virtual conference learnings to improve future f2f events

BUSINESS EVENTS
SYDNEY

As international borders open up and face-to-face conferencing resumes, BESydney commissioned research partner UTS to look at research from virtual events held over the last two Covid years, to see what delegates are saying about their experience with virtual conferences, so we can incorporate those learnings into events of the future.

KEY FINDINGS

A series of over 70 association journal articles looking at the benefits and shortcomings of virtual events were reviewed, with findings showing that the academic community prior to the pandemic were already questioning traditional modes of conferencing and were looking to new alternatives to address some of the acknowledged shortcomings of the traditional F2F conference model, while also noting the limitations of virtual meetings.

KEY SHORTCOMINGS OF F2F MEETINGS WERE:

- **Accessibility** Cost of registration fees, travel expenses, extensive time away and carer responsibilities
- **Sustainability** Climate change, negative environmental and sustainability aspects of conference travel and the conference itself is a strong thread in the literature, with some associations now measuring the impact of their reduced carbon emissions as a result of less travel by members
- **Social Exclusion** Format does not promote inclusion / diversity / equality of opportunity — can be hierarchical
- **Event Design** Often traditional with speakers reading their papers.

LIMITATIONS OF VIRTUAL CONFERENCES:

- **Social interaction** Particularly opportunity for informal interactions / networking; and lower engagement
- **Technology design and security** Technical difficulties; difficulty to reproduce emotive and body language cues; data security; effort to curate video content / manage online sessions
- **Destination and sponsor/exhibitor impact** Variable financial impact for local host and sponsors/exhibitors
- **Time zones** Co-ordination of speakers across time zones; inability to engage with live talks.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

In planning for 2022 events and in the longer term, hybrid delivery of events will provide the greatest flexibility for delegates. Association literature reviewed provided a number of tips to ensure success of the virtual component of hybrid events from a delegate's perspective.
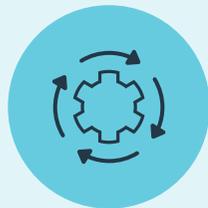
These have been divided into **three key areas**:

program

social

operational

As bidding professionals, organisers, suppliers and venues, we need to consider these and ensure our value propositions address these limitations in order to stay competitive.

F2F meetings have **significant benefits** to delegates:

career benefits

engagement and learning

accessibility

business benefits

social benefits

Further legacy benefits to associations, government and community from previous research can be found here — besydney.com.au/about-us/resources/publications/besydney-research/

We hope these tips may assist those of you new to hybrid events and re-affirm strategies for those highly skilled professional meeting planners, already conducting successful hybrid events.
We also hope to see your delegates again soon, face to face.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

program

- Shortened programs (i.e., 4 hours) including opening and closing ceremonies, lightening or 10-minute speaker presentations (maintain audience interest) on topic highlights
- Featured "town hall" event
- Virtual poster walks — with brief a brief audio clip "elevator pitch" of their paper — can be followed by a live moderated discussion with the authors and audience
- Share pre-recorded videos in advance
- Audio "postercast" commentaries
- Broadcast channels, live and/or pre-recorded, and an industry channel.
- Break out or preparation rooms for rehearsing, to enable presenters to familiarise themselves with the platform

- Talks pre-recorded as videos in case of heavy bandwidth load
- Enabling attendees to join a private group on a real-time social media
- Multiple platforms for contact that should not collect personal information
- Small workshops and limited number of participants in sessions
- Offer sponsors and exhibitors promotional opportunities, through a digital magazine published prior to the conference
- Industry presentation videos and podcasts
- Posters, presentations available to view on the conference website

social

- Local groups can host colleagues from the surrounding area with viewing sessions held F2F
- Small F2F groups under research themes, viewing hubs, to interact and network in settings that are conducive to social distancing
- Speed mentoring/mentoring groups connecting researchers at similar career stages, matchmaking app for networking, science cafes for connecting researchers
- Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms, quizzes
- In the future, chat rooms can utilise virtual-reality tools to enrich the social experience enabling novel ways of facilitating interaction (e.g., Online Town, Mozilla Hubs)
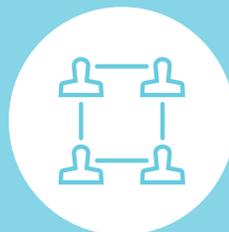
operational

