



CONFERENCES
IN FLANDERS



Flanders
State of the Art

The changing format of association events

Current attitudes and future aspirations of association executives and professional conference planners towards face-to-face, virtual en hybrid formats for international Conferences & Events.

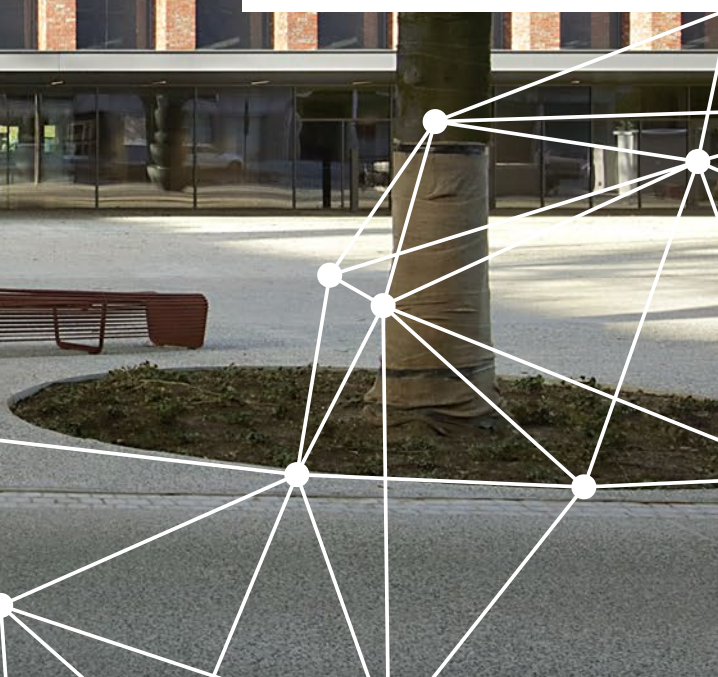
VISITFLANDERS





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1 BACKGROUND

The changing format of association events

Historically, the standard format of international association conferences was face-to-face.

Then came the Covid pandemic, and lockdown restrictions caused that Meetings and conferences could not take place face-to-face. Many organisers hurriedly learned how to hold an event virtually, which was the only alternative available.

In the recovery phase, many events were organised in 'hybrid' format – delegates could choose to attend in person or virtually.

Research conducted previously for VISIT**FLANDERS** showed that many organisers struggled to produce hybrid events well. There was a lack of time to learn how to do it properly, and the technology was also 'playing catch-up'. Therefore, many organisers were relieved to return to face-to-face only events.

However, there are now different reasons why hybrid may become the standard future format of international association conferences.

Attitudes towards climate change are growing increasingly in the direction of protecting the environment, which means reducing travel, especially flying.

Virtual attendance also offers delegates the benefits of saving significant time and cost of travel. Technology and expertise are improving, and so future hybrid events could be much more effective than the hurried efforts to date.

VISIT**FLANDERS** Convention Bureau believes that digital transformation will highly influence the future format of conferences and events. The Flemish conferences and events sector therefore needs to embrace this opportunity.

VISIT**FLANDERS**, together with partners in the sector, has developed **be.digital.flanders**, an initiative to assist organisers, venues and service providers to give state of the art experiences to both virtual and in-person delegates attending hybrid conferences hosted in Flanders.

This will accelerate the drive towards Flanders becoming a sustainable conference destination.

