

RESEARCH PAPER

Event horizon: What should you look for in a virtual events platform?

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Introduction

Covid-19 has seen both internal and external events move online in droves, with the pandemic making in-person events largely unfeasible.

While this move was initially out of necessity, many organisations have embraced virtual events, and are keen to find innovative ways of reaching customers and employees. Due to the convenience of attending virtual events from the comfort of their own homes, the pivot to online has proved popular with attendees, offering savings in terms of cost, time and environmental impact.

However, delivering a successful online event is not without its challenges. With attendees joining an average of 20 virtual events in 2020, expectations are higher than ever, and high-quality video and audio, ease of use, and innovative features are a must for those wanting to stand out from the crowd. Businesses have encountered difficulties recreating the atmosphere and opportunities for networking that in-person events bring. Therefore, as the world begins to plan for life after the pandemic, many are now considering how virtual events will fit into the future, and how a hybrid approach could play out.

This white paper, featuring bespoke research from *Computing*, will explore how organisations have responded to the challenges around both internal and external events over the past 12 months, their plans and opinions relating to the future, and what business leaders look for in a virtual event solution. We'll also discuss the challenges faced when doing business through the medium of video, and how this will change as workers return to the office. Finally, we pose the question, "Will future business events be predominantly hybrid?"

Key Findings

- On average, survey participants are attending one to three virtual events a month, with 31% attending more than four.
- 80% at least somewhat agree that their expectations when it comes to virtual events are higher than they were 18 months ago.
- In terms of the features respondents value when using a virtual events platform, high-quality video and audio and ease of use were the most popular choices.
- 43% cited difficulties recreating the atmosphere of physical events as an area of concern.
- 88% agreed that the future of events is hybrid, with 65% confident that their organisation has the necessary technology to deliver hybrid events.

Going virtual

While tech-savvy organisations were investing in virtual events prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, few could have predicted the rate at which virtual events have taken hold in 2020 and beyond. Now a rapidly growing industry, the virtual events sector is predicted to reach \$701.39bn globally by 2028.

Traditionally reliant on physical events to build awareness, launch products, generate leads, and boost customer loyalty, virtual events have proved invaluable to organisations as a way of reaching employees, customers and prospective customers alike.

18 months since the start of the pandemic, organisations that were quick to pivot online and may have rushed to purchase a virtual events platform are now consolidating and evaluating their efforts in order to prepare for the future.

Speaking at a recent *Computing* web seminar, Zachary Bosin, Vice President of Product Marketing and Communications at BlueJeans by Verizon explained that it is still early days for virtual events, and the rush to move online may have led to some hasty decisions:

“The organisations that were more reliant in hosting large-scale conferences and physical tradeshows had to pivot so quickly since March 2020 to transform their physical events into virtual events. They really had to throw something together and were grasping at straws on how to do that.

“People made quick decisions and said, “we’ve got to get something” and now we’re at this really interesting point in time where everyone is starting to rethink and re-evaluate if the platform they invested in in an impulsive way is the right one to scale going forward.”

With individuals now conducting a large proportion of their working lives online, discerning event attendees are well aware that not all virtual events are created equal. Audio and visual quality, ease of use and innovative offerings can make or break a virtual event, determining whether attendees will come back for more or log off.

