



2021 STATE OF THE INDUSTRY: CORPORATE REPORT

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How did 2020 affect corporate events teams?

Fewer live events took place and budgets were down, but the majority of companies avoided making cuts to their events team. *By Mark Williams*

It won't surprise anyone to learn that 2020 was a difficult year for corporate event planners. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on live events was, and still is, unlike anything the industry has dealt with before.

Nothing outlines this better than the fact that the number of B2B events organised by corporates in 2020 fell by 82%, going from an average of 74 events in 2019 to just 13 in 2020. For a handful of event professionals, their company held no live events at all in 2020.

When asked how many events their company had cancelled or postponed in 2020, the average answer was around 19 for both. However, the answers given here ranged from zero events cancelled

or postponed all the way up to 100 events cancelled by some companies.

The effect of not being able to run live events had an inevitable knock-on effect on budgets, with not one respondent saying their events budget increased last year. The most common answer, chosen by 45% of respondents, was that their events budgets had decreased a lot. Another 26% said their events budgets had decreased a little and 29% said they had stayed the same. In a year like 2020, it seems that managing to keep your events budget steady counted as a win.

Furloughing and redundancy

Furloughing and redundancies were an unfortunate fact of life for corporate events teams around the world, although some

fared better than others. On average, companies furloughed 23% of their events teams and made 10% of events jobs redundant.

That said, 52% of companies managed to completely avoid any furloughing among their events teams and 58% didn't make any jobs redundant, suggesting some were able to navigate their way through the year and find other ways of hosting events, such as virtual or hybrid.

Those furloughing statistics compare favourably to the national average of the UK, where 37% of employers had staff furloughed on 30 November under the national Job Retention Scheme.



How have your event budgets been impacted in the last year?

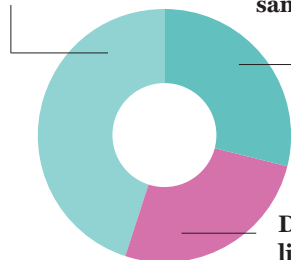
Increased a lot 0%

Increased a little 0%

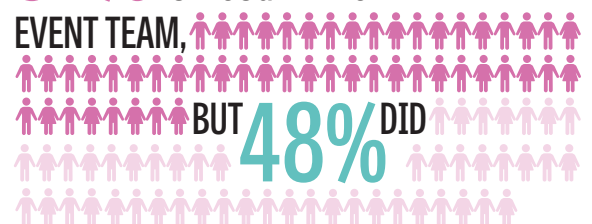
Decreased a lot 45%

Stayed the same 29%

Decreased a little 26%



52% OF COMPANIES DIDN'T HAVE TO FURLOUGH ANYONE IN THEIR EVENT TEAM,



On average, 23% of staff on events teams were furloughed and 10% made redundant last year



Digital and hybrid events

Corporate event planners have got to grips with digital meetings but hybrid is still uncharted territory for most companies. *By Mark Williams*



The coronavirus pandemic has acted as a catalyst for the growing importance of digital and hybrid events. Taking more events online had previously been talked about as something that companies could do to reduce the amount of travel required by staff, thereby reducing their carbon footprint.

But through large parts of 2020 and into this year, digital and hybrid became the only way to run events, from small meetings right through to 2,000 delegate conferences. The industry has learned a lot in a short space of time about what works well and what does not.

Just under 94% of companies who took part in C&IT's State of the Industry: Corporate survey had run digital B2B events this year. The average number organised was 22, with most of the answers from respondents falling between 10 and 100.

Hybrid events were much less common though – 71% of companies ran no hybrid events at all, which meant an average of just one hybrid event per company. This suggests that while the industry was fairly well prepared for a switch to digital-only, the hybrid event is still in its infancy and requires more time and practice to become commonplace. The prevalence of hybrid also depends on the laws regarding physical meetings different countries have in place.