Researching the needs of the market

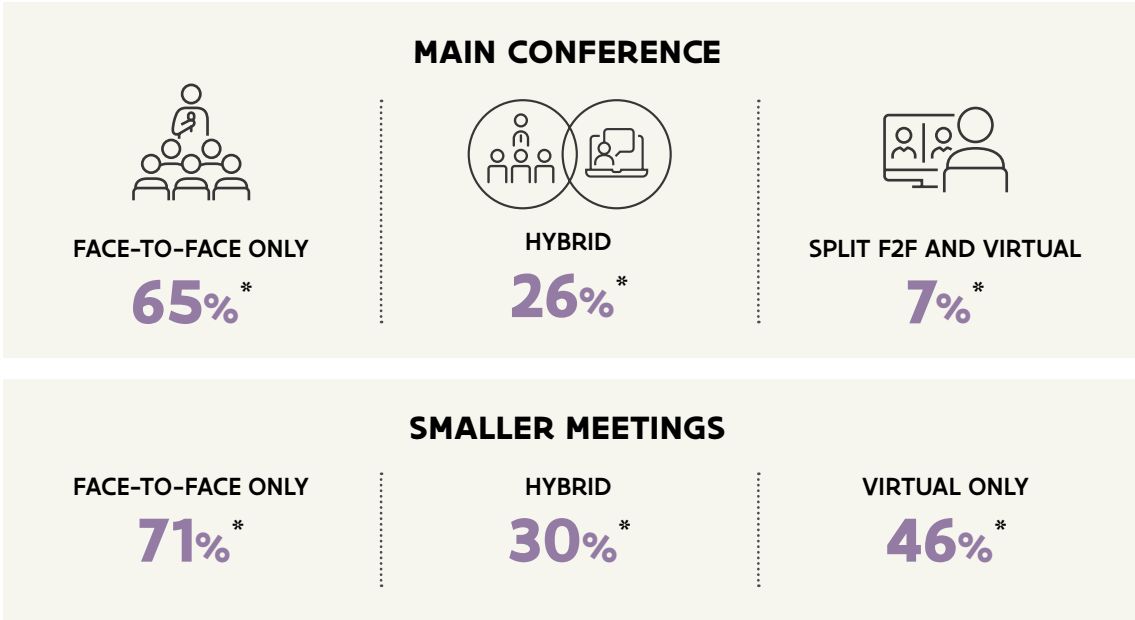
VISIT**FLANDERS** knows that organisers vary in their attitudes towards hybrid events, with some embracing the format and others wishing to stay well away from it. Research was needed to understand the views and experiences of organisers and delegates towards hybrid format in greater detail to inform the development of **be.digital.flanders**' activities.

SRI, an independent market research agency based in Cardiff, UK, was commissioned to undertake the research on behalf of VISIT**FLANDERS**.



2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Current situation



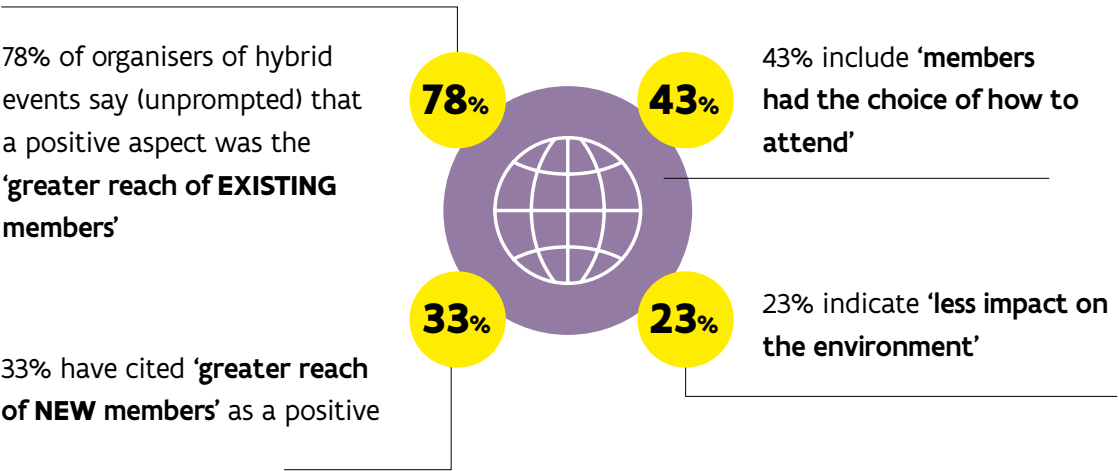
* % of organisers (across all respondent types)

What do delegates want?



Others believe they know what their members want, and it is usually face-to-face contact.

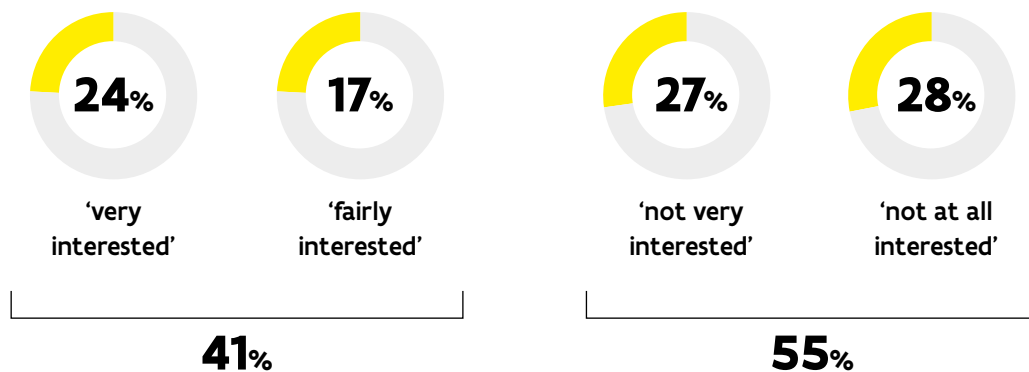
Advantages





Future interest

Level of interest of all organisers (250) in organising hybrid events in the future

