

DESIGNING FOR CONNECTION

HOW TO CREATE MEETINGS AND EVENTS THAT BUILD CULTURE AND COMMUNITY



In partnership with



COPYRIGHT

All rights reserved. No part of this report may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means whatsoever (including presentations, short summaries, blog posts, printed magazines, use of images in social media posts) without express written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations (50 words maximum and for a maximum of 2 quotations) embodied in critical articles and reviews, and with clear reference to the original source, including a link to the original source at <https://meetings.skift.com/reports/designing-for-connection/>

Please refer all pertinent questions to the publisher.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
PART 1 _____	7
The Shift to Hybrid Work and What It Means for Meeting Planners	
PART 2 _____	16
How Remote Work Impacts the Desire for Travel to Events	
PART 3 _____	28
Redefining Meeting Spaces: The Reinvention of Venues and Destinations for a Transformed Work World	
4 HOTEL TRENDS FOR THE NEW ERA OF HYBRID WORK	33
PART 4 _____	36
Rethinking Connection: 6 Event Design Trends for the New Attendee Profile	
CONCLUSION	49
CMP CREDITS	50
DISCLAIMER	50

ABOUT SKIFT MEETINGS

Skift Meetings, formerly EventMB, is defining the future of events.

As a Skift brand, we relentlessly deliver insights into the innovative business events that define organizations. Our global audience of meeting and event professionals trusts us to deliver up-to-date guidance and inspiration. Our thought-provoking, impartial content sets us apart. We take a business-focused approach that is accessible to everyone from senior leaders to aspiring students.

We are now entering a new era of business. An era where meetings, events, technology and travel all play leading roles in defining and instilling organizational – and indeed industry – culture. Skift Meetings is at the forefront of this new era, defining the way forward and helping you find new ways to thrive, regardless of the challenges that lie ahead.

INTRODUCTION

After two years of remote work, corporate culture will never be the same. But, the good news is that business events can play a leading role in one of the most critical challenges facing the business world today: connecting hybrid workforces.

With teams working remotely across multiple time zones and many workers re-examining their relationship to work and career, it has never been more essential to design events that connect colleagues, incentivize employees and new hires, and build company culture.

The opportunity for meetings and events extends far beyond simply bringing together teams that work from different locations. Team-building events and incentive travel can be essential in improving our complex relationship with work. In addition, every single meeting and event has the potential to be a crucial live touchpoint of social interaction.

As the meetings industry looks to recover from the impacts of the Covid pandemic, it has the opportunity to play a leading role in redefining the future of work. Meetings and events are no longer just a priority for the marketing and sales teams. Human resources and top management are also keen to host productive gatherings. Even finance departments are looking at business travel differently.

Designing meetings and events in a post-pandemic world has its challenges; selecting a destination easily reachable from multiple locations, coping with travel chaos, and communicating effectively about meetings and events are just a few.

At the same time, we have more avenues to connect remotely, both within our teams and across industry networks. As a result, planners have more options than ever, but this also creates an added complexity regarding when and how to integrate digital channels with face-to-face encounters.



What has not changed is a need to intentionally design meetings and events that connect us.

As we explore this topic further, consider the following questions:

- ✔ How does working remotely impact our desire to participate in meetings and events?
- ✔ How does a hybrid workforce impact the destination and venue selection?
- ✔ What has changed in the way companies and individuals want to connect?
- ✔ How are meeting spaces evolving to meet our needs and expectations?
- ✔ How do we orchestrate better networking opportunities?
- ✔ Will ubiquitous year-round connectivity change how we host meetings and events?
- ✔ What needs to change in our design thinking around meetings and events?

THE WORLD'S MOST ICONIC ENTERTAINMENT DESTINATION



ATLANTIS
DUBAI

Part 1

THE SHIFT TO HYBRID WORK AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR MEETING PLANNERS

After the Covid pandemic shuttered workplaces overnight, the world was forced into an experiment in remote working. While events have now largely returned to in-person formats, one undeniable holdover from the pandemic is the trend towards hybrid work. For many this is the new workplace norm.

“The shift to hybrid work has been the single most impactful change of the professional world in my lifetime.”

~ Lawrence Coburn, co-founder and CEO, twine

This shift to hybrid work is having a cascading effect that will fundamentally change the way professionals connect — and the way event planners manage those channels of connection. Not only will the skills inherent to meeting planning be in high-demand in traditional event management roles, but also in a new set of positions designed specifically to address this new need for connection.

“We’re starting to see job postings for things like employee experience design. In the job posting, they never reference the word event planner, but they talk about creating moments and creating space for connection, collaboration [across distributed teams] — to spark ideas, to change people’s perspectives. And that is what we’re trained to do as an industry. There’s a whole burgeoning role there for event planners, and they’re well-paying senior positions.”

~ Anh Nguyen, head of customer success, twine

“The word community is in demand within job titles now — chief community officer, community manager — but most of the job description is an event planner role.”

~ Caleb Parker, founder, Bold

As employers begin to develop new permanent roles designed to unify and recharge remote and hybrid teams, it is yet one more sign that this new workplace dynamic is just that: permanent.



In a recent [Gartner survey](#) of over 330 HR leaders, only 5 percent of respondents said they plan to force employees to come into the office five days a week. Perhaps even more strikingly, a recent [McKinsey survey](#) of over 25,000 U.S. workers across multiple job sectors (including those traditionally labeled “blue collar”) found that 58 percent of respondents were able to work from home at least one day a week. Further, a whopping 35 percent still have the option to work remotely all five days of the week.

“The flexible working world was born of a frenzied reaction to a sudden crisis but has remained as a desirable job feature for millions,” according to the report. “This represents a tectonic shift in where, when, and how Americans want to work and are working.”

THE RETURN-TO-OFFICE DEBATE

The pandemic made WFH (work from home) and WFA (work from anywhere) commonplace acronyms in professional spheres, but they are now being matched by RTO, which stands for “return to office.”

While remote work is far from disappearing overnight, many large companies — including Tesla, Apple, Google, the New York Times, and Goldman Sachs — are pushing for employees to return to the office for at least part of the week. The executives behind these decisions often cite productivity and collaboration as the reasons for return, but many are facing pushback from their staff. In fact, employees of both Apple and the New York Times have started petitions in favor of flexibility, with the latter even threatening to strike.

As yet another sign that many employees are ready to take a stand, an ADP Research Institute [survey](#) of over 32,000 workers worldwide found that 64 percent would consider looking for a new job if asked to return to the office full time. When it comes to enticing job candidates to take the offer, a [survey](#) of 1,500 U.S. job seekers suggests that the flexibility to work from home is their third highest priority, just after compensation and career growth potential.

The Big Picture: A Clash of Interests

Beyond the interest of individual workers, there are macro effects to consider.

Chloe Richardson, vice president of senior corporate relations, Explori, and managing director, Event Leaders Exchange (ELX), pointed out that the new hybrid work model can help to address some of today’s most pressing issues, both within the industry and beyond:

“The top three [most important priorities for our ELX members] are DEI, people (talent shortage, work culture, change management), and sustainability. The hybrid workforce spans all three of those.”

~ Chloe Richardson, vice president of senior corporate relations, Explori, and managing director, ELX

The option to work remotely can reduce carbon emissions by limiting commutes, can help with talent attraction and retention, and can create a more inclusive environment for those who are neurodivergent, have mobility issues, or need to manage caretaking responsibilities.

On the other hand, the shift to hybrid work is undoubtedly affecting the economic heart of downtown cores across the globe. According to [data from Kastle](#), a security firm that tracks key card swipes in commercial buildings, office buildings in the ten largest cities across the U.S. were still at only 43 percent occupancy in the third quarter of 2022. Further, while workers are understandably reluctant to spend money on commutes and office lunches, their savings amount to losses for downtown businesses.

FORECAST: HYBRID WORK LIKELY TO REMAIN THE NORM

Given all these competing interests, what is likely to become the workplace norm? While the option to work remotely is clearly valued, many companies are discovering that a large share of employees still want to come to the office a few days of the week. Additionally, this compromise position may help provide a lifeline to the downtown economy.

Nicholas Bloom, an economics professor with Stanford University and co-founder of [WFH Research](#), [predicts](#) that **two days in the office and three days at home will become standard for jobs that can be done remotely.**

In this tight labor market, staff with high-demand skills may even be able to dictate their own terms.

A [report](#) by the [Global Business Travel Association](#) (GBTA) suggests a gap between what companies are practicing and what they are preaching. The vast majority of travel managers surveyed (81 percent) said they have full-time employees based in a city where the company doesn't have a physical office. At the same time, 57 percent said that it remains to be seen whether their remote work policy is permanent or temporary, compared to 36 percent who said it is permanent. This suggests that many companies continue to evaluate their remote work policies — even as they hire and retain employees who live in remote locations.

HYBRID WORK REQUIRES INTENTIONAL POINTS OF CONNECTION

Even though it seems to be the clear favorite among employees, hybrid work may be bringing its own set of challenges.

