

A return to in-person events? Here's what the data suggests

Article

Trendspotting: While it's hardly back to normal for business travelers, data suggests more are willing to hit the road when it's worth it.

We were [on the ground at Advertising Week NY](#) in person recently, and while there were many attendees, it seemed that in-person attendance was far lower than pre-pandemic levels.

- COVID-19 has cost professional conferences and meetings approximately \$211 billion since the dawn of the pandemic, [per](#) data from the U.S. Travel Association and Tourism Economics.
- Domestic business travel isn't expected to fully recover until 2024, with international business travel not reaching pre-pandemic levels until the following year.
- All told, the pandemic dip is expected to cost \$522 billion in US economic activity.

This got us thinking: Are business travel and conferences on the road to recovery?

What the data says: More people are getting the OK from their bosses to hit the road for conferences.

Two-thirds of professionals say employees are “sometimes” or “usually” allowed to travel—**up from 57%** in July, [per](#) an October 21 poll of the Global Business Travel Association's 503 member companies.

- That figure should only move upward, as **46% expect their companies to resume** business domestic travel within the next 30 to 90 days.

With our on-the-ground coverage of Lisbon's Web Summit this coming week, it's interesting to note that in July, just 26% said employees were “sometimes” or “usually” allowed to travel internationally; that number increased to 42% in GBTA's October survey.

For context, the GBTA has been polling members since February 2020 regarding COVID-19 and its impact on travel.

Non-pandemic factors: As brands are called on to be more transparent in their sustainability efforts, they're looking at the role of business travel—including how restricting travel can help them meet their sustainability goals.

Travel-Related Measures Their Company Has Adopted or Is Likely to Adopt to Meet Its Sustainability Goals According to US Travel Professionals, June 2021

% of respondents



Note: n=89; top 2 responses

Source: Deloitte, "Corporate Travel Survey 2021," Aug 2, 2021

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Plus, virtual and hybrid just isn't the same: Business travel is coming back, in part, due to virtual events' inability to capture the relative magic of in-person relationship-building.

BlueJeans and Forrester Consulting recently conducted a survey of 200 North America-based marketing event decision-makers and found:

- **Nearly 6 in 10 respondents** said, in hindsight, they didn't have enough time to vet the ideal virtual events platform heading into the pandemic.
- 51% consider themselves to be satisfied with their virtual events platform, but **94% encountered issues** with their platform's setup.
- Mid-pandemic, 62% considered having a virtual events strategy to be a critical focus—prior to COVID-19, that number was 40%.
- **71% say that it's difficult to make virtual events accurately mimic the IRL experience**, with 2 in 3 (67%) feeling it's difficult to articulate a brand narrative through virtual events.

Our take: One driver leading to increased interest in-person experiences: they're higher fidelity. For many business professionals, travel is worth the additional expense—though they're likely to be more selective about travel opportunities in 2022 than 2019.

- Virtual and hybrid experiences are far from perfect, which is part of the reason many professionals are open to business travel and in-person conferences again.