools" but that even these have been used effectively in larger-scale meetings.

"But there are other technology companies that specialize in that more refined, targeted environment where the camera quality and speed is top-notch, and it is almost like being live—you can definitely feel the production value improvement."

Streaming capability and live broadcasting capability, in fact, were the virtual and hybrid technologies most fre-

MOST ADDED EXTERNAL TECH

Did your company purchase or select external technology to facilitate virtual or hybrid meetings after 2019?

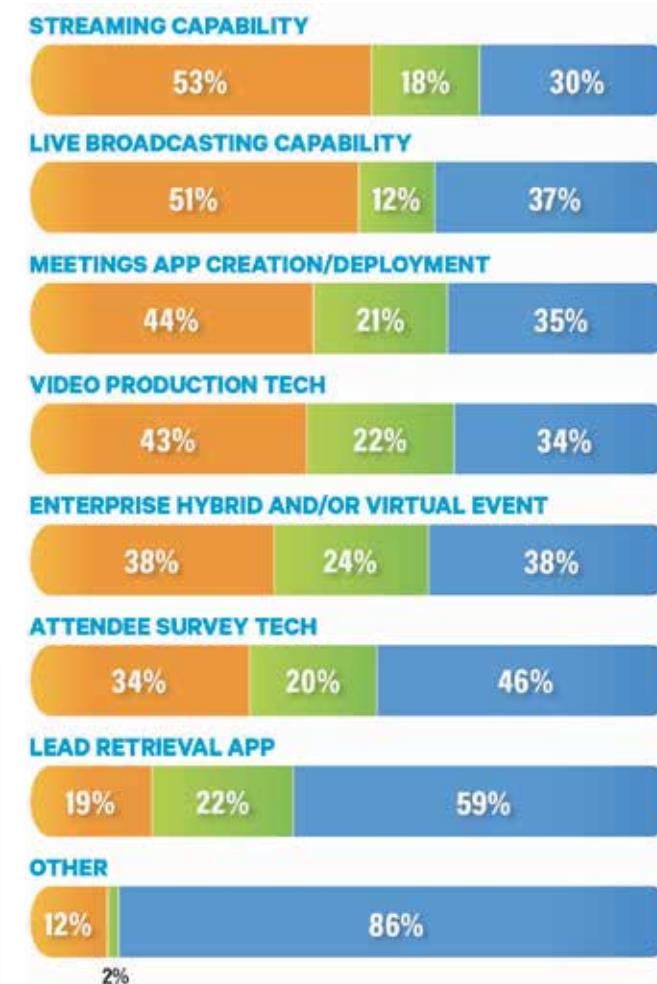


Source: BTN October 2022 survey of travel and meetings buyers and managers

STREAMING, BROADCAST TOP CHOICES

Which applications have your organization formally adopted or endorsed?

█ Have formally adopted/selected/deployed
█ Plan to formally adopt/select/deploy within next 12 months
█ Do not plan to adopt/select/deploy



Source: BTN October 2022 survey of travel and meetings buyers and managers

quently adopted or endorsed by BTN's respondents. About 53 percent of those surveyed indicated their organizations have adopted streaming capability, with 51 percent who have done so for live broadcasting capability, and another 18 percent and 12 percent, respectively, plan to do so within the next six months.

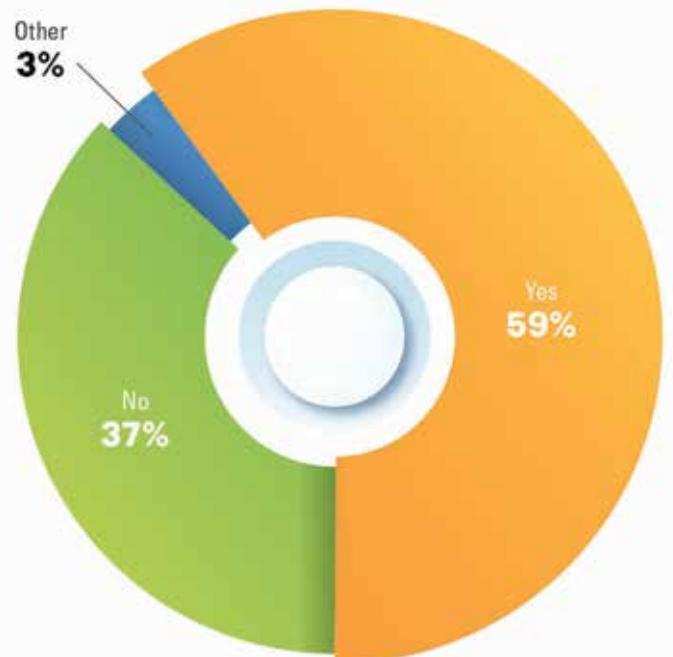
Other technological products that more than 40 percent of respondents indicated their organizations have adopted include meetings app creation and deployment tools and video production tech.

Broadcasting and video in particular can be pricey, es-

pecially considering attendees expect a level of production quality that doesn't always come cheap. Still, Iwamoto said, companies are willing to balance those high costs at times when the situation calls for it.

MOST OK WITH THEIR MTGS. TECH SKILLS

Do you personally feel comfortable assessing the technological requirements of a virtual or hybrid event?



Source: BTN October 2022 survey of travel and meetings buyers and managers

"Companies are trying to find a happy medium," Iwamoto said. "That more enhanced technology is not cheap ... yet. Right now, the higher-quality technology is used for doing main sessions or plenaries. As those price points come down, it will open it up for a bigger audience."

STRAP ON YOUR HEADSETS

The future of corporate meetings technology doesn't end at virtual and hybrid events, and the horizon holds the promise of artificial intelligence, augmented reality and other potentially landscape-altering platforms. Among them is the Metaverse, the immersive, headset-requiring platform in which meeting attendees' avatars could one day collaborate. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's development of and investment in the Metaverse has drawn some Silicon Valley snickers, but Zuckerberg might have the last laugh: BTN's respondents collectively rated the potential value of the Metaverse to meetings at 3.33 on an ascending one-to-five scale. That's not bad for technology that doesn't yet practically exist.