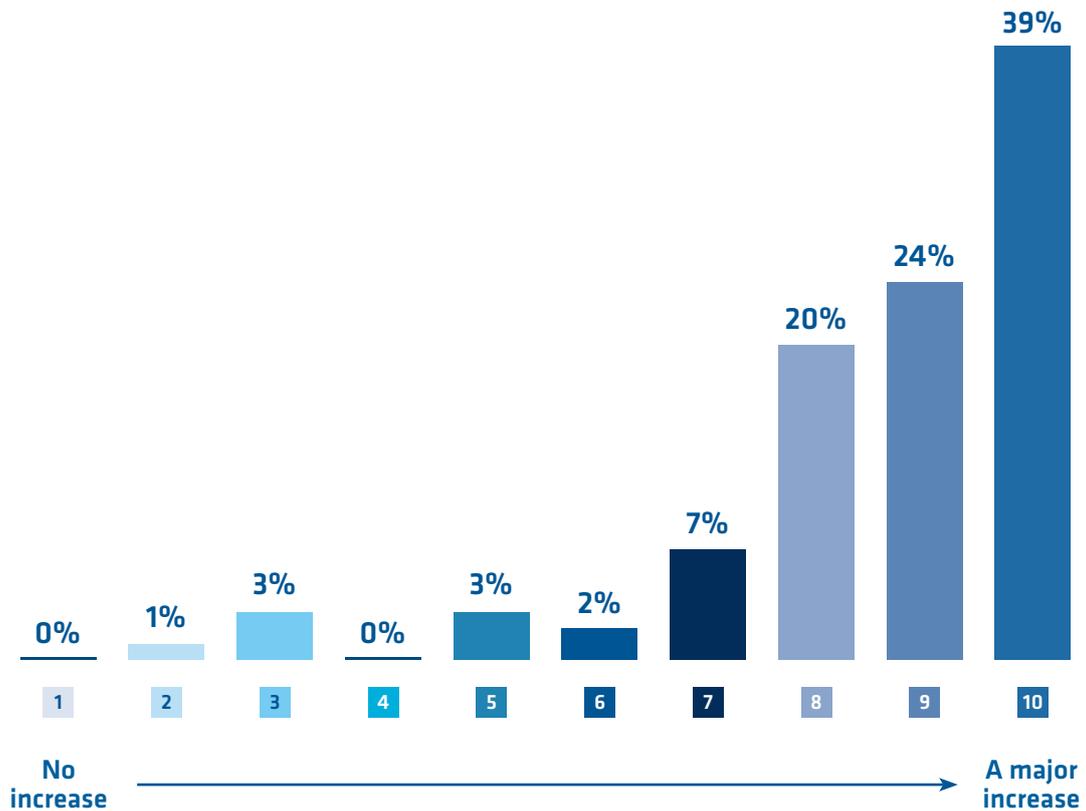
So what are both event attendees and organisers looking for in a virtual events platform? We surveyed 150 IT decision-makers who have hosted or attended a virtual event in the past 18 months from a range of industries to understand what has worked, what hasn't, and their plans for the future.

Survey participants reported a significant increase in the number of virtual events they are attending, on a scale from one to ten, where one is no increase and ten is a major increase, 83% of respondents selected an eight or higher. These results are far from surprising, and one may even expect a greater proportion of respondents to respond a ten.

In this saturated marketplace, organisers should now be looking to refine event strategies to incentivise attendance, customise attendee experiences and encourage higher levels of engagement.

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Fig. 1 : On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being “no increase” and 10 being “a major increase”) how much has your use of virtual events/ video conferencing increased over the past 18 months?



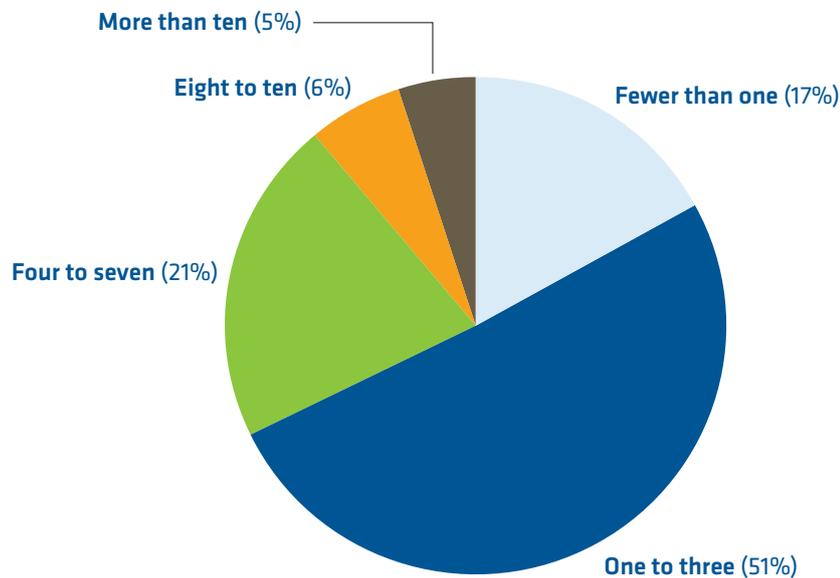
When asked how many virtual events they attend in an average month, the most common answer was one to three, with 31% attending more than four. Event organisers are now vying for attendees’ attention now that the world of virtual events is oversaturated with offerings. Attendees are now well versed in what makes a good and a bad event, and from the comfort of their own homes, it’s easy for them to tune out if the content isn’t engaging and the platform isn’t intuitive.

Organisers should take this into account, ensuring that their event does not stand out for the wrong reasons.

In order to do this, event organisers should not only ensure the content they are delivering is relevant and interesting but should also consider how it is presented. If platforms are not easy to use, from the point of registration to the event itself, attendee engagement may plummet.