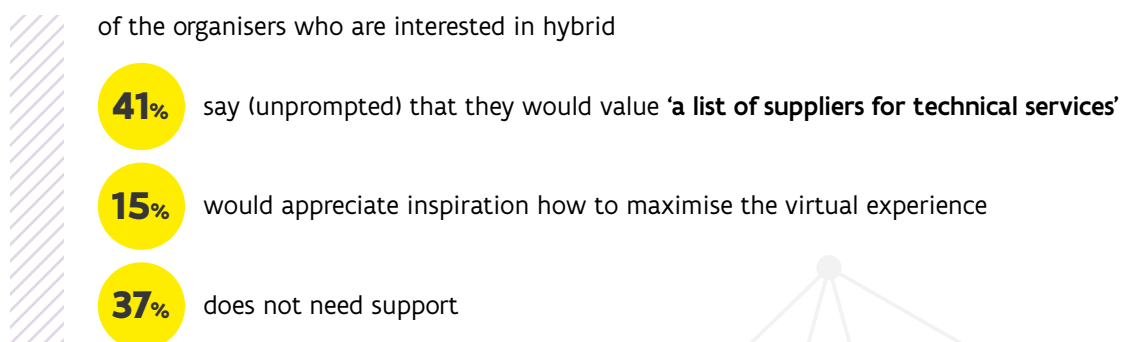


Level of interest tends to depend on how the organiser perceives the balance between the pros and cons.

Although 'face-to-face only' format seems to be currently preferred by organisers and their members, climate change might swing attitudes in the direction of hybrid.

29% of organisers who are not interested in hybrid events admit that attitudes towards climate change mean they may have to embrace the format in the future !!

Support Needed



3 FORMAT OF RECENT CONFERENCES & EVENTS

1. Format of main conference

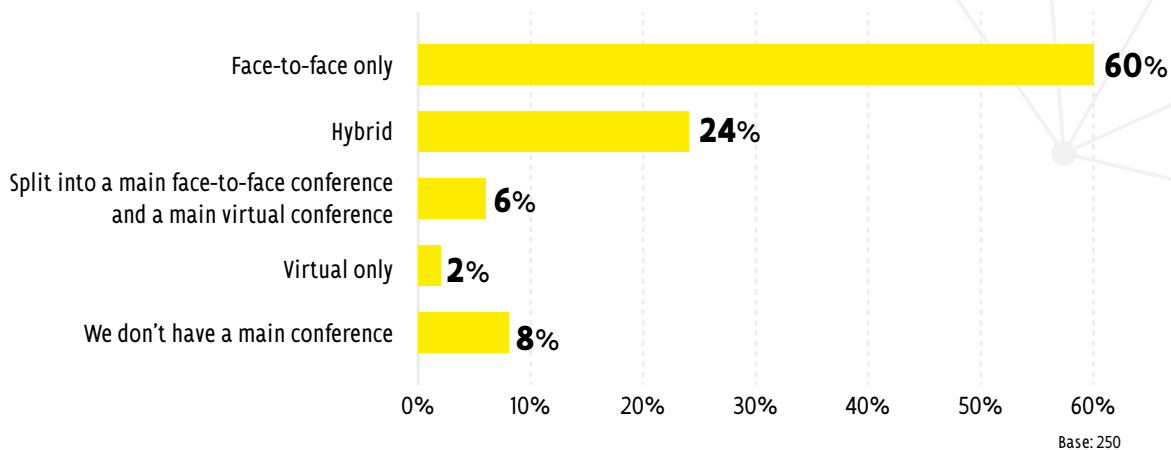


Chart 1: Format of most recent main conference

A. General

Face-to-face only is much more common than hybrid

- As the world emerged from the Covid pandemic and travel became feasible again, there was a **strong appetite for people to meet face-to-face**. As things currently stand, **this desire has not died down**. **Hybrid conferences** do take place, but they are currently much **less common than face-to-face only**.
- Face-to-face only is the most common format for main conferences across all respondent types – in/outside Belgium, Europe-only / multi-continent associations, and all sizes of association.
- Among **global associations**, **15%** say their most recent conference **was split into a main face-to-face event and a main virtual event**.