“Quiet quitters” — employees who are not going above and beyond at work and are just meeting their basic job requirements — now make up at least 50 percent of the U.S. workforce, according to [Gallup](#), which has tracked workers' investment in their jobs since 2000. People under 35 reported the largest drop in engagement. The overall decline was related to dissatisfaction around the clarity of expectations, opportunities to learn and grow, and feeling cared for and connected to the organization's mission and purpose. These numbers may signal a growing disconnect between employees and companies, which in turn may be tied to remote working conditions or challenges in adequately [supporting](#) remote workers.

Remote Work: Feelings of Disconnection

Although attitudes may have shifted since, a [2020 study](#) by the Pew Research Center found that 65 percent of those new to remote work felt less connected to their coworkers, while only 27 percent of those in longstanding remote positions felt this way. The discrepancy might have been a matter of adaptation, but it could equally be a question of personal inclination among those who seek out fully remote positions.

“Prior to the pandemic, those who worked remotely actually pursued that format. It naturally catered to a certain personality type. Whereas now, because everybody's remote, the people who are more social have a strong urge to meet face to face.”

~ Will Curran, chief event Einstein, Endless Events

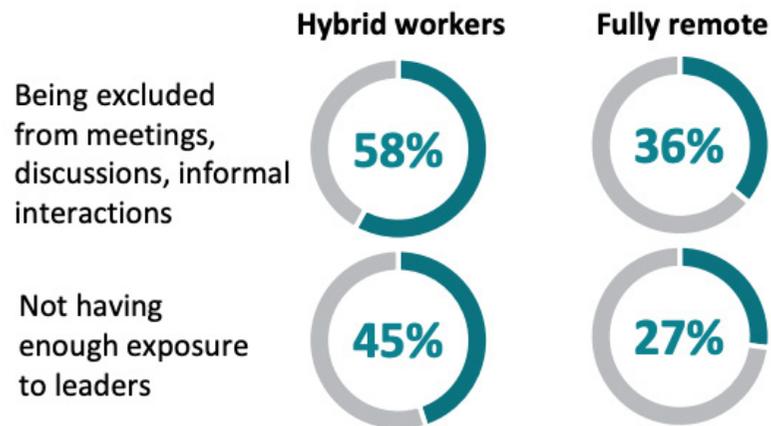
Among the more than 25 interviews that Skift Meetings conducted for this report, a recurring theme was the increased need for intentional in-person meetings and corporate retreats to help re-forge a sense of connection between distributed teams and industry contacts.

Hybrid Work: Risks of Exclusion

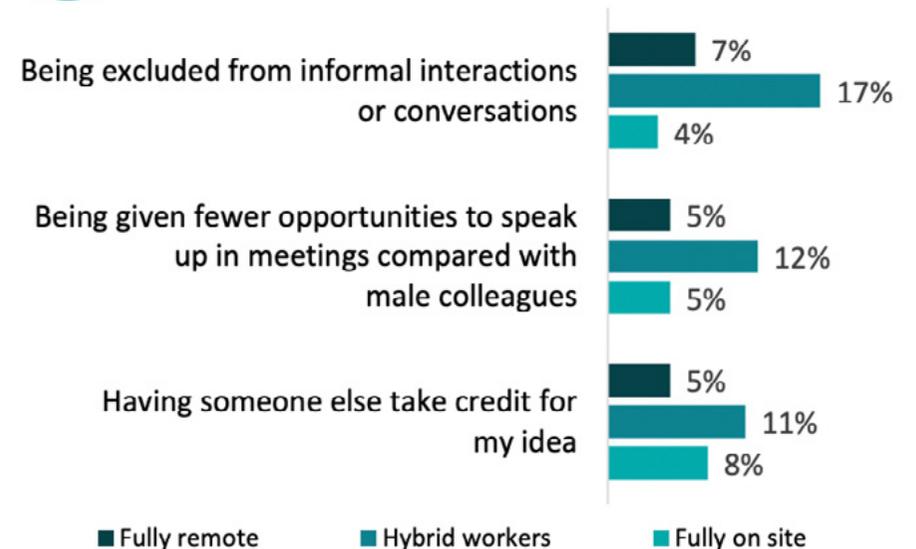
While hybrid work models may potentially help address some of this need, there are signs that it may actually make some employees feel less connected than remote work. A recent [Deloitte study](#) surveyed 5,000 women to gauge differences between remote, hybrid, and in-person working conditions. Of those in hybrid positions, 58 percent felt that they were excluded from important meetings, discussions, and informal interactions — compared with only 36 percent of those in fully remote positions. A similar trend was observed in their ability to connect with leaders.

The Deloitte study even found that remote work was comparable to onsite jobs along a number of other key metrics, while hybrid work lagged significantly behind. For example, when asked about opportunities to speak up in meetings as compared with male colleagues, only 5 percent of women in remote and onsite positions reported being excluded — versus 12 percent of those in hybrid roles.

Have you experienced any of the following aspects of working in a hybrid or remote environment?



Which of the following behaviors have you experienced at work over the past 12 months?



Graphics courtesy of Deloitte.

Source: [Women @ Work 2022: A Global Outlook](#)

While this study was focused on the experience of women workers, it may speak to a potential pitfall of hybrid work. As staff become more intentional about reserving their in-person workdays for key meetings, anyone who doesn't have the luxury of selecting those days due to disabilities, childcare, or other concerns may be at greater risk of feeling excluded or missing opportunities associated with those face-to-face interactions.

On the flip side, those organizing in-person meetings may be increasingly selective about who they invite for this very reason. Wary of unnecessarily burdening colleagues with the commute, their thinking may shift from, "Who can we invite?" to "Who really needs to be there?"

If this thinking does indeed become the norm, larger gatherings designed to break down barriers will be especially beneficial. Further, it will be all that much more crucial for a skilled professional to be in charge of designing activities that serve to integrate team members at every level and from every department, helping to foster synergies between staff who might otherwise be stuck in siloes.

Professionally Designed Meetings: A Solution in High Demand

Companies are addressing the challenges of both remote and hybrid work on a structural level, introducing titles such as head of remote and chief remote officer. This role combines HR, operations, and communications, but as mentioned earlier, it ultimately shares many of the same key skill sets as a traditional event planner role. And with many companies facing a talent shortage, a growing number may look to third-party planners to help fill in the gaps.

Liz Lathan, co-founder of event-planning agency The Community Factory, noted that not only is demand increasing for internal events, but that companies are outsourcing more and more of their planning needs. She pointed to three factors:

- ✔ Demand is increasing rapidly in the context of hybrid work.
- ✔ Internal event planners took on digital marketing responsibilities during the pandemic and continue to perform this role, limiting their time for onsite event planning.
- ✔ Many companies cut back or reorganized their staff during the pandemic and are now facing hiring challenges.

Although the contributing factors may be multifold, there is no denying that experienced event planners are now in a unique position to capitalize on the skills they have been developing for years.

With teams working remotely across multiple time zones, it has never been more important to hold events that connect colleagues, incentivize employees and new hires, and build company culture. Extending beyond pure team-building events and incentive travel, it potentially makes every business event a crucial live touchpoint of interaction.

David Kliman, a professional event moderator and president of The Kliman Group, has even seen clients co-locating their meetings with larger events, in this way taking advantage of the opportunity to meet with as many suppliers and buyers as possible. Every chance to meet is an opportunity worth seizing when face-to-face meetings are so vital for re-establishing connections.

“A product of the pandemic and the isolation that has taken place over the last two plus years is a very strong demand to reconvene and nurture relationships. I would urge suppliers and event strategists to focus on that and ensure their content speaks to it. This advice comes from a culmination of the hundreds of planners that have been in my think tanks for the past year plus.”

~ David Kliman, president, The Kliman Group



Part 2

HOW REMOTE WORK IMPACTS THE DESIRE FOR TRAVEL TO EVENTS



“Remote and hybrid working has challenged assumptions about what each of us need to work and learn effectively, and achieve well-being. It has caused us to refocus on what matters the most, and to question things that might no longer serve us. That critical perspective carries into if, how, and where we conduct meetings and events.”

~ Shawna McKinley, principal, Clear Current Consulting

If time is the new currency, it not only represents an expense when attendees and other event stakeholders are asked to attend events, but also when they're asked to travel for them, and a culture of working from anywhere adds a number of new factors to the cost-benefit analysis.

For one thing, people are less disposed to travel because working remotely has forced us all to take a critical look at the material value of doing all sorts of business in person.

For another, employees are no longer required to be in one geographical location, and team distribution presents unique logistical challenges. Recently, ongoing airline cancellations and airport operational issues have made matters worse.

THE STATE OF BUSINESS TRAVEL

After coming to a halt in 2020, business travel is showing positive signs of recovery. Some 83 percent of respondents to a recent GBTA survey stated that their company permits at least some domestic travel, while 63 percent permit international business travel. Half of the travel managers report their company's business travel volume has returned either "more" or "much more" quickly than they expected in January 2022.

Nevertheless, remote work is shaping this trend by changing how both attendees and their employers perceive the necessity of doing certain business interactions in person. While employees may be eager to meet, they may not be inclined to travel for training, events that focus on disseminating content, and possibly even rewards for a job well done that might be delivered closer to home.

