

THE VIRTUAL CONFERENCES REPORT



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Executive Summary

This report continues the work of four prior publications—*The Virtual Events Report 2018*, *Association Virtual Events 2014*, *Association Virtual Events 2012*, and *Association Virtual Conferences 2011*—in assessing the role of virtual conferences, trade shows, and other events and providing insight into how these events may evolve.

At the core of the report is an online non-statistical survey. Of the 418 survey responses recorded between March 19 and April 17, 2020, 361 qualified and are included in the results presented here.

The State of Virtual Conferences

Of the qualifying responses, 21.6 percent indicate their organization has previously offered a virtual conference. Another 66.2 percent indicate they plan to offer a virtual conference in the coming 12 months. If that adoption plays out, nearly 88 percent of organizations may have offered a virtual conference by the end of the first quarter of 2021, driven in large part by the new realities of the COVID-19 era, which have made virtual a predominant option for conferences now and for the foreseeable future.

Of the qualified survey respondents, 21.6 percent have previously offered a virtual conference.

The Operational Perspective

The field of virtual conference technology is fragmented, and the fragmentation is exacerbated by the fact that options ran the gamut from platform-only offerings to full-service providers—and sometimes organizations use a mix, blending in other technologies (such as a learning management system or an online community platform) to achieve their goals. Of 24 named virtual conference providers and platforms, only three have been used by more than a tenth of respondents: Zoom (43.9 percent), GoToMeeting/GoToWebinar (18.2 percent), and ON24 (12.1 percent). The second-largest segment of respondents, 27.3 percent, chose the catch-all “other” option.

A majority of organizations that have offered a virtual conference incorporate these three components:

- Live sessions delivered in real time (87.7 percent)
- Archived recordings after the virtual conference ends (76.7 percent)
- Real-time text communication between participants (69.9 percent)

More than a quarter of respondents report incorporating three additional elements:

- Discussion boards (46.6 percent)
- Pre-recorded sessions with on-demand playback (38.4 percent)
- Virtual exhibit hall (27.4 percent)

Of organizations that have already offered a virtual conference, 44.4 percent held it as a standalone, not associated with a place-based event, and 40.3 percent pegged it to the same time as a place-based event. Most respondents opted to keep their virtual conferences short and sweet: 48.6 percent of respondents report their virtual conference lasted no more than a day and a half.

The Business Perspective

A fifth of respondents (20.7 percent) have a formal, documented strategy for virtual conferences, but a noteworthy 59.8 percent have no strategy, and 19.5 percent say they aren't sure whether they have a strategy—meaning nearly 80 percent effectively have no strategy.

"To reach customers or members who could not otherwise attend place-based events," cited by 75.3 percent of respondents, is the primary reason organizations have held a virtual conference. "To support an overall goal of delivering more services online" (52.1 percent) and "to be perceived as embracing cutting-edge approaches to serving customers or members" (50.7 percent) come second and third and are the only other reasons selected by a majority of respondents. A new choice in this year's survey, COVID-19 was cited by 42.5 percent of respondents who have already offered a virtual as a driver behind their decision. Among organizations that have not yet offered a virtual conference but plan to offer one in the coming year, 92.6 percent cited COVID-19 as a driver. Clearly current circumstances are driving a major near-term surge in the format.

Over three-quarters (79.7 percent) report that registrations for their virtual conference either met or exceeded expectations. Respondents report an average attendance rate of 62.2 percent of registrations, and just over half (52.9 percent) report a lower level of attendance at their virtual conference than a comparable place-based event.

The overwhelming majority (85.1 percent) of survey respondents that have previously held a virtual conference indicate the virtual conference had to be at least self-sustaining, and 59.7 percent needed it to be profitable.

To generate revenue, 65.2 percent of the organizations charged registrants directly, but 15.2 percent did not charge registrants to attend. The majority charged significantly less (30.4 percent) or somewhat less (39.1 percent) for their virtual conference than for a comparable place-based event. Of organizations that have previously held virtual conferences, 43.8 percent have not collected sponsorship or exhibitor fees.

A majority (53.9 percent) of respondents report offering continuing education (CE) for some or all parts of their virtual conference, but 43.1 percent report not offering any CE.

The Performance Perspective

The vast majority (85.5 percent) of organizations that have previously held a virtual conference collected formal evaluations, and the majority of those evaluated the virtual conference overall (94.9 percent) as well as each session (81.4 percent).

Just over three-quarters (75.4 percent) report attendees gave the same or very similar evaluation scores to the virtual conference as to a comparable place-based event.

Of the 85.5 percent of respondents who collected formal evaluations, just under a third (31.3 percent) measured whether learning occurred at their virtual conference, whether through evaluation questions tied to learning objectives (the most common approach, used by 76.2 percent of those measuring learning), post-session or post-meeting assessments or follow-ups, a combination of pre- and post-event assessment, or other means.

Half (50.8 percent) of organizations report being very satisfied with their virtual conferences; another 38.5 percent report being somewhat satisfied. The areas of highest satisfaction deal with feedback from attendees (54.8 percent are very satisfied), connection to the organization's strategic plan or the direction set by the leadership (47.6 percent), ease of technologies used (43.5 percent), and cost of technologies used (42.9 percent).

Revenue and attendance are the most dissatisfying dimensions. Over a fifth of respondents indicate they are somewhat or very dissatisfied with revenue (27.5 percent) and with attendance (22.6 percent).

Over 90 percent of respondents rate their virtual conferences as very successful (43.5 percent) or somewhat successful (46.8 percent). Only a single respondent characterizes their virtual conference as very unsuccessful.

Over 90 percent
rate their virtual
conferences
successful.

Organizations that consider themselves very successful are significantly more likely than all respondents who have previously held a virtual conference to do these things:

- Have a formal, documented strategy for their virtual conferences (40.7 versus 20.7 percent).
- Report that the number of registrations exceeded expectations (59.3 versus 33.3 percent).
- Measure whether learning occurs at their virtual conference through evaluation questions that align with learning objectives (88.9 versus 76.2 percent).
- Indicate they want their virtual conference to break even or deliver positive net revenue (96.3 versus 85.3 percent). In keeping with that financial goal, the very successful are more likely to charge the same for

the virtual conference as they do for a comparable place-based event (45.5 versus 30.4 percent) rather than less.

- Offer continuing education credit for all or parts of the virtual conference (66.7 versus 53.9 percent).
- Identify themselves as very satisfied with their virtual conference overall (88.9 versus 50.8 percent) and very satisfied in all six specific categories we probed. High satisfaction with revenue shows the widest variance with the very successful coming in 30 points ahead of respondents overall (57.7 versus 27.4 percent). In the five other categories—attendee feedback, connection to the strategic plan or the direction set by leadership, cost and ease of technologies used, and attendance—high satisfaction is on average 20 points ahead for the very successful group compared to respondents overall.

Of all organizations that have held a virtual conference in the past, only a single respondent plans to abandon the format, a handful of organizations (6.3 percent) are unsure if they will offer another, and an overwhelming 92.2 percent say they will offer another.

While many organizations are yet to try a virtual conference, the use of the format across a diverse range of organizations proves its viability and value, which will likely be further buoyed by the lasting impact of the COVID-19 era. ►

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Introduction

The Virtual Conferences Report 2020 represents an ongoing effort to assess the role of virtual conferences, trade shows, and other online events and to provide insight into how these events may evolve. This report builds on four prior Tagoras publications: *The Virtual Events Report 2018*, *Association Virtual Events 2014*, *Association Virtual Events 2012*, and *Association Virtual Conferences 2011*.

Respondents include those working for any organization that might be a candidate for offering a virtual conference, regardless of whether they have actually offered one. Respondents represent charitable and philanthropic organizations, trade associations, professional societies, educational institutions, for-profit corporations, and other types of organizations.

To supplement the online survey data, we conducted interviews with some respondents. Their experience and examples have been incorporated into the report, and we are grateful for their varied perspectives and their grounded-in-reality insights.

We (the two authors of this report) have together worked in the field of technology-enabled and technology-enhanced learning for more than 40 years, and, for the better part of that time, we've worked specifically with associations, nonprofits, training firms, and other learning businesses serving the third sector of education—which focuses on serving the professional development, continuing education, and lifelong learning needs of adults learners, after completing K-12 and higher education. We've also designed and hosted our own annual virtual conference for four years.

Throughout the report we provide our analysis of the information collected through the online survey, and we draw on our experience to offer observations that may not be readily apparent from the data. Our approach is relatively conservative, in keeping with the limitations imposed by a non-statistical survey and an understanding that the range of organizations represented in the responses is wide; broad conclusions should be offered with caution.

The Organization of the Report

In the remainder of this report, we look at the rate of adoption of virtual conferences, the core components that make up virtual conferences, and key decisions about how to structure a virtual conference. We also provide our top takeaways, including success and satisfaction among organizations that have offered a virtual conference. For organizations that have offered more than one virtual conference previously, we asked them to respond to the survey questions with a typical virtual conference in mind.

The report is structured into the following sections:

1. The executive summary
2. This introduction
3. A look at the state of virtual conferences, including the role of COVID-19 as a driver of adoption

4. A look at the survey respondents' demographic data
5. A section on the operational aspects of virtual conferences, including their core components, their connection to place-based events, their duration, and the technology platforms used to deliver them
6. A section that takes the business perspective, looking at the strategy and goals that drive the use of virtual conferences, registration and attendance, revenue expectations, and the role of continuing education
7. A section that looks at performance, including evaluations, self-reported satisfaction, common characteristics of organizations successful in their use of virtual conferences, and what survey respondents have to say about the future of virtual conferences
8. Information about Tagoras (publisher of this report) and us (Jeff Cobb and Celisa Steele, authors of this report)
9. An appendix with the raw online survey data (parts of which are cited throughout the report)

We hope this resource proves useful to you and your organization as you assess your existing efforts or contemplate launching your first virtual conference. ►



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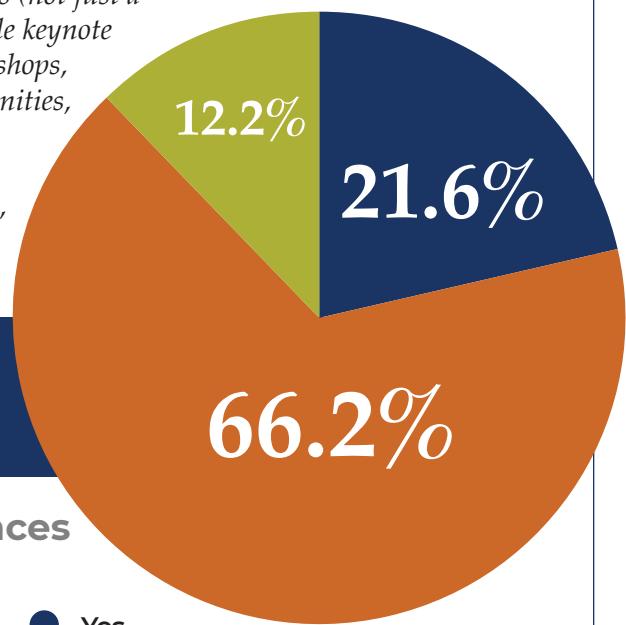
The State of Virtual Conferences

At the core of this report is a non-statistical online survey conducted between March 19 and April 17, 2020. We received 418 responses to this survey, of which 361 qualified and are included in this report. We offered this definition of *virtual conference* at the beginning of the survey to normalize responses:

A virtual conference is a Web-based event that replicates many aspects of a traditional place-based conference, membership meeting, or trade show. It may take place on a standalone basis or in conjunction with a place-based conference (i.e., a "hybrid" event).

Virtual conferences feature multiple sessions (not just a single Webinar or Webcast) and may include keynote presentations, training and education workshops, discussion areas, social networking opportunities, exhibit areas for vendors, and various other features. Activities in a virtual conference may take place in real time (synchronously), on demand (asynchronously), or some combination of the two.

Has your organization previously offered a virtual conference? (361 responses)



Adoption of Virtual Conferences Set to Spike

Of 361 respondents, 21.6 percent indicate their organization has previously offered a virtual conference. An additional 66.2 percent indicate they plan to offer a virtual conference in the coming 12 months. That spike in growth in the near term is attributable in large part to the implications of the COVID-19 era.

- Yes
- No but plan to in next 12 months
- No and don't plan to in next 12 months

The most common length of time organizations have offered virtual conferences (the mode) is one calendar year, and the median is two years. One respondent's organization has been offering virtual conferences for 15 years. While virtual conferences are new to some, there are also veterans of the form among the survey participants.

Not surprisingly, respondents are more than four times as likely to offer place-based events than to offer a virtual conference: 90.3 percent of responding organizations have previously offered a place-based conference, meeting, or trade show as part of the value they offer to customers or members.

COVID-19 MAKES MAKING THE CASE EASY

COVID-19 features prominently in the supplemental interviews we conducted with some survey respondents. The pandemic and the related limitations and bans on travel and in-person meetings necessitated the adoption of virtual conferences.

Sondra Reis, director of e-learning at the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, notes that the novel coronavirus obviated the need for much of the marketing they had to do less than two years ago. “The challenge was really convincing our audience that a virtual conference had any value,” she says. When they held their first virtual conference in the fall of 2018, a “virtues of virtual” campaign was a centerpiece of their marketing efforts. “We highlighted the benefits—that you don’t have to travel, that everything is recorded, that you can still interact and get great content.”

The New York County Psychiatric Society experienced a similar need to educate the audience about the format with their first virtual conference. “We definitely had to sell the format to people new to the whole idea,” shares executive director Meagan O’Toole. She and her internal team had experienced virtual conferences and were “excited about the format, but we learned quickly that the format does not excite people until they’ve already had experience with it. It’s not really a selling point until you get them in there. Once you get them in there, the next time they’re big proponents of it.” With the arrival of COVID-19, the need to make the case has evaporated. “Now people are hungry for any sort of interaction,” says O’Toole. “So the online aspect of a full virtual conference is appealing to people in a way that it probably wasn’t nine months ago.”

Necessity, that mother of invention, is also a huge driver of adoption.