“We are trying to reach out to younger delegates and people from poorer countries but it’s too expensive for them to come face-to-face so we are looking at hybrid for those delegates ... but it’s challenging as the face-to-face and virtual separately are working more effectively at the moment. Who knows though, hybrid might be a better format in the future. I hope so.”

- Intermediary, Belgium -

B. Face-to-face attendance

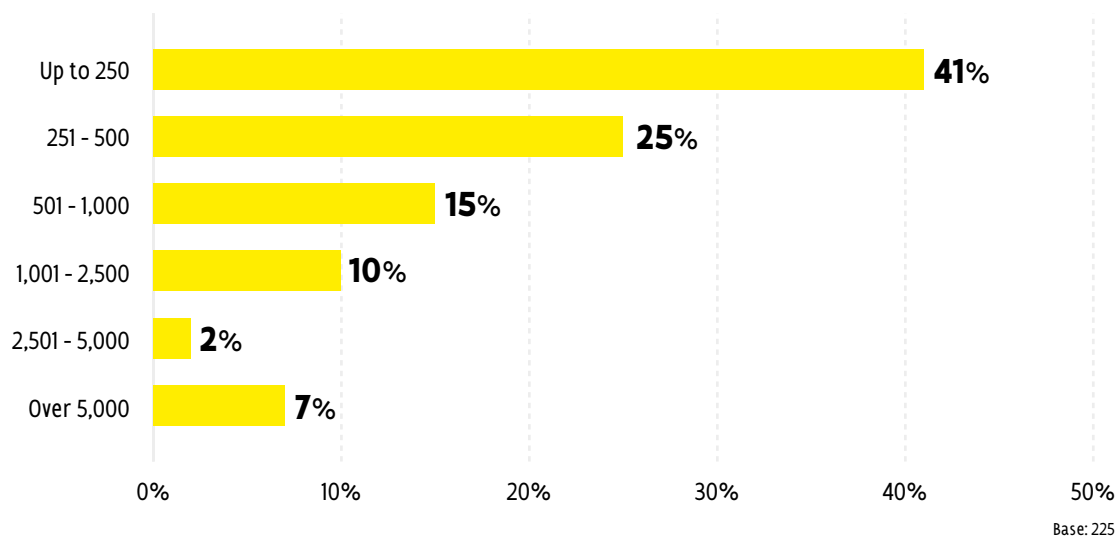


Chart 2: 'in person' attendance at main conference

Association membership size is only a loose predictor of conference size:

- Not all members turn up. Among the 22 associations with over 5,000 members, 50% had fewer than 1,000 delegates turn up to their last main conference.
- It can also work the other way around, as not all conference delegates are necessarily members. Among the smallest associations with fewer than 250 members, 28% had more than 250 delegates at their last main conference.

Size of Main Conference	No. of members in the association			
	Up to 250	251 – 1,000	1,001 – 5,000	Over 5,000
Up to 250	72%	43%	17%	23%
251 – 500	16%	29%	39%	5%
501 – 1,000	6%	14%	25%	23%
1,001 – 2,500	4%	10%	14%	14%
2,501 – 5,000	1%	-	3%	9%
Over 5,000	1%	5%	3%	27%