Conversely, networking and meeting colleagues in person may be more motivating for those who work in a distributed team. This is reflected in the shift in business traveler demographics, with sales teams dropping from 51 percent in 2019 to 45 percent in 2022, according to recent data from corporate travel agency TripActions. At the same time, engineering, product, and marketing teams gained ground. Some experts suggest that internal meetings that focus on team building and collaboration are responsible. For a

growing list of hybrid and permanently remote employers, business travel is becoming vital to perpetuating company culture.

"Incentive Travel, by definition, is inextricably linked with rewarding and recognising performance whereas this new emerging trend involving travel experiences will be less around reward and recognition, and more around bringing folks together to build esprit de corps. [...] Anecdotally I'm hearing that transient travel budgets have been slashed but not so much group meeting or incentive budgets."

~ Padraic Gilligan, chief marketing officer, SITE

Jason Fudin, CEO and co-founder of Placemakr, **predicts** that as more companies adopt the work-from-anywhere model, it's likely that the frequency of short-stay business travel will decrease. At the same time, the length of stay for each trip is likely to increase. "We think that work-from-anywhere will be the largest factor driving where people live, stay, and have fun over the next number of decades."

REMOTE WORKING MEANS MORE DISTRIBUTED TEAMS

According to a [country-wide survey of 6,604 Canadians](#) conducted between March 1 and April 18, 2022, “23 percent say that since the start of the pandemic, they have moved to a different community because they now have the option to work from home.”

As many companies are headquartered in major cities, the ability to move to smaller, more affordable communities without having to sacrifice employment opportunities is a strong incentive for a highly qualified workforce.

“As soon as we told people that we were not going back to the office, half of our staff started looking for apartments outside of Toronto.”

~ Thorben Grosser, VP of marketing and events at EventMobi

Among those who want to travel, there is also a growing trend of striking a balance between work and wanderlust. These “digital nomads” have existed since the early 2000s, but with remote working going mainstream, a host of services are being created to accommodate the surge of remote working expats, and in some cases, to [attract](#) them.

Distributed workforces want to improve their work-life balance and defect from the status quo of eight-to-ten-hour shifts in fluorescent lighting book-ended by onerous commutes.



DISTRIBUTED TEAMS MEAN COMPLEX LOGISTICS FOR CORPORATE EVENT AND TRAVEL PLANNERS

While distributed teams may afford motivated employees the opportunity to strike a better balance between their professional and personal goals, they do present a logistical problem for corporate event planners who need to corral them for in-person internal meetings.

Whereas a corporate planner organizing an internal meeting would traditionally enjoy group booking discounts and the logistical simplicity of putting the bulk of the employees on the same travel routes, a distributed team means that each individual team member could require their own door-to-door agenda. In the best of times, the risk of running into issues is multiplied by the number of destinations and layovers involved.

This added complexity of booking people from multiple locations is compounded by the travel chaos of the past year. According to a June GBTA poll, nearly four in five travel managers report spending “more time” or “much more time” troubleshooting traveler issues. This is not surprising considering that current travel is often plagued with staffing shortages and flights are often canceled or delayed.



REMOTE WORKERS ARE LESS INCLINED TO TRAVEL TO EVENTS

These logistical risks make those working from home who are getting used to conducting business virtually even less inclined to embark on trips for work, even if those trips are meant to be a reward for high performance.

Catherine Chaullet, president and CEO of Global DMC Partners, noted that the negative travel experience is among the top concerns for her clients right now, oftentimes impacting their decisions about participating in incentive travel: “There are so many challenges with airlines that end clients participating in incentives are now actually refusing to go to some destinations if the flight is not direct.”

“Today, cost is not the most important piece anymore,” confirmed TROOP founder Dennis Vilovic. “Now, the first priority is actually locations where everyone can go via a direct flight.”

Attendees are being forced to reconsider the ROI of traveling to an event against not only the time and expense of the trip as planned, but the high risk of travel mishaps and accompanying anxiety.

“[You might pay] \$2,300 to go to a user conference [only to get] there on the third day because you got stuck in Dallas”

~ Liz Lathan, co-founder, The Community Factory

Reluctance at the prospect of being trapped at an event destination is not helped by a general post-pandemic sluggishness around business travel. For those who prefer to work from home because they are homebodies, a multi-stop route may be a dealbreaker. “People are thinking, ‘I’ve gotten used to this homebody life; how can I make travel as efficient as possible?’” noted Will Curran, founder of Endless Events.

Sean Hoff, managing partner of “corporate culture building” agency Moniker, pointed out that, since many haven’t had cause to look into their travel documentation or travel regulations in a long time, issues can arise when trying to corral a group at a remote destination. “We’ve had a lot of Americans who had to renew their passports because they didn’t realize that they had let them expire during Covid,” he lamented. “It’s actually prevented people from coming on some of the retreats we’ve planned.” Someone inevitably realizes with too little time that their documentation is not in order, and the processing time for visas and consulates can be over six months.

In short, event planners who need to motivate people to come to a destination have to cope with a travel industry that has yet to find its footing while attendees drag their own feet.

COMPANIES IN SPECIFIC SECTORS WON'T SIGN-OFF ON TRAVEL TO EVENTS

Not all sectors are rushing back to business travel, especially for internal meetings. Higher risk factors applied at scale and within the context of a distributed staff make for a much less compelling case for companies to send significant numbers of employees to a destination.

Notably, many tech companies are taking a conservative approach to business travel, with volumes of 50 percent of pre-pandemic levels compared to most other sectors that had reached 80 percent, according to data from the travel rebooking and auditing platform Tripbam. [Google](#) recently announced that it's clamping down on employee travel, limiting it to "business critical" trips. This mandate explicitly puts the kibosh on "social functions, full-team offsites and employee travel to in-person events that have a virtual option." This signals a realization that a desire to connect in person doesn't necessarily entail a travel component.

While tech companies may be more inclined to embrace remote working, and to do it more effectively, other market pressures are giving companies in all sectors new reasons to scrutinize the ROI of traveling to events.

Costs versus budgets. Rising fuel prices and inflation across the board are increasing prices associated with travel while corporate event planning teams are experiencing budget cuts.

"The question is whether this is due to reduced travel budgets or lingering reluctance to travel. It's probably a mix of everything."

~ Kai Hattendorf, managing director and CEO, UFI

Unpredictable flights. For Lathan, the biggest challenge in deciding to do an in-person event is the travel logistics. "Hypothetically, a speaker might not even make it to an event because Delta canceled 7,000 flights this week," she said. "Do I need a backup speaker? It's just an added level of stress for everyone."

Sustainability. Pursuing technological opportunities to mitigate escalating emissions that contribute to climate change is a priority for McKinley, but she points out that "this will only happen if it transitions us away from higher carbon activities," like travel.

"We're only climate positive where changes in work environments allow our transport footprint to drop more than our digital footprint rises, helping to stretch our limited carbon budget."

~ Shawna McKinley, principal, Clear Current Consulting

THE IMPACT ON PERCEPTIONS OF EVENT ROI

As mentioned earlier, while attendees who prefer working from home might feel significant desire to meet in person and connect with colleagues and other stakeholders, the effort they're willing to expend and the risk tolerance for travel-related hassles is low, even when the travel is meant to reward their performance.

"There is so much angst that there are some people who are actually saying they prefer to get some money and not go to an incentive."

~ Catherine Chaulet, president and CEO, Global DMC Partners

For corporations, the ROI of events that hinge on networking, teambuilding, and social engagement depends on the network effect. The more attendees, the better the value for those in attendance. The fewer, the worse. Travel complications and disinclined employees raise questions about the ROI of holding the event in person if a large percentage of the team is distributed — especially internationally.

"We need to be purposeful whenever we connect in-person," said McKinley. "Thinking clearly and strategically about outcomes is important." For McKinley, it's imperative to think about how the meeting format serves the objective: "[There may be] a strong case for intermittent retreats where team-building, strategic planning,

and development are intentions. But group travel to educational conferences might be less necessary because we've shown professional development goals can be achieved online."

Exhibitions and trade shows are categories with a traditionally high perception of face-to-face value, and are generally perceived as more "business critical." When Mobile World Congress was canceled in the early days of the pandemic, so many companies were at a loss for how to fill their sales pipelines that local exhibitors scrambled together their own impromptu show.