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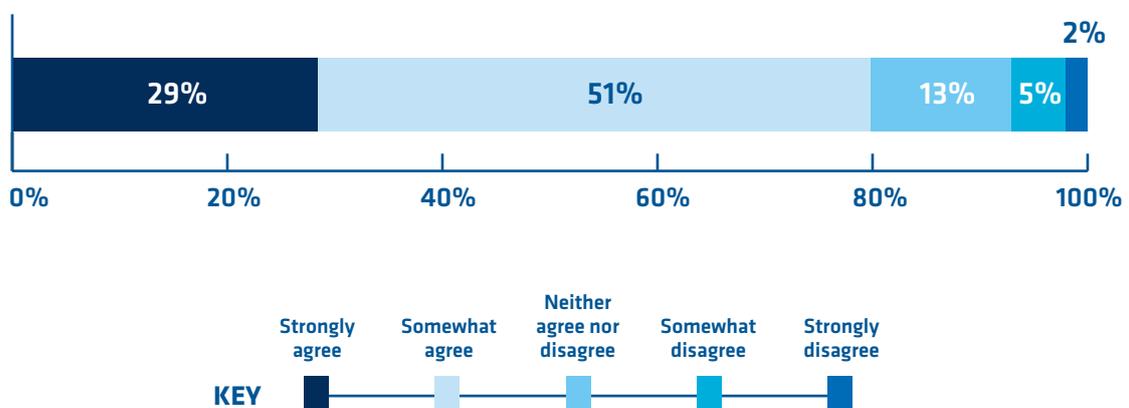
Fig. 2 : On average, how many virtual events do you attend a month?



Unsurprisingly, an influx of virtual events has led to higher expectations. 80% at least somewhat agree that their expectations when it comes to virtual events are higher than they were 18 months ago. Just 7% disagreed with the statement.

Whether the aim of a virtual event is to launch new products, attract new customers, build brand awareness or connect with existing customers, features such as customised branding, networking and engagement tools and an intuitive event platform can go a long way to creating a memorable event experience.

Fig. 3 : “My expectations when it comes to virtual events are higher than they were 18 months ago”



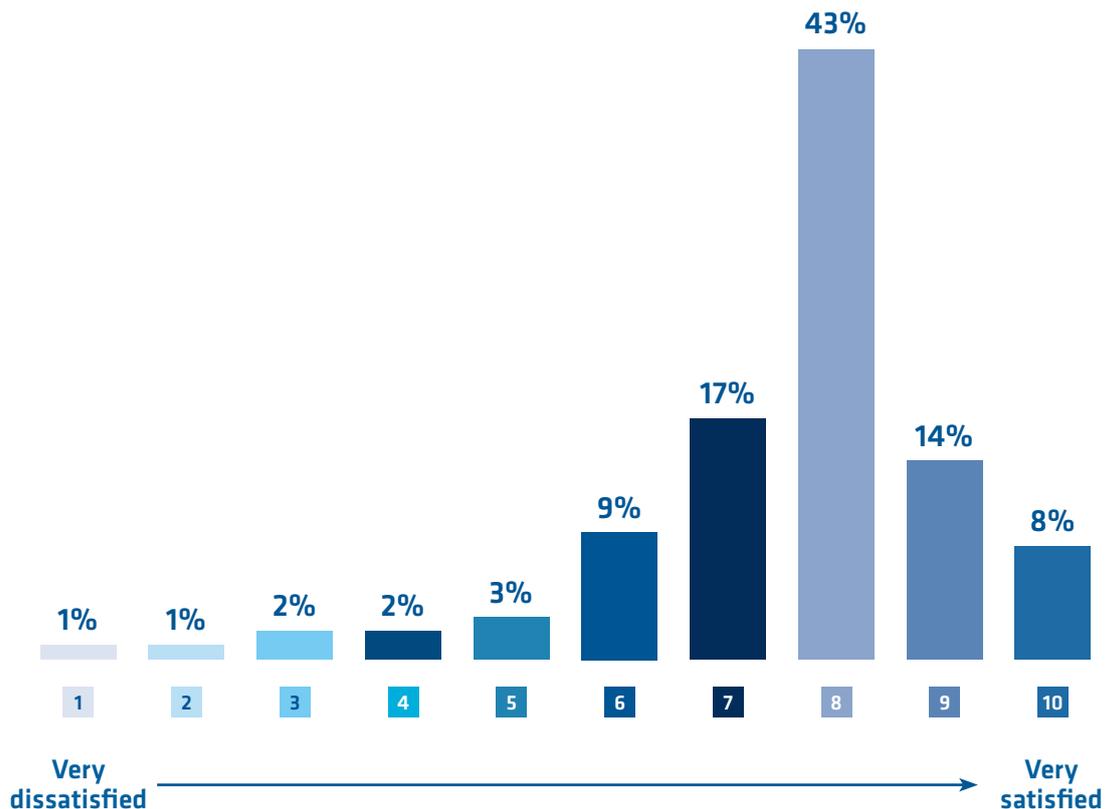
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However, on the whole, events appear to be living up to attendees' heightened expectations. 65% of survey participants ranked their satisfaction levels when it comes to virtual events as an eight or higher, with the average ranking a 7.6. However, just 8% ranked their experience as a ten out of ten, indicating that there is some room for improvement.