YOU'VE GOT SKILLS

All of this technological development and deployment has had a notable downstream effect on the meetings professionals who have been tasked with executing these events. Virtual and hybrid meeting production and assessment requires a level of technical proficiency that might not have been part of many meeting managers' education and training.

Still, 59 percent of BTN survey respondents indicated they personally felt comfortable assessing the technological requirements of a hybrid event. About 37 percent said they did not. Several respondents detailed how they felt about the new demands of their profession and the skills they felt they needed to succeed.

"It required additional collaboration with and training from our IT team for our program, services and events teammates to become comfortable with using the new applications," wrote one.

"Our event planning team needs to be proficient in technology and have someone on the event team to manage the technology aspect of the meeting," wrote another.

"I doubled what I knew before," wrote still another. "Many planners still are behind in knowing all requirements."

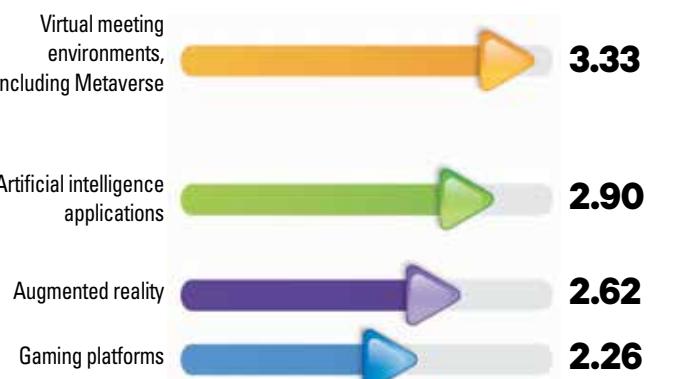
Several respondents noted their organizations had outsourced some of the technical requirements of their hybrid and virtual meetings—"It is something we outsource and currently have little capacity internally to learn," wrote one—and some noted the necessity of working with other departments in their organizations, particularly IT. Others, though, welcomed the changes.

Wrote one: "I actually think there are fewer places to hide for workers who don't come properly prepared." ■

Mark Frary contributed to this report.

NEXT TECH WAVE STILL JUST A RIPPLE

On a scale of 1 (none) to 5 (essential), how much value you see in these forms of meetings technology?



Source: BTN October 2022 survey of travel and meetings buyers and managers

Groups360

The rapid evolution of business meetings and events has motivated planners to seek out technology to help them adapt to the changes. The most innovative technology companies don't simply digitize existing processes—they reimagine a better way to do business.

For decades, meeting planners have expressed frustration with the longstanding hotel RFP process for booking groups. And the earliest digital RFPs simply sped up an already cumbersome process, rather than rethinking it altogether.

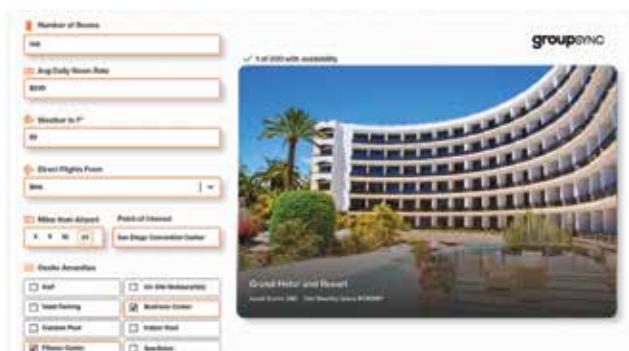
As hospitality industry veterans, the Groups360 team has been both behind and in front of the hotel check-in desk. We created GroupSync to provide a better, faster, more targeted way for meeting organizers to search, source and book hotel rooms and meeting space.

Create a Standout RFP

One of the primary advantages of the GroupSync Marketplace is its proprietary algorithm, designed to match you with destinations and properties that align with your specific needs and preferences. Your search starts by inputting your ideal destination, event dates, room count, average daily room rate, meeting space requirements and distance from airports, as well as preferred hotel brands and amenities.

From among more than 200,000 properties around the world, GroupSync search results include only properties that can accommodate your group. Destinations and hotels are also scored according to how well they align with your needs and preferences. And unlike legacy systems, there are no paid placements—only properties that can accommodate your group based on your criteria.

GroupSync search results also highlight properties with incentives that align with your program, as well as those with need dates that might give you a price advantage on room rates. The detailed, well-informed RFPs you produce on GroupSync can lead to faster, better responses from hotels and frees you to focus on what matters most—your event.



Book Rooms and Space Instantly Online

Instant Booking allows planners to book room blocks, meeting space or both, as well as A/V, F&B and more, in a single online purchase on GroupSync.

Ideal for the smaller, simpler meetings currently driving the industry's recovery, GroupSync Instant Booking connects meeting organizers to 1 million available rooms—soon to be 3 million—at 20,000 leading hotels. By the end of 2022, meeting space will be available for booking at thousands of properties.

Customized search results display which of the preselected hotels offer Instant Booking, and planner login credentials reflect group rates previously negotiated with your preferred hotels.

GroupSync's live hotel room inventory—from Hilton, IHG, Marriott and Omni, as well as a growing number of other leading brands—can also inform your sourcing process so you can know before submitting an RFP if a hotel can accommodate your room block.

Get Ready to Hit the Road

According to recent surveys, 80% of planners intend to prioritize in-person events once it's safe to do so, and 72% of hybrid meeting attendees believe they'll get more value from the in-person experience. And 68% of planners for B2B marketing events say face-to-face interaction generates more leads.

Professionals agree that conventions, conferences and client meetings are best experienced face-to-face. Nothing can replace the enthusiasm, interpersonal connections, new business opportunities or increased ROI of an in-person gathering.

That's why Groups360 is dedicated to empowering meeting planners to bring people together more easily, more effectively and more often.

groups360

Sign up for a free GroupSync account at groups360.com.

FORGING A NEW ROLE: THE EVENT TECH EXPERT

BY MARK FRARY

When we went through the pandemic, everyone became virtual and got familiar with that technology,” said EY global virtual event advisor Erin Babarskis. “We saw a decline in meeting budgets and there was a natural lift and shift to that virtual component.”