Table 1: N° of members vs. N° of participants at main conference

C. Virtual attendance

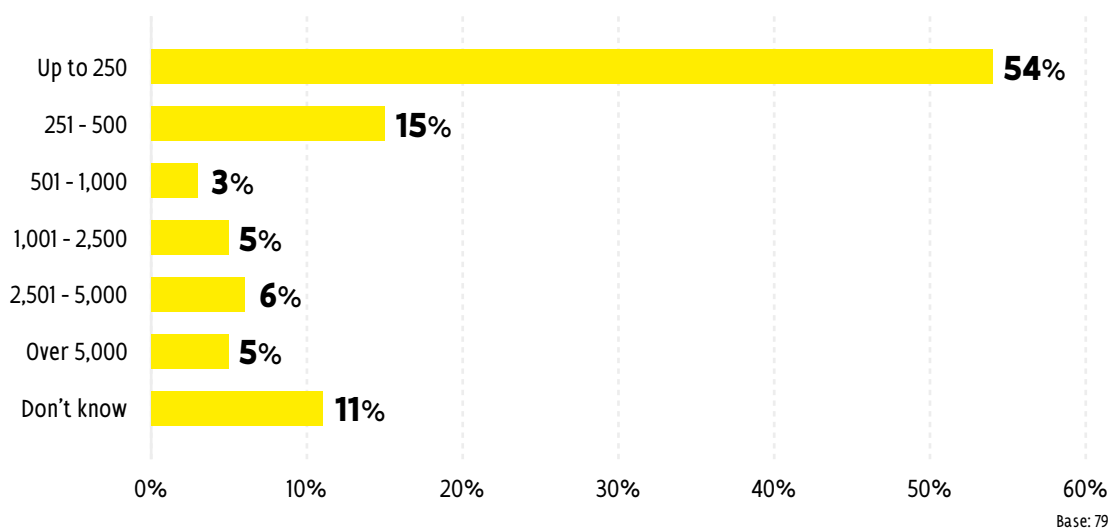


Chart 3: virtual attendance at main conference

Low virtual attendance

- Virtual attendance at main conferences is still at the lower end of the scale, which is a clear indicator that participants still prefer in-person over virtual attendance.
- Further research needs to be done, to investigate how this will evolve in the coming years, with a growing percentage of younger generations as participants.
- 9 organisers (11%) had set up the possibility to attend online but do not know how many delegates do so.

“Having an online platform that allows the organisers to easily analyse the event afterwards is vital ... who saw what?”

- Intermediary, Europe outside Belgium -

In-person vs. virtual at hybrid events

We have compared answers to N° of people in-person vs. virtual attendance at hybrid events. Main conclusion is that face-to-face attendance tends to either outweigh or equal virtual attendance.

Of all hybrid main conferences:

39%

had a higher face-to-face attendance than virtual attendance

60%

were in the same size bracket

1

Only 1 main hybrid conference had a higher virtual attendance face-to-face



2. Format of smaller meetings

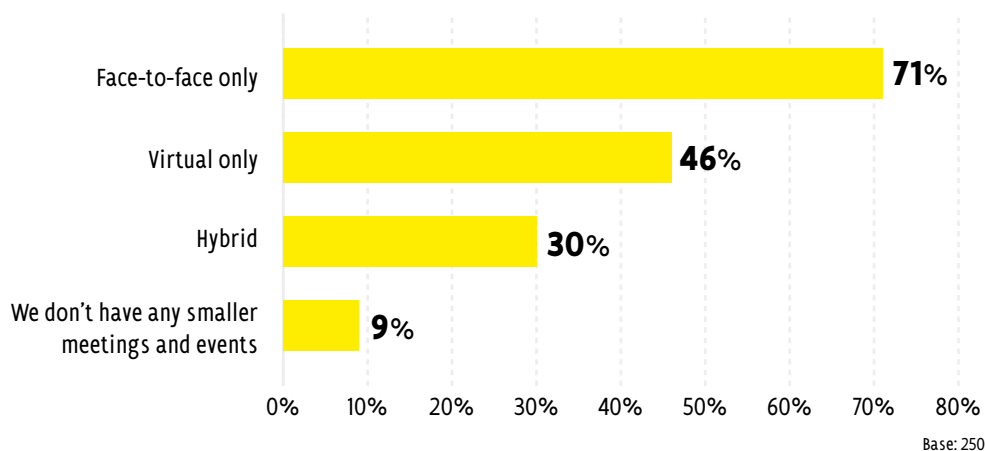


Chart 4: Format of the most recent smaller meetings

Greater use of virtual format for smaller meetings compared to main conferences

Whilst the 'face-to-face only' format dominates main conferences, **the format used for smaller meetings and events is more varied.**

The main difference between smaller meetings and the main conference is the use of virtual-only format. It is much easier than hybrid and it makes sense for many smaller meetings.

"We organise monthly meetings and courses for associations which have approximately 20 attendees. These smaller meetings are typically either face-to-face only, where delegates can chat and network, or online-only."

- Intermediary, Belgium -

Hybrid is inevitable for some organisers, even if they don't want to offer it

Some organisers say they try hard to bring all delegates together in person because it's easier for discussion, but inevitably they end up offering a hybrid format because there is always someone who can't attend in person.

"People are so used to having the option not to travel. We try not to offer the hybrid option but in the end we always have to do it."