Practice makes perfect

We asked for corporate event planners to share their tips and advice for digital

events. Rehearsing was a common theme, something arguably easier to do with digital events than physical ones. One event planner said: "Do at least one technical rehearsal with attendees and stick to a platform you know well – don't make it too fancy."

Another added: "Rehearse your speakers and consider speaker coaching from a broadcasting house or supplier. Someone who is good on stage isn't always good on screen."

And don't worry if your speaker is a pro who has done it all before, says this event planner: "Hold tech rehearsals, they are so important. Some speakers won't see the value, but it's peace of mind for them and you."

Remembering that our attention spans are shorter for online content was also popular advice. "Keep the agenda short, think about the audience engagement and don't just replicate a live event," said one respondent.

Echoing that advice, another event planner said: "To keep peoples' attention, the maximum event time should be no more than three or four hours long." Brevity was also the order of the day for the respondent who said: "Keep your speakers to a max of 15 minutes per session."

Different principles also apply to planning the content for digital events, as outlined by one organiser, who said: "Keep the content engaging. You don't have the luxury of

speakers being too anecdotal like they would be on stage, as your audience is more likely to leave a virtual event because it's easy to do without anyone noticing." (Or, looking at it another way, plenty of delegates have wanted to sneak out of content sessions at live events but didn't want to appear rude. Now they can.)

Despite the industry's understandable eagerness to get back to putting on face-to-face events, one event planner pointed out the different options digital provides: "Challenge your preconceptions! Some things actually work better digitally than live." With fewer companies having run hybrid events, there was less advice on the subject from respondents to C&IT's survey. However, remembering that you are running two events at the same time was reiterated by several people.

"You have two audiences and need to give them the same content in different ways," said one event planner. "You'll need a good host who can hold the two channels together." Another said: "Have two event managers, one for the live event, managing the venue and production, and another managing the virtual platform.

Ensure the viewers are getting the same value from the event as the physical attendees by making some sessions online-only and some only for those in physical attendance."

Finally, one event planner predicted that hybrid is very much here to stay and we should plan accordingly: "I think hybrid events will be around for some time to come, so I would advise everyone in the event space to find a good live streaming company."

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Working with event agencies

Most corporate event planners intend to work with agencies this year but what do they want to see in their pitches? *By Mark Williams*

A confident 78% of corporate planners say their team's ability to organise digital or hybrid events is good or very good, but at the same time 61% acknowledged that they do need external expertise.

In total, just 9% of respondents said their ability to organise digital or hybrid events was bad or very bad. This could be why the majority of corporate event planners (58%) did not use an event agency in 2020. However, just over half (52%) say they will use an agency in 2021, suggesting that either last year's digital events didn't go exactly to plan or there is room for improvement that an agency could help with.

"BE REALISTIC ABOUT WHAT YOU CAN DELIVER. GOOD REPUTATIONS TAKE A LONG TIME TO BUILD BUT POOR REPUTATIONS TAKE AN INSTANT TO GAIN"

But what do corporate event planners want to see in pitches from event agencies? Our survey responses covered a range of topics, including transparency about what can really be delivered, as well as simply keeping in touch when times are quiet.

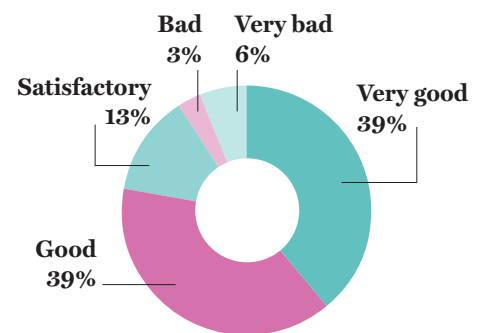
Here's what corporates advised to agencies pitching for business in 2021:

- **Help clients define** what can be achieved through virtual and what cannot, rather than overpromising to completely replace the live experience.
- **Show flexibility** within contracts (ie with venues/suppliers) and how you can

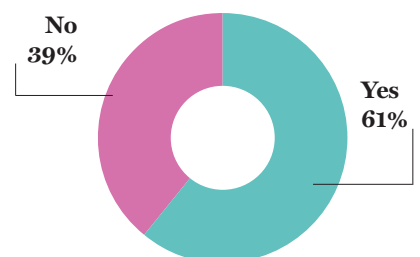
transition to hybrid/digital if required. Then tell us the associated costs/refunds with that option, if it is needed.

