

RETHINKING SIMPLE MEETINGS

SOURCING AND BOOKING STRATEGIES FOR THE NEW ERA



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Just as some leading corporations began rolling out new approaches and technologies to more quickly and conveniently source and book simple meetings, the world of meetings took a long pause. As meetings resume, pressure is mounting for more efficient and expedient ways to book such meetings.

Automated, online booking tools, packaged solutions and concierge approaches to simple meetings are among the options that companies are considering as they redefine small meetings as simple and complex. Some companies are finding that more small meetings must really be defined as “complex” and may require the skills of professional planners to source, contract, establish payment terms, reconcile or compile data. Whether due to travel rules, health and safety or compliance, some small meetings now require additional layers of management expertise applied.

This white paper highlights how some

companies are sourcing and booking small, simple meetings. It also explains the challenges that such meetings can present for a company or its meeting planners and why inaction on a strategy for small meetings sourcing and booking can be a costly misstep.

Small, simple meetings are often estimated to comprise more than 50 percent—and up to 80 percent—of an organizations’ total meetings expenditures. Speakers on a BTN Group webinar, sponsored by Cvent, said simple meetings within their organizations comprised between 30% to 50% of meeting volume at one company and north of 60% at two others.

WHY SOURCING PROCESSES FOR LARGE, COMPLEX MEETINGS MAY BE TOO COSTLY FOR SMALL, SIMPLE MEETINGS

As part of standard procurement processes, companies over the past decade or two have adopted standard processes, contractual terms and signing authority for major purchases, including for meetings over a dollar or risk threshold. Meeting planners or sourcing teams may need to secure three or more bids for each meeting and require hotels to accept standard contractual terms. Such terms are designed to allow for credits in the event of cancellations or changes, prevent competing organizations from hosting meetings in the same property over the same dates or provide other key protections for a company.

For a small, simple meeting, such processes may be too cumbersome and costly for both corporation and hotel contacts. That is especially so with limited resources on both sides. Recognizing such concerns, some companies allow stakeholders to book simple meetings without following the more rigid requirements for larger, more expensive meetings.

Meeting owners or administrative assistants have long planned simple meetings. With a quick email, call or online request for proposal sent to local or favorite hotel contacts, nonprofessional planners may negotiate rates, terms and sign contracts, especially for last-minute meetings. Costs are typically charged to corporate payment cards. However, in the event of cancellations, attrition or changes, the risks of such contracts emerge. They may omit standard terms and conditions required by procurement or professional meeting sourcing teams that allow for rebooking or protect against having a competitor at the same property over meeting dates. As the pandemic began and all meetings ceased, many companies and executives identified the weaknesses in their existing contracts and procurement practices when told of financial penalties to cancel meetings.

Payment and other data may not be correctly recorded. Among the concerns of such ad hoc contracts: corporate risk, the ability to capture attendee and spending data, the ability to leverage all spending, duty of care and consistent branding. For some, defining the challenges may be the best approach.

▶ WHAT IS A SIMPLE MEETING?

Definitions of small "simple meetings" vary widely by organization. Typically, they are:

- One- or two-day meetings with 50 or fewer attendees
- No more than 100 hotel room nights

Some set the attendee threshold much lower—at 25 or even less than 10. Others use spend thresholds of less than \$25,000, \$10,000 or even \$5,000. Such meetings may require a meeting room or two, sleeping rooms, meals and some audio visual. Meeting purposes are often for internal stakeholders, teams, field marketing or training. Complex technology, room sets or elaborate food and beverage orders or entertainment are usually not involved here.

Even a small meeting may be defined as "complex" due to a variety of factors. Among them: safety and security provisions for attendees, including COVID testing or quarantines, when international borders must be crossed by attendees, when compliance to industry or governmental rules requires reporting of spending, when contracts expose a company to financial or other risks.

BOOKING AND SOURCING STRATEGIES

Automated Request for Services and Booking: Whether through a simplified request form or real-time booking site, some companies offer meeting owners the ability to book, or at least, request help to book space, dates and rates online.

Packaged Solutions: Some companies or their meeting planning partners create packaged solutions with key hotels. Rates, terms and contracts are already negotiated. Meeting owners simply need to contact a property to confirm date and space availability and select menu, audio-visual and other packaged options to confirm their meeting.