- Association, Belgium, European scope -

3. Positive aspects of hybrid format

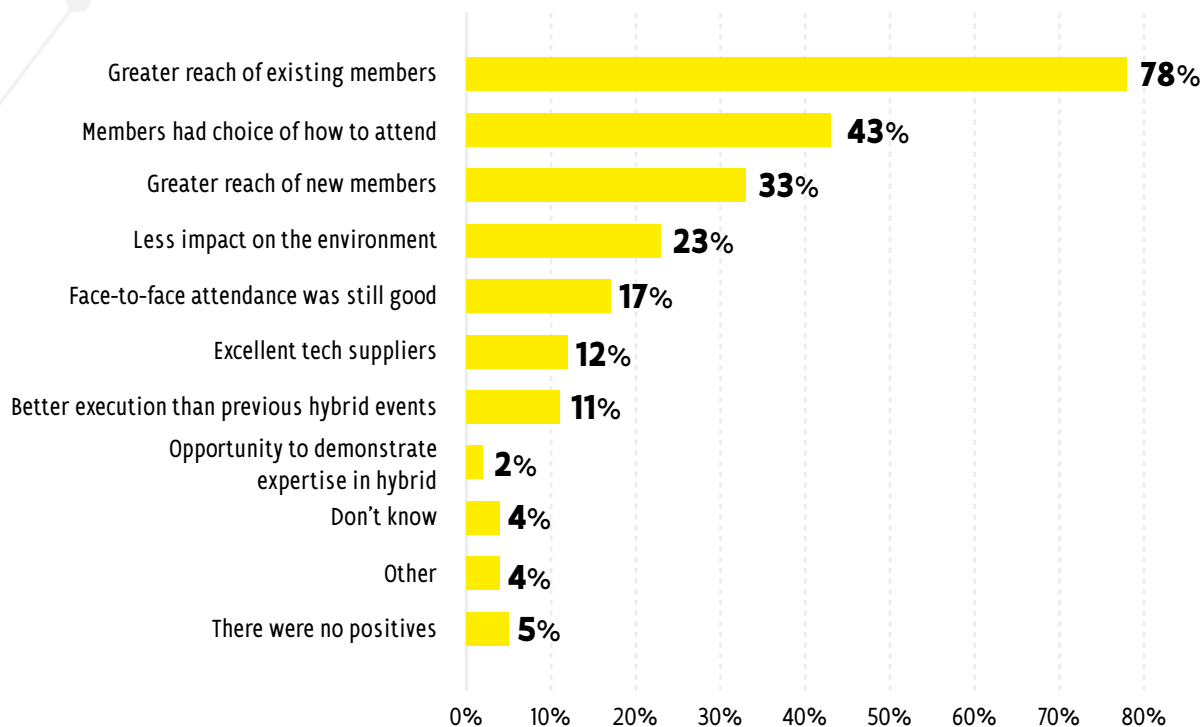


Chart 5: positive aspects of hybrid formats

Base: 103

There are numerous positive aspects of hybrid events. The most important can be summarised as follows:

1. Hybrid events offer a greater reach

More existing and new members can attend conferences and meetings. Hybrid format makes events also more inclusive in terms of reaching delegates in poorer countries.

“Hybrid lends itself very well to academic conferences. They make the events more accessible, particularly to the younger generation or people travelling from nations who do not have the means for long haul travel.”

- Association, Europe outside Belgium, worldwide scope -

As well as reaching general delegates more effectively, hybrid events are more likely to secure the right speakers who can't travel, or won't travel due to being too busy.

“It's easier to attract more interesting speakers if the event is hybrid. Being able to present virtually and not having to take a great deal of time out of their schedule is a big benefit.”

- Association, Belgium, European scope -



2. Delegates can choose how they want to attend

Similar to greater reach, hybrid events give members the choice of how they wish to attend.

Some want to travel to meet people and also see new places. Others might not want to spend the time travelling and they might not be interested in the whole event. Hybrid format allows virtual delegates just to attend the parts they are interested in.

“Before hybrid there was a temptation for people to skip the whole event because they didn’t want to endure the parts they weren’t interested in. Some would think, ‘I’m not going to travel all that way’.”

- Association, Belgium, European scope -

3. Less impact on the environment

Some organisers point out that reduced impact on the environment is a positive aspect of offering hybrid format.

“As an NGO who works within the climate change environment, it’s about putting your money where your mouth is”

- Association, Europe outside Belgium, worldwide -

Only 4 associations did not know which positive aspects their hybrid event(s) had, and only 5 responded there were no positive elements.