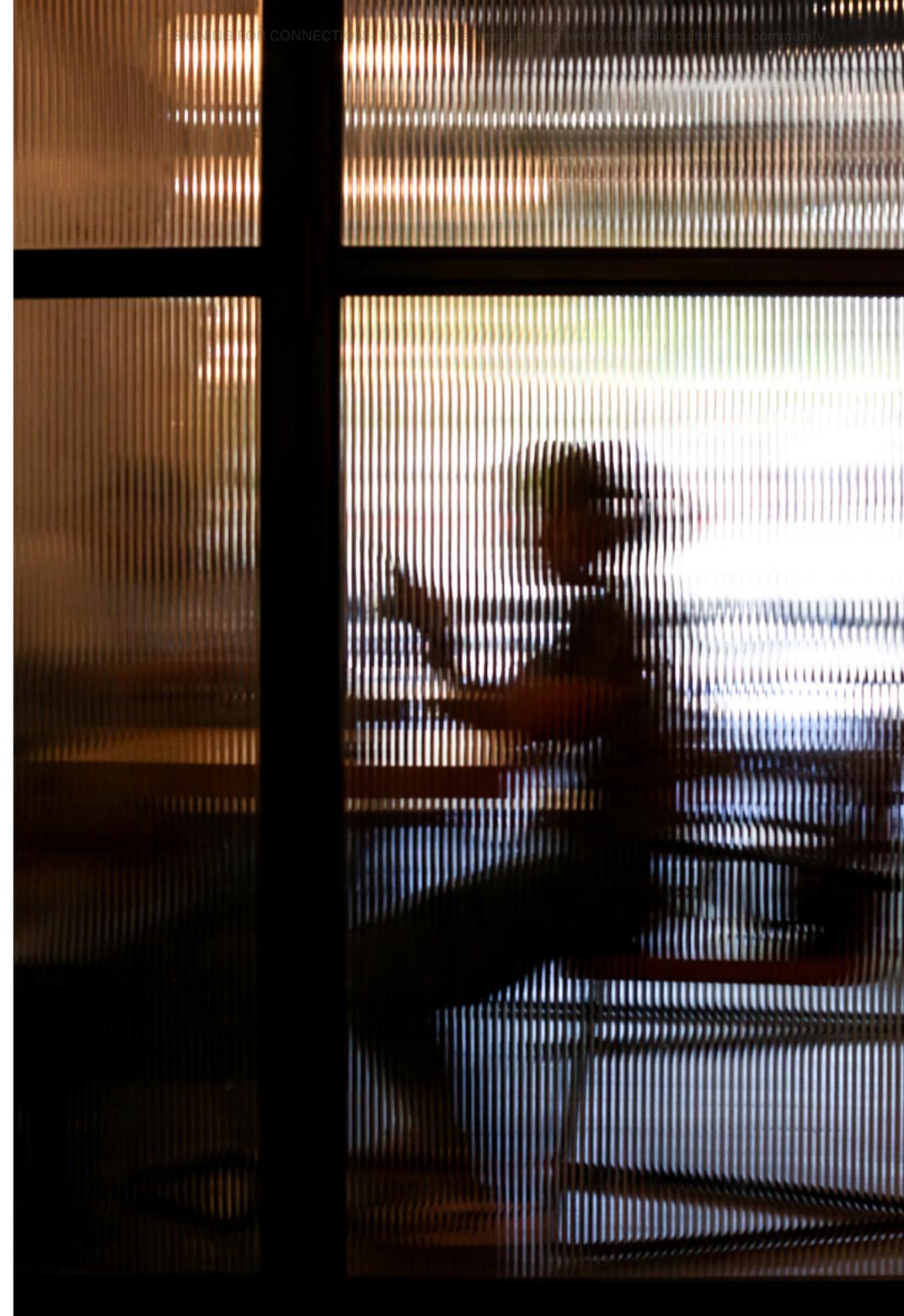
After two years of disappointing virtual options, exhibitors are very motivated to get back onsite, but according to Kai Hattendorf, managing director and CEO of UFI, **exhibitors are returning faster than attendees.**

Exhibitor participation is at 80 to 90 percent of 2019 levels, compared to attendee participation at 60 to 80 percent.

"Organizing trips to meet people in their workplaces is much more complex as a result of the hybrid working environment making the value and necessity of developing connections through business events even more important," said IMEX CEO Carina Bauer. The

single point of connection for meetings that exhibitors and trade shows offer may be more important than ever. For Bauer this is a benefit that adds value to all types of business events. “Business events provide that opportunity to meet everyone in one place, at one time – the need hasn’t changed, but the effectiveness has increased at events.”

Reduced attendee numbers and more scrutiny surrounding the ROI of corporate travel could motivate a heavier reliance on virtual and hybrid event alternatives that align with the comfort levels and lifestyle adaptations of an increasingly remote and distributed workforce. And while motivating attendees to travel isn’t a new challenge for exhibitions and trade shows of a certain size, the risk of unexpected delays also lends itself to technological backups that could enable waylaid attendees to engage even if they don’t make it to the event — at least until travel becomes more reliable.



HOW TO COPE WITH TRAVEL CHALLENGES IN A REMOTE WORKING WORLD

Seek a smoother ride. The most straightforward way to cope with the reluctance to travel is to make the travel as efficient as possible. Select closer or better-connected destinations to increase the odds that your distributed stakeholders will be able to find a direct flight.

For something like a company-wide sales meeting, you can even think of the cumulative hours of each attendee traveling to a destination in terms of the productivity lost in man-hours. Reducing the distance by even 30 percent could amount to huge savings depending on the number of attendees:

“We were doing an analysis for a large travel company doing an all-team meeting for a thousand people. We ran their chosen destination through our platform and discovered that the cumulative time added up to 10 years of working time for a single employee. We helped them to optimize that [by selecting a different destination], reducing the 10 years to seven years. The cost was also \$500,000 cheaper and the CO2 was lower.”

~ Dennis Vilovic, TROOP

Allow attendees to find a personal reason to go. Be flexible with vacation days in and around business travel obligations to make it more worthwhile for attendees to bear the expense, inconvenience, and recent risk of traveling. How people live, work, and socialize has changed dramatically during the pandemic, merging work and personal lives and giving rise to the new reality of [The Great Merging](#). Blended trips that combine business and leisure are replacing purely business trips, with an emphasis on exploring the destination and engaging in non-work related activities. American Airlines recently reported an increase in such trips from 20-25 percent to 50-55 percent in the first half of 2022. [Skift Research](#) has also revealed that the majority of remote workers have taken more trips as a result of work flexibility, regardless of the countries they reside in.

Incorporate a buffer on either side of your group bookings. When negotiating hotel group rates, look to negotiate special rates for event visitors that extend a few days before and a few days after the event itself. Some people might decide to come early in case of delays or cancellations, or to leave late in case they decide to stay a few extra days.

Prepare for lower attendance; plan for those experiences.

One way to cope with travel hesitancy is to concentrate on smaller and more local meetups. “We haven’t had a full corporate retreat because there’s 5,000 of us,” said Anne Sophie Duchene, head of internal and change communication at Euroclear. “Divisions and even departments just go away, domestically or to a country close by. There’s one every week.”

“Before the pandemic, the typical use case we saw were meetings for somewhere between 30 to 300 people. Today the typical meeting we serve starts from five to 30 people.”

~ Dennis Vilovic, TROOP

Focus on a qualified audience. Focus on targeting and compelling the right attendees to come, not just getting as many people through the door as possible. In the case of exhibitions and trade shows, this may be people with more purchasing authority.

“Across industries, there are fewer people per buying company. Where you had a group of five, you now may have a group of three — but these three people signed at least as many orders as the five people did before.”

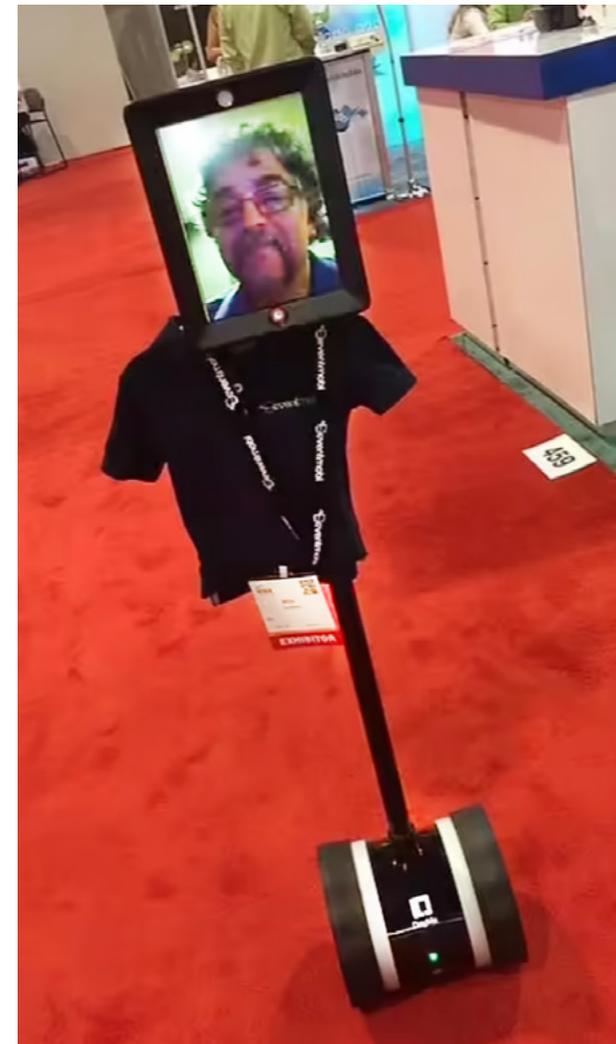
~ Kai Hattendorf, UFI

Use technology to manage a hybrid experience. Kiosks or desks that allow remote stakeholders to connect with those onsite work well if things are scheduled ahead of time, says Grosser.