- **Clearly demonstrate** your understanding and operational expertise of hybrid events, taking learning and knowledge from TV broadcasting.
- **People are bored of Zoom** and virtual events, so think about how we can keep them engaged. Don't just think about the end product but be abundantly clear about the route to get there and what and how the agency will support the process. Be sure to highlight what you need to make the content work, what elements the agency would take care of and what you'd need from your client.
- **Be realistic** about what you can deliver. Good reputations take a long time to build but poor reputations take an instant to gain.
- **Meet the brief** – don't pitch gimmicks and unnecessary virtual features that don't add impact. They usually get buggy and don't work.
- **Flexibility for all suppliers** will be key. Make sure both sides are involved in decision timelines for procurement, etc.
- **Be aware** that most corporate firms can only use approved platforms due to risk and data privacy. Any technology that the agency puts forward in a pitch must be compatible.
- **Keep in touch!** Some agencies and suppliers in 2020 were really good at providing updates, while there were some we never heard from.

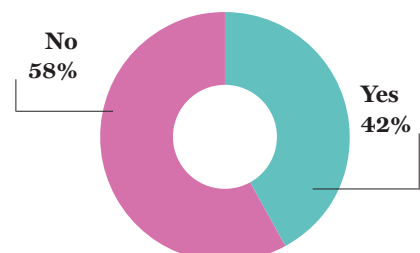
How would you rate you/your teams' capabilities to deliver hybrid/virtual events?



Do you think you need external expertise?



Did you use any event agencies in 2020?



CASE STUDY:

Bentley's first live event since the pandemic



How the luxury car manufacturer hosted a special overnight test-driving event in a safe and COVID-secure way. *By Mark Williams*

For its first live driving event since the coronavirus pandemic began, Bentley hosted an event called Toy Box at The Falcon Hotel in Northamptonshire.

To keep both guests and staff safe, the event was run under strict COVID protocols. The entire staff – including all hotel personnel – were antigen-tested before the event, on-site during the running of the event and immediately afterwards, and all guests had their temperatures recorded on arrival.

Guests were paired and placed in micro-bubbles for meals and presentations with hosts as they joined the event, and face-masks were worn indoors and outdoors at all times. Every car received an immediate and thorough sterilisation after each use, using a powerful aerosol disinfectant.

By using these measures, the luxury car brand was able to allow 70 guests to experience past and present Bentleys in a safe and responsible way.

“BENTLEY HAD ALREADY MADE A NAME FOR ITSELF BY BEING COVID-SECURE AND BEING ONE OF THE FIRST BIG UK MANUFACTURERS TO GET BACK TO WORK AFTER THE FIRST LOCKDOWN”

FACT FILE

WHAT: Bentley Toy Box
WHEN: November 2020
WHO: 70 delegates
WHERE: The Falcon Hotel, Northamptonshire, UK
WITH: Goose Live Events

The best laid plans...

The original plan for the event had been to launch Bentley's new Bentayga in April 2020, in Switzerland, giving the world's media a chance to test-drive Bentley's first ever SUV. But then the pandemic came along and with it the first wave of national lockdowns.

“We pushed it back from April to June, then July but eventually took the decision that it was going to be in the UK,” says Sophie Treacher, Bentley Account Director at Goose Live Events – the agency that helped deliver the event. “Our preferred site was Gleneagles, so we had site inspections there and a plan in place, but then Scotland imposed further COVID restrictions and we had to move it to England.”

Wayne Bruce, Director of Communication at Bentley Motors, explains how the event evolved from a single car launch into a test drive of the entire range: “I think we'd gone

through plan A, B and C and were onto something like F. By this time it coincided with the renewal of our entire product range, so we thought we'd get them all together and invite the media to drive them all.