4. Challenges of hybrid format

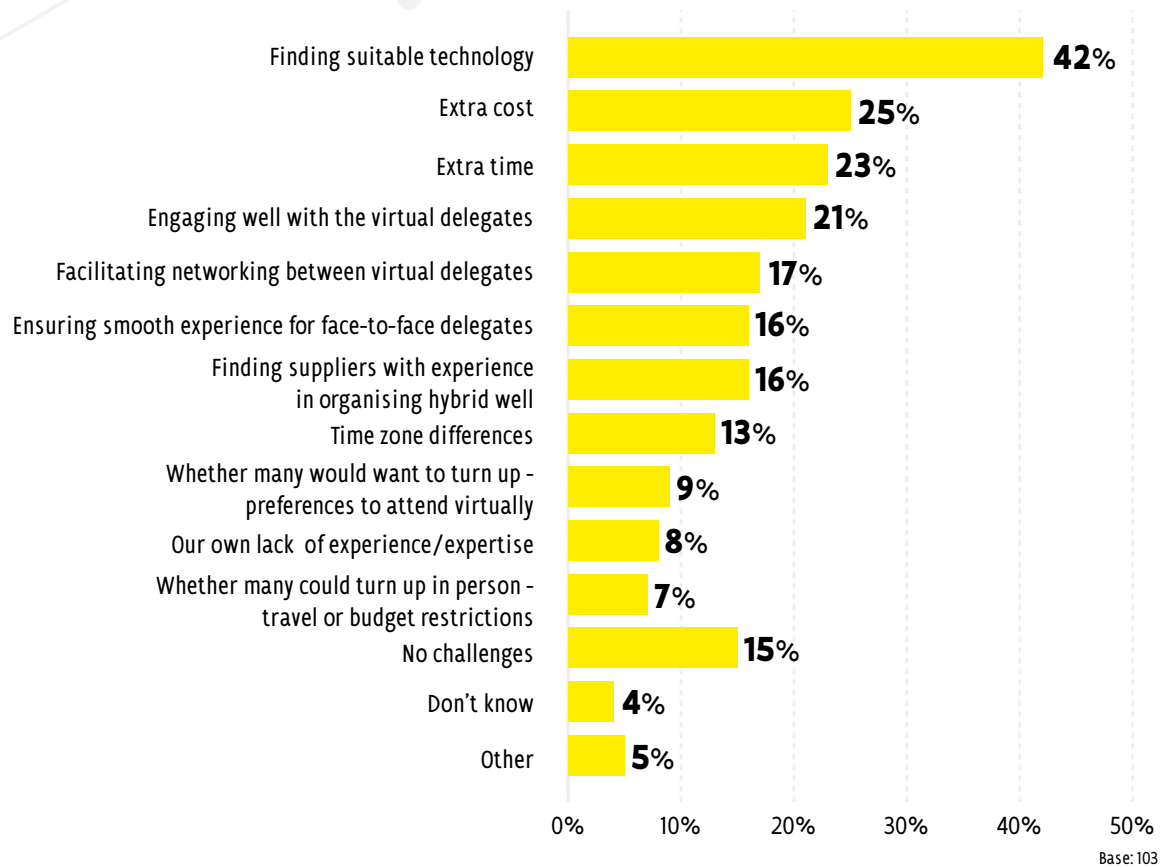


Chart 6: challenges of hybrid formats

The challenges of organising conferences and meetings in a hybrid format are very diverse amongst the respondents. The most important ones are:

1. Suitable and reliable technology and suppliers

According to the respondents, most difficult seems to be to find the most suitable technology (42%) and/or finding the right suppliers (16%).

Utilising the right technology could alleviate many of the other challenges, especially engaging with the virtual delegates, facilitating networking between them, and ensuring a smooth experience for the face-to-face delegates too.

Specific technical challenges include: linking up sound and visual, reliable software, mediocre internet connections, venues being adequately equipped and ensuring online security.

“The technical platform should be easily usable by everyone. We have people attending from places such as Ethiopia where they might have less sophisticated technology. You have to think of that if you’re using something that takes up a lot of bandwidth.”

- Association, Europe outside Belgium, worldwide scope -

2. Extra cost and time for the organiser

The extra cost (25%) and time needed (23%) are key challenges among organisers of hybrid events. This, combined with the lack of experience (8%) is most likely a main reason why association executives are reluctant to organise hybrid events.

“More and more of our clients are reverting to face-to-face only events. The added cost and time involved in organising hybrid is the biggest challenge and deterrent for our clients.”

- Intermediary, Europe outside Belgium -

3. Delegates' experience and engagement

Engaging well with virtual delegates (21%) and facilitating networking amongst them (17%) are perceived as important issues for organisers. Some organisers admit that the virtual delegates can 'get forgotten about'. Involving them in discussions and allowing them to ask questions is a particularly challenging aspect of hybrid events.

Attempting to improve virtual engagement can detract from a smooth experience for the face-to-face delegates (16%), with as a result that hybrid events become a 'clunky' experience for everyone.