“The crucial element is that it’s a hosted buyer meeting with pre-scheduled appointments,” he explained. “If you just put an iPad somewhere in the corner and say, ‘Hey, you can click on a button and you can talk to somebody remotely,’ no one is going to do it.” While anyone can just use their phone for this purpose, a dedicated space reinforces the feeling that you’re there to do business. For Grosser, “the experience is shaped by the expectation.”

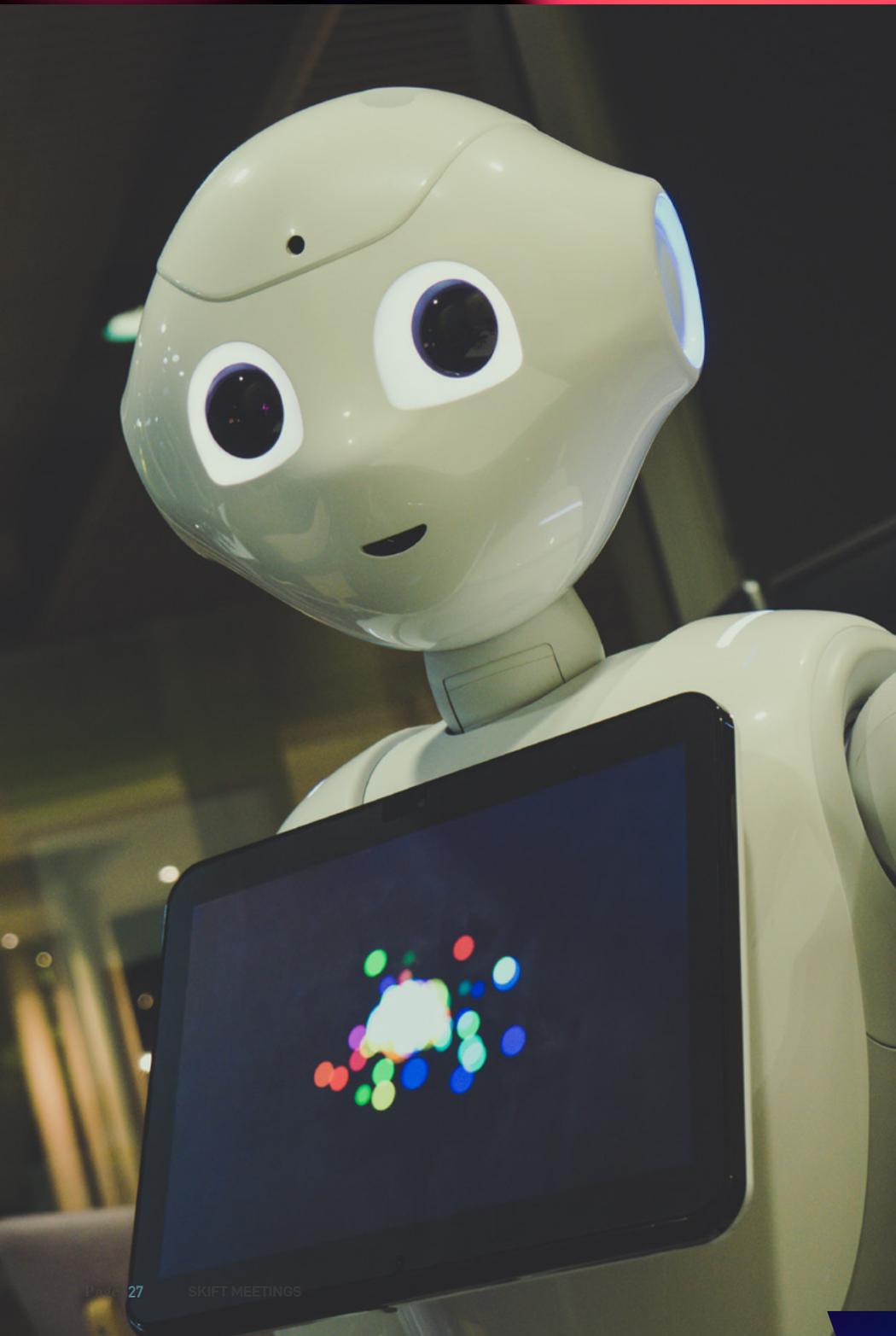
Robots with mounted tablets or other screen interfaces that wheel around an event on behalf of absent attendees have been around for at least 10 years, but “the verdict is still out to what degree you can bring [them in] for someone who can’t access the event in person,” said Hattendorf.

“I do recall that some of the attendees with whom I interacted were a bit unsure as to what to make of the robotic person’s face on an iPad,” said James Spellos of Meeting U.



Curran similarly observed that, while there is some novelty to the device that attracts attention, it's far from a seamless experience for remote attendees. "It's a microphone in a loud area trying to capture people talking to you, and the video quality isn't necessarily the best," he recounted of an experience with the technology five to six years ago. "The hardest part about it is that you have to use your mouse and keyboard to move around. I spent most of my time wheeling myself around trying to get to places."

And while many business events have already begun to live stream sessions to a remote audience, Hoff noted that some internal corporate events and strategy sessions have adopted this approach as well, adding that it makes sense to record it and offer it on demand for those who aren't able to join live.



Part 3

REDEFINING MEETING SPACES: THE REINVENTION OF VENUES AND DESTINATIONS FOR A TRANSFORMED WORK WORLD

The shift to hybrid work has transformed not only how we conceive of work spaces, but how — and what — we value from the spaces that connect us. These shifts are ushering in a merging of office and venue spaces, along with the emergence of a whole new set of criteria governing meeting destination choices.

OFFICES ARE EVOLVING INTO MEETING VENUES

As more employers shift to a hybrid work model, the nature of the office itself is evolving to prioritize meetings over individual work. The spaces are increasingly designed around connection and collaboration.

What does this mean for meeting and event professionals? Those planning internal events shouldn't discount company offices as a potential venue. When company-owned spaces aren't available, flexible coworking spaces may also double as meeting rooms or event venues.

Zoom — a company that has become almost synonymous with remote work — gave its 8,000 employees permission to work from home forever earlier this year.

When Zoom analyzed the workflow at its offices, however, it discovered that many employees still came in periodically to meet in person, be social, and collaborate. As a result, the company *remodeled* its headquarters to

remove cubicles in favor of a more communal design, somewhere between a cafeteria and an event venue.

Similarly, when Salesforce learned that roughly 80 percent of its employees wanted to come into the office periodically to reconnect with colleagues, the company got to work redesigning its workspaces as a “community hub,” with a “sea of desks” being replaced by “collaboration and breakout spaces,” according to a [statement](#) on the company's website.

Anne Sophie Duchene, head of internal and change communication for financial services company Euroclear, stated that her company continues to support remote work and is adapting office spaces for in-person meetings with hybrid flexibility:

“We no longer need a big open space with lots of work stations, because for that type of work, people use their homes. We now have a lot more collaboration rooms and spaces, with better screens and technical equipment to do hybrid meetings.”

~ Anne Sophie Duchene, head of internal and change communication, Euroclear

In-person meeting spaces, in turn, are by default hybrid points of connection as well. “Rather than thinking about hybrid, virtual meetings, we now consider all meetings to be digitally live, meaning

the remote attendance or speaker becomes a normal part of live meetings, not a separate different meeting type,” said Mark Cooper, CEO of the International Association of Conference Centers (IACC).

The Office Is the Offsite

As companies reinvent their offices into hubs for collaboration, social bonding, and hybrid connectivity, they are becoming top choices for special events and retreats.

Caleb Parker, founder of office space management company Bold, said that his client base is looking for more venue-like room layouts that accommodate hybrid meetings and live streams. “We hosted an event recently where we had a panel of four and an audience of 40, but we had live streaming for 2,000,” he said.

When Parker recently interviewed Salesforce senior VP of workplace services Michele Schnieder for his #WorkBold podcast, she reported that the company is now hosting its BlueSky Thinking team meeting at the office. “Now, because 85 percent of their workforce don’t come into the office every day, their offices are becoming a venue. The office is the offsite,” said Parker.

Chris Savage, CEO of Wistia, has also repurposed the company’s office headquarters for its all-staff retreats. “We used to have the offsite at different places, but now it’s happening at the office.”



The New “Venue From Anywhere” Model

The pandemic not only forced us to re-evaluate where we work, but where we meet — not only shifting our perception of what an office looks like, but where we hold events.

Savage, for example, said that his company is now finding great value in their headquarters’ unusual architecture, which includes “a big design space that used to be a garage, with a door we can open to the outside air.”

Nicole Osibodu, co-founder of The Community Factory, has noticed that **clients are increasingly open to outside-the-box venue choices.**

Outdoor venues, in particular, have seen a big upswing in demand. According to Osibodu, this shift is partly an antidote to the effects of the pandemic on our work lives, and in part a natural extension of the creative thinking it required as a survival strategy.