- Troubleshooting guide for delegates
- Longer breaks to allow for greater interaction between delegates or aid rest after looking at the screens for too long
- Allocate additional time for the Q&A activity
- Planned periods for gathering and sharing experiences
- Themed sessions with a "tutorial" talk accessible to trainees at various levels and with various backgrounds
- Panel discussions with speakers in which trainees can ask questions on a variety of topics that might not arise in a traditional Q&A

- Highlight the work of trainees by including a designated time for their presentations, rather than making these talks "secondary" by scheduling them alongside other sessions or at inconvenient times
- Digital platform has strong encryption, privacy controls, and security protections, ease of use and streamlined accessibility for organisers, presenters, and participants
- Polling and moderator functions, such as muting and terminating speakers who exceed their time limit
- Disperse prominent speakers evenly throughout an event

- Collect participant analytics, such as the total length of time logged by individuals and time spent viewing specific presentations
- Allow posting of questions prior to presentation randomly allocated small breakout groups and loosely structured talking points
- Consider intellectual property issues, confidentiality of research and patents as there may be reluctance to allow material in pre-recorded formats
- All-day "welcome desk" (as a video conference or chat room) where attendees can find and ask questions
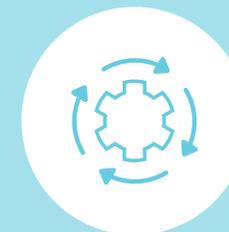
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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

career benefits

- Giving a live presentation in front of one's current or potential future peers invariably generates mixed, sometimes intense emotions — anxiety, excitement, pride, and even joy
- Such emotions energise a speaker, and mastering these emotions to deliver a successful, engaging talk builds confidence that extends across other aspects of life
- Visual cues and emotions experienced by both speakers and members of an audience affect one fundamental goal of a conference — learning and retaining new information
- For persons at all career stages, meetings help establish "street credibility"
- Presenting review or refresher courses and moderating sessions fuel promotions for faculty
- Face recognition and visibility help faculty recruit trainees and/or advance to new positions
- Rewards efforts of trainees and enables them to engage the broader community in their chosen field
- Pave the way to a prestigious post-doctoral, fellowship, or faculty positions
- Audience members also look for these cues and interactions to engage in the presentations
- Emotions experienced by speakers also permeate a meeting, generating an "energy"
- Eye contact throughout the room to interest the audience, and visual cues, such as smiles, head nodding, and laughter, also help a speaker determine if they are communicating effectively
- Memory retention, as well as perception, learning, and problem solving, are intricately tied to emotion

social

- Local groups can host colleagues from the surrounding area with viewing sessions held F2F
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- Speed mentoring/mentoring groups connecting researchers at similar career stages, matchmaking app for networking, science cafes for connecting researchers
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- In the future, chat rooms can utilise virtual-reality tools to enrich the social experience enabling novel ways of facilitating interaction (e.g., Online Town, Mozilla Hubs)

accessibility

- Traveling to an in-person conference is a recognised perk for trainees and professionals at all stages of careers
- Larger conferences have begun to offer childcare

business benefits

- Meetings with vendors to learn about new technologies and equipment are a major reason to attend a conference
- Generate new leads for follow up
- Well-run conferences build loyalty among attendees, presenters, and even vendors, motivating people to return each year and maintain membership
- Conferences also help recruit new members,
- Economic benefits for the destination

social benefits

- Allow persons to step away (at least to some degree) from demands of teaching, institutional committee meetings, and clinical care
- May be the only real chunk of protected time to devote solely to professional work and development
- Interacting with colleagues casually, enjoying food and culture in a place that's not your home, and more