Summary

Having looked at virtual conference adoption and the general state of virtual conferences, we continue with survey respondents’ demographics before turning to how virtual conferences are held and the results they achieve. ►

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Demographics

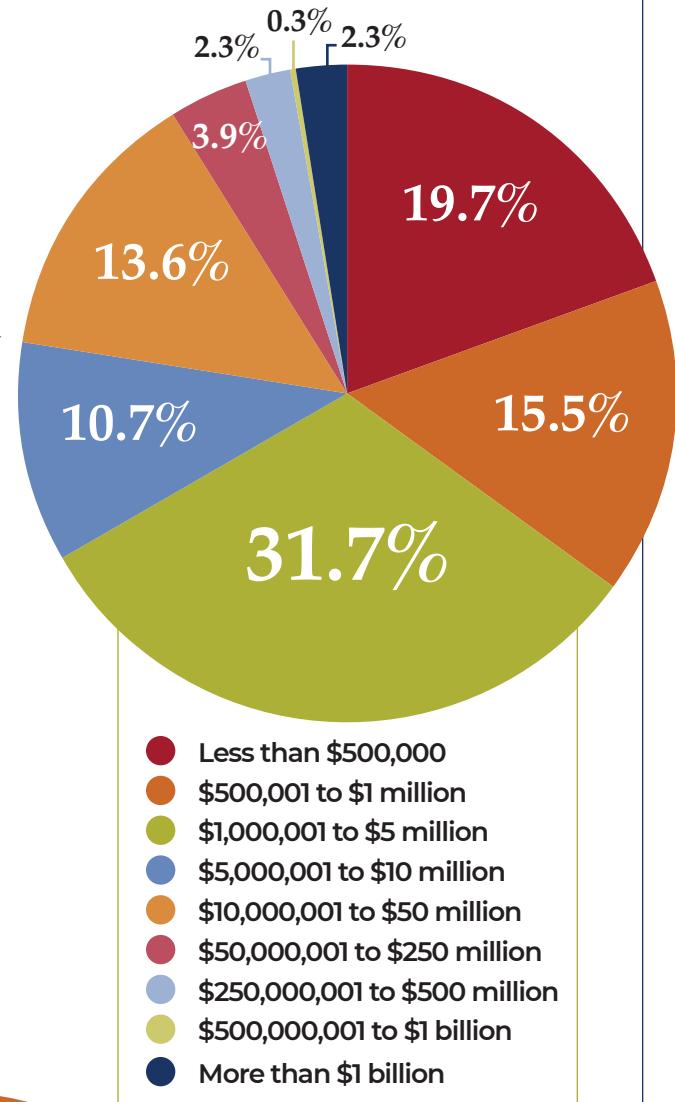
Responses to the survey come from a broad range of organizations—from those with no paid staff and annual revenue under \$500,000 to those with 130,000 paid staff and annual revenue of more than \$1 billion.

The largest clusters of survey respondents are nationally focused organizations (44.7 percent) with annual budgets between \$1 million and \$5 million (31.7 percent).

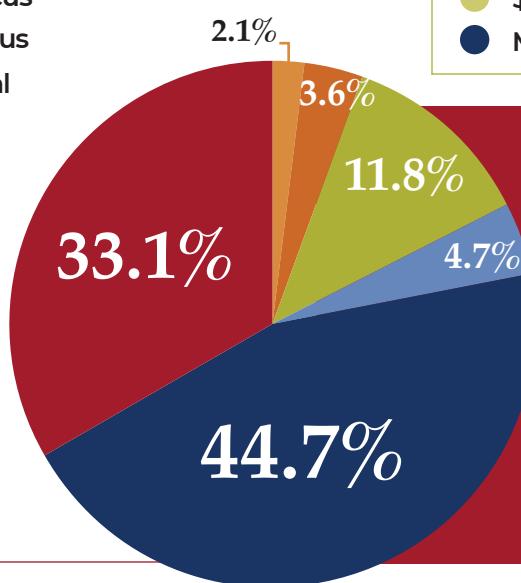
Respondents average 767.5 paid staff (median 16.0). Associations with only or primarily individual members such as professional societies (38.2 percent) and associations with only or primarily organizational members such as trade associations (21.6 percent) make up the majority of organizations surveyed, but respondents also represent

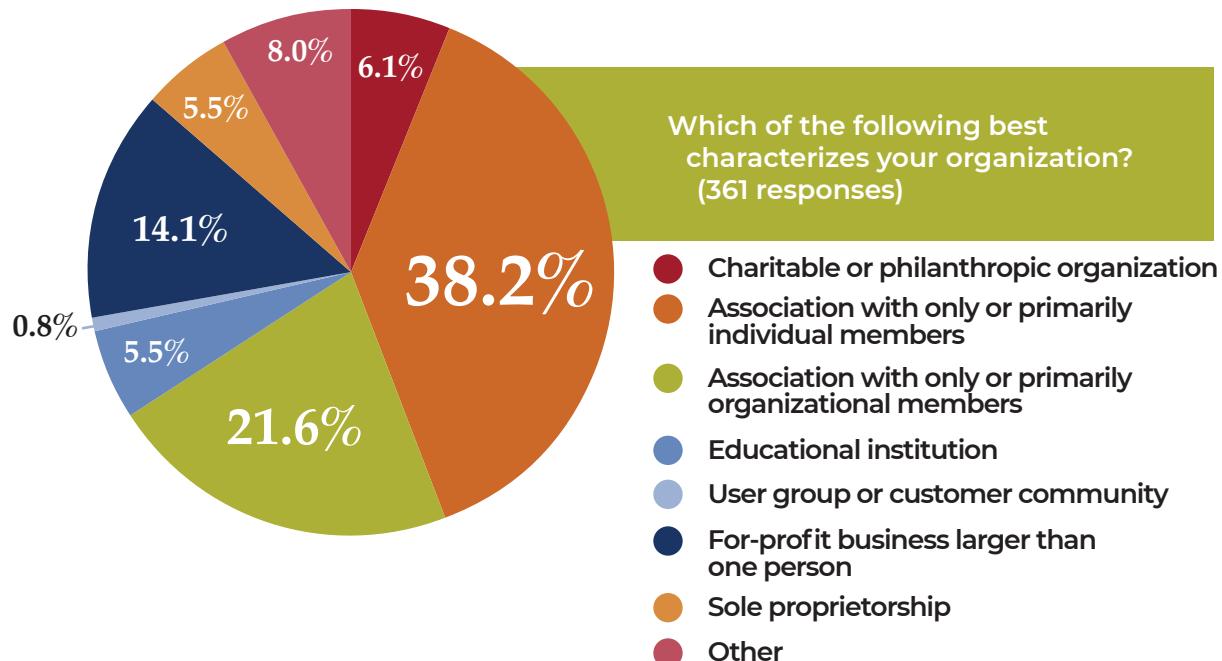
- Single-community or municipality focus
- Multiple-community focus within one state
- Single-state or province focus
- Multi-state or multi-province focus
- National focus
- International focus

What is your organization's annual revenue (in U.S. dollars)?
(309 responses)



Which best describes the geographic focus of your organization (i.e., which best indicates the areas in which you actively solicit members or customers)? (338 responses)





for-profit businesses, charitable and philanthropic organizations, educational institutions, and more.

Survey participants represent truly diverse industries. Of the twenty top-level categories drawn from the [North American Industry Classification System](#) (the standard used by federal statistical agencies in the United States of America to classify business establishments), survey respondents represent all but one. Three classifications were chosen by over a tenth of respondents: educational services (18.8 percent); professional, scientific, and technical services (18.8 percent); and health care and social assistance (16.1 percent). “Other” was the most common response (19.1 percent), and all other classifications were selected by under 6 percent of respondents.

Having looked at the demographics of the survey respondents, we now delve deeper into operations, the business view, and performance. ▶

Which of the following best describes your organization's industry? (335 responses)

Educational services	18.8%
Professional, scientific, and technical services	18.8%
Health care and social assistance	16.1%
Other	19.1%

The Operational Perspective

In this section, we delve into the decisions made by organizations that have offered at least one virtual conference: the core components of the virtual conferences, the technology platforms they use to deliver them, their connection to a place-based event, and their duration.

Core Components of Virtual Conferences

While the options for creating and delivering a virtual conference can feel overwhelming, a standard set of technologies have emerged as core components of most events. These include the following:

- **Webinar and/or Webcasts tools** to deliver audio and video content presented by experts, facilitators, sponsors, and exhibitors
 - It's common for virtual conferences to include multiple real-time presentations, and most organizations also archive these presentations for on-demand access. Additionally, organizations may develop the virtual conference experience based entirely on pre-recorded presentations. These can be enhanced by the use of various communication tools to enable attendees to ask questions and interact with experts and facilitators in real time.
- **Communication tools** to allow for interaction among attendees, subject matter experts, and exhibitors
 - These tools range from the text chat features included in many Webinar platforms to integrated discussion board capabilities in virtual conference platforms to social media tools such as Twitter. Use of social media tools is particularly appealing in hybrid events as they allow for the free flow of communication among online participants and attendees at the face-to-face portion of the event.
- **Document- and resource-sharing** to provide attendees with information that complements and supports presentations from subject matter experts
 - These documents and resources may include articles, case studies, checklists, and copies of presenters' slides—in short, the same types of materials an attendee at a place-based event would typically receive. For events with sponsors and exhibitors, the materials may also include white papers, brochures, and other marketing materials.

WHAT SURVEY RESPONDENTS ARE OFFERING

A majority of organizations that have offered a virtual conference incorporate these three components:

- Live sessions delivered in real time (87.7 percent)
- Archived recordings after the virtual conference ends (76.7 percent)
- Real-time text communication between participants (69.9 percent)

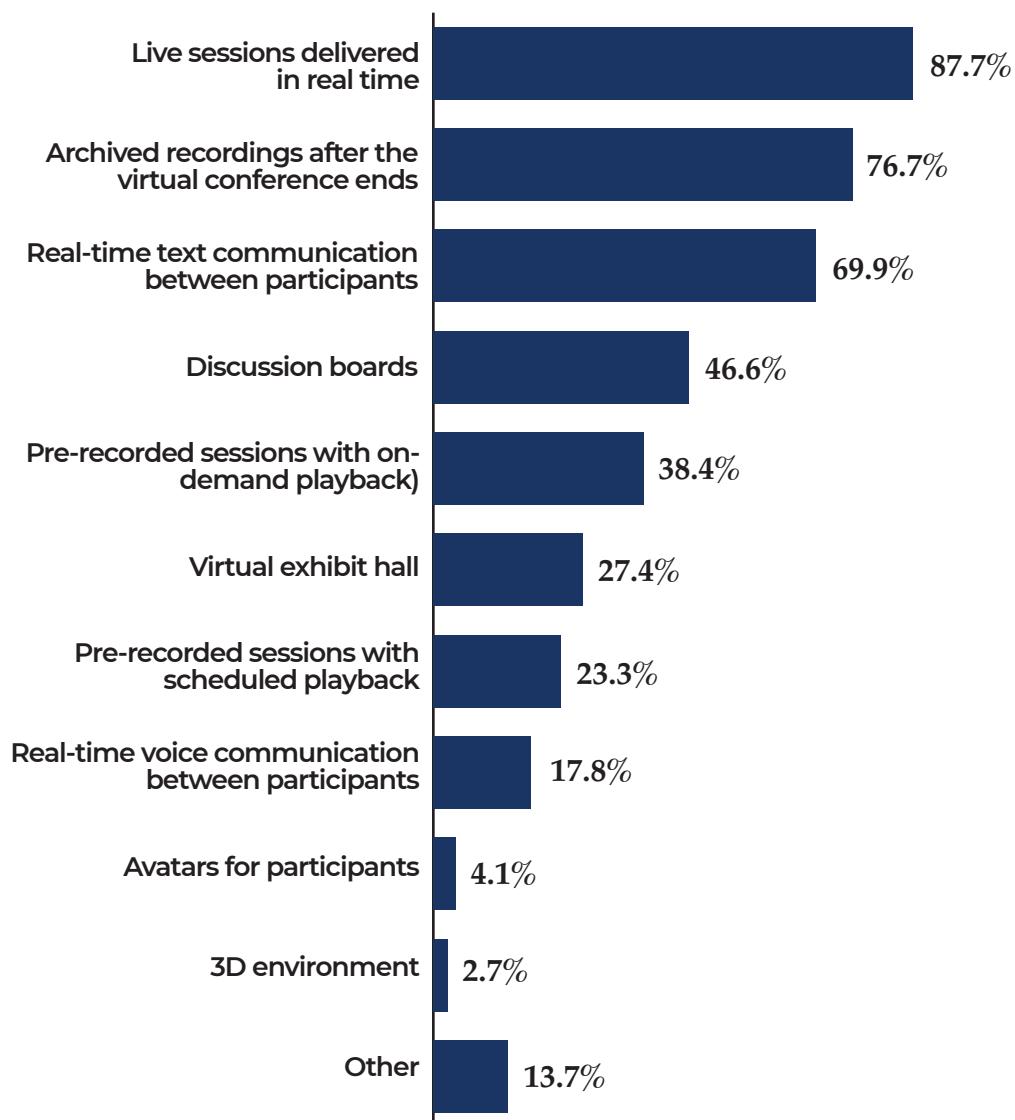
While the majority incorporate those three elements, multiple survey respondents, when asked about lessons learned from their virtual conference experience, cite the need to *not* assume attendees will use them or know how to

use them. One comments on the importance of “instructions sent beforehand on how to navigate between sessions.” Another recommends “you have a post-conference plan in place to remind attendees about the recordings.” And a third respondent suggests you “make sure that volunteers who introduce speakers know how to encourage audience questions via chat. Have them meet with the speaker ahead of time to develop some softball questions.”

More than a quarter of respondents report incorporating three additional elements:

- Discussion boards (46.6 percent)
- Pre-recorded sessions with on-demand playback (38.4 percent)
- Virtual exhibit hall (27.4 percent)

**Which of the following elements did your virtual conference include?
(73 responses)**



One comment again highlights the effort of making these elements valuable. “Getting participants to use discussion boards takes a lot of pre-planning,” cautions the respondent. “If you build it, they won’t come unless there is a compelling reason to do so.”

To go along with the 38.4 percent offering on-demand pre-recorded sessions, another 23.3 percent offer pre-recorded sessions with scheduled playback. Multiple respondents tout the virtues of pre-recording. One recommends, “Pre-record as much as you can.” Another shares that having “pre-recorded videos of the speakers can be more engaging (videos with effects and key points listed on the side) and [allow] better control of the time and quality of the session.”

While virtual exhibit halls remain far from mainstream (used by only 27.4 percent of respondents), this is an area we expect to grow. Success so far with virtual exhibits is mixed, but this is a nut many organizations are actively trying to crack, as they look to replace exhibitor dollars from their canceled or converted-to-virtual place-based events. It will be interesting and instructive to see the approaches and models organizations use to make virtual exhibits valuable for all stakeholders. One respondent notes, it’s “very important to find different and varied opportunities to provide sponsors with exposure.” Another shares, “Be sure to coach exhibitors on best practices for a virtual exhibit hall. Many of them are only familiar with face-to-face environments. Survey your attendees to find out what they want from exhibitors.” (See “The Business Perspective” for more on exhibitors.)

Not quite a fifth of respondents (17.8 percent) report incorporating real-time voice communication between participants into their virtual conferences. Like virtual exhibit halls, real-time voice communication between participants seems ripe for growth, as it represents a way to support engagement and social learning in a manner that can feel more familiar and akin to face-to-face interactions—if no technology hiccups cause frozen videos or garbled audio.

Avatars (simulated versions of event participants) and 3D environments fall at the tail end of the elements asked about in the survey. While we don’t expect it to happen quickly, we can imagine the growth of virtual reality (VR) impacting virtual conferences and bringing a more realistic, 3D feel complete with avatars to the experience.

Technology Platforms for Virtual Conferences

We asked survey respondents which technologies they have used to deliver their virtual conferences, and, of 24 named options, only 3 have been used by a more than a tenth of respondents: Zoom (43.9 percent—up significantly from 23.7 percent in our 2018 report), GoToMeeting/GoToWebinar (18.2 percent), and ON24 (12.1 percent). The second-largest segment of respondents, 27.3 percent, falls under the catch-all “other” option—and there are no duplicates among the provider and platform names entered by those respondents.