EY employs more than 350,000 people worldwide and hosted thousands of in-person meetings annually pre-Covid, so Babarskis’ synopsis may sound like a slight understatement regarding the major shift that rocked the Big Four consulting company’s travel and meetings operations during the pandemic.

Like the rest of the world, EY reacted to the immediate reality of Covid with a nearly wholesale move to virtual. In contrast to many companies, though, EY didn’t see the trend toward virtual as temporary. EY for a long time has foretold travel and meetings moving toward a digitized world and has been nudging the industry in that direction. As the trend accelerated with the pandemic, it made sense for EY to define that future, not to become obligated to it.

“There was a need to have digital event managers who understood not only how to plan an in-person event but also to bridge the gap between event strategy and all the different technologies” used to execute that strategy, said Babarskis.

A year and a half ago, she began leading a centralized team of three other meeting colleagues—one for the Asia-Pacific region, one for the Americas and one for Europe, the Middle East and Africa—to decipher the new world of virtual and hybrid meetings technology and define the path forward for EY’s global meetings and events roster.

WHAT DO THEY DO?

Each virtual event advisor on the team has more than 10 years of in-person meetings experience. EY has a robust strategic meetings management program in place, and Babarskis’ team consults on large events and those in which the organizers specifically seek advice on virtual options.

Babarskis noted virtual and hybrid events typically are more complex than in-person events. “There are a lot of puzzle pieces that make the technologies fit,” she said. “We have vetted different platforms with features at different price points for internal clients, so they aren’t researching a new platform



WHO: ERIN BABARSKIS

WHAT: GLOBAL VIRTUAL EVENT ADVISOR

WHERE: EY

WHY: EVENTS ARE CHANGING TO INCLUDE VIRTUAL AND HYBRID COMPONENTS, AND “SOMEBODY HAS TO UNDERSTAND IT.”

every time. Our platforms have all been stress-tested, and we know the level of service we are getting.”

The technologies include simple webcasting tools and templated platforms where creative material can be dropped in or more advanced features turned on, such as networking. At the top end are custom platforms where events are built entirely from scratch.

Success with technology-based meetings requires new formats that don’t necessarily replicate how in-person content is designed and delivered. It also requires what Babarskis called “virtual sparkles and glitter”—added production elements for which EY relies on both both internal and external providers.

DEMAND IS GROWING

EY’s meetings tech team consulted on around 700 events in the past year and were fully involved with 250 to 300—still a “small percentage” of the number of events organized by the company, according to Babarskis. But use cases are growing as EY realizes the affect of virtual on event ROI and accessibility.

“We have events that maybe had 500 people attending in person but now have 1,500 people online,” she said. “We can also bring a speaker without having them travel across the globe to speak for an hour. They do some testing and show up on screen.”

Babarskis acknowledged not every in-person event needs a virtual element: “If the goal is networking, I am not going to say you need it,” she said.

She also recognizes not every market has reached the same technological maturity: “For a global event, we ask what regions they need, whether they have clients in certain countries and where clients are flying in from. That feeds into what platform we recommend and into the contingency plans” should tech infrastructure fail.

Having tech specialists in the events team only will become more relevant, Babarskis said. “It is important to understand how technologies can connect to give our users and attendees the best experience. Event tech is evolving, and somebody has to understand it.” ■

CORPORATE PROFILE

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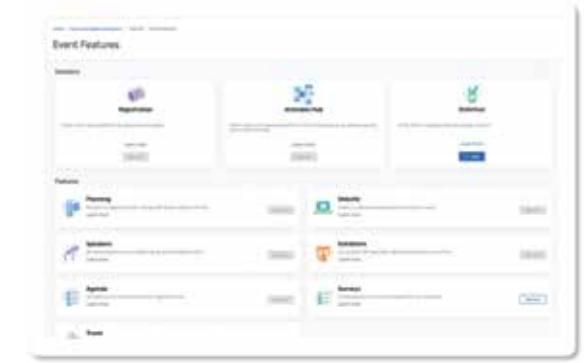
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GUIDING MTG. DECISION- MAKING IN A CHANGED WORLD

BY ANGELIQUE PLATAS & ELIZABETH WEST

About 90 percent of meetings are projected to have an in-person element next year, compared with 88 percent in 2022, according to American Express Meetings & Events' 2023 forecast. Looking at the numbers the other way around, however, is also important. Fully 38 percent of meetings, according to this forecast, will incorporate some type of hybrid or virtual meetings technology in 2023.

That's a lot of decision-making around when, where, why, how and which type of technology to apply. Do meeting organizers have the right guidance to do it? Furthermore, should they be vetting and choosing those technologies on a one-off basis or on their own personal preferences?

THE GO, NO-GO DECISION

Demand for in-person meetings, particularly in North America and particularly for smaller events of 100 people or less, actually has surpassed pre-pandemic levels, according to Amex M&E. Whether pent-up demand has triggered a post-pandemic spike in such get-togethers or if this is the new normal remains to be seen, but Amex M&E VP of the Americas Linda McNairy painted a picture of a more active meeting environment moving forward.

"Face-to-face meetings play a vital role in strengthening company culture, employee wellness, professional development, employee empowerment and customer relationships," she said, adding that meetings are replacing the in-person office environment for the companies that have gone largely remote after the pandemic.

Companies have some counter-arguments at their disposal, namely the high cost of travel, the drive toward sustainability and the increased demand for diversity, equity and inclusion, all reasons to leverage technology to reduce meetings volume to be gentler on the planet and expand the reach of meetings that do happen in person.

To that end, virtual and hybrid meetings technologies have opened a new world of decision-making for meeting organizers. How each company will situate virtual or hybrid options in their specific meetings policies will depend on the company strategy and meeting goals.

"The thing that is driving the biggest changes in policy, I think, is sustainability and what people can do to help their organizations really achieve those carbon-emissions goals," Bondurant Consulting president Betsy Bondurant said. Some of those policy elements will be around how in-person events are executed in a way that reduces food waste, reduces water and energy usage and reduces landfill-directed waste overall. But

other policies may also develop around whether to hold the meeting.