“To make it even more exciting, we went to our heritage fleet and brought along some of our old cars that they wouldn't normally get to experience and branded the event Toy Box – as in we were emptying our toy box for their pleasure.”

A reputation for safety

Bentley's board members and guests were very eager to get out to a live event but Bruce says he had to reassure them that it was going to be done safely. Bentley had already made a name for itself by being COVID-secure and being one of the first big UK manufacturers to get back to work after the first lockdown. “We could not compromise that reputation,” says Bruce.

The next challenge of this event became filling it. When Bentley and Goose Live Events began planning it at the start of 2020, it was going to be for 150 guests from all over the world. As regulations changed they had to alter their target list. Flexibility and resilience were very important, says Bruce, as well as having more than one backup plan.

The return of large-scale events

Corporate event planners predict large-scale events making a comeback later this year, with business travel to follow. *By Mark Williams*

The majority of corporate event planners expect large-scale events to return in the second half of this year, according to C&IT's State of the Industry: Corporate survey. Just under 23% chose Q3 2021 and 35% chose Q4 2021 as the period they anticipate large, in-person events will make their comeback.

However, a further 23% said they did not think such events would return until Q1 2022 and 16% believe it will be Q2 2022. While Q3 2021 was the most popular answer, there was a fairly even spread of answers over a 12-month period.

The uncertainty about when business events will be able to restart is tied into the similarly unpredictable return of international business travel. When we asked respondents when they expect international travel to start again, the most

popular answer was Q4 2021 with 32% of the votes and the second most popular answer Q1 2022, chosen by 29%. Just over 16% thought that 'normal' travel might resume by Q3 2021.

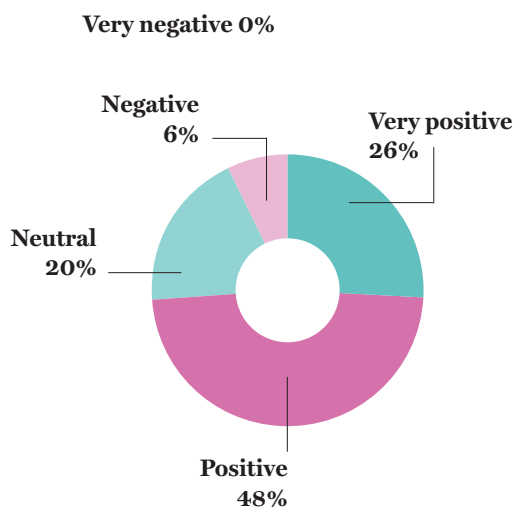
This means that, if predictions are correct, we will see the return of large-scale business events first at the end of this year, followed by more commonplace and unrestricted international travel a few months later.

For one UK-based event planner, the success of vaccinations was the key: "It all depends on what the vaccination rollout will mean for our European audience, but more concretely on the COVID-19 guidelines of a destination."

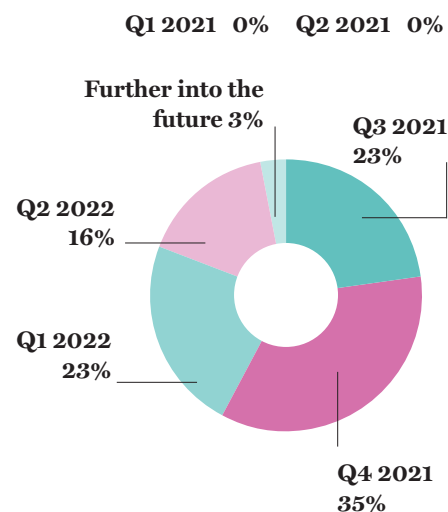
When asked what capacity events corporates expect to run in 2021, the answers were similarly mixed. They ranged from a cautious response of 30 people all >

"IF PREDICTIONS ARE CORRECT, WE WILL SEE THE RETURN OF LARGE-SCALE BUSINESS EVENTS FIRST AT THE END OF THIS YEAR, FOLLOWED BY MORE COMMONPLACE AND UNRESTRICTED INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL A FEW MONTHS LATER"

How do you feel about the future of the industry?