Concierge Approach: Finding variables for small, simple meetings too diverse to attempt to automate services, other companies are opting for a “concierge” approach. A dedicated professional planner or two can gather all needs from a meeting owner, leverage preferred partnerships and master contracts or meeting credits to provide date, space and rate options.

Standardized Contracts, Preferred Providers:

Some companies are pointing meeting owners to preferred providers or at the least, standard contracts and clauses, that protect a company in the event of changes and cancellations. Many companies have adopted new clauses in contracts, prompted by the pandemic and industry changes. While trying to automate as much as possible for simple meetings, companies are finding that the complexities introduced in the last couple of years have made a certain level of human interaction necessary for many such meetings.

Nick Pupa, category manager for Royal DSM, said his organization in 2020 planned to relaunch its strategic meetings program into tiers based on the complexity of meeting types with respective service models to support each. “Our Tier 3 were our

simple meetings. We wanted them to be essentially self-service via technology and supplier solutions in place,” Pupa said on the webinar. “Unfortunately, we were never really able to bring that to bear due to the circumstances of the pandemic. As we started to transition back to live meetings and business travel coming back, we started to see other changes,” he added.

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**SIMPLE MEETINGS IN
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BUSINESS TRAVEL.**

— Nick Pupa, DSM

“Simple meetings in today’s environment are not simple,” due to the complexities of international business travel. “A lot of our internal meetings have international components,” so identifying who is allowed into certain countries, the best destinations to hold a meeting for specific participants and quarantine requirements on either end of a trip requires the expertise of professional travel experts.

It also prompted DSM to again review “what do we need our simple solutions to look like in the future? Is it going to be the same as in 2020, or a bit different,” due to the new dynamics, Pupa said. During a two-day brainstorming session, Pupa said his team defined more than 100 qualifiers for small, simple meetings before substantially narrowing the list.



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— Damian Pisanelli, ConferenceDirect

Meetings of less than 20,000 Euros that involve room blocks for less than 50 attendees could be processed through a self-service online booking tool and quick request-for-proposal. More complex or costly meetings would go through a different process and support. Overall, the company requested registration of all meetings outside the company and all meetings, even if held in-house, estimated to cost more than 5,000 Euros. The team defined the service, suppliers, cost and payment for each of three meeting tiers.

For face-to-face and simple meetings in 2022, executives studied technology options. They looked at whether to extend its main strategic meetings management platform for simple meetings or embrace one of multiple other technologies to help with the sourcing and planning of those meetings.

"We don't know if we'll go back to pure self-service anytime soon," Pupa said last fall. "Our internal stakeholders really value the professional meeting planning services we have in place with our existing suppliers. We realize that the interaction between the agency, hotel or venue and internal stakeholders offers a ton of value."

Like DSM, ConferenceDirect spent months researching various technologies and options to solve simple meeting pain points for a specific client that typically holds 500 to 800 events of all sizes in any year, global accounts director Damian Pisanelli said on the webinar. In addition to solving for sourcing, booking and contracting, Pisanelli said his team also researched how to remedy pain points of payment processes, vendor set-ups, compliance and risk mitigation.

After months of research, the team decided to partner with a supplier as an "early adopter" of a new tool. "We're one of the beta testers so we can have influence on the build out. When looking at tools, you want to make sure that your company has a voice and can influence the direction of the tool," he advised.

Boston Scientific also has significantly evolved its approach to simple meetings as part of its overall strategic meetings management initiative, according to Katy Petersen, senior manager of SMM Operations for the Global Business Services Meetings Management for Boston Scientific. Instead of just defining meetings as big or small, Boston Scientific identified them as simple or complex.

"Complex meetings are those with 10 or more room nights on peak" and three or more of the following parameters of five or more: meeting hours, employees or attendees, expense types or travelers flying. In 2018, Petersen said, the team not only redefined meetings, but how various types would be serviced. "We mandated that all complex meetings would be sourced and reconciled through our central team." Simple meetings that involved fewer than 10 room nights and just one of the other complexities could continue to be booked by stakeholders. Professional meeting planners who work for any of seven business units were required to register the meetings and provide final expense data to the meetings team, who would enter it all in a centralized meeting tool for reconciliation and reporting.