Bosin explained that it is imperative for event organisers to understand what makes engaging content. And failing to do so could mean failing to meet attendees' increasingly high expectations.

"If you have something that's boring and singular: a single speaker, no production value, you're going to lose people. You have to create something that's really incredible to actually keep people's attention. But if you bring in different perspectives, if you bring in a variety of speakers and a variety of different content types, whether it's PowerPoint slides or video, there's a lot of different ways that you can introduce different media formats to make an event more engaging."

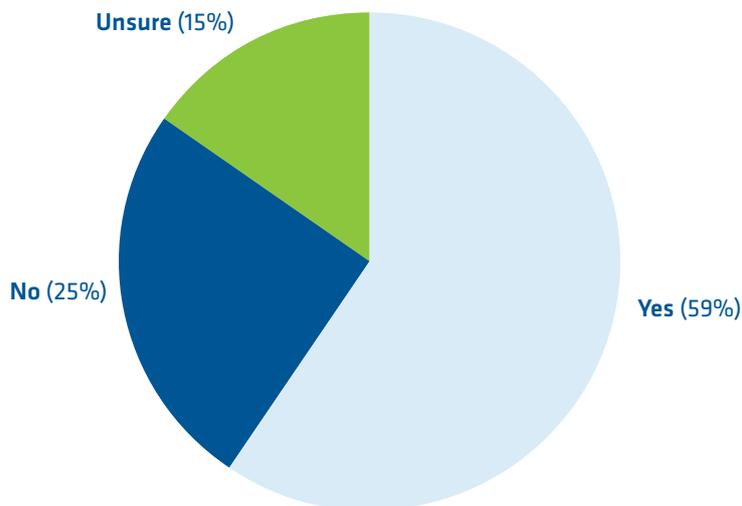
Fig. 4 : On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being "very dissatisfied" and 10 being "very satisfied") how satisfied have you been with your experience of virtual events?



The dos and don'ts of virtual

The technology behind a virtual event plays a significant role in its success, and a good online event management solution can help streamline the often complex process of planning and execution through services such as content management, promotions, messaging, registration and check-ins.

Fig. 5 : Have you used an online event management system?



59% of survey respondents said that they had used an online event management system, suggesting a good level of familiarity with the technology.

Desirable features in an events platform will differ depending on the organisation, but combining your event management software and a virtual events platform in one place can save time and money.

Bosin said that the data generated through event management systems is important for demonstrating the business case for virtual events:

"As event organisers, the most important thing to have is that single source of truth of who you invited to the event, did they show up, did they engage, were you able to successfully follow up after the fact. This depends on the outcome that you're driving. Maybe you're driving for pure awareness for the content you're putting out there, maybe you're actually trying to sell the audience something...all those things matter. I think understanding what the outcome for each event is and then building each event with that in mind and how you're going to track the audience's engagement and participation is really what you're looking for."