“For 18 months straight, we could take calls outside in our backyards. Why would you want to bring them back into a ballroom? Nobody wants that. It’s outside of your normal, but this is normal now. We get to redefine what ‘normal’ means and what that looks like now.”

~ Nicole Osibodu, co-founder, The Community Factory

Osibodu added that coworking management companies are being

equally inventive, with [Selina](#) offering co-living and working spaces that take advantage of outdoor spaces and beautiful scenery. “They understand that these locations are built for connections,” she said.

The New Destination: Authenticity, Experience, and Connection

All of these changes are equally transforming the way meeting planners and event organizers think about destinations. As working professionals re-evaluate what makes travel worthwhile, a new set of priorities is emerging.

In keeping with the new emphasis on human connection and the trend toward smaller gatherings, both transformative experiences and cultural immersion are emerging as a key differentiator for destinations.

Catherine Chaulet, president and CEO of Global DMC Partners, said that this shift in thinking is drawing more business to secondary destinations, particularly for incentive travel.

“There is definitely more interest in what we call secondary markets or experiential destinations, with a big focus on authenticity. They are much more interested in smaller group experiences, sometimes even individual experiences, and more importantly, in discovering the destinations in a much more personal way — connecting with the people, but also supporting initiatives around sustainability.”

~ Catherine Chaulet, president and CEO, Global DMC Partners

Chalet pointed to concerns around over-tourism as another driving factor. The pandemic disrupted our habitual patterns of travel, forcing us to think deeply about why and where we do it. Setting the stage for connection between your attendees and meeting participants now means choosing a destination that will appeal to what makes us human: our values and our sense of belonging.

A truly transformative shared experience can also be a mechanism for team bonding. Chris Savage, for example, is considering the possibility of hosting future retreats somewhere outside of company headquarters. It partly comes down to a question of full immersion. Speaking to the differences between employees who lived near Wistia's headquarters and those who had to travel to their office-based "offsites," he said, "[Those coming from afar] had to find childcare or pet care, but then they are 100 percent present. We may explore trying new places so that everyone can be a visitor."

What kind of location is he considering? One of his top choices would be a skiing destination because it would allow employees to try new experiences that push their comfort zones and allow them to develop new skills. "Trying anything for the first time can be scary, but you build confidence. I've seen the magic come from that," he said.





IAN RENTON

Director of Sales,
[Atlantis Dubai](#)

Ian Renton is a well-seasoned salesperson with over 23-years of experience, most of which has been acquired in the region. After beginning his career as a kitchen porter in his home country of Scotland, Ian cut his teeth for four years as a Conference and Banqueting Manager at Barcelo Hotels & resorts in Spain, before making the move to the UAE to join Jumeirah Group as Sales Manager. After four years, Ian made the jump to Associate Director of Sales at Atlantis, The Palm where he has spent the last ten years of his career. In April 2012, he was promoted to Director of Group Sales before being promoted Director of Sales-Groups and Marine & Waterpark in 2016.

Described as an inspirational leader with a great sense of humility and democracy Ian currently leads a team of 22, securing an average of \$40m per annum cross the MICE and weddings segment of both Atlantis, The Palm and Atlantis The Royal as well as Marine and Waterpark Sales. Ian oversees all revenue generation and conversion for the world's largest waterpark, Aquaventure, The Lost Chambers Aquarium, Dolphin Bay, Sea Lion Point, DMC restaurant sales, Weddings, Events and Groups.

4 HOTEL TRENDS FOR THE NEW ERA OF HYBRID WORK

During the research process for this report, Skift Meetings discovered that office spaces are merging with venues, and that destinations are in turn reinventing themselves for a new emphasis on experiences and authentic connections. How do hotels fit into the picture?

To answer this question, Skift Meetings sat down with Ian Renton, director of sales for Atlantis Dubai. Dubai is at the forefront of innovation and cutting edge infrastructure,

giving Renton special insights into where the industry is headed next. Further, The Atlantis Dubai's unique approach to experiential design stands out from other hotels in the region for its combination of theme-park-worthy attractions and state-of-the-art business facilities.

Here are his four top trends for group bookings in the new age of hybrid work and distributed teams.



1. The Time Is Right to Expand Hotel Workspaces

As hybrid work models become increasingly prevalent, Renton believes hospitality brands like Atlantis are likely to see steady demand for workspaces within business event venues. While these amenities are not entirely new, his remarks suggest they are becoming a bigger priority for the sector.

“Workspaces remain an important aspect at Atlantis Dubai. With the eagerly awaited arrival of Atlantis The Royal, we will introduce a luxurious new conference center which features six boardrooms as well as a robust business center, incorporating desk spaces to address the trend toward hybrid work. In addition, at Atlantis, The Palm, our generous pre-function areas within the conference center offer multiple spaces where guests can be seated and operate a workspace in and around events.”

~ Ian Renton

2. Extended Stays Are Becoming the Norm

Travel trends inevitably have a ripple effect on business meetings and events, and the rise of “bleisure” travel is no exception. Renton reports that demand has never been greater for extended stays among group bookings.

“Almost every group that stays at Atlantis, The Palm expresses a need to extend the stay so that they can fully experience the rich offerings within the resort. When contracting groups, we regularly give an

option to extend three days prior and post to the event dates to help accommodate this type of traveler. With daily access to Aquaventure Waterpark and The Lost Chambers Aquarium, as well as activities at Dolphin Bay, dives in the Ambassador Lagoon, treatments at the spa, and 35 restaurants, bars and lounges to choose from, guests often desire additional time to fully explore everything we have to offer.”



3. Experiential Activities Are a Growing Trend

It's not just destinations that are waking up to the new demand for experiential activities and authentic cultural immersion. Renton explains how Atlantis Dubai's offerings, both new and long-established, are helping to address the shift from "must haves" to "must dos."

"Atlantis Dubai has noticed a trend of our guests placing more emphasis on experiential activities. This is something at the forefront of our offerings and we look to adapt and introduce more cultural connections across both Atlantis, The Palm and Atlantis The Royal. From a culinary perspective, Ayamna at Atlantis, The Palm is considered a "must do" for those wanting to embrace Middle Eastern cuisine while in Dubai. In close proximity, we also have our Arabian Terrace where guests can relax and enjoy an authentic vibe with flavors and tastes from the region. Atlantis The Royal is also excited to introduce Ariana's Persian Kitchen, which promises a fresh take on Iranian cuisine, serving time-honored classics spun with a refreshingly modern twist. Guests can also book an expansive range of experiential activities, such as a dive in the Ambassador Lagoon surrounded by 65,000 marine animals, or taking on 105 rides, slides and attractions at Aquaventure, the world's largest waterpark, which is included within all our room rates."

4. Networking + Experiences = The Ultimate "Wow" Factor

An increased emphasis on networking was one of the top trends identified by almost all of our interview sources, and Renton was no exception. To take your networking activities to the next level, he recommends adding experiential elements to break the ice and encourage conversation.

"Having a location that encourages people to move around can be far more effective than a traditional meeting space. Agile and flexible meeting spaces are something that we are very fortunate to offer at Atlantis Dubai. In addition, having unique features — such as the marine exhibits at Ambassador Lagoon — is a great ice breaker when meeting new people, which helps increase engagement and interactions. One of my personal favorites is exclusively booking The Lost Chambers Aquarium, which is a perfect "wow" setting for networking events in particular. The venue is designed to encourage guests to journey through the chambers while meeting new people, exploring the underwater world and enjoying a wide range of cuisines from our culinary team."

Part 4

**RETHINKING
CONNECTION:
6 EVENT
DESIGN
TRENDS FOR
THE NEW
ATTENDEE
PROFILE**

Across multiple sectors, events and tradeshows are reporting an increase in attendance and willingness to participate in events moving forward, a positive sign on the road to recovery.

At the same time, many potential attendees are still unwilling or unable to travel, and those who do make the trip expect a much greater return on their investment of time and money than before. In turn, organizers must now rethink the core purpose of their events and redesign every element to reignite not just confidence in the ROI of meeting in person, but the feeling of FOMO (fear of missing out).

In order to design the optimal event experience and keep the conversation going, it's important to understand how attendee expectations and needs have changed.



1. ACCOUNTING FOR THE COMFORT-ZONE EFFECT

One of the advantages of working from home is also one of the most important factors for meeting and event planners to keep in mind when thinking about the new attendee profile: Many professionals are now used to working in their comfort zones, making them much more prone to over-stimulation in public settings.

“I’m a huge extrovert, but I am exhausted way faster when I go in person these days, because there is a lot of stimulus,” said Liz Lathan.

Similarly, Chris Savage reported that Wistia had over-programmed his company’s first corporate retreat coming out of the pandemic. “We underestimated how overwhelming it is for everyone. You’re still not used to being around your coworkers all the time,” he said. “If there are people you haven’t seen in a long time, you want to catch up — but you do that all day and then you’re so zonked.”