The field is fragmented, and the fragmentation is exacerbated by the fact that options ran the gamut from platform-only offerings to full-service

providers—and sometimes organizations use a mix, blending in other technologies (such as a learning management system or an online community platform) to achieve their goals.

"We use basically an online community platform as the scaffold for the event," shares Jack Coursen, director for professional development at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). He elaborates:

Beyond the recorded sessions and the live chats, there are a bunch of other elements. There are daily welcome announcements, which are configurable to get sent out as external e-mails or to specific groups within the event. There's the conference hall with all the pre-recorded presentations that are folded into discussion areas. Speakers are subscribed to their own presentation discussion, where the presentation is posted, and, as attendees post comments and questions, the speakers automatically get an e-mail with those comments and can even reply directly through that e-mail and have the comments automatically folded back into the conference discussion without even having to log in to the event site.

The size and complexity of your event—think number of sessions, attendees, speakers, exhibitors, etc.—also directly impacts technology. "If you're not at that mega size, if you're not trying to serve a thousand people, there are cheaper solutions for you that are also lighter-weight in terms of production," explains Veronica Diaz, director of professional learning at EDUCAUSE. "Setting up the frameworks for these virtual events is not trivial. Never mind getting the content in there and getting the presenters in there and all that business," she continues. "It's exponentially harder and more expensive the bigger your event." This is part of why Diaz and EDUCAUSE are focused on designing and delivering smaller virtual conferences. "My advice would be right-size your solution," says Diaz, "because that solution could break the bank otherwise."

Another factor is the speed at which some organizations made the switch to a virtual format due to COVID-19. Quick pivots do not allow for a lengthy, comprehensive technology selection process. For some new to virtual conferences, their choice of technology may be a decision to revisit. "We stitched together several technology platforms rather than using a comprehensive provider," one survey respondent shares. "We are looking at doing another virtual conference in about a month and a half and are looking for a comprehensive technology platform."

Shannon Lockwood, events and programs manager at NIGP: The Institute for Public Procurement, thinks COVID-era quick pivots are a great time to rely on professionals. "If you are taking on virtual conferences in the middle of a pandemic for the very first time," she says, "I would let your technical vendors do what they do. They really are the experts, and we have leaned on them heavily to advise us on what's a good idea and what's a great idea, what we should try, or things that have worked well for them."

In this hodgepodge of pure software companies that align with a more do-it-yourself approach and value-add service providers, finding the right partner and platform—or partners and platforms—to meet your virtual conference needs is

not necessarily a straightforward task. But the good news is that there are options that span the range from bare-bones to white-glove.

Under Half of Virtual Conferences Currently Standalones

Once an organization decides to offer a virtual conference, a key decision is how to schedule it in relation to existing place-based events. Options range from offering virtual activities that extend and enhance an existing conference or workshop to creating an entirely new, distinct event scheduled at a different time.

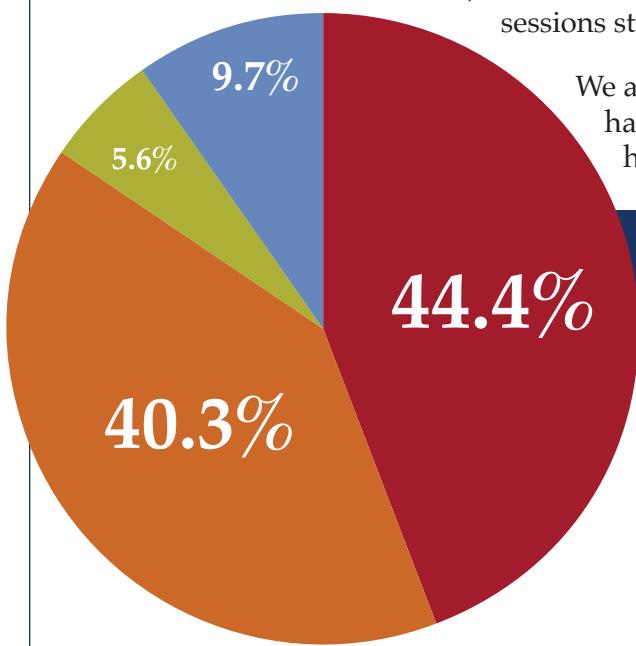
Of organizations that have already offered a virtual conference, 44.4 percent held it as a standalone, not associated with a place-based event, and 40.3 percent pegged it to the same time as a place-based event. Another 5.6 percent held the virtual conference at a different time but still associated it with a place-based event.

We take the fact that roughly equal numbers of respondents have offered a virtual conference as a standalone as have associated their virtual conference with a place-based event as further evidence of the growing acceptance of digital events; they don't need the connection to a place-based event to be seen as a legitimate, appealing options.

And we expect future data will tip more dramatically towards standalone offerings. Until a COVID-19 vaccine or other solution that enables large-group, in-person gatherings to resume, a rise in virtual conferences held as standalones is inevitable.

Most Virtual Conferences Short

Another important operational decision is how long a virtual conference should last, and choices are limitless, ranging from a single day to sessions staggered over days, weeks, even months.



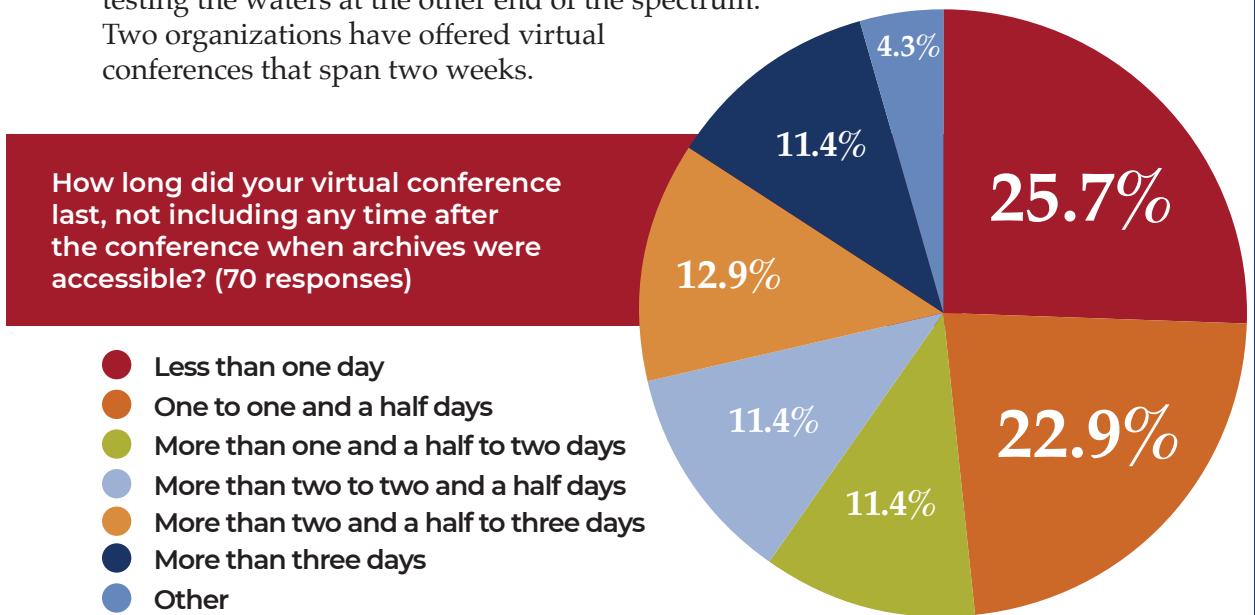
We asked survey respondents whose organizations have previously held at least one virtual conference how long the event lasted, not including any time

Which of the following best describes the relationship of your virtual conference to a place-based event? (72 responses)

- Standalone, not associated with a place-based event
- Associated with a place-based event and held at the same time
- Associated with a place-based event but held at a different time
- Other

after the event when archives might be accessible. Most respondents opted to keep their virtual conferences short and sweet: 48.6 percent of respondents report their virtual conference lasted no more than a day and a half. The text comments submitted by those selecting “other” indicate that several organizations are testing the waters at the other end of the spectrum.

Two organizations have offered virtual conferences that span two weeks.



Virtual conferences are not limited by the travel expense and facility logistics that place-based events are subject to. Those travel and facility constraints often make both very short and very long place-based events impractical or cost-prohibitive. We expect the lack of consensus around a common length for virtual conferences (even among those indicating their virtual conference lasted less than a day, there is variance) to continue as organizations offering virtual conferences take advantage of the benefits of the format to fit the length to the content and goals of the event rather than letting other factors dictate duration.

We also expect to see organizations experiment to see what works for their audience. One survey respondent comments, “We tried to have a three-quarters-day session and expected people to attend that day, but we found that people did not remain connected all that time and relied on taped recordings after.” Another shares, “We spread our conference out over an entire week. I’d recommend a shorter time frame.” Coursen of ASHA shares in his interview that “there is something about the focus and immediacy of a [time-bound] event, even if it’s online, that seems to foster more activity.”

Summary

This section looked at some of the myriad operational questions faced by organizations offering virtual conferences and highlighted how respondents are answering those questions: what features and functionalities to include, which platform or platforms will power the event, whether to tie the virtual conference to a place-based event, and how long to run the event.

In the next section, we move from operations to a business perspective. ▶



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The Business Perspective

We concentrate in this section on the business perspective of virtual conferences: the strategy and goals that drive the use of virtual conferences, registration and attendance, revenue expectations, and the role of continuing education.

Majority of Virtual Conferences Not Strategic

While a fifth of respondents (20.7 percent) have a formal, documented strategy for virtual conferences, a majority (59.8 percent) have no strategy, and another fifth (19.5 percent) say they aren't sure whether they have a strategy—which, in our book, means nearly 80 percent effectively have no strategy.



Our personal bias is that strategies are important, as they serve to unite an organization around common goals, contextualize investments (of time and money) in terms of the value expected in return, and provide insight into what to pursue and what to lay aside.

There are thousands of decisions when it comes to offering a virtual conference—how long should it be, should it be part of your annual conference or its own beast, what should you charge, how do you find sponsors, and so on. You need a strategy for your virtual conferences so you and others in your organization can translate that strategy into the right answers to the myriad questions.

Strategy is a “framework which guides those choices that determine the nature and direction of an organization,” according to the definition posited by Benjamin B. Tregoe and John W. Zimmerman in *Top Management Strategy*. In the case of virtual conferences, a strategy is the framework for making the decisions that determine the nature and direction of an organization’s virtual conferences, trade shows, and other digital events.

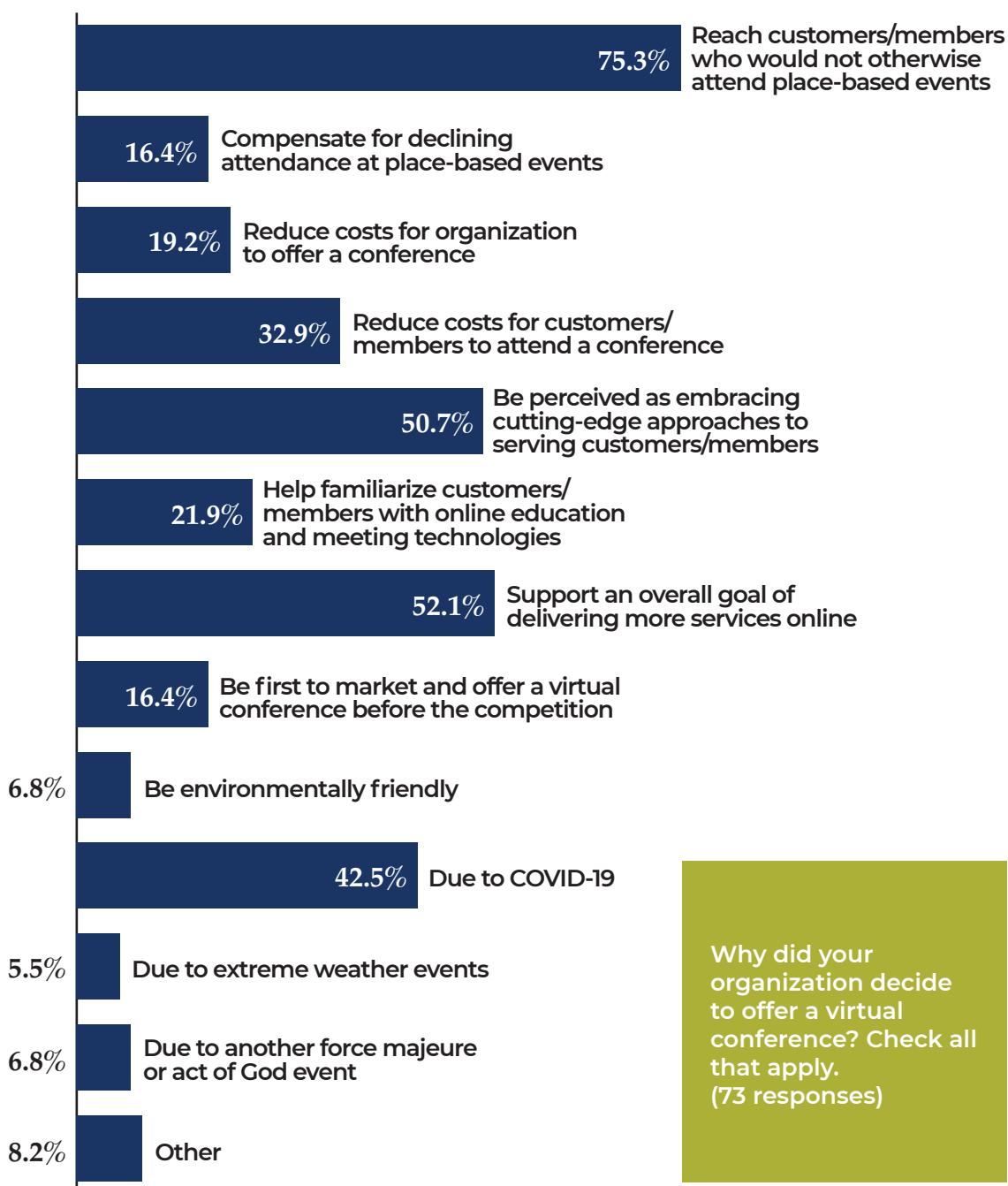
But there also needs to be an organization-wide strategy that derives from its mission, vision, and values. A virtual conferences strategy without the other layer is pointless, likely to be ignored, and might send you in the wrong direction and lead to a series of unwise decisions.

Assuming an organizational strategy exists, the following questions can get you started on a virtual conferences framework, or strategy:

- Do you want to use virtual conferences to expand or improve the products and services you offer?

- Do you want to use virtual conferences to expand beyond the markets you target or improve how you serve your current markets?
- Are you focused on increasing revenue through virtual conferences?
- Are you focused on growing the organization and the customers or members you serve through virtual conferences?

Choose the single goal—e.g., reaching a specific new market—that is most important to your organization, and use that goal to focus your virtual conferences and to inform your decisions about the virtual conferences. While virtual conferences may not be right for every organization, every organization that delves into virtual conferences should have a strategy leading the way.