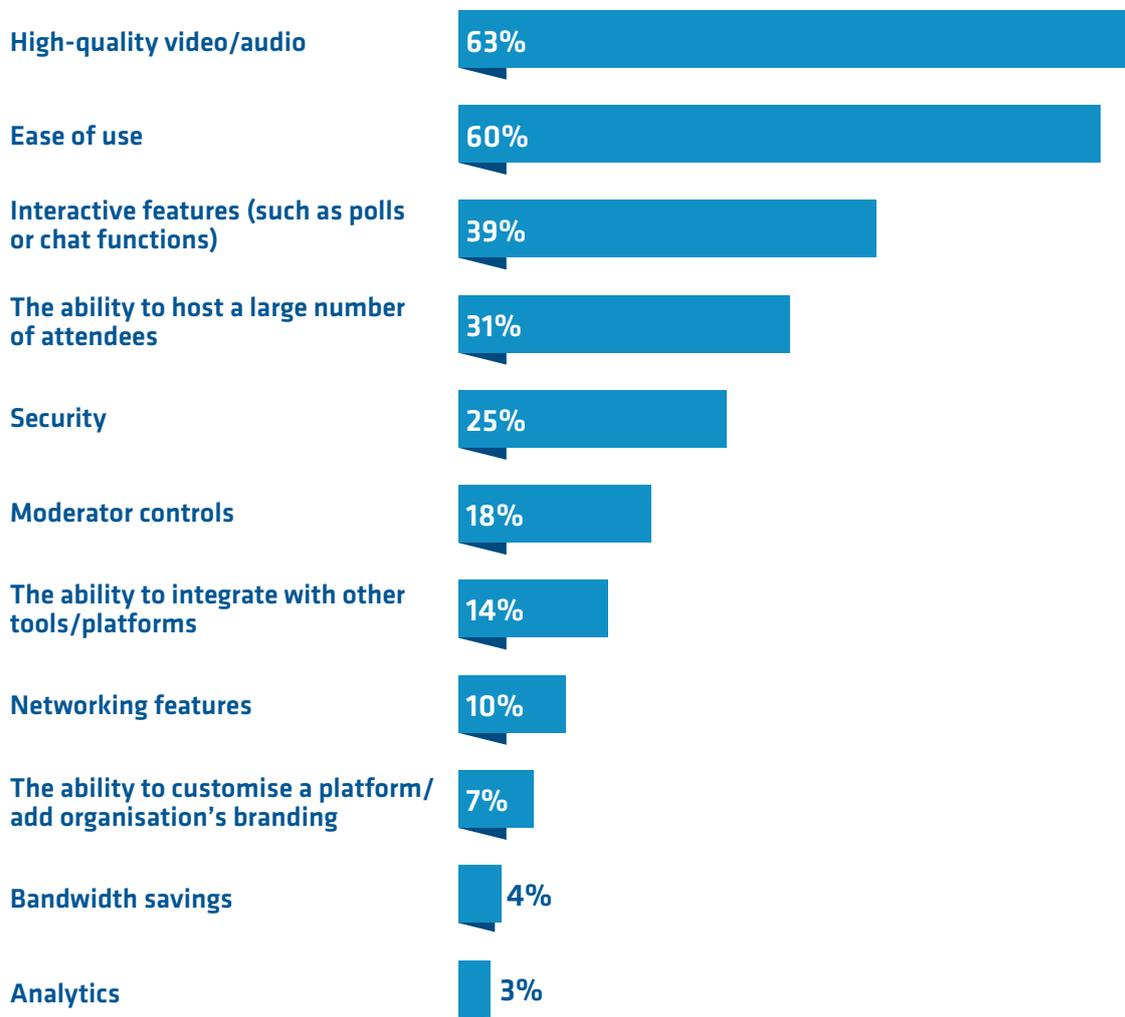
In terms of the features respondents value when using a virtual events platform, two areas emerged as priorities: high-quality video and audio and ease of use, with over 60% of survey participants choosing these features. This suggests how well they are executed can make or break an event. Event organisers should therefore prioritise ensuring attendees have the additional bandwidth required for high-quality audio and visual and delivering events in an easy-to-use service.

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At the other end of the scale was analytics, which was selected by just 3% of survey participants. While post-event analytics may not be a key factor for attendees, event organisers should not underestimate their importance in measuring the overall success of a virtual event, as data helps planners determine their event's success and make improvements for their future events.

It is also surprising that security was not higher up the list, selected by just a quarter of participants. Ensuring that virtual events remain secure, and that attendees' details are kept out of harm's way should be a key concern when organisations are choosing an events platform.

Fig. 6 : What features are most important when using a virtual events platform?



Similar concerns were raised when participants were asked to select the main challenges when attending or hosting a virtual event. Again, video and audio issues emerged on top at 52%, and difficulties recreating the atmosphere of physical events also emerged as an area of concern. This is a key issue when planning and executing a virtual event, as the organic opportunities to network that are presented at a physical event difficult to recreate from behind a screen.

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While comparisons between physical and virtual events are unavoidable, event organisers should look to promote the unique advantages of virtual events to their audience, such as flexibility, personalisation and analytics.