Decision-making technologies are out there, said Bondurant.

"Troop is something I would like a lot more people to use because it does totally focus on [data]," Bondurant stated. The platform answers the question: "If X number of attendees coming from X places, where is the most sustainable and cost-effective place for me to have my meeting," Bondurant said.

Speaking to BTN in late October, after winning the BTN Group Innovator of the Year award, Troop CEO Dennis Vilovic said clients have used the platform to help determine whether to hold a meeting. "Sometimes they'll see the costs, they'll see the carbon footprint involved in holding the meeting, and they'll reconsider—often, now, from a carbon perspective," he said. "Or, maybe they'll reduce the number of attendees who come in person."

Another option that has gained traction during the pandemic is what Amex M&E called the multi-hub hybrid meeting, in which local or regional groups gather, reducing travel downtime and the carbon footprint, and then link up to other local or regional groups simultaneously via technology.

"There are technology companies that specialize in that more refined, targeted environment where the camera quality and speed is top-notch and it is almost like being live—you can definitely feel the production value improvement," compared to more utilitarian tools like Teams and Zoom, said Bizly chief customer officer Kevin Iwamoto.

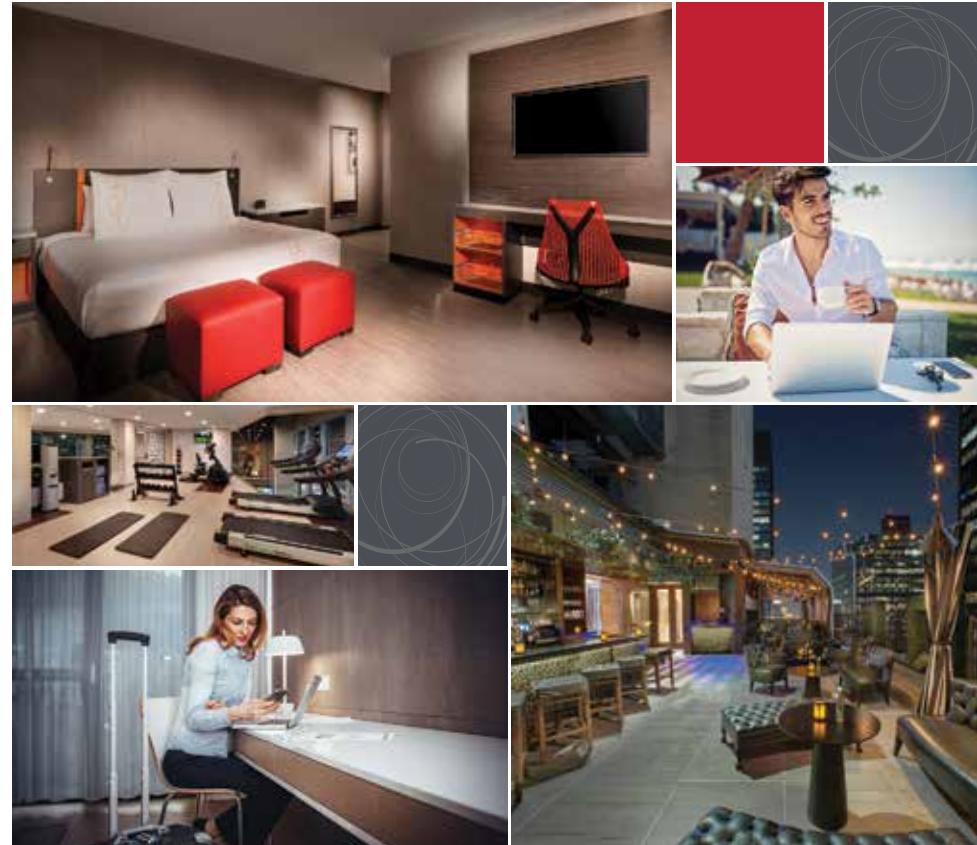
Yet Iwamoto said a common mistake for organizations is thinking virtual technology will be less expensive than an in-person meeting. "Companies are trying to find a happy medium. That more enhanced technology is not cheap ... yet."

EMBEDDING TECH IN POLICY

Some companies now are taking advantage of those full production offerings (see story, page 16) and expanding



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addressable audiences, reaching out to those who have been reluctant to travel for health or other reasons. Other companies have been more modest in their approach. But even with more limited options, meeting planners will need guidance in terms of the technologies that will suit their meeting formats and goals.

Takeda Pharmaceutical head of global meeting and events Rawya Tullgren has taken that decision-making responsibility off the table for her team by integrating compliance to preferred technology vendors into Takeda's meetings policy.

Takeda's in-house meeting management team handles events in conjunction with Takeda's information technology teams and external service suppliers. The company has adopted a policy recommending virtual and hybrid meetings when such options are applicable, but does not mandate replacing travel and in-person meetings, said Tullgren. "It's important to consider the purpose of the event and the best platform for it, which is often in-person," she said. "We're not trying to replace that, but we do want to make the right decisions."

When virtual and hybrid tech is required, Tullgren has contracted directly with a number of suppliers and has master service agreements governing them. She worked with the Takeda IT department to ensure the right criteria for those agreements and to vet the suppliers for uptime and security. The company uses SpotMe for larger events. Speakers can join that platform via Microsoft Teams. For meetings that are more interactive, Takeda uses Zoom because it has better collaboration functions like whiteboarding capabilities that support a different kind of work purpose, according to Tullgren.