Going Virtual Expands Reach

"To reach customers or members who could not otherwise attend place-based events," cited by three-quarters (75.3 percent) of respondents, is the primary reason organizations have held a virtual conference. "To support an overall goal of delivering more services online" (52.1 percent) and "to be perceived as embracing cutting-edge approaches to serving customers or members" (50.7 percent) come second and third and are the only other reasons selected by a majority of respondents. A new choice in this year's survey, COVID-19 was cited by 42.5 percent of respondents who have already offered a virtual as a driver behind their decision. Among organizations that have not yet offered a virtual conference but plan to in the coming year, 92.6 percent cited COVID-19.

The supplemental interviews echo this goal of expanding reach. "What drives me in this work is increasing accessibility to the things that we offer," says Sondra Reis, director of e-learning at the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits.

Shannon Lockwood, events and programs manager at NIGP: The Institute for Public Procurement, sees their virtual conferences as part of a broad democratizing effort:

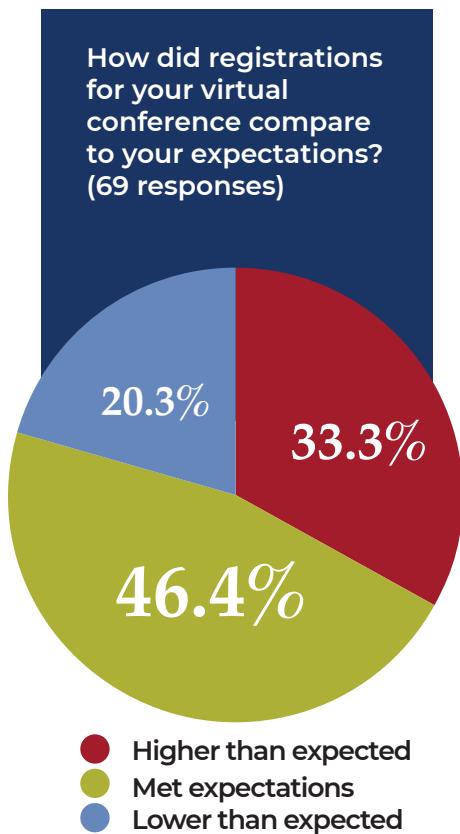
We kept hearing we need to democratize access to best practices and what's out there in the world in terms of intelligence from their coworkers and peers and get that information to everyone, not just the folks who can attend Forum [NIGP's large place-based annual conference] and spend a thousand dollars on registration and a thousand dollars on a hotel and a thousand dollars on a flight. That was the impetus, and NIGP as a whole has made a huge leap in the direction of digital content, not just offering events as virtual conferences but allowing for our seminars and face-to-face education classes to also become instructor-led online courses or on-demand content.

Virtual conferences also make sense for organizations moving to be more international. "We made the decision to go virtual because our membership has been changing," shares Sheila Guston, a member of the Association for Healthcare Documentation Integrity board of directors. "As we continue to expand our membership into global spaces, we really need to provide a way for everyone to meet, to have the same educational opportunities. When you have a conference face to face, you can conceivably be limiting by people's ability to pay or by geography."

While cannibalization is a concern for some, there's little evidence it happens. "There's no cannibalization for our in-person events," asserts Jack Coursen, director for professional development at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). "The online conference attendees are folks who can't afford to take time off work or the cost of travel or being away from their family, but they still really want a rich and robust experience."

Registrations Meet or Exceed Expectations

To help gauge the appeal of virtual conferences, we asked organizations that have held a virtual conference to tell us how actual registrations compared to

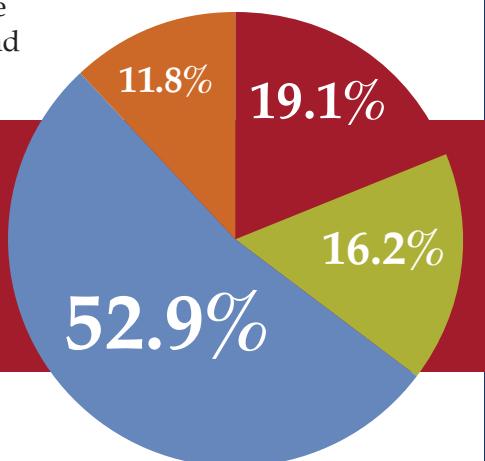


what they expected. Over three-quarters (79.7 percent) report that registrations either met or exceeded expectations.

Knowing that actual attendance is often well below registration levels, especially for free online offerings, we also asked what percentage of registrants actually attended a typical virtual conference. Respondents report an average attendance rate of 62.2 percent of registrations and a median of 67.0 percent, putting these virtual conferences above the rule of thumb of 50 percent no-shows for Webinars.

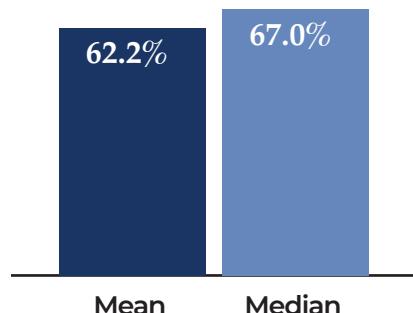
Just over half (52.9 percent) reported a lower level of attendance at the virtual conference than a comparable place-based event, but over a third (35.3 percent) said attendance was higher or the same.

While some organizations are enjoying success, a fifth are seeing lower registrations than expected, and over half are seeing lower turnout than for a similar in-person event. So there's room to improve in the areas of registration and attendance.

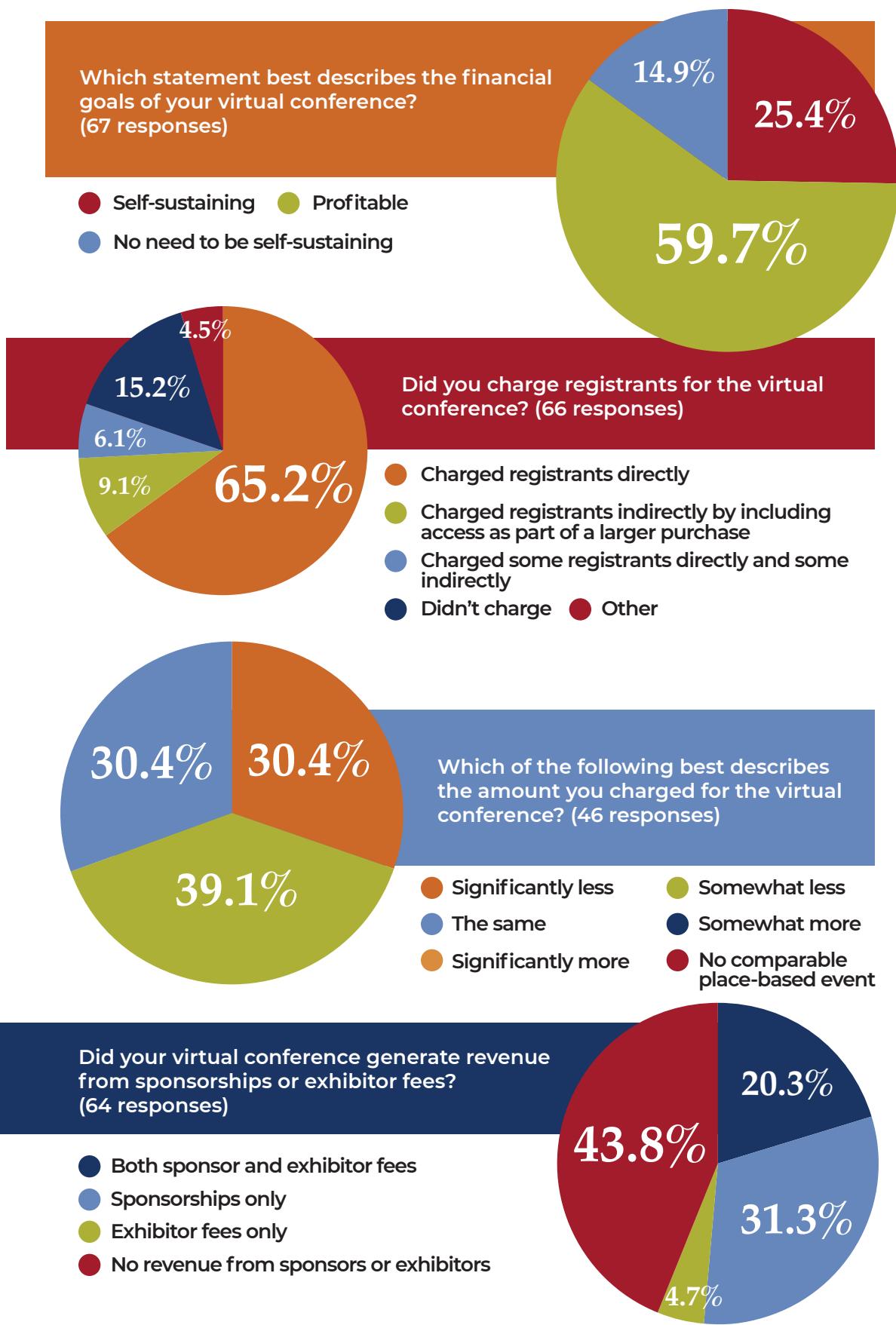


How did attendance at your virtual conference compare to typical attendance for a comparable place-based event? (68 responses)

● Greater attendance ● Same attendance
● Less attendance ● No comparable place-based event



Approximately what percentage of registrants actually attended your virtual conference? (67 responses)



Registration Fees Drive Financial Sustainability

Whether a virtual conference must generate revenue and, if so, how much are key questions organizations must answer. The majority (59.7 percent) of survey respondents indicate the virtual conference had to be profitable. A quarter (25.4 percent) need the virtual conference to be at least self-sustaining, leaving only 14.9 percent willing to underwrite the expense of the virtual conference.

To generate revenue, 65.2 percent of the organizations that previously offered a virtual conference charged registrants directly, but 15.2 percent did not charge registrants to attend.

When looking to increase profitability, keeping costs low is also a factor. “Online events are way less disruptive to operations,” notes Courses of ASHA, “which means that staff can do a lot more than they otherwise could, which improves your overall potential for positive returns.”

Veronica Diaz, director of professional learning at EDUCAUSE, offers a COVID-colored view of virtual conference sustainability. “I think we’re in kind of an in-between pain point, where we don’t want to lose the presence we have in front of the community, so we’re rushing to have some continuity, and we’re seeing some probably financially unsuccessful continuity efforts going on,” she remarks. Not being able to charge top registration fees now and the technology costs are only part of the equation: “We’re seeing unprecedented attention and involvement from very high-priced staff, and we’re bringing on new staff; we’re retraining and retooling. And that’s expensive.” Her view—which strikes us as astute—is that the current pivot to virtual changes the game for the old revenue model: “I think the virtual conference model has to evolve to be more distributed, more bite-sized, and more focused. It can’t be the same buffet model that you had face to face. You will recover that revenue, but over time, by offering smaller and more distributed options over the year.”

The Majority Charge Less for Virtual Than Place-Based

Because the dollar amount attendees are charged for an event can vary dramatically, we focused the survey on how fees for virtual conferences compare to those charged for face-to-face events.

The majority of respondents who have already offered a virtual conference charged significantly less (30.4 percent) or somewhat less (39.1 percent) for their virtual conference. Another 30.4 percent charged about the same for the virtual conference and a similar place-based event. No respondents reported charging more for a virtual conference than for a comparable place-based event.

That 69.5 percent of respondents charge less for their virtual conference than a comparable-place based event is consistent with the response given by 32.9 percent of respondents when asked why their organizations decided to offer a virtual conference: reducing costs for customers or members to attend a conference. But people tend to associate price with value, so organizations that

price virtual conferences low may unintentionally send the message that the value is low too.

Another tack is to change the business model. What worked for a place-based conference may benefit from an overhaul when going virtual. EDUCAUSE is actively pursuing a smaller-is-better design with virtual events focused on specific communities or industry sectors. “The face-to-face model is much more of a giant buffet, all you can eat,” explains Diaz. “But you only go to 10 percent of what’s out there.” While EDUCAUSE has traditionally co-located full- and half-day workshops and meetings with its conference, they’re now unbundling in light of attendees’ limited time and budget: “We don’t want to make a giant price-point ask of a couple thousand dollars when maybe people can only really pay \$200 or \$300 right now. But later in the year they might be able to pay something else.” EDUCAUSE hasn’t seen fewer sessions and concurrents result in fewer sales. “We have found that you get just about the same amount of purchases if you do two or three tracks than if you do one that’s very focused. The price point has changed, and attendees are not really interested or able to pay the all-you-can-eat price,” says Diaz. “They are really looking at things that speak very directly to them and really speak to their current situation.”

PANDEMIC COMPLICATES PRICING DECISIONS

There’s the usual approach to pricing, and there’s what becomes necessary or gracious in an economic downturn, like that caused by COVID-19. Many organizations are trying to balance the need to generate revenue from their virtual conferences with the financial reality of their attendees. And that balancing act is made even more difficult by mid-course pivots.

Reis shares that the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits (MCN) left the pricing where it was when they made the decision to pivot their in-person conference scheduled for April 2020 to a virtual format. “We did not do any of the price increases that typically happen as you get closer to a conference date, but we also did not discount it beyond where it had been when we pivoted it,” she says, “because we already had 350 registrants, and if you give someone a discount after someone else has entered the door, it creates a problem. So we stuck with the same pricing.” Only 12 of the original 350 registrants requested a refund, and another 150 registered once the event was announced as virtual. But it’s unclear what MCN will need to do with pricing moving forward. “There’s catastrophic revenue loss in the nonprofit sector right now, from donations, from services provided,” explains Reis. “We’re dealing with members we have to be sensitive to. They may not have any professional dollars available to them.”

The same is true of the procurement professionals served by NIGP. “We as an organization recognize that many of our attendees, as small government procurement staff, are experiencing furloughs,” says Lockwood. “We have heard from many, many of our people who have said their entire training budget has been cut through the end of 2020. So we now know that if someone is coming to our event, it’s likely—not just possible but likely—that they’re paying out of their own pocket.”

ASHA too is working to be sensitive to the situation of their members—and taking bold steps. “I enrolled all 211,000 of our national members [in the ASHA Learning Pass that provides unlimited access to our 900+ hours of online content] for free through June 30, 2020, and we just had one online conference so far where registration overlapped with that free offering,” shares Coursen. “So now all members have totally free access to get unlimited learning, or they can pay \$300 for an online conference that focuses on a really specific topic for two weeks. By the end of registration, the total registration was pretty much exactly what we had projected it to be prior to the crisis and prior to the free offering.”

Room to Grow Sponsor and Exhibitor Revenue

Registration fees paid by participants are not, of course, the only way to generate revenue from a virtual conference. Sponsors and exhibitors can contribute too. But 43.8 percent of organizations that have previously held virtual conferences have not collected sponsorship or exhibitor fees.

Among the organizations that are capitalizing on non-registration revenue, sponsorships have a much stronger foothold than exhibitor fees: 31.3 percent of respondents report using sponsorships alone, 20.3 percent collect both exhibitor and sponsor fees, and 4.7 percent use exhibitor fees alone.

IDEAS FOR INCORPORATING SPONSORS AND EXHIBITORS

Effective involvement of sponsors and exhibitors crops up in a number of our supplemental interviews because it is a critical piece of making virtual conferences profitable.