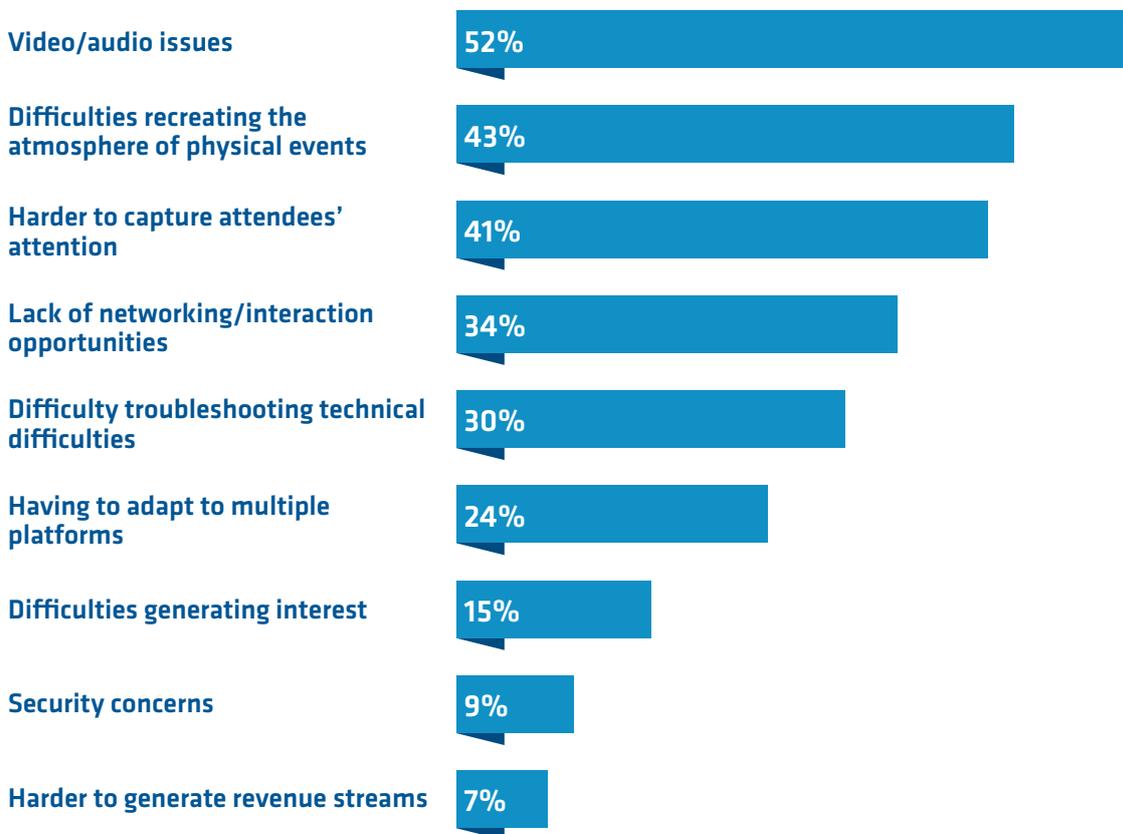
Organisers should not underestimate the importance of creating opportunities for networking, as for many attendees this aspect of virtual events may be just as important as the content itself.

“If you’re hosting a virtual event, a virtual conference or a virtual trade show, and you miss the opportunity to facilitate some type of networking or some type of interaction between attendees, you’re probably not meeting the mark,” said Bosin. “What we’ve been investing in at Bluejeans is creating booths and breakout sessions to provide opportunities for individuals to self-select where they want to go within the context of a virtual event.”

He added that innovative technology, such as virtual and augmented reality, may soon be a regular part of the event experience, and organisers should strive to innovate in this area:

“We’ve had some recent innovation around virtual reality, augmented reality and the gamification of the experience from a collaboration perspective. I think we’re going to see some innovative approaches that aren’t just going to be video conferencing based.”

Fig. 7 : What are the main challenges when attending/hosting virtual events?