MANAGING THE LONG TAIL

With Takeda's centralized team, it's fairly straightforward for Tullgren to designate a handful of virtual meetings technologies as preferred and communicate that to her core team. But in an increasingly remote work world, small and ad hoc meetings are the fastest-growing pieces of the overall meetings

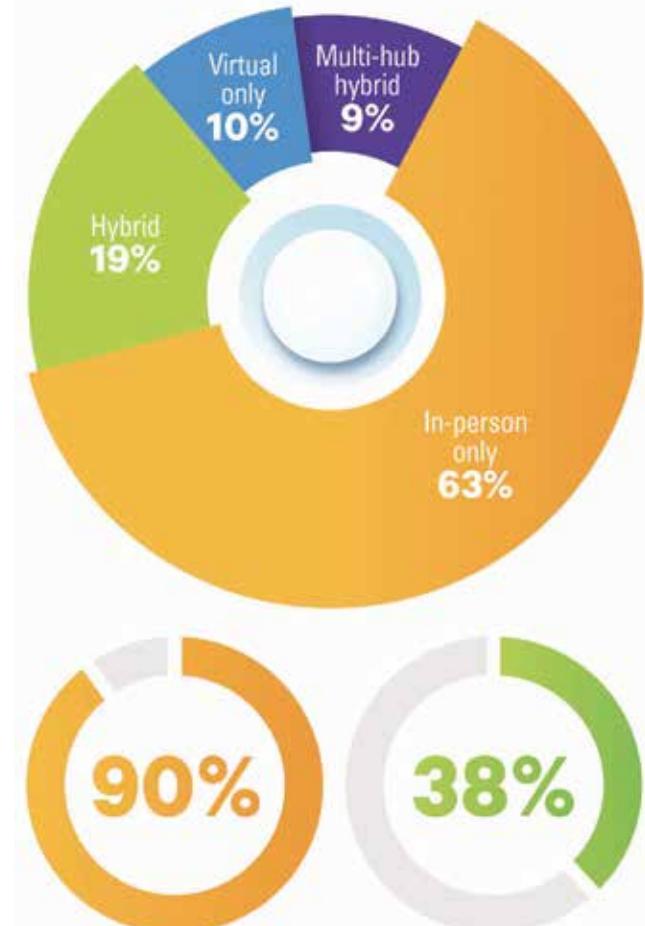


Companies need a way to assess which technologies are being used so the IT department can remove the under-performing vendors.

Companies should be able capture that data within their meeting planning platforms and give the company's [chief information officer] confidence in the technology strategy."

—BIZLY'S RON SHAH

2023 MEETING FORMAT FORECAST



Source: Amex Meetings & Events, 2023 Meetings Forecast

pie, according to Amex M&E, and these pick-up meetings aren't necessarily organized by a meetings team. So how does a meetings manager filter preferred tech choices and policies down to the meeting organizer level?

American health insurance provider Elevance Health has tackled that issue with the strategic use of another technology. Prior to the pandemic, the company contracted with meetings technology platform Bizly to provide a solution to its broader employee community in order to capture ad hoc meetings data, simplify sourcing and bring visibility to those activities.

Since that time, Bizly also introduced what they call 'playbooks,' which allow program administrators to define certain

addressable audiences, reaching out to those who have been reluctant to travel for health or other reasons. Other companies have been more modest in their approach. But even with more limited options, meeting planners will need guidance in terms of the technologies that will suit their meeting formats and goals.

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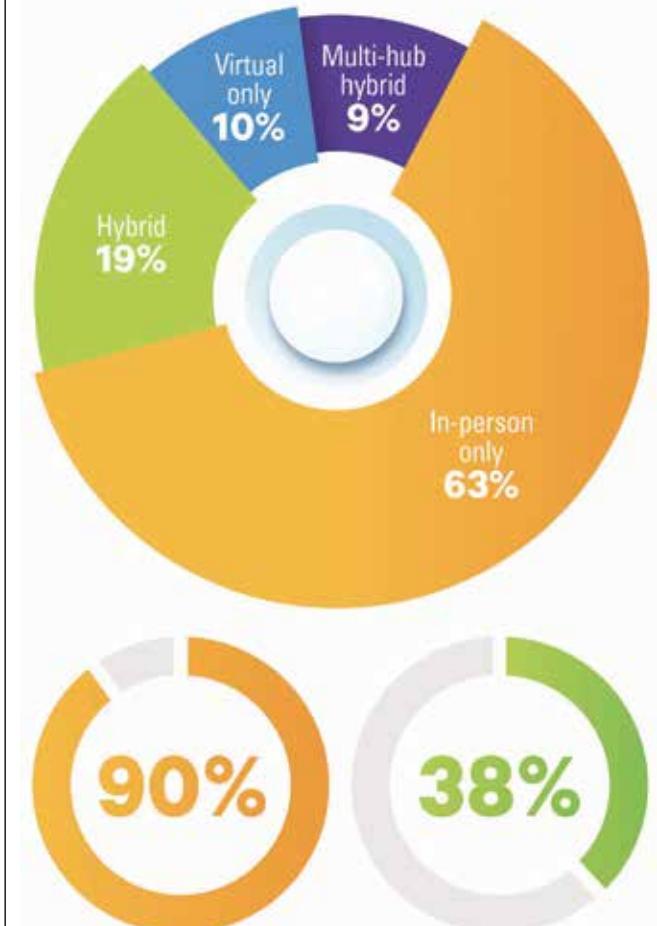
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meeting types, whether by budget or purpose of the meeting, that trigger customized workflows and support materials.

During the pandemic, Elevance incorporated virtual meeting technology providers into its supplier universe. Its policy now includes compliance to those providers, if such technologies are needed to execute a meeting. In conjunction with the Bizly playbooks, ad hoc meeting planners are directed to Teams or WebEx as simple virtual alternatives, according to Elevance travel and meetings director Cindy Heston. When the invites are sent through the platform to potential attendees, they can register for the in-person event, if there is one, or for the virtual option.

If event details trigger a more complicated “playbook” in terms of virtual or hybrid requirements, the meeting is kicked over to a meetings professional, who also has policy guidance on which tools are in play for Elevance.

“We are past the experimentation stage. We’ve got our lanes to say, Lenos is great through Brightcove and can be highly customized. We’ve got two or three parties if you need engagement or a special wrapper, or if you want games or breakouts. If you have education or training meeting, that’s a Webex,” said Heston. “Everything has been vetted,” she added, to save time and money but also to ensure reliability and reduce risks that might come with unproven providers.

Bizly CEO Ron Shah told BTN that while Elevance is an

outlier in how it has advanced its preferred technology strategy, more companies are looking at tightening up their virtual and hybrid technology partners.