The current moment is also likely to bring around reluctant online sponsors and force hosting organizations to figure out viable, valuable models. “After COVID, I think sponsors are also going to get more comfortable with doing things online,” says Meagan O’Toole, executive director at the New York County Psychiatric Society. “I know a lot of people are losing money right now from sponsors backing out because they don’t want to do things online, but sponsors are going to realize they have to at some point, and we’ll learn a little bit better how to make it work for them.”

O’Toole shares that, during their PsychSummit events, they run sponsor ad videos between sessions, get sponsors to underwrite making a certain number of tickets free or a certain class of tickets free, and draw on gamification to get attendees to visit virtual exhibitor booths for a chance to win a donation to their preferred charity.

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association also uses gamification to drive interaction with vendors. They use a sweepstakes approach, where the prize might be a complimentary registration to a future online event or the annual convention or a \$100 or \$200 Amazon gift card. To get a ticket to enter the sweepstakes, attendees must go to each exhibit in the virtual hall and post a comment that includes their name, e-mail address, and a brief note on how that exhibitor’s program, product, or service could be useful to them in their job. Those posts make high-quality leads for the exhibitors.” Often by the end of an

online conference,” shares Coursen, “we see as much or more participation in the exhibit hall in terms of number of attendee posts than we see in the actual conference hall where the presentations are.”

Lockwood of NIGP also notes how valuable virtual exhibits can be compared to physical booths. At their annual Forum, the exhibit hall is open for a total of seven hours over two days. “We’ve heard from people that you can’t access all of our exhibitors in that amount of time,” notes Lockwood. Not true for their virtual conferences. “As long as the event’s open on-demand, our exhibitors have access to the folks who reach out to them in their booth. For some of our events, that is upwards of six months.” NIGP also incorporates gamification and rewards attendees for interacting with a booth, by viewing a video, for example, or chatting to an exhibitor.

Along with the longer access to exhibits, another benefit of virtual that Lockwood mentions is reporting. NIGP can share with its virtual exhibitors which attendees came to their booth and let them know what item (e.g., a video or PDF or link) got the most views. “What’s the thing that you should be spending more money or R&D on? What are some of the things that we should deprioritize based on what the traffic was?” These are the kinds of actionable insights that data can give vendors, says Lockwood.

“Our current challenge is keeping our sponsors and exhibitors happy,” says Reis of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits. While sponsors of MCN’s finance conference would have traditionally had an exhibit, MCN wasn’t sure how best to replicate that sponsor benefit in the quick pivot to virtual. “We thought about leaving a Zoom link open both days, but then it didn’t really feel like that would get any traffic,” shares Reis. “So they got to have special mini sessions, where they could talk on a topic of their choice related to their expertise. Our sponsors were really good about making them applicable to today. So our CPA sponsor talked about the CARES Act, and our real estate advisor sponsor talked about renegotiating your lease.” Reis feels like, on balance, the sponsors received greater value in the virtual format: “They got between two and three dozen people at their mini session who really wanted to hear from them. I feel like that was a more valuable experience for them as sponsors than an exhibit may have been.”

Diaz of EDUCAUSE agrees with Reis that working with sponsors and exhibitors is a major challenge now. “We used to have a huge vendor show with a couple thousand vendors,” says Diaz. In moving to virtual, EDUCAUSE is breaking its large place-based conference into smaller offerings focused on particular communities or segments of their audience. “Trying to help the vendors find the right community is really important. And that’s another reason that having that community focus in the event and moving away from the buffet is really important too because that’s more appealing to the vendors.” By going smaller, the quantity of connections vendors make is lower, but, with matchmaking to pair vendors with the appropriate community, the quality is much higher. “We’re looking at opportunities to make it a bit more appealing with matchmaking. AI [artificial intelligence] engines are really important in helping people find the right vendor for the right purpose,” shares Diaz. “Then the vendors aren’t

speaking to the masses, but speaking to 20 people who really are their audience and are really interested.”

Over 40 Percent Offer No CE

Another key strategic question for organizations planning to offer a virtual conference is whether to provide continuing education (CE), if they serve customers or members who need such credit. In our research and consulting practice, we see the availability of continuing education credit as one of the most important drivers for enrollments—one that’s equally important in the specific venue of virtual conferences.

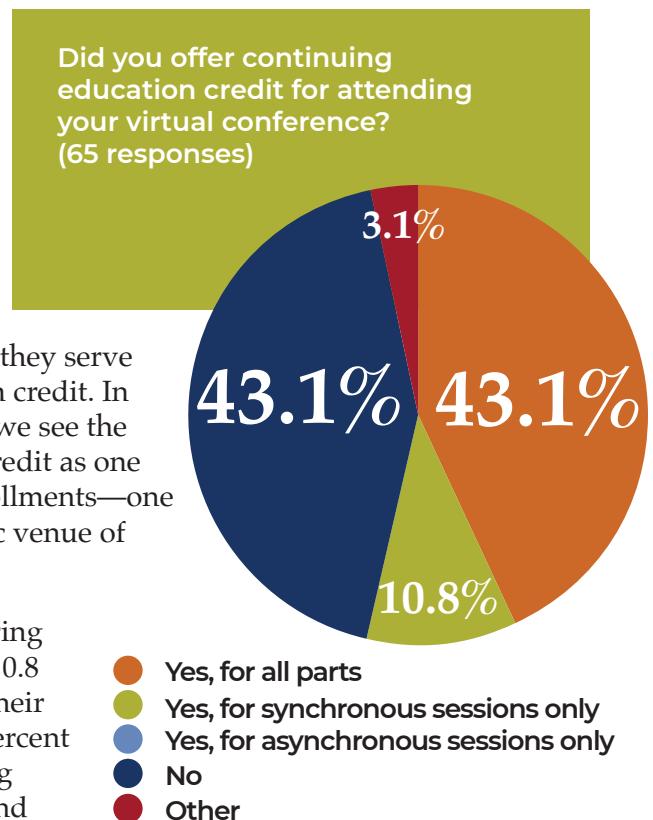
A majority of respondents report offering continuing education (CE) for some (10.8 percent) or all (43.1 percent) parts of their virtual conference, but another 43.1 percent report not offering any CE. Continuing education doesn’t apply to all fields and professionals, which undoubtedly explains some of the nos. (Among all surveyed organizations, 36.9 percent don’t offer a credential or provide education in support of a credential in the field or industry they serve.) For other organizations, the decision to not offer credit may reflect requirements of an accrediting body that are more difficult to satisfy in an online environment or may stem from the nature of some components of the virtual conference—e.g., discussion boards and chat—that aren’t commonly awarded CE.

Given its overall importance as a demand driver for educational activities, our expectation is that the availability of continuing education credit at virtual conferences will increase over time. However, because events may focus on hot topics that members may need information about regardless of credit and because attendees will become more and more adept over time at getting networking value out of virtual conferences, those that do not offer continuing education credit will remain viable.

Summary

In this section we considered issues important to managing virtual conferences as a line of business, including strategy and goals for virtual conferences, registration and attendance, revenue expectations, and the role of continuing education.

In the next section we look at performance and the results organizations are seeing from virtual conferences. ►



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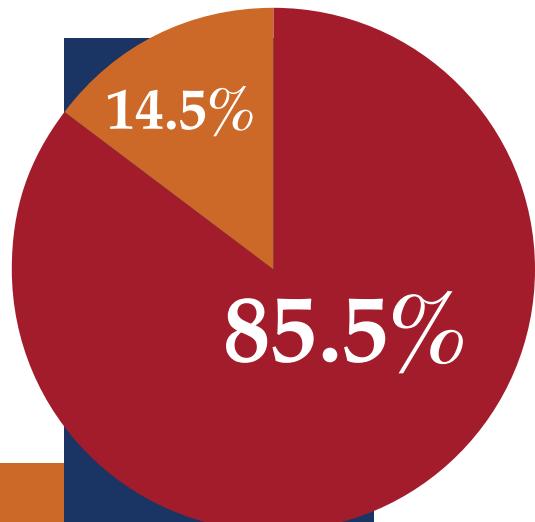
Even given the level of statistical error that may be present in a non-probability survey, the survey behind this report makes it clear that virtual conferences are on the road to becoming mainstream, given a big push by the realities of the COVID-19 era.

But offering a virtual conference is not the same as achieving the desired results.

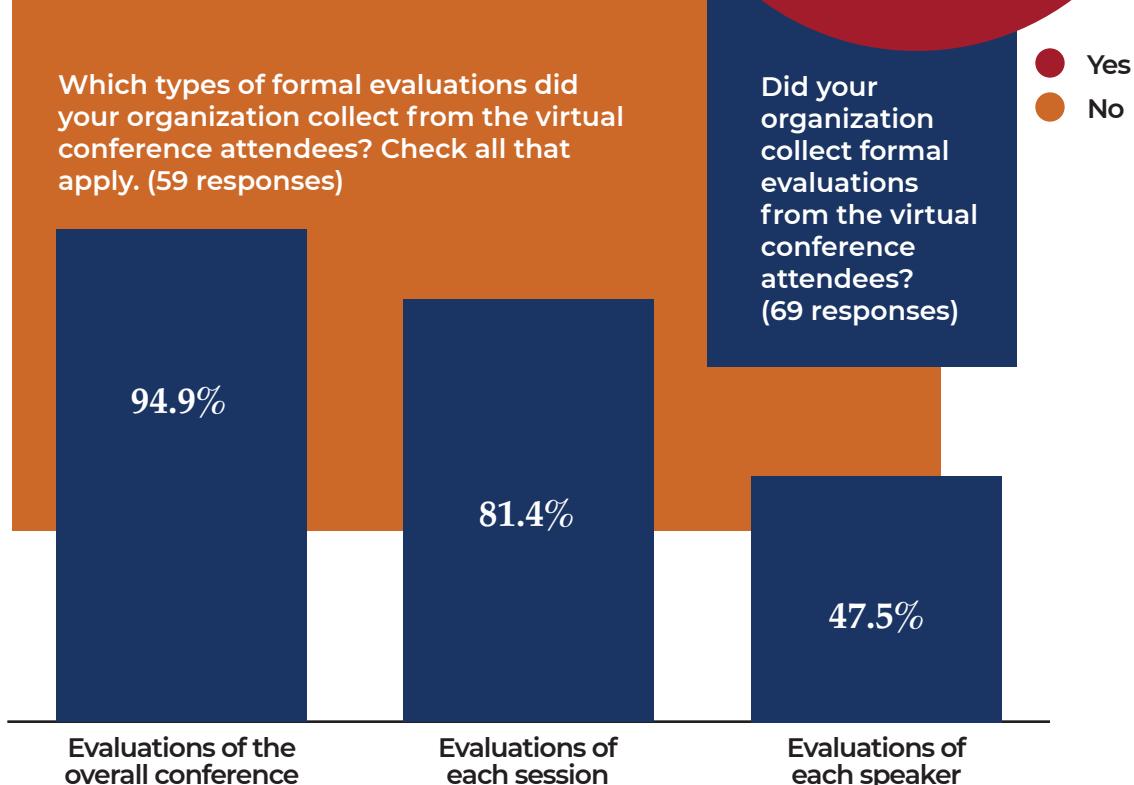
In this final core section, we look at organizations' assessment of the results achieved with virtual conferences: evaluations, self-reported success and satisfaction, and what they have to say about the future.

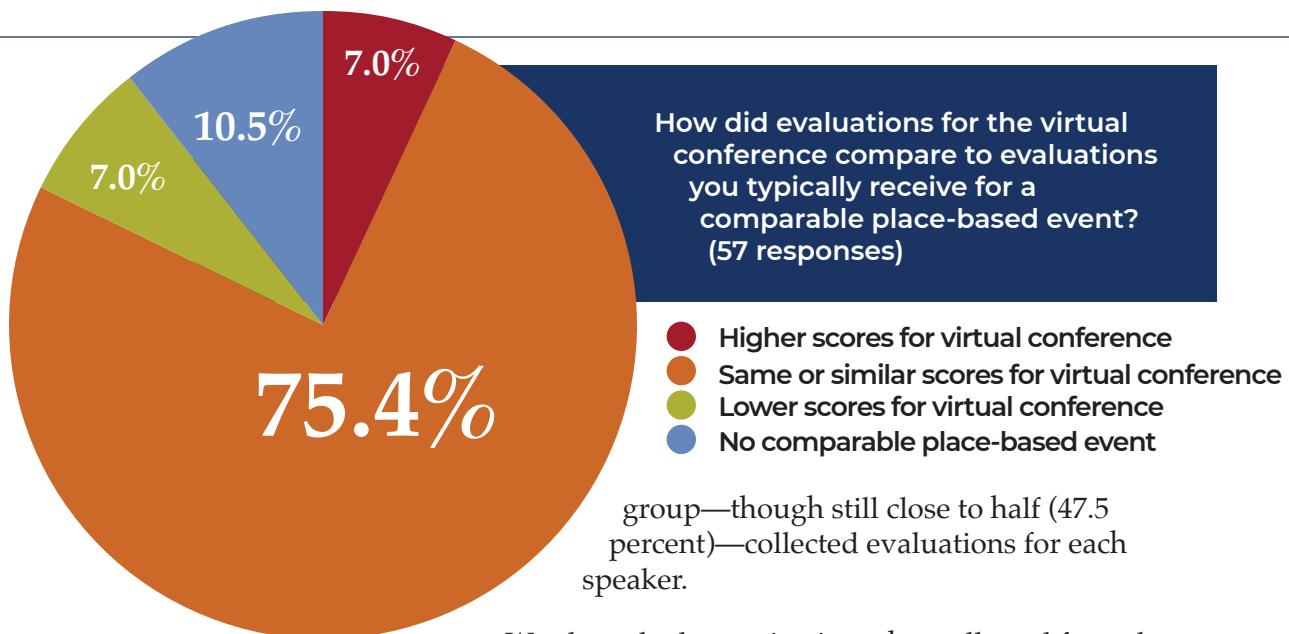
Evaluations Show Decent Success

One common success measure for any event, whether virtual or place-based, is the evaluation scores from attendees. The vast majority (85.5 percent) of organizations that have previously held a virtual conference collected formal evaluations, and the overwhelming majority of those evaluated the virtual conference overall (94.9 percent) and each session (81.4 percent). A smaller



Which types of formal evaluations did your organization collect from the virtual conference attendees? Check all that apply. (59 responses)





group—though still close to half (47.5 percent)—collected evaluations for each speaker.

We also asked organizations that collected formal evaluations to tell us how the evaluations for the virtual conference compared to similar place-based events. An equal number of respondents (7.0 percent) who have previously held a virtual conference report attendees gave higher evaluation scores to the virtual conference as report attendees gave the virtual conference lower marks. Just over three-quarters (75.4 percent) indicate attendees gave the same or very similar evaluation scores to the virtual conference. These results make it clear that the goal of delivering a virtual experience attendees value is achievable.

In our work, we interview, formally and informally, many professionals working in learning businesses of all kinds. When talking about barriers to online education in general, we hear over and over that learners fear losing the ancillary benefits of place-based events: the impromptu conversations in hallways and over lunch and the more structured networking opportunities built into many sessions. We believe virtual conferences that are architected to support peer-to-peer and informal learning will garner higher evaluation scores—because they're providing what attendees value.

