

AIPC COLUMN BY AIPC PRESIDENT, EDGAR HIRT

Virtual Meetings: What are the Prospects?



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AIPC is the pre-eminent international association of convention centres, with a mission of encouraging, supporting and recognizing excellence in centre management. It's global network of over 165 leading centres in 53 countries, combined with the active involvement of more than 650 centre management professionals ensures a broad and diversified level of industry knowledge and expertise, while its wide variety of program activities supports members in developing and enhancing their skills in the areas of operations, finance, technology, staff development, marketing, client relations and sustainability.

The sudden emergence of virtual meetings as a real factor in the meetings industry has left a lot of people struggling to decide if they represent an enhancement to more traditional formats or a threat that will eventually end up replacing face to face meetings. In reality, the answer is likely a bit of both.

In trying to determine where this issue is leading, it helps to take a look at how it developed. The sudden emergence of virtual meetings can be attributed to four things, any one of which would have advanced the level of interest in this format. However, they appear to be interacting with each other to create a synergy that has resulted in a lot more impact than any might have had on their own. Furthermore, each is likely to become even more of a factor in the years ahead.

The first is the lingering effect of the recent global recession, which created a lot of concern over cost management and led to 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 pretty 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 getting a lot better – what only a few years earlier involved delayed reactions, fuzzy images and a real sense of disconnection has been replaced by real time interactions with the kind of resolution that was able to convey a lot of the reality of a meeting situation far more effectively.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.

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

And, finally, there were increasing concerns around the impacts that meetings, conventions and exhibitions with their associated travel were having on sustainability and environmental concerns. Meetings by definition involve travel simply in order to gather together people from different places and while this is likely 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, they made a tempting target for those looking to assign blame for things like 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 the face of other benefits to be achieved such as those described above? As an example, the cost-savings realized in a period of economic concern are likely to remain attractive even as economic conditions improve, and sustainability concerns aren't 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 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 which will lead to greater comfort with accessing group discussions and presentations without actually having to attend – and if, as some now contend, they will drain rather than drive attendance over the longer term.

The fact is, none of us know the answer to this – and even the answers we are getting today may not be what actually happens as both the formats and the technologies evolve even further. However, the one thing that can be said is that virtual meetings are now a reality and need to be addressed from that 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.