“Users should have the ability to request new virtual meetings technologies to be brought into a company’s preferred vendor ecosystem, but it’s hard from a productivity and risk standpoint to make an argument that non-professional meeting planners need to source these types of technologies on a one-off basis,” he said.

“I would think the opposite would be more important: Companies need a way to assess which technologies are actually being used so the IT department can remove the underperforming vendors. Companies should be able capture that data within their meeting planning platforms and give the company’s [chief information officer] real confidence in the meetings technology strategy.” □

tegic customers and operations for CWT Meetings and Events. “So, they have to outsource to use it.”

Outside of such situations, the decision largely comes down to a planner and their team’s capabilities, along with the complexity of meeting needs, said Smith, who added the Cvent sees a mix of customers working with them directly.

Dawn O’Hearn, director of corporate travel for the American Red Cross, said that while “[Microsoft] Teams had become our friend” during the pandemic, she has been looking at platforms for more complex events herself, as she is hoping to keep some level of travel virtual even post-pandemic as a cost-savings measure, given that her organization is donor-funded. She said she’s taken stock of platforms used while attending other events, noting, for example, that Concur had provided “the closest I felt to an actual conference in person.”

O’Hearn said she is also in contact with her IT team not only to provide more training around how to use virtual spaces but also to overlay a questionnaire over Teams that can see how many people would have traveled had the event not been virtual, which she can then measure as savings.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Regardless of who is handling the sourcing, virtual and hybrid suppliers must be regularly assessed, as their priorities can change, as can platforms.

“I love to speak to the founder or CEO or whoever is running the organization and ask, ‘What is your vision? Where do you see this going?’” McNairy said. “Some might be focused on individual engagement and enabling conversation, while someone else might be more focused on virtual congresses or speaker support, but it’s important you understand the future vision.”

Service-level agreements with vendors can help define success,

though Bondurant said they need to be “fair and equitable” and urged planners not to go overboard.

“Less is more,” Bondurant said. “Once you have to start measuring 15, 20 or 30 different activities, you’re spending more time measuring than you are actually producing the event. Determine what is critical to success and measure those things but stay away from minutiae.”

Such basics include whether the event started on time or taking into account technical difficulties. McNairy concurred that reliability was key in SLAs, making sure participants are not having continually issues accessing a platform.

In terms of determining success of events, ROI measurements tend to be similar whether the meeting is virtual, hybrid or live. As with live events, planners for virtual events need to outline what they expect to achieve and build measuring criteria to see if those goals are reached, Wendel said.

Virtual events can allow granular measurements of activities that are harder to track in a live setting, according to Bondurant. Suppliers can provide specific data on how long people stayed in general sessions, how much time they spent on a virtual expo floor or how much interaction they had.

“The measurements can be so nebulous, so that’s something the internal clients really appreciated when they started to understand the amplification you can get,” she said.

In fact, having access to such data is encouraging planners to enhance the way they conduct events, Smith said. More planners are using such tools as badges with chips so they can track how many people went into a room for a session or how long they stayed, or they elect to forgo live questions in a session altogether and push everything through an app, he said.

“Organizations saw how much information they could get in virtual, and that want to bring that to in-person events as well,” Smith said.

While it remains to be seen how big of a portion of the entire event space that virtual and hybrid events will occupy in the coming years, Wendel—who herself said she’s seen recent demand for hybrid and virtual events “fall off a cliff”—said planners need to remain educated about virtual options even if they don’t plan to use them. Knowing the complexity of virtual and hybrid meeting sourcing and execution, for example, can be helpful in an “elevator pitch” if an upper-level executive suddenly questions whether it would be cheaper just to move everything virtual, she said. And, as one of the lingering lessons from the pandemic, the travel landscape can change unexpectedly in a matter of weeks.

“They need to be savvy about some of the basics,” Wendel said. “We’ll see a resurgence in virtual meetings if necessary, and they need to have all of these things as tools in their toolbox.” □

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—CONSULTANT
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VENUES GET IN THE HYBRID ZONE

BY ELIZABETH WEST

Forty-six percent of meeting organizers who responded to BTN's Future of Meetings survey said they would plan hybrid events in the next 12 months. Corroborating that, American Express Meetings & Events has forecast 28 percent of meetings in 2023 will be hybrid. No matter how you look at the numbers, organizers are on the hook to integrate a positive experience for both in-person and virtual participants over the next year.

Hotels have done some good legwork on this. Big brands like Hilton, Hyatt and Marriott have rolled out hybrid meeting suites, but they haven't necessarily blanketed their portfolios with them. Both hotel companies largely have worked with Encore, the reincarnation of PSAV which acquired Encore Events in 2019, to equip their spaces and provide onsite expertise. Marriott also partners with Encore, but also has formalized relationships with virtual meetings platforms Cvent, Hopin and MeetingPlay as well as offsite production and broadcasting services from Convène.

"During the pandemic, people certainly leaned on their AV partners to understand delivery of virtual and hybrid," meetings consultant Betsy Bondurant said, and they still do.

Forty percent of travel and meeting buyers responding to BTN's survey said they prioritize a venue's technology capability when vetting for their events. That percentage roughly corresponds with the percent of survey respondents who said they would pursue hybrid events in the next 12 months. For those who said they would not pursue hybrid, 36 percent cited lack of technical expertise and 33 percent cited additional costs to execute. And that's the rub: Venue capability almost always translates into costs.

For both Hilton and Hyatt, small groups of about 20 or less can execute a hybrid meeting without invoking additional services and costs from Encore. Any larger, though, and meeting hosts would be looking at increasing costs with the in-house AV provider. The Marriott approach is more customized to integrate with common platforms the meeting organizer may already use, but costs are still there.

SOME CONSIDER HOTEL CAPABILITY

To what extent do you agree that your organization considers the hybrid and/or virtual event technology and production capability of hotels or other venues in site selection?



Source: BTN October 2022 survey of travel and meetings buyers and managers

For some, this a la carte business model might not be the answer.