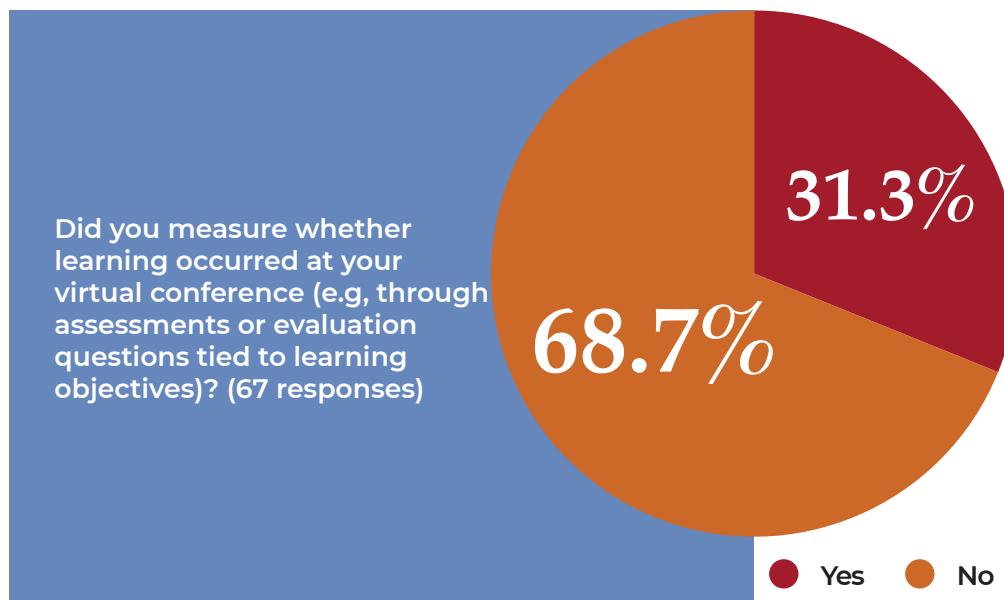
Also, there can be a gap between perception and reality. Jack Coursen, director for professional development at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), doubts that networking is actually as valuable for most attendees as they think it is. Some attendees enjoy being surrounded by others, and just being around people may be what *networking* means to them. “There are high-octane attendees who are shaking hands with the top names in the field, actively making professional connections. But I think it’s probably a small number of people,” says Coursen, “and those people can do it online anyway.”

MEASURING LEARNING NOT A PRIORITY

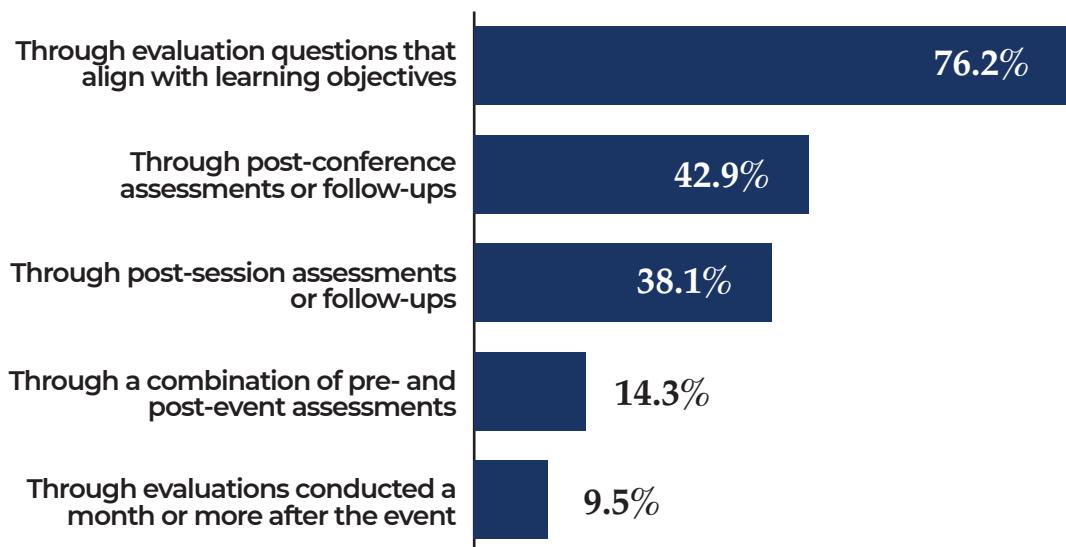
Of the 85.5 percent of respondents who collected formal evaluations, just under a third (31.3 percent) measured whether learning occurred at their virtual conference, whether through evaluation questions tied to learning objectives (the most common approach, used by 76.2 percent of those measuring learning),

post-session or post-conference assessments or follow-ups, a combination of pre- and post-event assessment, or other means.

The organizations not measuring whether learning occurs are missing out on an opportunity not only to evaluate the effectiveness of their virtual conferences but to gather data that could be leveraged to show the value of the virtual conference to would-be attendees.



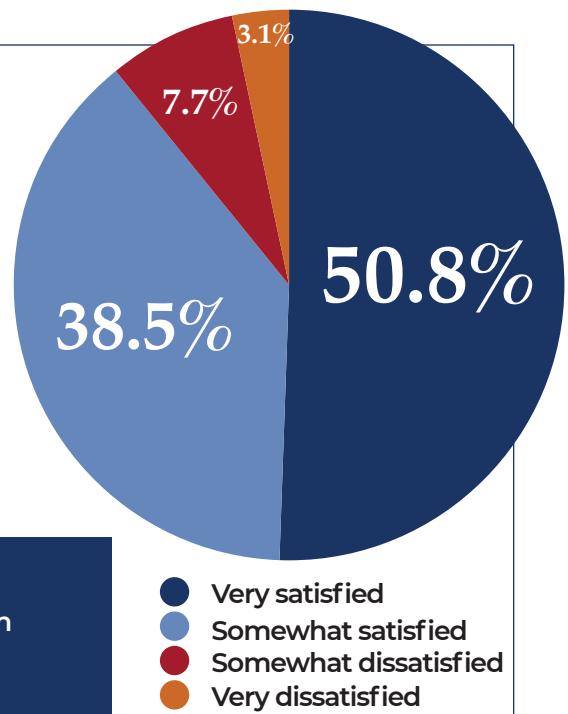
How did you measure whether learning occurred at your virtual conference? Check all that apply. (21 responses)



Satisfaction with Virtual Conferences High

We asked organizations how satisfied they are with their virtual conferences, and half (50.8 percent) report being very satisfied. Another 38.5 percent report being somewhat satisfied.

When it comes to satisfaction with the specific aspects of virtual conferences probed by the survey, the very satisfied group is at least

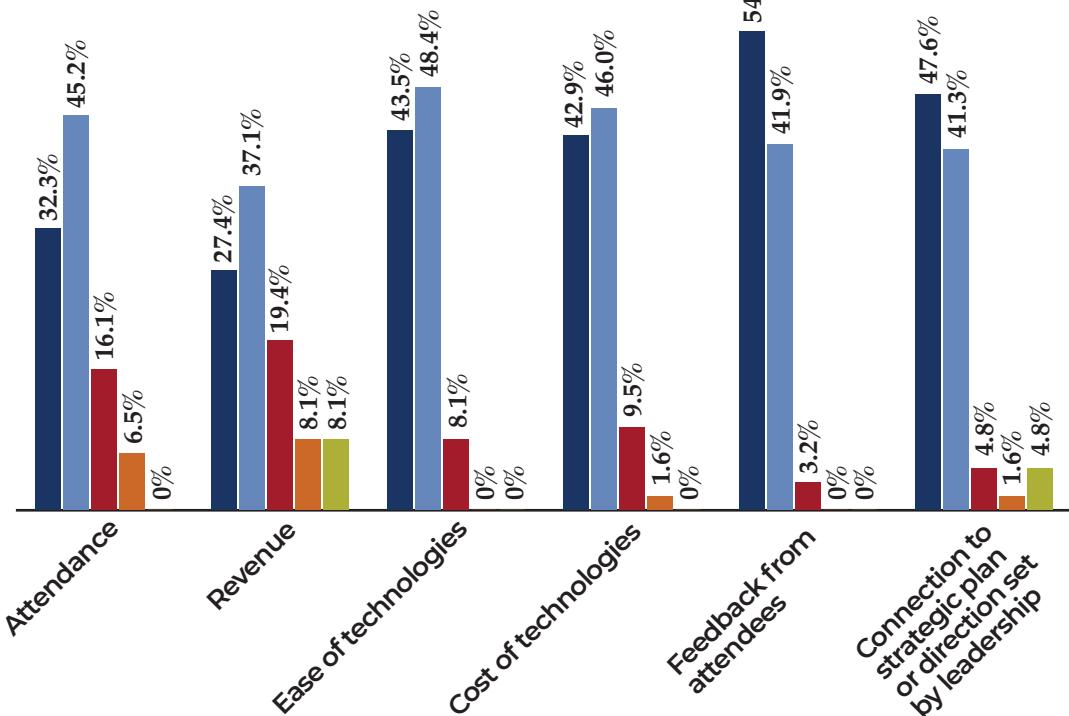


Overall, how satisfied was your organization with its virtual conference? (65 responses)

- Very satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

How satisfied or dissatisfied was your organization with its virtual conference in terms of the specific items below? (63 responses)

- | Satisfaction Level | Attendance | Revenue | Ease of technologies | Cost of technologies | Feedback from attendees | Connection to strategic plan or direction set by leadership |
|-----------------------|------------|---------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Very satisfied | 32.3% | 27.4% | 43.5% | 42.9% | 54.8% | 47.6% |
| Somewhat satisfied | 45.2% | 37.1% | 48.4% | 46.0% | 41.9% | 41.3% |
| Somewhat dissatisfied | 16.1% | 19.4% | 8.1% | 9.5% | 3.2% | 4.8% |
| Very dissatisfied | 6.5% | 8.1% | 0% | 1.6% | 0% | 1.6% |
| Not applicable | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 4.8% |



marginally smaller than the very-satisfied-overall group for every item except feedback from attendees (54.8 percent).

After attendee feedback, the other areas of highest satisfaction deal with connection to the organization's strategic plan or the direction set by the leadership (47.6 percent), ease of technologies used (43.5 percent), and cost of technologies used (42.9 percent).

Revenue and attendance are the most dissatisfying dimensions. Over a fifth of respondents indicate they are somewhat or very dissatisfied with revenue (27.5 percent) and with attendance (22.6 percent).

Virtual Conferences Characterized As Successful

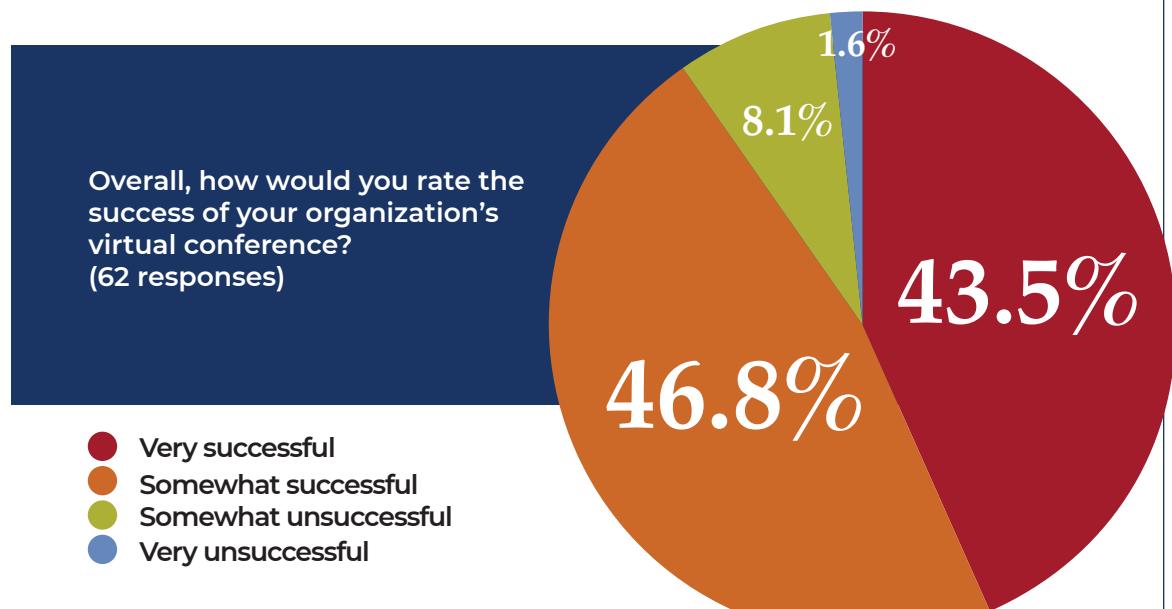
Over 90 percent of respondents rate their virtual conferences as very successful (43.5 percent) or somewhat successful (46.8 percent). Only a single respondent characterizes their virtual conference as very unsuccessful.

We didn't offer any definition of success or suggest metrics, but Sondra Reis of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits offers a sound perspective on arguably the most important metric: "The metric really is, are we offering something that people want to access? It's not necessarily about the total numbers; it's about the indication that you get from the market about the value of what you're doing."

PORTRAIT OF SUCCESS

We found organizations that consider themselves very successful are significantly more likely than all respondents who have previously held a virtual conference to do these things:

- Have a formal, documented strategy for their virtual conferences (40.7 versus 20.7 percent).



- Report that the number of registrations exceeded expectations (59.3 versus 33.3 percent).
- Measure whether learning occurs at their virtual conference through evaluation questions that align with learning objectives (88.9 versus 76.2 percent).
- Indicate they want their virtual conference to break even or deliver positive net revenue (96.3 versus 85.3 percent). In keeping with that financial goal, the very successful are more likely to charge the same for the virtual conference as they do for a comparable place-based event (45.5 versus 30.4 percent) rather than less.
- Offer continuing education credit for all or parts of the virtual conference (66.7 versus 53.9 percent).
- Identify themselves as very satisfied with their virtual conference overall (88.9 versus 50.8 percent) and very satisfied in all six specific categories we probed. High satisfaction with revenue shows the widest variance with the very successful coming in 30 points ahead of respondents overall (57.7 versus 27.4 percent). In the five other categories—attendee feedback, connection to the strategic plan or the direction set by leadership, cost and ease of technologies used, and attendance—high satisfaction is on average 20 points ahead for the very successful group compared to respondents overall.

The data points where the very successful tend to diverge from all respondents are not on tactics and logistical decision, suggesting there are many types of and approaches to successful virtual conferences and that success resists being boiled down to a pat list of best practices.

Lessons Learned Touch on Strategy, the Medium, Interaction and Engagement, and a Growth Mindset

We asked survey respondents who have previously held at least one virtual conference to share any lessons learned. In addition to advice to allow for as long a timeline as possible (things will inevitably go wrong or take longer than planned, especially if you rely on volunteer presenters whose sense of urgency about their session may not match yours) and admonitions to test, test, test and rehearse, rehearse, rehearse (especially with speakers and facilitators who may be new to online delivery), lessons shared fall into four areas: start with strategy, be mindful of the medium, design for interaction and engagement, and adopt a growth mindset. These are also areas we heard about in the supplemental interviews we conducted.