When do you expect large-scale live events to return?



The return of large-scale events cont'd

"THE PAST 12 MONTHS HAVE BEEN A HUGE LEARNING CURVE FOR THE INDUSTRY AND HAVE GIVEN US TIME TO LOOK AT PROCESSES, PROCEDURES, BEST PRACTICES, OUR TEAMS AND SUPPLIERS. WHEN WE ARE ABLE, WE WILL COME BACK STRONGER THAN EVER."

the way up to large-scale exhibitions or trade shows for 100,000 people. Quite a few expected to be running events for thousands of delegates again this year, as lockdowns gradually end and the industry is able to get back to face-to-face again.

Thoughts on the future

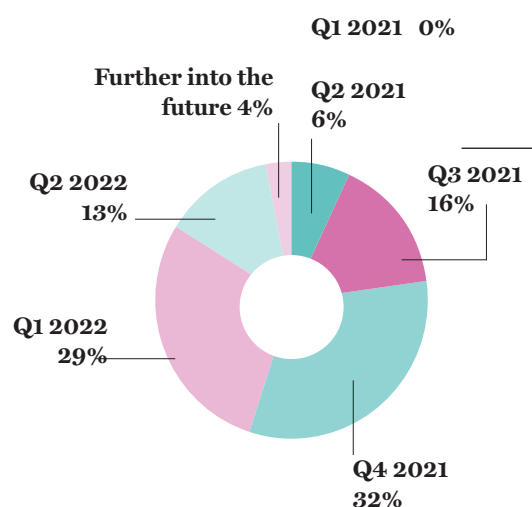
After receiving predictions on the comeback of live events and travel, we wanted corporate event planners to share words of encouragement for the industry after what has been a very difficult year. And it was the resilience of the industry and event professionals that came through time and time again in these comments.

"I don't think our events world will ever be the same again, there will be new restrictions, rules and hesitant attendees," said one corporate event planner. "However, events people are the most flexible, understanding and above all resourceful, so

we will be able to handle anything heading our way."

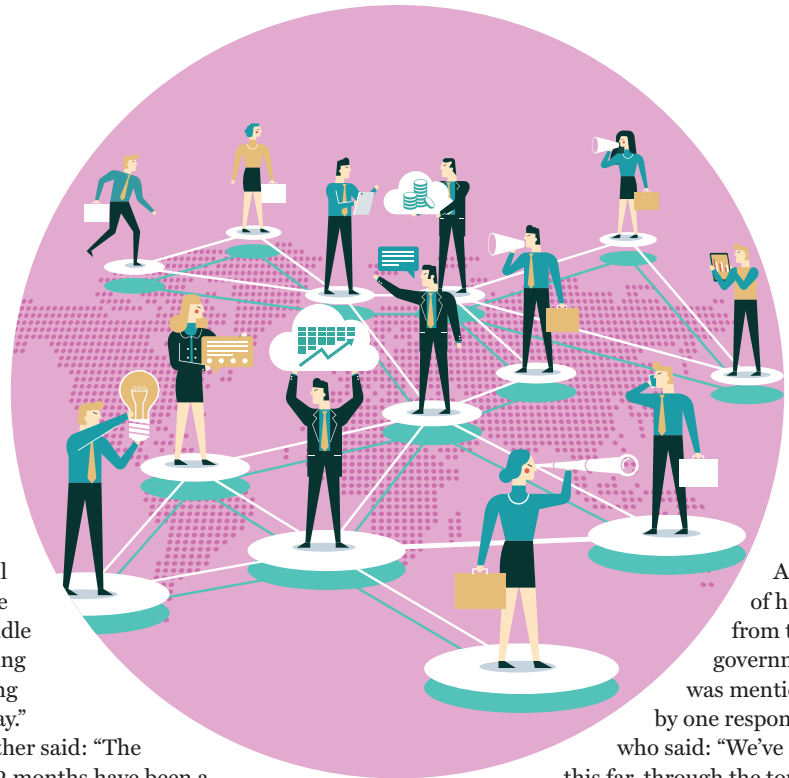
Another said: "The past 12 months have been a huge learning curve for the industry and have given us time to look at processes, procedures, best practices, our teams and suppliers. When we are able, we will come back stronger than ever and be able to deliver events across many platforms, with even better results and to audiences that are truly grateful for the opportunities."