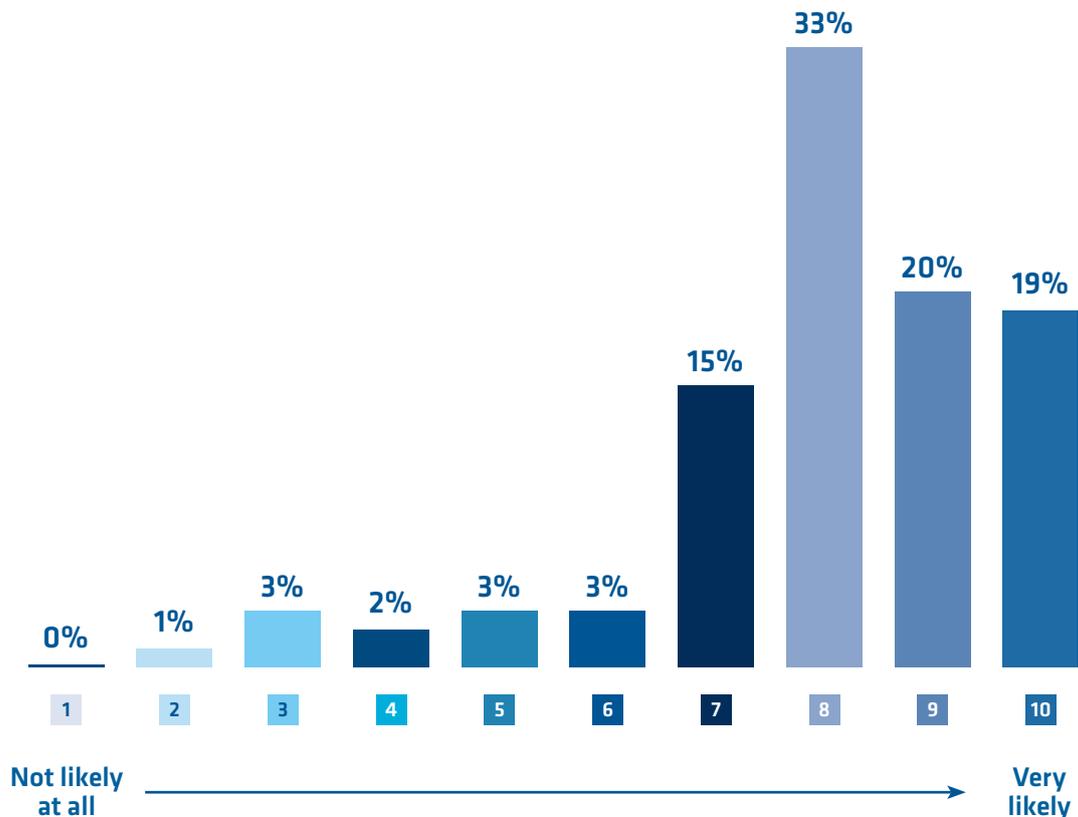
The future is hybrid?

With the two-year anniversary of the start of the Covid-19 pandemic fast approaching, organisations are now strategizing for the future. Part of this will be an evaluation of the role of virtual events.

When asked how likely their organisation is to continue using virtual events once it is safe to return to physical events, with ten being very likely and one being very unlikely, 72% selecting an eight or higher, with just 9% rating it as a five or lower.

This indicates that organisations on the whole intend to stick with virtual events, at least partly, even now that physical events can occur in some capacity. This is an encouraging vote of confidence for virtual events and shows that organisations are keen to invest both time and money in them in the future.

Fig. 8 : On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being “not likely at all” and 10 being “very likely”) how likely is your organisation to continue using virtual events once it is safe to host/attend in-person events?



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When discussing the future of work, it is rare that the concept of “hybrid” is not mentioned. For events, attention has now turned to how best to combine “live” in-person events with a “virtual” online component.

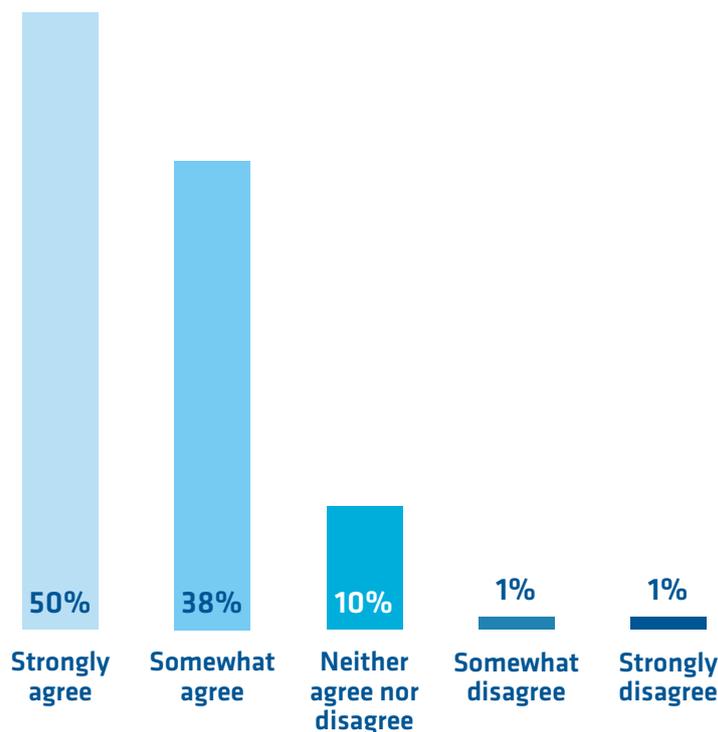
“[a hybrid event] is an event that has both a physical and a virtual component” said Bosin. “You could also think of it as taking a portfolio approach, where you have a mix and match of some physical and some virtual events. I think it’s really about ensuring that attendees that are not located at the event can participate in that event regardless of if they’re there or not.”

