

# Virtual meetings



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## What are the prospects?

The sudden emergence of virtual meetings has left many wondering whether these represent an enhancement of more traditional formats or a threat to face-to-face meetings. The answer is likely a bit of both. **By Edgar Hirt**

**T**aking a look at how this issue developed is useful in attempting to determine where it is leading. The rapid emergence of virtual meetings can be attributed to four aspects, any one of which would have advanced the level of interest in this format. However, these appear to be interacting with each other to create a synergy that has resulted in a lot more effect than any might have had on its own. In addition, each is likely to become even more of a factor in the years ahead.

*The recent global recession created much concern over cost management and led to questioning of the value of meetings-related travel*

The first is the lingering effect of the recent global recession, which created much concern over cost management and led to people questioning the value of meetings-related travel. Anything that could enable participation in essential business interactions while reducing or even eliminating related travel expenses was obviously rather attractive in this situation, and virtual meetings certainly met this requirement admirably. The real question was whether or not such meetings could actually



deliver the same kind of results, which brings us to the next point.

At the same time, the technology was improving greatly – what only a few years earlier involved delayed reactions, fuzzy

images and a real sense of disconnection was quickly replaced by real-time interactions with the kind of resolution that was able to convey a lot of the reality of a meeting situation far more effectively. This will only

get better in the future, which means that users can expect further improvement as the various formats evolve. This better technology was logically leading to better outcomes as virtual meetings were delivering more of what a meeting was all about.

After this, the way for virtual meetings was paved by a lot of other forms of electronic interaction that made it much less foreign as a method of relating to transactions. A whole generation had moved into place for whom Internet-based interfacing is the primary means of communication, and these had already penetrated more traditional meetings formats extensively via pre-, post- and intra-communications that were increasingly associated with meetings.

Finally, there were increasing concerns around the effects that meetings, conventions and exhibitions, with their associated travel, were having on sustainability and the environment.

**The future of face to face**

Meetings by definition involve travel, simply in order to gather together people from different places, and while this is probably a lot more efficient than the multitude of smaller meetings that might have to take place in order to achieve the same volume of interactions, these large gatherings made a tempting target for those looking to assign blame for things such as climate change and excessive energy use.

All of this created fertile ground for the promotion of virtual meetings as viable and attractive alternatives. The real question, however, remains: do virtual meetings actually deliver the full spectrum of benefits of their face-to-face counterparts, and if not, does it really matter in light of the other benefits to be achieved, such as those described above? For example, the cost savings realised



**San Diego**

The 2011 AIPC Annual Conference and 53rd General Assembly will be held in San Diego, USA, from 28 June to 1 July. Themed 'It's All About Change', programme content will tie together a variety of sessions intended to explore not only what has changed and is changing, but also where these changes may lead and what centres are doing and must do in response. The sessions will combine the expertise of global observers with a finger on the pulse of international economic prospects with the perspectives of clients, suppliers and centres themselves to provide the best possible overview of how transition is shaping the industry. And along with the results of new research and technologies, the event will provide expertise on how centres can respond to all these factors in a coherent way. For more information about the conference, e-mail [marianne.de.raay@aipc.org](mailto:marianne.de.raay@aipc.org).

in a period of economic concern will remain attractive even as economic conditions improve, and sustainability concerns are not likely to go away anytime soon.

The current view of many in the industry is that the need to meet face to face will remain and that more than anything virtual meeting technology will strengthen the value of meetings and

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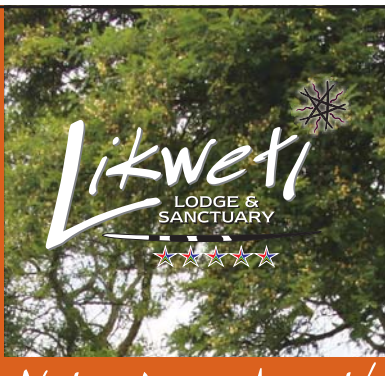
conventions by expanding their scope and reach to participants, presenters and even content that would not otherwise be accessible. Some of the early research supports this notion. However, the real question is whether or not this is a kind of transitory stage that will lead to greater comfort through accessing group discussions and presentations without actually having to attend – and whether, as some now contend, this will drain rather than drive attendance over the longer term.

The fact is, none of us knows the answer to this, and even the answers we are getting today may not be what will actually be the case as both the formats and the technologies evolve even further. However, one thing that can be said is that virtual meetings are now a reality and need to be addressed from this perspective. As professionals involved in the industry, we all need to not simply keep a close eye on how this develops, but actually play as much of a role as we can in its outcome. **35**



**About the author**

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