Kai Hattendorf, CEO of exhibition industry association UFI, described a similar phenomenon with sensory stimulation. Speaking of a recent conference, he noted that the noise levels were so high that people could hardly understand one another and many complained. He questioned, however, whether it was really a matter of unusually high noise levels, or a lower tolerance:

“We are not used to this noise anymore. It’s like when I lived in the States for years and then came back to Europe when smoking was still allowed indoors, and I couldn’t stand the smoke anymore. When you live a different experience for an extended time, you rediscover things that you had stopped noticing.”

~ Kai Hattendorf

Event Design Solutions

Build breaks into the schedule: Give attendees and meeting participants a chance to decompress. “We need some downtime in there. Event producers shouldn’t be afraid to schedule in that 90 minutes of an actual break,” recommends Lathan.

Keep sessions short: In addition to providing frequent breaks with some stretching for extended periods, it can help to keep content short. “I’m seeing the stereotypical Ted Talk 16-minute nuggets that are highly consumable, both face to face and online,” said Kliman.

Upgrade the basics: Make sure the acoustics in your meeting space or exhibition hall are as sound-suppressing as possible. For a more eco-conscious option, consider recycled carpeting. It also pays to invest in quality catering and a streamlined check-



in process. The more elements of comfort that you can introduce, the lower your risk of distracting attendees with points of friction. In the end, that means they will have more energy to invest in the face-to-face interactions that they're there to nurture. "It's really just about people talking to people, but that opens so many considerations about how to create an atmosphere that fosters these conversations, both in the design of the booth and the whole design of the hall," said Hattendorf.

Merge emcee and entertainer roles: One way to keep your audience engaged is to add an entertainment element into the transitions between sessions. Martin Smith, who goes by the stage name DJ Graffiti, has made a name for himself by combining music with banter designed to energize the audience. "In the past, I was almost always hired for a party, or celebration. Now, my bookings are pretty evenly split between some clients booking longer traditional celebrations or a series of shorter energy breaks," said Smith. He added that this breakdown applies as much to his in-person bookings as to his virtual ones.

Build in spaces for remote work: While it might seem counterintuitive, providing work spaces for your attendees can help to reduce stress by allowing them to catch up with emails and other pressing matters. "I think people have really stopped taking the three days for the conference off, and they're just constantly on," said Lathan.

2. TAKING NETWORKING BEYOND COCKTAIL HOUR

If there was one event design trend that almost all of our interview sources reported, it was an increased emphasis on networking. With face-to-face interactions now coming at a premium, the time we have to expand and deepen our relationships is that much more valuable.

“There is a greater focus on connection at in-person meetings. We’re seeing a lot more time for networking and breakouts, as compared to sessions where they’re preaching at you,” said Liz (King) Caruso, chief event strategist at Liz King Events.

It is not just about quantity, either. Multiple interview sources pointed to the need for more intentionally designed networking activities. Gone are the days when event professionals could rely on an alcohol-fueled cocktail hour to take care of all their networking needs.

“I think what’s changed for the design of these experiences is that you can’t rely on the networking and the connections to just happen organically. It’s just not going to happen as people bump into each other in the halls or at the bar. You actually have to design it.”

~ Lawrence Coburn, co-founder and CEO, twine

“It’s far more intentional than what we saw before the pandemic. Now, clients are asking for activations that cause employees and attendees to get together and reconnect.”

~ Andrew Roby, event planner, Andrew Roby Events

“It’s cool to have an after party, but you can’t call it networking. And I don’t feel like people want to network. People want to converse.”

~ Liz Lathan, co-founder, The Community Factory

Event Design Solutions

Think strategically about activity groupings: When designing a networking activity, it’s key to put just as much thought into how you’re grouping the participants as you are into what they’ll be doing. For industry-wide events, it pays to group participants with fellow attendees who work in similar roles or who have shared interests. For internal events, the opposite principle applies: Mismatching is matching. Make sure each group contains a mix of people in different departments and levels of seniority for maximum disruption of siloes.

Rethink roundtables and birds-of-a-feather activities: There are few better ways to forge meaningful relationships than to connect over mutual interests and share new ways of thinking. For this reason,



Lathan recommends revisiting roundtable discussions, with more emphasis on peer-to-peer exchanges and intentional groupings: “Leadership is often afraid to lose control of the conversation, so they want a subject matter expert to steer the messaging. While the participants don’t mind that because they recognize they’re going to a branded conference and they want that content, they also just want to hear from each other sometimes.” The key, according to Lathan, is to hire a professional facilitator skilled in encouraging dialogue and balancing multiple perspectives.

Gamify icebreakers: There are more ways to gamify icebreaker questions than with the traditional human bingo. Sean Hoff, managing partner of Moniker, has had success combining icebreaker questions with popular games. For example, at one retreat they placed questions on Jenga pieces. When participants drew a piece, they had to answer or ask the question to someone else — and if the structure tumbled, they had to tackle all of them at once!

Play with team dynamics: Sometimes it can be effective to create team dynamics that allow some members to take a supporting role. For example, for one of its offsite activities, Wistia used a game of rock-paper-scissors to help break the ice. Anyone who lost would join the cheerleading squad for the person who defeated them.

3. SPARKING CREATIVE SYNERGIES AND MAXIMIZING LEARNING POTENTIAL

Meeting in person can do more than help strengthen social bonds and build trust between business partners. It can also be essential for sparking creative synergies and maximizing the learning potential of attendees.

According to Nicole Osibodu of The Community Factory, cross-pollination can be essential for generating new ideas, and it works best in person: “The creativity sparks because you’re around people.”

Catherine Chaulet confirmed that this is just as true for STEM industries. “Even pharmaceutical companies have said that the lack of office sharing has actually impacted their teams’ creativity,” she said.

“Meetings and event conferences help in creating not only stronger bonds, but also fostering better exchanges and the creativity of companies, regardless of the fields they’re in.”

~ Catherine Chaulet, president and CEO, Global DMC Partners

Chris Savage of Wistia has seen firsthand how team-based challenges, combined with opportunities to socialize in person, can lead to product innovations. “There have been many times that a product came out of a hackathon,” he reported. “And some of it is driven by folks who connected together at the offsite to bounce ideas off each other.”

For Coburn, this kind of brainstorming is now one of the key benefits of the company’s all-staff retreats, which they now do quarterly.

“Before the role of the offsite was to align, to strategize, and to recharge — in that order. And now it’s to connect, to brainstorm, to come up with new ideas, and to connect again.”

~ Lawrence Coburn, co-founder and CEO, twine

Even educational content, long thought to be well-suited to virtual delivery, can benefit from the in-person context. Multiple interview sources pointed to the value of informal conversations and experiential activities in helping attendees to retain and expand on new information.

“There is a hunger for education that is dialogue based, because while virtual learning is possible, the opportunities to apply our learning in conversation and context is what makes it remembered and relevant.”

~ Tahira Endean, head of program, IMEX

“Experiential learning is a very important part of connecting people and creating memories that are not possible over virtual channels in my view. More team building, more fun activities in groups, are required today for adult education and association conferences.”

~ Mark Cooper, CEO, International Association of Conference Centers (IACC)

Event Design Solutions

Bring together diverse perspectives: According to Chris Savage of Wistia, the real “magic” happens when bringing together a mix of different roles and thinking styles for team-based challenges. For an egg-drop challenge (in which teams had to design protective gear for an egg dropped from 11 feet), the best ideas didn’t always come from the engineers. “You have some engineers and a marketer and an admin person, and you realize, ‘This admin person has a really interesting, different idea.’ It’s showing people that if you want to be really creative, you have to take a lot of different ideas in.”

Think metaphorically: Is there a particular skill set or thinking style that you want to foster among your attendees? Jesse Gainer of C2 believes in identifying the concept behind group challenges first, and then thinking of a metaphorical way to represent the idea, either through activities or in the physical design of the space. This is the strategy behind C2 Labs, a series of collaborative exercises designed to “create authentic, meaningful connections” that serve business interests. Typically catering to smaller groups, these activities “use an elaborate environment design or challenge as a metaphor.” For example, they recently designed a group challenge using Lego as “a metaphor for non-verbal leadership.” The group had to find a solution without communicating verbally.

Add experiential and interactive elements to educational sessions: Is there a way to illustrate your session’s content through a hands-on exercise? Does it lend itself to a debate between your attendees? If you are bringing people together for in-person educational content, take advantage of the collaborative potential that comes from being in the same physical space.

4. DESIGNING FOR THE COMPLETE PERSON

Wellness, CSR, and self-care were buzzwords long before 2020, but these priorities have been pushed further into the spotlight over the past two and a half years.

According to the Global Wellness Summit, the pandemic has fundamentally changed what consumers see as “true wellness.” It’s not about taking a break to stretch anymore. It’s about experiences that reflect their values and foster creativity, respect their work-life balance, and incorporate sustainable practices in everything from food to aisle carpeting.

According to Robyn Duda of event planning agency Robyn Duda Creative, event organizers are starting to take heed of this trend. “A lot of clients ask about what I call values-based planning,” she said. “What’s your mission and vision as a brand, and how is that translating to the moments that you’re creating for both employees and customers?”