START WITH STRATEGY

While only 20.7 percent of respondents who have held a virtual conference have a formal, documented strategy for virtual conferences in place, several comments emphasize the importance of starting with strategy:

- “Begin with a strategy, convince your board to make the financial commitment, get the right staff members to lead the development and execution, and spend the necessary marketing dollars to advocate for virtual learning experiences.”

- “Have clearly defined expectations—what do you want to accomplish, what do you want to learn? What are your measures of success? Understand your risk tolerance. Will your organization be okay with not meeting attendance and revenue goals and treat it as a learning experience?”
- “Establish a clear purpose—know why you’re offering the virtual event. Does it fit into your organization’s strategy, assuming you have one...? Build a true business model if you’re going to attach financial expectations.”

As part of your strategy work, factor in the current moment. “Virtual conferences will address the needs of specific audiences and will likely trend during economic downturns or public health crises,” notes one survey respondent, who goes on to share that “in the last two weeks, we have experienced an uptick in membership, expressly because they want to take advantage of virtual learning in an era where in-person learning is not an option.”

“Disaggregate the model; break it down,” recommends Veronica Diaz of EDUCAUSE as a starting point. She suggests you look at the elements that have traditionally been part of your place-based conferences: networking, keynotes, workshops, exhibits, etc. “Then really look at who the audience is for those products,” she suggests, “because at the end of the day, those are all products.” Some aspects may translate easily to a virtual format; others may need to be re-imagined. Ask questions of the relevant stakeholders to find out what they truly value. Don’t assume you know. “To the extent that you can try to sell a smaller, not so all-inclusive product, I think that’s a really good starting point,” she says. “This is the time for creativity.”

Also make sure you have a content strategy to support your virtual conference strategy. “If you didn’t have a content strategy before,” says Diaz, “you really need to have one now.” As a practical example of a content strategy, one survey respondent shares, “We use the most popular sessions presented at our annual conference as the basis for our virtual conference.”

“Disaggregate the model.”

BE MINDFUL OF THE MEDIUM

Respondents emphasize the need to consider choices in light of online delivery, so the virtual medium can become a benefit, not an afterthought or, worse, a hindrance:

- “Be sure not to copy / paste the face-to-face experience into a virtual experience. It needs to be adapted and designed according to the constraints and opportunities of the online world.”

- “Design for online. Replicating and delivering place-based content ‘as is’ online is not good.”
- “Acknowledge that it is different, and look to take advantage of it being different. Do NOT try to recreate things in the same way; think about the result not the method.”
- “Do not get caught up in the drawbacks of not being in-person.”

Courses of ASHA makes an interesting point that the virtual medium may allow more latitude to address emerging issues because attendees don’t have to have to give up tried-and-true practical content to explore new topics when they have access to recordings of all concurrent sessions. “An emerging issue might fall flat in person when it’s competing with really practical sessions at the same time slot,” he notes.

The virtual format can also be more appropriate than face-to-face options for certain audience segments. The Minnesota Council of Nonprofits developed its first virtual conference specifically for “small-development shops,” which they define as organizations with two or fewer full-time employees working on fundraising. “What we hear from them is that the examples of fundraising from large institutions are just overwhelming and not applicable,” says Reis. “So we really felt like we were creating the right place for them [with the virtual conference], where they didn’t have to worry about travel costs. All they had to do was pay for the registration fee.”

Sheila Guston, a member of the Association for Healthcare Documentation Integrity board of directors, points out that going virtual opens up new options for speakers. “Not only did virtual open up attendance for all of our members, globally and stateside, but it also opened up possibilities for speakers,” says Guston. “We’re no longer limited to a 60-mile radius of whatever geographic location we picked for a particular year’s conference.”

Shannon Lockwood, events and programs manager at NIGP: The Institute for Public Procurement, has found that having a host who can put a bow around the experience and tie the sessions together is extremely helpful in the context of their virtual conferences. “Having a host makes a really big difference in terms of continuity,” she says.

DESIGN FOR INTERACTION AND ENGAGEMENT

In the interviews and the open-ended survey responses, the need to proactively plan for and scaffold attendee interaction comes up again and again.

“Prep speakers to some of the finer points of a virtual presentation versus an in-person presentation. It’s much more challenging to engage virtually than in person,” notes one respondent. Another survey respondent notes that the lack of input from attendees can strain presenter performance: “Even though our faculty were skilled, the overall tone seemed very rehearsed and not as interactive as we had hoped.”

“The thing that still surprises me about offering virtual conferences,” says Reis, “is that it is very hard to convince the breakout session speakers to be interactive.” Meagan O’Toole, executive director at the New York County

Psychiatric Society, notes that the switch to virtual made necessary by COVID means she and her team are “working out the social component and how to do social things online.”

Diaz of EDUCAUSE puts in a plug for making the virtual as social as possible. “Try to retain the human element in whatever you do.” And she suggests that size may be a factor: “I think the bigger you go, the harder it is to personalize and humanize your experience.”

But there may be benefits of the online format, even when it comes to the social aspects. “I think there’s more direct learner-to-speaker interaction at our online conferences than there are at our in-person conferences,” says Coursesn of ASHA.

ADOPT A GROWTH MINDSET

Mindset is the frame of mind and perspective we bring to anything we do or experience in life—including designing and delivering virtual conferences. As Dr. Carol Dweck explains in *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, if you have a fixed mindset, you believe “your qualities are carved in stone.” A growth mindset, on the other hand, is founded on the “belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts.”

Though they don’t mention growth mindset by name, these responses speak to how a curious, open, iterative approach to virtual conferences can help your organization be resilient and persevere even when results are inconclusive or disappointing.

- “We’re still learning and experimenting—taking baby steps towards a vision.”
- “Just do it. It’s okay to learn as you go. It’s the future for continuing education.”
- “We’re just getting started, so we were okay with a smaller attendance. We’re now assessing process and how we want to grow and make it sustainable operationally. I’d say that you want to start with something small and very manageable and then build from there if possible.”

“Don’t be afraid,” says O’Toole. “Obviously, you have to make your investment proportional to what you can manage, but there’s really not a ton to lose. I think right now, particularly, people are open to the online environment, and they’re willing to try things out, and they don’t expect everything to be perfect yet. So it’s a good time to try things.”

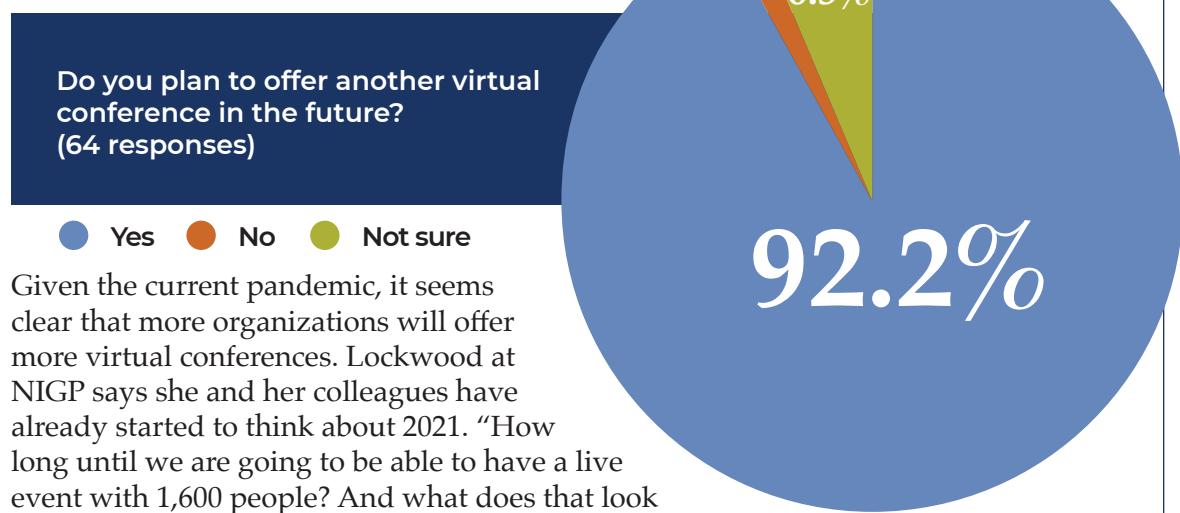
Coursesn advocates for more fun: “One thing I’d like to include more in our events period is just fun.”

The Future of Virtual Conferences

One indicator of the future of virtual conferences is whether the organizations that have held one plan to do so again.

Of organizations that have held a virtual conference in the past, only a single respondent plans to abandon the format. A handful of organizations (6.3

percent) are unsure if they will offer another. An overwhelming 92.2 percent say they will offer another.



Given the current pandemic, it seems clear that more organizations will offer more virtual conferences. Lockwood at NIGP says she and her colleagues have already started to think about 2021. "How long until we are going to be able to have a live event with 1,600 people? And what does that look like? The metric of being able to test—whether it's just thermal testing or if it's COVID-19 testing that has to happen for every attendee at an event—what's the financial burden of bringing all those people together until there is a viable vaccine? Can your organization support the cost of hosting a live event, or does it just make more sense to stay virtual?"

"COVID is giving us an opportunity to double-down on what we think we know about virtual conferences," continues Lockwood, and she thinks expectations of virtual events will mature quickly:

We've only been doing virtual conferences for a year and a half at NIGP. Other people have been doing them for a month and a half. We're going to have to continue to push the envelope in terms of what we're willing to put out as part of a virtual event, whether that's including Zoom dance parties or happy hours or virtual galas. If we're not pushing the envelope of what a virtual conference is, we are going to be light-years behind all of these companies or associations that hired white-glove service to make it happen because those white-glove service providers are already thinking, "What's next?"

Diaz of EDUCAUSE says, "One opportunity I'm looking at is how you reuse content differently in the future. When we go back to a face-to-face world, whenever that is, I think we're going to do much more of a hybrid model, where the face-to-face encounter is smaller and less expensive."

Coursesn of ASHA says, "It's highly unlikely that this will be your last online conference. So plan for the best experience that you can deliver in the most cost-and time-efficient way possible."

While many organizations are yet to try a virtual conference, the use of the format across a diverse range of organizations proves its viability and value, which will likely be further buoyed by the lasting impact of the COVID-19 era. ▶▶



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About Tagoras

Publisher of the Report

This report is published by Tagoras, Inc. (www.tagoras.com), which was co-founded by Jeff Cobb and Celisa Steele.

At Tagoras (pronounced tah-GOR-us), we advise the learning businesses, service providers, and investment firms that serve the global market for adult lifelong learning, continuing education, and professional development. Through market assessment, market amplification, and advisory services, we help clients maximize their reach, revenue, and impact.



We are the founders and hosts of the annual Learning • Technology • Design™ (LTD) virtual conference (ltd.leadinglearning.com) and hosts of the weekly Leading Learning Podcast (www.leadinglearning.com/podcast). Other Tagoras reports include *Association Learning + Technology*.

Celisa Steele

Celisa Steele has led the development of successful online education sites with smaller groups like the Frameworks Institute and the Alliance of Chicago Community Health Services and large national and multinational organizations like the American Red Cross, the American College of Radiology, the Society for Human Resource Management, and WebJunction, an initiative of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Celisa is a managing director at Tagoras, where she serves as editor-in-chief of the company's research publications. She was co-founder and chief operating officer of Isoph, one of the leading providers of e-learning services to the nonprofit sector. She also served as vice president of operations at LearnSomething. Prior to Isoph, she worked in creative services at Quisic, a developer of high-end online course content for major universities and Global 2000 companies. Before joining Quisic, Celisa worked in curriculum development for the not-for-profit Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the Jordan Institute for Families at the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

A veteran of the e-learning world, Celisa served on the research committee of The Learning Guild and has served multiple times as a judge in Brandon Hall's annual e-learning awards.

Celisa is a published poet (www.celisasteele.com) and served as the poet laureate of Carrboro, North Carolina, from 2013 to 2016.

Jeff Cobb

A managing director at Tagoras, Jeff Cobb has spent more than two decades immersed in the global market for adult lifelong learning as an entrepreneur, consultant, teacher, and author. He was co-founder and chief executive officer of Isoph, a leading provider of e-learning technologies and services to associations. He has also served as senior vice president of business development for Quisic, an e-learning partner to top-tier business schools and Fortune 500 companies, and as vice president of business development for LearnSomething.

Jeff is a respected expert on the global market for lifelong learning and author of *Leading the Learning Revolution*. He currently serves on the governing board of NIGP: The Institute for Public Procurement, to which he was specifically appointed as an education thought leader. He has previously served on the Professional Development Section Council of the American Society of Association Executives, the research committee of The Learning Guild, and the editorial board of Innovate.

Jeff is also a keynote speaker focused on helping individuals and organizations leverage the power of learning to navigate change, drive innovation, and shape a brighter future. More information about his speaking is available on his personal Web site at www.jeffthomascobb.com/speaking. ▶



Appendix: Survey Data

We're grateful to the organizations that took the time to participate in our online survey about virtual conferences between March 19 and April 17, 2020.

Of the 418 survey responses recorded, 361 qualified and are included in the results presented in this appendix. Note that this is a non-statistical survey.

All Respondents

The following questions were asked of all respondents.