He explained that hybrid events can be a good way of expanding an event’s reach:

“If you’re hosting the event you are looking at expanding your footprint as much as possible in terms of content reach. I think it is an absolute no-brainer whenever you are hosting a keynote session that you’re not only trying to engage on-site participants but you’re trying to get as broad an audience as possible.”

Respondents were almost unanimous that the future of events is hybrid, with 88% at least somewhat agreeing with the statement.

Fig. 9 : “The future of events is hybrid”



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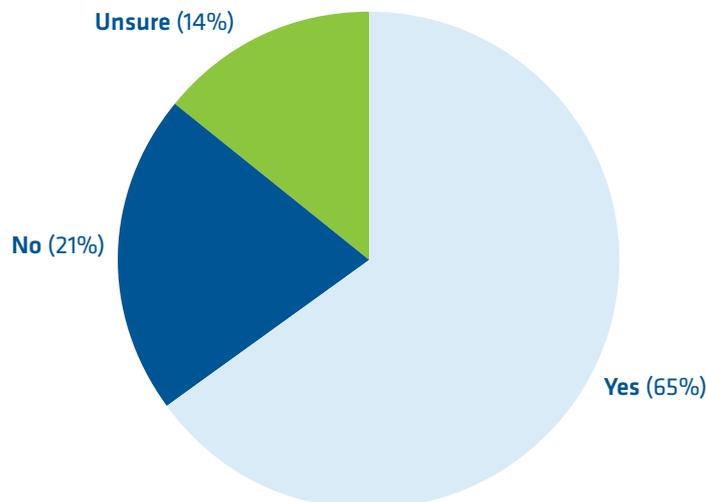
However, while hybrid may be the current buzzword of choice, delivering successful hybrid events may be easier said than done. Organisers must make sure that both online and in-person attendees are getting the most out of events, ensuring that the correct technology is in place to livestream keynotes and sessions and that corresponding mobile event apps are relevant to all attendees, regardless of location, all without breaking the bank.

On the whole participants appear confident that their organisation has the necessary technology to deliver hybrid events, with 65% agreeing with this statement. Hybrid working has been a key focus for organisations over the past year or so, and these findings suggest that they may have already invested in the technology to make hybrid events possible.

“When you start to move to a hybrid content, the requirement to have cameras and production teams onsite, high quality audio and video are the number one issue people have,” said Bosin. “So you need to make sure that your ability to deliver that experience is on point. There’s a lot of hardware, there’s a lot of gear, there’s a lot of expertise that comes with actually livestreaming an event.”

It is therefore important that organisers take stock of how their current events platform fits into their long-term goals, and how well it integrates with in-person events, and whether it can adequately deliver the hybrid experience that attendees may be looking for moving forward.

Fig. 10 : Does your organisation currently have the technology to facilitate hybrid events?



Conclusion

From our research it is clear that survey respondents are engaging with virtual events on a previously unseen scale. This comes as no surprise, with the Covid-19 pandemic forcing many aspects of our working lives online, with events being no exception.

What may come as more of a surprise is the way in which attendees have responded to such events. Overall, reception has been positive, despite heightened expectations, with respondents keen to continue engaging with virtual events once physical events can resume.

However, concerns remain around certain aspects of virtual events, particularly audio and video quality and difficulties recreating the atmosphere of physical events. These should be key considerations for organisations planning and executing virtual events, as falling short in these areas can lead to an event that stands out for the wrong reasons.

It is important for event organisers to build on this momentum to create a strategy for generating revenue and long-term engagement, as well as meeting customer expectations. Central to this is their virtual events platform, and organisers should take this opportunity to evaluate whether their current events platform is providing the right insights for their organisation and experiences that will drive greater engagement among attendees.

Part of this is combining the best elements of virtual and physical events, with the future of events most likely involving hybrid aspects in some capacity.

“What’s so exciting about this space in particular is we’re at the very beginning” said Bosin. “We understand the fundamentals but where we have historically relied on production specialists, production teams and broadcast teams to produce these virtual events, we’re at the forefront of democratising that and giving those tools to everyday marketing managers and communications analysts. Folks can put on these events from the comfort of their own home and create these really incredible, engaging production quality type experiences. I think there are very exciting days ahead.”

About the sponsor, BlueJeans

BlueJeans is the world’s leading provider of interoperable video communication, bringing video to you wherever you are. Thousands of global companies use BlueJeans every day for meetings, events, and on social networks across any location or device including mobile, desktop, and room systems. BlueJeans replaces traditional web conferencing technologies for a modern workforce, delivering face-to-face video communication for any organization who wants to bring their employees, leaders, and partners closer together.

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