When COVID began, “we needed to shift and couldn’t remain complacent with our structure. We started to roll out new services to approach and solve for virtual meetings, as well as for simple. We felt simple was the next frontier and we needed to come up with a solution,” Petersen said. After collecting meeting data for two years, she said, the group “knew our stakeholders and types of meetings. We created focus groups to hear their pain points and where they could use additional resources. We also looked at reporting and worked with our compliance team to understand their needs.” Within the medical device sector, the company must follow strict guidelines for reporting on meeting spending for healthcare professionals, Petersen explained.

For nonprofessional planners, “we’ve chosen to roll out simple meeting services with a concierge service. We’re providing sourcing, planning, payment and reconciliation services, leveraging the competencies of our centralized team and meeting planners to provide the booking and planning, payment and final spend reconciliation services on our users’ behalf,” Petersen said. She acknowledges that may be a little different than others, but what the company decided after extensive reviews.

Mick Durkin leads the company’s Global Business Services Meetings Management team. He readily acknowledges that COVID “changed how we traditionally worked. But it also opened viable opportunities for an SMM program to expand. COVID didn’t just affect the meetings world; it affected everything.” Sales reps or others who may have planned small, simple meetings in the past, “didn’t have the ability, time, bandwidth or capacity to take on the extra work to plan a meeting for your region when you now needed to go out and make up a difference from the deficit caused by COVID. When you look at it from that perspective, we needed to look at it from the change management perspectives.”

Taking a big-picture view of the changes within the company during COVID, Durkin said, “The world didn’t shut down from a connection standpoint. Because of the hybrid and virtual options we had, people still wanted, yearned and craved in-person meetings. They are still tremendously valued. People do business with people they can sit across the table with, meet, and shake hands.”

When the pandemic eased in 2021 and in-person meetings resumes, Durkin said, his team expected many to be small, simple meetings. “When they came back, our meetings were completely complex. These people wanted to get together, wanted to have opportunities to meet with larger groups. Of course, we had to pivot again because of more and more restrictions on these larger meetings.”

Another change emerging in some companies is the definition of and process for team meetings necessitated by the new world of remote work. Such meetings may be small and simple, but need to be expensed as meetings, not transient travel, Durkin said.

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"Meetings have a tremendous amount of data that can be leveraged," Durkin said. "That comes down to the return-on-investment. We're spending a tremendous amount of money on meetings and need to be able to identify where is the value, where can we control or mitigate expenditures. Strategic meetings management programs will be the key the driving reconciliation, budget and financial transparent to help organizations make very good strategic decisions."

LESSONS LEARNED

Continue to Evolve Simple Meeting definitions, services and approaches. While the pandemic necessitated some changes to approaches, executives noted that market and business priorities will continue to change and may require changes to small meeting approaches, policies and strategies. "If you are not flexible and nimble, your SMM will essentially become a dinosaur," said DSM's Pupa.

Continue to Educate Customers and Suppliers on the current simple meetings strategy. "That line of communications is not a one-and-done; it's constant," Durkin emphasized. Make sure that people know what their options are, where they should be going. People try to be compliant when they understand the rules."

Provide Tools to Stakeholders to estimate meeting costs, book meetings through online booking tools, if that is strategy, or seek help to source meetings through other means.

Incorporate Payment and Reconciliation Assistance into your simple meeting strategies. Payment, reconciliation and reporting are often pain points for non-professional planners. Reporting back to stakeholders and executives on the actual costs of simple meetings can ensure that all are properly budgeting for such meetings in the future. ■

About CVENT, Inc.



Cvent Holding Corp. (Nasdaq: CVT), is a leading meetings, events, and hospitality technology provider with more than 4,000 employees and nearly 21,000 customers worldwide. Founded in 1999, the company delivers a comprehensive event marketing and management platform and offers a global marketplace where event professionals collaborate with venues to create engaging, impactful experiences. Cvent is headquartered in Tysons, Virginia, just outside of Washington D.C., and has additional offices around the world to support its growing global customer base. The comprehensive Cvent event marketing and management platform offers software solutions to event organizers and marketers for online event registration, venue selection, event marketing and management, virtual and onsite solutions, and attendee engagement. Cvent's suite of products automate and simplify the entire event management process and maximize the impact of in-person, virtual, and hybrid events. Hotels and venues use Cvent's supplier and venue solutions to win more group and corporate travel business through Cvent's sourcing platforms. Cvent solutions optimize the entire event management value chain and have enabled clients around the world to manage millions of meetings and events. For more information, please visit [Cvent.com](https://www.cvent.com).

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