Elevance global travel and meetings director Cindy Heston negotiates with every venue the ability to bring in her own technology and production partnerships.

"We reserve the right to bring in our own [providers] with no penalties from the venue," she said. "We don't know what the costs are, but we want to be able to bid it externally and then determine if the venue offers better value or the external vendor." What usually works for Elevance is a blend. "We'll often do the main session, big-ticket items, and the venue does the breakouts. We've seen that work really well," Heston said, adding that Elevance has returned to about 80 percent of its pre-Covid meeting volume, but now runs 60 percent of those in a hybrid format compared to zero prior to the pandemic.

"It's a big change," Heston confirmed in an email.

Other travel and meetings leaders don't have the bandwidth or appetite to take on the a la carte model or source external providers themselves. They are looking for a more integrated approach with dedicated conference venues like Convène or Etc.venues.

"We've known for a long time about the pain points of audiovisual providers, and it really can hurt," said Steven Mandelbaum, who half-jokingly invoked the scenario of needing a power cord that you can buy at Home Depot, but instead having to source that from an internal AV provider for a cost and then "paying the AV guy to gingerly uncoil it for you."

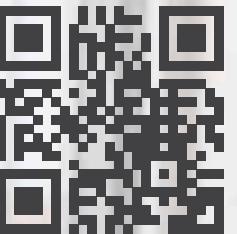
While Mandelbaum said he never likes to go all-in with a specific provider, he acknowledged that the integrated business model, where technology and AV are baked into the overall meetings package is "really compelling for the current scenario" when organizations are looking to scale turnkey solutions, with technologies that are still unfamiliar to many.

"It's a model that hotels really need to consider," said Mandelbaum, "because the Convènes of the world will continue to take their business if they don't." ▶

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CAN THE METAVERSE DWELL BETWEEN ZOOM AND IN-PERSON?

BY BOB CURLEY

Destinations like Las Vegas and Orlando remain top of mind for many corporate meeting planners, but have you considered the moon for your next big business event?

Rather than booking attendees on a red-eye flight, the Ramon Foundation, which supports educational programs in science, aviation, and space, recently convened a few hundred employees, grantees and supporters on a lunar space station—not a trip across the universe, but into the metaverse, the digital world traditionally inhabited by gamers but increasingly studied by companies seeking to bridge the gap between Zoom calls and in-person meetings in the post-Covid world.

When Facebook in October 2021 said that it was changing its name to Meta, announcing that “Meta is helping to build the metaverse, a place where we’ll play and connect in 3D,” it was the loudest signal yet that this virtual world could become part of the mainstream. And just as tools like Zoom and Microsoft Teams have become ubiquitous in facilitating small-group meetings in the corporate world, getting together in the metaverse—an immersive virtual world facilitated by the use of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technology—has become a viable alternative to events of every size, including sales conferences, corporate retreats, and trade shows.

“VR allows you to have natural interactions in a virtual space,” said Tomas Budrys, customer success manager at MeetinVR, a company that facilitates small and midsize virtual meetings for corporate clients globally. The fundamental experience of meeting in the metaverse—navigating an artificial 3D environment aided by avatars and headsets—has its origins in gaming, said Budrys. “These tools are built on gaming engines, but it’s not quite playing a

game; it’s a game built for business purposes,” he said.

Designing virtual meeting spaces is the bread and butter of Allseated, which has a database of more than 100,000 floorplan templates that can be populated with 10,000-plus 3D objects from trade show booths to video screens, decorative plants to landscapes. Allseated CEO Yaron Lipshitz recently demonstrated a live virtual trade show on its Meetaverse platform, using a personal avatar to navigate to breakout rooms and among booths to watch video presentations and converse with other attendees roaming the space with their own avatars.

Admins controlled the opening and closing of meeting rooms, and individuals had the power to accept or reject participants in conversations, offering a high degree of control on both the facilitator and individual level.

“Zoom is a wonderful tool when you have a one-on-one meeting,” said Lipshitz during an interview conducted via Zoom. “The challenge is when you get beyond one-on-one or one-on-a-few. How do you recreate the experience of being in a meeting that we knew from prior to the pandemic? How do you get people not to just consume content, but to be active participants?”

Unlike what global travel technology evangelist Johnny Thorsen calls “square meeting technology” like Zoom, digital environments can deliver what Lipshitz called “a sense of presence,” whether that’s being in a convention center, at a rooftop happy hour, or even a space station on the moon.

“There’s a notion of experience and exploration: You’re not just on a call, but able to look around,” he said. “There’s the serendipity of interaction, of meeting and shaking hands. In the 3D environment, that’s much easier to accomplish.”

Branding is also an important

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differentiator for meetings in the metaverse. When makeup artists, buyers and others attended Sephora's virtual press day on Metaverse, for example, they entered a custom-designed Virtual House of Beauty splashed with logos and brand imagery to hear presentations from company CEOs, get information on new product launches, and earn points redeemable for Sephora products by attending sessions and playing games.

A business meeting using VR and AR technology, such as 7-Eleven's global CEO conference, hosted by Allseated, might not be as flashy, but many of the same capabilities carry over to the corporate world. "Virtual twinning" can recreate any physical meeting space in the metaverse, allowing attendees around the world to experience a meeting at headquarters in a branded setting, for example. Gamification can be used to reward attendees for completing certain tasks, such as earning points for every interaction they make at a networking event.

Tuning out of a Zoom meeting is as simple as turning off your camera, but digital environments not only are more engaging but harder to disappear from, experts say. "People spend more time interacting because it's easy," said Thorsen, who cited data showing that person-to-person interaction is twice as high at virtual trade shows versus live ones.

"You lose the random effect. Having a targeted list of who you want to meet is very easy in this environment," he said. The ability to collect potentially valuable data on attendee behavior is also huge. "In the real world you can have 15,000 steps at a big convention center, and there's little information on who you meet," said Thorsen. "In digital it's all tracked, and all conversations are stored."

Lipshitz said the strongest use cases for virtual meetings in the corporate world include trade

shows, HR activities like teambuilding and onboarding, networking and next-generation webinars that can be used to nurture leads and allow prospective customer to engage with both people and content.