When do you expect international business travel to return?



A lack of help from the government was mentioned by one respondent, who said: "We've come this far, through the toughest experience the industry has ever faced, with very little acknowledgment or support from the government. We will get through this, we'll get back to what we do best, and our industry will thrive." The irreplaceable nature of face-to-face meetings was perhaps the most commonly recurring theme in your comments though, especially from the event planner who said: "People have the need to see others in person and, to be honest, everyone will be fed up of virtual events by the middle of 2021."

This final comment struck a balance between optimism that events will return but a pragmatism about how they will look: "There's a light at the end of the tunnel for tech-savvy event agencies and managers. Events will never return to what they were pre-pandemic so now is the time to invent the events of the future and gear up for them."



What's next for incentive programmes?

Only 10% of companies organised incentive programmes in 2020 as group travel became virtually impossible. *By Mark Williams*

As part of our State of the Industry: Corporate survey, *C&IT* asked corporate event planners how many incentive programmes they had run last year. A huge and unsurprising 90% of you said you had run none at all in 2020 and the highest answer was four.

It either wasn't possible to travel or feasible to plan more than a couple of weeks ahead, with lockdowns and travel restrictions between countries coming and going at a rate that was often hard to keep up with.

One event planner said that they had managed to run an interim incentive as an alternative to a Mediterranean Cruise that got pushed back to 2021. "We selected a location that had a very low number of COVID cases, they explained. "We provided masks, hand sanitisers and a sanitising box for their phone, room key, and other belongings." However, it's not all doom and gloom for incentive programmes, with hopes high for international travel resuming later this year. And some alternative options that can be implemented in the interim...

Incentives in the short-term

Earlier this year, *C&IT* spoke to Lisa Lernoux-Dock, SITE's CSR & Charity ambassador and MICE Sales Director for Iconic Luxury Hotels, to find out more about how incentive programmes have changed during the past 12 months.

How have MICE incentives changed during the past year?

"Incentives are going to be much smaller now, maybe even done on an individual level and more domestic-based. Previously, people thought that to have that amazing authentic experience it needed to be abroad, but now they're discovering their own country."

Did you run any incentive programmes in 2020?

Yes
10%

No
90%

What can event planners do to offer delegates the same kind of experiences without getting on a plane?

"There are all sorts of experiences you can put together in a city like London that even people who live there haven't tried before. Like getting out and about with a graffiti artist or something related to CSR that they would not normally experience.

"Pre-COVID we were running an activity at one of our UK hotels' cookery schools where delegates would make afternoon tea full of

cakes and sandwiches and then we would bring over isolated elderly people and they would serve them afternoon tea. Everyone loved it. You can make it something where people really feel involved.

"What's the old saying? Cut your cloth to suit your coat."

What does the immediate future look like for incentives?

"Even if a company could launch a luxury high-end incentive to somewhere like Mauritius tomorrow, I bet you'd get a significant percentage of people that wouldn't want to go. They'd be a bit nervous about travelling. Domestic incentives let people take baby-steps back into travelling and allowing them to see how safe hotels are.

"Also, you want companies to keep thinking about travel and experiences, not going back to giving their staff 'stuff'. Once they give them stuff, they might keep on doing it, and it isn't as motivational. Domestic incentives will keep them in that mindset until we can go back to a wider variety of options."





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