EXPERIENCE WITH VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

A virtual conference is a Web-based event that replicates many aspects of a traditional place-based conference, meeting, or trade show. It may take place on a standalone basis or in conjunction with a place-based conference (i.e., a "hybrid" event). Virtual conferences feature multiple sessions (not just a single Webinar or Webcast) and may include keynote presentations, training and education workshops, discussion areas, social networking opportunities, exhibit areas for vendors, and various other features. Activities in a virtual conference may take place in real time (synchronously), on demand (asynchronously), or some combination of the two. Has your organization previously offered a virtual conference? (361 responses)

Yes	21.6%
No, but plan to in the next 12 months	66.2%
No, and don't plan to in the next 12 months	12.2%

EXPERIENCE WITH PLACE-BASED EVENTS

Has your organization previously offered a place-based conference, meeting, or trade show as part of the value it offers to customers or members? (361 responses)

Yes	90.3%
No	9.7%

TYPE OF ORGANIZATION

Which of the following best characterizes your organization? (361 responses)

Charitable or philanthropic organization	6.1%
Association with only or primarily individual members (e.g., professional society)	38.2%
Association with only or primarily organizational members (e.g., trade association)	21.6%
Educational institution	5.5%
User group or customer community	0.8%
For-profit business larger than one person	14.1%
Sole proprietorship (including single-person LLC)	5.5%
Other	8.0%

INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIP

This question was asked only of respondents identifying their organization as an association or user group or customer community. How many active individual members does your organization currently have? (216 responses)

1,000 or less	19.4%
1,001 to 5,000	25.0%
5,001 to 10,000	14.8%
10,001 to 25,000	12.5%
25,001 to 50,000	6.9%
50,001 to 100,000	3.2%
More than 100,000	6.0%
We have only organizational members.	12.0%

ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERSHIP

This question was asked only of respondents identifying their organization as an association or user group or customer community. How many active organizational members does your organization currently have? (209 responses)

Less than 100	15.8%
101 to 200	15.8%
201 to 500	10.0%
501 to 1,000	10.5%
1,001 to 5,000	11.5%
More than 5,000	3.3%
We have only individual members.	33.0%

GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

Which best describes the geographic focus of your organization (i.e., which best indicates the areas in which you actively solicit members or customers)? (338 responses)

Single-community or municipality focus	2.1%
Multiple-community focus within one state	3.6%
Single-state or province focus	11.8%
Multi-state or multi-province focus	4.7%
National focus	44.7%
International focus	33.1%

INDUSTRY

Which of the following best describes your organization's industry? (The options are based on the North American Industry Classification System.) (335 responses)

Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting	0.6%
Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction	0.3%
Utilities	0.6%
Construction	2.7%
Manufacturing	1.5%
Wholesale trade	0.3%
Retail trade	1.2%
Transportation and warehousing	0.6%
Information	1.8%
Finance and insurance	4.8%
Real estate and rental and leasing	0.9%
Professional, scientific, and technical services	18.8%
Management of companies and enterprises	1.2%
Administrative and support and waste management and remediation services	0.0%
Educational services	18.8%
Health care and social assistance	16.1%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	3.0%
Accommodation and food services	0.6%
Other services (except public administration)	5.1%
Public administration	2.1%
Other	19.1%

CREDENTIALS

Does your organization offer a credential or provide education in support of a credential in the field or industry you serve? Credentials include licensure, certification, accreditation, recognition designations, and certificates. (333 responses)

Yes, and the credential is required	15.9%
Yes, but the credential is not required	40.8%
No	36.9%
Not sure	1.8%
Other	4.5%

STAFF SIZE

How many paid staff does your organization currently have? (323 responses)

Mean	767.5
Median	16.0

ANNUAL REVENUE

What is your organization's annual revenue (in U.S. dollars)? (309 responses)

Less than \$500,000	19.7%
\$500,001 to \$1 million	15.5%
\$1,000,001 to \$5 million	31.7%
\$5,000,001 to \$10 million	10.7%
\$10,000,001 to \$50 million	13.6%
\$50,000,001 to \$250 million	3.9%
\$250,000,001 to \$500 million	2.3%
\$500,000,001 to \$1 billion	0.3%
More than \$1 billion	2.3%

Respondents Who Plan to Offer a Virtual Conference in the Coming Year

The following questions were asked only of respondents indicating their organizations have not previously held a virtual conference and but plan to offer one in the next 12 months.

REASON FOR PLANNING TO OFFER A VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

Why is your organization planning to offer a virtual conference? Check all that apply. (217 responses)

To reach customers or members who would not otherwise attend our place-based events	54.4%
To compensate for declining attendance at our place-based events	23.5%
To reduce the costs for our organization to offer a conference	21.7%
To reduce the costs for our customers or members to attend a conference	26.3%
To be perceived as embracing cutting-edge approaches to serving our members or customers	31.3%
To help familiarize our customers or members with online education and meeting technologies	15.2%
To support an overall goal of delivering more services online	32.7%
To be the first to market and offer a virtual conference before the competition does	12.0%
To be environmentally friendly	10.1%
Due to COVID-19	92.6%
Due to extreme weather events	0.9%
Due to another force majeure or act of God event	3.2%
Other	6.9%

PLANS FOR TRADE SHOW/VIRTUAL EXHIBITS

Will the virtual conference you are planning include a trade show component (e.g., virtual exhibits)? (208 responses)

Yes	36.1%
No	22.1%
Not sure	41.8%

Respondents Who Have Not Held a Virtual Conference and Have No Near-Term Plans for One

The following questions were asked only of respondents indicating their organizations have not previously held a virtual conference and have no plans to offer one in the next 12 months.

REASON FOR NO VIRTUAL CONFERENCE YET AND NO NEAR-TERM PLANS

Which of the following statements best reflects why you have not offered a virtual conference and do not plan to offer one in the next 12 months? (44 responses)

We currently offer meetings and / or other types of events, but a virtual conference doesn't make sense for our organization.	20.5%
We don't currently offer meetings and / or other types of events, and a virtual conference doesn't make sense for our organization.	11.4%
We have plans to offer a virtual conference, but it will not be offered in the next 12 months.	22.7%
We see one or more significant barriers to offering a virtual conference.	25.0%
Other	20.5%

CONCERN ABOUT OFFERING A VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

This question was asked only of respondents indicating they see one or more significant barriers to offering a virtual conference. What are the biggest concerns your organization sees in offering a virtual conference? Please check no more than three that your organization considers most important. (11 responses)

We're concerned about the cost of offering a virtual conference.	27.3%
We're concerned about the complexity of the technology.	54.5%
We're concerned we won't get the level of attendance we hope for.	72.7%
We're concerned it will hurt attendance at our place-based events.	27.3%
We're concerned about the quality of the learning experience.	27.3%
We don't think our customers or members want a virtual conference.	54.5%
Offering a virtual conference doesn't make sense for our type of organization.	18.2%
Other	18.2%

Respondents Who Have Held a Virtual Conference

The following questions were asked of respondents indicating their organizations have previously held a virtual conference.

STRATEGY FOR VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

Does your organization have a formal, documented strategy for virtual conferences? (82 responses)

Yes	20.7%
No	59.8%
Not sure	19.5%

YEARS OF EXPERIENCE WITH VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

For how many calendar years has your organization offered at least one virtual conference? (81 responses)

Mean	3.2
Median	2.0
Mode	1.0

NUMBER OF DIFFERENT VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

How many different virtual conferences has your organization offered? Please do not include repetitions of the same virtual conference (e.g., if you've offered the same conference annually for the past three years, count that as a single virtual conference). (79 responses)

Mean	5.4
Median	1.0
Mode	1.0

REASON FOR OFFERING A VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

Why did your organization decide to offer a virtual conference? Check all that apply. (If your organization has offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical event.) (73 responses)

To reach customers or members who would not otherwise attend our place-based events	75.3%
To compensate for declining attendance at our place-based events	16.4%
To reduce the costs for our organization to offer a conference	19.2%
To reduce the costs for our customers or members to attend a conference	32.9%
To be perceived as embracing cutting-edge approaches to serving our members or customers	50.7%
To help familiarize our customers or members with online education and meeting technologies	21.9%
To support an overall goal of delivering more services online	52.1%
To be the first to market and offer a virtual conference before the competition does	16.4%
To be environmentally friendly	6.8%
Due to COVID-19	42.5%
Due to extreme weather events	5.5%
Due to another force majeure or act of God event	6.8%
Other	8.2%

ELEMENTS OF A VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

Which of the following elements did your virtual conference include? Check all that apply. (If your organization has offered more than one virtual conference, please indicate the elements a typical virtual conference at your organization includes.) (73 responses)

Live sessions delivered in real time	87.7%
Pre-recorded sessions with scheduled playback	23.3%
Pre-recorded sessions with on-demand playback	38.4%
Discussion boards	46.6%
Real-time text communication between participants	69.9%
Real-time voice communication between participants	17.8%
Avatars for participants	4.1%
Virtual exhibit hall	27.4%
Archives after the virtual conference ends	76.7%
3D environment	2.7%
Other	13.7%

RELATIONSHIP TO A PLACE-BASED EVENT

Which of the following best describes the relationship of your virtual conference to a place-based event? (Remember if your organization has offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical virtual conference at your organization.) (72 responses)

The virtual conference was a standalone event not associated with a place-based event.	44.4%
The virtual conference was associated with a place-based event and held at the same time.	40.3%
The virtual conference was associated with a place-based event but held at a different time.	5.6%
Other	9.7%

LENGTH OF THE VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

How long did your virtual conference last, not including any time after the event when archives were accessible? (Remember if your organization has offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical virtual conference at your organization.) (70 responses)

Less than one day	25.7%
One day to one and a half days	22.9%
More than one and a half days to two days	11.4%
More than two days to two and a half days	11.4%
More than two and a half days to three days	12.9%
More than three days	11.4%
Other	4.3%

REGISTRATIONS

How did registrations for your virtual conference compare to your expectations? (If your organization has offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical event.) (69 responses)

The number of registrations exceeded our expectations.	33.3%
The number of registrations was about what we expected.	46.4%
The number of registrations was lower than we expected.	20.3%

ATTENDANCE

Approximately what percentage of registrants actually attended your virtual conference? (If you have offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical event.) (67 responses)

Mean	62.2%
Median	67.0%

ATTENDANCE COMPARED TO A PLACE-BASED EVENT

How did attendance at your virtual conference compare to typical attendance for a comparable place-based event? (If you have offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on typical event.) (68 responses)

Attendance was greater than for a comparable place-based event.	19.1%
Attendance was the same as for a comparable place-based event.	16.2%
Attendance was less than for a comparable place-based event.	52.9%
We do not offer a comparable place-based event.	11.8%

EVALUATIONS

Did your organization collect formal evaluations from the virtual conference attendees? (If your organization has offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical event.) (69 responses)

Yes	85.5%
No	14.5%

TYPES OF EVALUATIONS

This question was asked only of respondents indicating they collected formal evaluations at their virtual conference. Which types of formal evaluations did your organization collect from the virtual conference attendees? Check all that apply. (If your organization has offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical event.) (59 responses)

Evaluations of the overall virtual conference	94.9%
Evaluations of each session	81.4%
Evaluations of each speaker	47.5%

EVALUATION RESULTS COMPARED TO A PLACE-BASED EVENT

This question was asked only of respondents indicating they collected formal evaluations at their virtual conference. How did evaluations for the virtual conference compare to evaluations you typically receive for a comparable place-based event? (If you have offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical event.) (57 responses)

Attendees gave higher evaluation scores for the virtual conference.	7.0%
Attendees gave the same or very similar evaluation scores for the virtual conference.	75.4%
Attendees gave lower evaluation scores for the virtual conference.	7.0%
We do not offer a comparable place-based event.	10.5%

MEASURING LEARNING

Did you measure whether learning occurred at your virtual conference (e.g., through assessments or evaluation questions tied to learning objectives)? (If your organization has offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical event.) (67 responses)

Yes	31.3%
No	68.7%

HOW LEARNING WAS MEASURED

This question was asked only of respondents indicating they measured whether learning occurred at their virtual conference. How did you measure whether learning occurred at your virtual conference? Check all that apply. (If your organization has offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical event.) (21 responses)

Through evaluation questions that align with learning objectives	76.2%
Through post-conference assessments or follow-ups	42.9%
Through post-session assessments or follow-ups	38.1%
Through a combination of pre-conference and post-conference assessment	14.3%
Through evaluations conducted a month or more following the virtual conference	9.5%

FINANCIAL GOALS

Which statement best describes the financial goals of your virtual conference? (If you have offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical event.) (67 responses)

Wanted it to be self-sustaining (i.e., at least break even), but profitability (positive net revenue) wasn't required	25.4%
Wanted it to be self-sustaining and profitable (positive net revenue)	59.7%
Didn't need it to be self-sustaining	14.9%

CHARGING REGISTRANTS

Did you charge registrants for the virtual conference? (If you have offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical event.) (66 responses)

We directly charged registrants to attend.	65.2%
We indirectly charged registrants by including access to the virtual conference as part of a larger purchase (e.g., a membership fee or subscription package).	9.1%
We directly charged some registrants (e.g., non-members) and indirectly charged others (e.g., members).	6.1%
We did not charge.	15.2%
Other	4.5%

REGISTRATION FEE COMPARED TO A PLACE-BASED EVENT

This question was asked only of respondents indicating they charged registrants for the virtual conference, whether directly or indirectly. Which of the following best describes the amount you charged for the virtual conference? (If you have offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical event.) (46 responses)

We charged significantly less than what we charge for a comparable place-based event.	30.4%
We charged somewhat less than what we charge for a comparable place-based event.	39.1%
We charged the same as we charge for a comparable place-based event.	30.4%
We charged somewhat more than what we charge for a comparable place-based event.	0.0%
We charged significantly more than what we charge for a comparable place-based event.	0.0%
We do not offer a comparable place-based event.	0.0%

REVENUE FROM SPONSORS AND EXHIBITORS

Did your virtual conference generate revenue from sponsorships or exhibitor fees? (If you have offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical event.) (64 responses)

Yes, we generated revenue from both sponsorships and exhibitor fees.	20.3%
Yes, we generated revenue from sponsorships.	31.3%
Yes, we generated revenue from exhibitor fees.	4.7%
No, we did not generate revenue from sponsorships or exhibitor fees.	43.8%

CONTINUING EDUCATION CREDIT

Did you offer continuing education credit for attending your virtual conference? (If you have offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on a typical event.) (65 responses)

Yes, we offered continuing education credit for all parts of the virtual conference.	43.1%
Yes, we offered continuing education credit but only for the real-time (synchronous) education sessions.	10.8%
Yes, we offered continuing education credit but only for the on-demand (asynchronous) education sessions.	0.0%
No, we did not offer continuing education credit.	43.1%
Other	3.1%

USE OF SPECIFIC TECHNOLOGIES FOR VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

Which of the following technologies and / or service providers did you use to deliver your virtual conference? Check all that apply. (If you have offered more than one virtual conference, please check technologies you have used for any of your virtual conferences.) (66 responses)

6Connex	4.5%
Adobe Connect	9.1%
Blue Sky eLearn	4.5%
CadmiumCD	1.5%
CE21	0.0%
CommPartners	7.6%
Communique Conferencing	1.5%
Community Brands (Freestone)	4.5%
Digitell	7.6%
Expos2	0.0%
GoToMeeting / Webinar	18.2%
iCohere	3.0%
INXPO (part of Intrado)	6.1%
Mainstream Media	0.0%
Matchbox Virtual Media	0.0%
Meeting Tomorrow	0.0%
ON24	12.1%
Onstream Media	0.0%
Performedia	1.5%
TEOOH	0.0%
vConference	0.0%
Web Courseworks	1.5%
WebEx	7.6%
Zoom	43.9%
Other	27.3%

OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

Overall, how satisfied was your organization with its virtual conference? (If you have offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on typical event.) (65 responses)

Very satisfied	50.8%
Somewhat satisfied	38.5%
Somewhat dissatisfied	7.7%
Very dissatisfied	3.1%

SATISFACTION WITH ASPECTS OF VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

How satisfied or dissatisfied was your organization with its virtual conference in terms of the specific items below? (If you have offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on typical event.) (63 responses)

	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
Attendance	32.3%	45.2%	16.1%	6.5%	0.0%
Revenue	27.4%	37.1%	19.4%	8.1%	8.1%
Ease of the technologies used	43.5%	48.4%	8.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Cost of the technologies used	42.9%	46.0%	9.5%	1.6%	0.0%
Feedback from attendees	54.8%	41.9%	3.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Connection to the organization's strategic plan or the direction set by leadership	47.6%	41.3%	4.8%	1.6%	4.8%

SUCCESS WITH VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

Overall, how would you rate the success of your organization's virtual conference? (If you have offered more than one virtual conference, please answer based on typical event.) (62 responses)

Very successful	43.5%
Somewhat successful	46.8%
Somewhat unsuccessful	8.1%
Very unsuccessful	1.6%

FUTURE VIRTUAL CONFERENCES

Do you plan to offer another virtual conference in the future? (64 responses)

Yes	92.2%
No	1.6%
Not sure	6.3%