The transition to remote and hybrid work may be a key factor in driving this more holistic view of attendee needs. Beatriz Arantes, a trained psychologist currently employed as senior manager of user experience for Wayfair, recently linked the blurring of personal and professional posts on LinkedIn to a wider trend towards greater fluidity between work and home life:

“I think we have to look at the broader change that has happened through Covid — the fact that this employee population [...] was suddenly in each others’ lives in such an intimate and vulnerable way. For that intense period of time, we were forced to bring our whole selves to work... or the other way around. The mask of professional-without-a-life-outside-of-work fell off, and people see no reason to put it back on.”

~ Beatriz Arantes, senior manager of user experience, Wayfair

As people are increasingly inclined to bring their “authentic selves” to work, they in turn expect their work environments to acknowledge and respond to their humanity — particularly when it comes to the points of interpersonal connection that define meetings and events.

Event Design Solutions

Research values: David Allison, founder of the Valuegraphics Database, has conducted extensive research into the values that inform our decision making. The data is drawn from a half-million surveys conducted in 152 languages worldwide, and includes studies of people with specific behavioral patterns. Understanding your audience’s values can be the first step in designing an event that speaks to their needs.



Design with mindfulness and intentionality: While the practice of mindfulness can extend to an entire philosophy around your complete event design, it can also take the form of concrete activities. Holly Duckworth, a mindfulness expert with Leadership Solutions International, recommends creating a mindfulness lounge on the showfloor where attendees can engage in a meditative experience and set their goals for the event. For some groups, an effective activity could be a gratitude exercise coupled with a social responsibility project.

Foster a sense of safety and inclusion: When attendees feel secure, they build stronger connections, are more engaged, and experience a deeper sense of belonging. “In designing inclusive events, we have to make sure we’re welcoming to everyone, no matter their cultural background or where they’re from,” said Tim Mousseau, founder of Create Safe. “Creating safe environments requires intentionality and investment in our attendees’ voices to drive inclusive change.” This statement holds particularly true when bringing together remote teams who might have various levels of comfort with traveling and sharing in-person spaces. Mousseau suggested starting with first determining the safety needs of the organizer’s team members, such as their preferences around receiving feedback or managing conflict. One step could be to provide a multitude of channels for people to speak up and have their concerns heard.

5. TAPPING INTO YEAR-ROUND CONNECTIVITY

While hybrid work does put a premium on face-to-face encounters, it also means that business professionals are that much more plugged into digital channels of communication. Ignoring the connective power of online communities risks under-serving your attendees.

Just as the best in-person events offer experiences that can't be replicated online, the most effective digital strategies tap into the qualities that are native to the web. According to Anh Nguyen, hybrid workplaces are transforming into a model for the online communities that have long been the holy grail of event marketing:

“What are the moments that you need to connect people in person and what are you doing with that time that can't be done online? And then in between that, how are you leveraging technology and other channels to build those connections? That 365 community engagement that we used to talk about is now happening at work.”

~ Anh Nguyen

Although simultaneous hybrid events may not have taken off in the way that many predicted during the height of the pandemic, savvy event professionals are taking advantage of the opportunity to engage their audience through online channels both pre- and post-event.

In fact, Kai Hattendorf predicts that the event industry's concept of “hybrid” will come to be associated primarily with this kind of asynchronous communication. “The big organizers are looking to serve their communities all year with data-driven models that take the relationships they built at the face-to-face event, and turn them into a cycle of activations in between the shows,” he said. “This will become the predominant definition of what we used to call hybrid.”

When it comes to strictly virtual events, multiple event planners reported that while demand has dramatically declined since the height of the pandemic, there is still a far greater market for them than in the pre-2020 era. And these reports coincide with what we are hearing from event tech vendors. “There was one point where we did 100 percent virtual events, and that number has now dropped to about 20 percent,” said EventMobi's Thorben Grosser. “In pure absolute numbers, that's a massive drop. However, there's suddenly 20 percent virtual events that didn't exist before.”

Depending on audience and budget, regular virtual events as part of a strategic mix of in-person and virtual activations can be a popular approach using the best of both worlds to keep attendees engaged.

Digital Engagement Solutions for Events and Meetings

Enable follow-up exchanges post-event: One of the key advantages of online chat threads is that they allow participants to reflect before contributing to the conversation. For sessions and activities designed to provoke an exchange of ideas, it can be effective to invite post-event additions to the conversation. Robyn Duda, for example, recommends creating dedicated lines of communication for follow-up ideas after a brainstorming session. “Brainstorming doesn’t just happen in the hour that you ask people to come up with ideas. Brains don’t work like that,” she explained.

Upcycle event content: Pinpoint the content that was most popular at your event, and use it for spin-off resources and activities. “The content long tail enables activations through communication — a poll, a newsletter,” Hattendorf recommends. “The dialogue leads to an ad hoc exchange of opinions, closer to an online chat than an online webinar.”

Take advantage of multimedia streaming and crowdsourcing: The most successful digital campaigns tap into the activities that people already enjoy doing online. Wistia, for example, used a music streaming app to create a private, internal radio station. “We started having people DJ at different times. 70 percent of the team listens to at least 30 minutes a month,” said CEO Chris Savage. Additionally, the channel doubles as a platform for sharing verbal announcements.

Let your community develop their own activity ideas: One way to ensure that your online community feels engaged is to give them a sense of ownership. At twine, employees are nominated to design group activities that are hosted on twine’s own product, which is designed to enable remote team communication. “People have done cool things like use Google street view to show us their neighborhood and where they take their kids to school,” explained Lawrence Coburn. Other activities have included checkers and haiku-writing workshops.

Invest in a mobile event app: One way to ensure that you draw attendees into an online relationship with your event brand is through a mobile event app. With digital literacy reaching an all-time high, it’s likely your attendees will appreciate the ability to connect with fellow registrants through the app. As attendees expect efficient touchless event check-ins, this has positively impacted adoption rates of mobile event apps. “We are now seeing event app adoption anywhere north of 95 percent,” said Grosser.

6. KEEPING UP WITH AR, VR, AND THE METAVERSE TO OPEN UP NEW WORLDS

With augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technology quickly advancing, events may soon be able to leverage those capabilities for more than just 3D property tours and brief interactive elements. Ideally, planners should be able to stretch the limits of their imagination with fantastical environments and innovative experiences in VR.

Remote companies are already harnessing some of these metaverse (virtual reality) technologies for collaborative work, as well as remote onboarding and training of employees. “My clients are using a lot of metaverse-based tools for internal incubators and innovation hubs,” said Robyn Duda. “You can be anywhere in the world working on prototyping something in the metaverse together.”

Some are even using VR headsets to bring distributed teams together for remote social interactions.

“We gave the whole team Oculus so we could play games together remotely in VR. A lot of it is finding the activities that work natively on the web. When you take an in-person activity and try to make it work remotely, it doesn’t always work.”

~ Chris Savage, founder and CEO, Wistia

As these two examples illustrate, most existing VR platforms cater to two needs: specialized work tasks and video games. In time, however, the combination of more customization options and better, cheaper headsets may open up a new world of opportunities.

As an event producer with a company known for highly-imaginative immersive experiences, Jesse Gainer is watching the space closely. “The hype train is very powerful. I don’t think we’re there yet, but I see the potential.”

Once the tools become more advanced and accessible, virtual reality should present almost unlimited opportunities for creativity. “I think what we’re starting to see now — similar to virtual events — is that our first steps are trying to recreate the things we do in person[...] But I’m excited to see when it gets sophisticated enough that we can rethink the fundamentals,” said Gainer.

Conclusion

One of the Covid pandemic's most long-lasting effects may be how it has reshaped our perceptions of remote work. The impact extends to virtually every corner of public life, but it is particularly relevant to the world of meetings and events.

There is nothing better than coming together, be that virtually or in-person, to bounce ideas off each other. Working in silos often results in siloed ideas. Connecting with colleagues is vital as deeper relationships often equate to products with much more depth.

Whether an effective return to office happens in the future may not matter. The many facets of hybrid work are already impacting the entire business world.

The way we meet is changing and is providing a call to action for meeting and event professionals skilled in the art of fostering human connection. This might be the best opportunity strategic planners have to demonstrate their value by moving an organization's needle forward at such a critical time.

“Life has changed. We put new value on our time. We measure what travel means to our lifestyle, planet and bottom line. We redefined connection. And more of this connection will come from intentional gathering at and around events. The protection around time management and the flexibility that remote and hybrid work offers doesn't diminish the desire to meet. It reformulates it. It creates a vacuum that events can fill in an impactful way. It offers more benefits and the opportunity to capitalize on those select and intentional moments of meeting.”

~ Kathryn Frankson, global director of marketing, Money20/20

CMP CREDITS

Skift Meetings is a CMP Preferred Provider accredited by the Events Industry Council and provides Continuing Education credits for learning activities.

This report is worth 1 CMP Credit under the Strategic Planner category.

REDEEM YOUR CREDIT

For more information about the CMP credential or Preferred Provider Program, please visit <http://www.eventscouncil.org/>.

DISCLAIMER

This report was created by Skift Meetings in partnership with IMEX Group.

If you wish to sponsor our future publications or receive sponsorship opportunity notifications, email meetings@skift.com.