"We've closed deals virtually where before would require getting on a plane multiple times," he said.

A NEW ERA OF INTERACTION

"The events industry is forever changed," said Beau Ballin, VP and global market leader at CWT Meetings & Events. "Certain meetings will totally happen in the virtual space, like first sales calls; small team meetings with seven or eight direct reports will no longer happen in person." Town halls are another category of meeting that likely will go digital for good, he said.

Budrys said the potential for VR and AR technology shines through for teambuilding and collaboration, from group activities like designing a company coat of arms on a digital canvas to "foresight workshops" to brainstorm around the future of work and engaging in "lightning decision jams" to come up with solutions to specific problems.

The idea of interacting in a virtual environment isn't new. As early as 1982 it was the basis of the movie Tron, the term "metaverse" was coined in 1993, and people began using personal avatars to explore Second Life, the first created metaverse, in 2003.

Development of VR and AR technology accelerated in the following decades, but it took the Covid-19 pandemic for acceptance of virtual experiences to start catching up in the mainstream and business worlds.

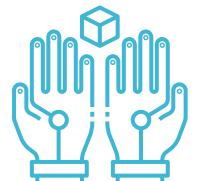
"We had a surge of virtual during Covid, when it was the only alternative," said Thorsen. "It made people accustomed to having video on, and [tools like Zoom are] now the default over the phone. If I want to show you something, I can do that. If there's even the hint of creativity, this is the way to do that."

Some demand for virtual meetings is coming from the client side. Thorsen recalled a recent conversation with a major pharmaceutical company that's rapidly abandoning in-person sales calls with virtual ones based on feedback from doctors, for example.

Another driver is generational, said Ballin, which is investing in research and development of virtual meeting technology. "As today's youth move into leadership positions and have immersion into digital environments and gaming, [the shift to metaverse meetings] will happen," he said.

"The stage is set for the next generation to come out and advocate for this," said Thorsen, noting that Twitch—a live-streaming platform for gaming and other activities in the metaverse, including tutorials, social interaction, and software development—has more than 45 million daily users, a substantial majority under age 45.

"HR is keeping an eye on VR because hiring tech tal-



"There's a notion of experience and exploration. There's the serendipity of interaction, of meeting and shaking hands. In the 3D environment, that's much easier to accomplish."

—ALLSEATED'S YARON LIPSHITZ

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ent means keeping them satisfied at work, and VR is part of that," said Budrys. "It makes a workplace more attractive for millennials and younger workers. VR be used more and more for work, and companies that are investing in it now will have quite the benefit for adopting the technology early."

The rising utilization of the metaverse will also impact the kinds of people that companies hire in their travel department, said Thorsen.

"The profile of the person who owns meetings and events in the company will have to change," Thorsen said. "That person will need to be able to understand these new technologies, not just be a travel agent."

HEADING INTO RESISTANCE?

Significant barriers to widespread adoption of VR and AR remain in the business travel world and across the corporate hierarchy. Ballin said such "failure points" including age, familiarity with technology in general, and the limitations of the technology itself.

"There's a lot of buzz over the metaverse, but not a lot of people have tried it," said Budrys. MeetinVR advises new corporate clients to ease into adoption, starting with small group meetings in departments that tend to have employees who are more comfortable with technology and have a stronger business case for adopting VR and AR, such as IT, R&D and HR.

"Choose a specific team that does team meetings on a regular basis," said Budrys. "Then when you're comfortable, do a proof of concept. If that's successful, greenlight broader use in other business units that are less tech-savvy."

Extensive onboarding is part of MeetinVR's services, largely necessitated by reliance on VR headsets. "If you give a headset to a nine-year-old, they will figure it out on their own," said Budrys, but the learning curve is steeper for older users.



The profile of the person who owns meetings and events in the company will have to change. That person will need to be able to understand these new technologies, not just be a travel agent.

—JOHNNY THORSEN

The immersive environment enabled by headsets like the Meta Quest Pro and Pico 4 work best for the types of collaborative small group meetings, workshops, VIP events, and board meetings facilitated by MeetinVR—"things where stakeholders used to fly into a hotel for a few days," notes Budrys.

Headsets are powerful tools: "small computer on your face" is how Budrys describes them.

"If we are both neurosurgeons, there's the ability for us to put on headsets and look at someone's brain together," said Ballin. "That's powerful, meaningful and makes sense."

Operating in an immersive environment also can be fun in a way that can facilitate closer connections among team members, said Budrys. "You might think senior managers are serious people, but put a headset on them and they start goofing around," he said. "Because it's not you but 'virtual you,' it demolishes boundaries and helps build friendships—you can be looser than in real life."

Part of the reason that companies like MeetinVR tend to focus on smaller groups, however, is that the fully immersive environments facilitated by headsets require significant bandwidth. Headsets also have limited battery life, and newer users, in particular, tend to be limited in how long they can comfortably remain in a headset-enabled digital environment.

"We had VR back in 2017, but usage was very low: nobody wanted to wear goggles for more than two minutes," according to Lipshitz. Budrys advises clients to cap meetings at no more than an hour, interspersed with breaks.

Not all metaverse meetings and events require VR goggles, however. Metaverse participants need only a web browser and a mouse or trackpad to navigate and interact in a created environment, which enables companies to scale events for far greater numbers of attendees. "It's an environment for the tech we have now," according to Lipshitz.

As for the future of VR and AR enabled meetings, "the key will be spread of technology and bandwidth," said Ballin. Budrys said it "will be some time before we have holograms," but on the near horizon are devices that provide the functionality of VR headsets but are the size and shape of eyeglasses, facilitating navigation of environments that blend the physical and digital worlds—a "phygital" landscape, as Lipshitz called it.

"We are seeing a transition from VR to mixed reality, with some 3D elements and some real," said Budrys.

"Hotels can provide a guaranteed high-speed Wi-Fi environment and project you into a virtual conference room," said Thorsen. "The question is, how do we communicate when you're in the room and I'm not? The headsets need to go, which will happen in the next three to five years. Once we have VR glasses in consumer life it will easily move into corporate life." ■

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