Some organisers questioned whether the virtual delegates are always paying attention. They might be watching the event online but doing other work at the same time – therefore they are not fully engaged in the event.

“The focus is always on those who are physically present at the time. The virtual delegates can often be forgotten about. It's difficult to bring them into discussions. We copied all their comments and sent them to relevant speakers so they could respond afterwards.”

- Association, Europe outside Belgium, worldwide scope -





4 THE FUTURE OF HYBRID

1. What do members want?

So far we have discussed the event formats currently being used by organisers. However, the formats they use may or may not be what their members prefer. Organisers can only be sure of what their members want if they ask them.

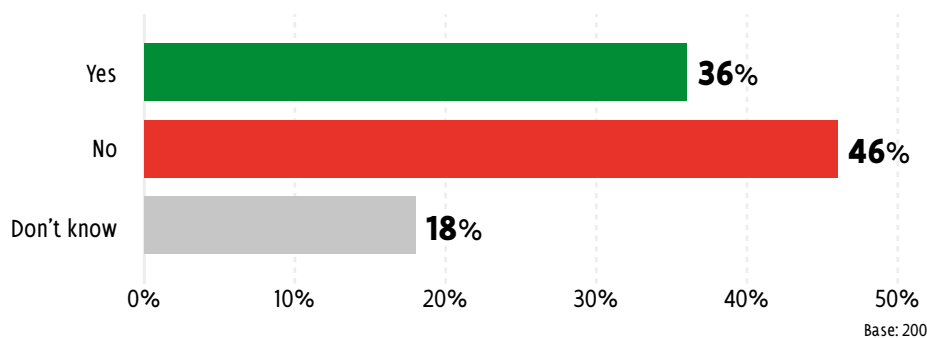


Chart 7: Have associations surveyed their members/delegates about preferred event format?

Who has asked their members?

Of the respondents, only 1 out of 3 organisations have surveyed their members or delegates about their preferred event format.

“Some of our clients don’t ask their delegates what they want. Even just doing a Twitter poll, asking people would they rather attend in person or online.”

- Intermediary, Europe outside Belgium -

Feedback from the members

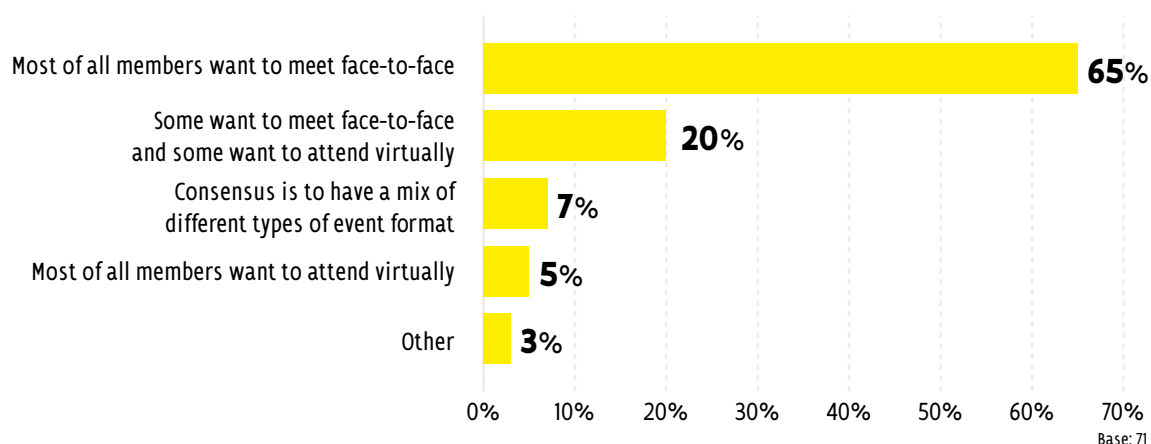


Chart 8: feedback from members/delegates about preferred event format

Strong desires to meet face-to-face

For those organisations who asked for feedback from their members, 65% declared that most or all **members want to meet face-to-face**. Yet of these organisations whose members prefer face-to-face, **88% are interested in hybrid**.

Since there is no specific information about when the member surveys were conducted, we don't know if some organizers ignored the wishes of members who wanted to attend virtually, or if the surveys were done after the latest main conference had already taken place.

“We surveyed our members and know that there is a demand for regional face-to-face events, larger flagship events and in addition, smaller hybrid or virtual meetings / training / workshops.”

- Association, Europe outside Belgium, worldwide scope -

2. Organisers' attitudes towards hybrid events

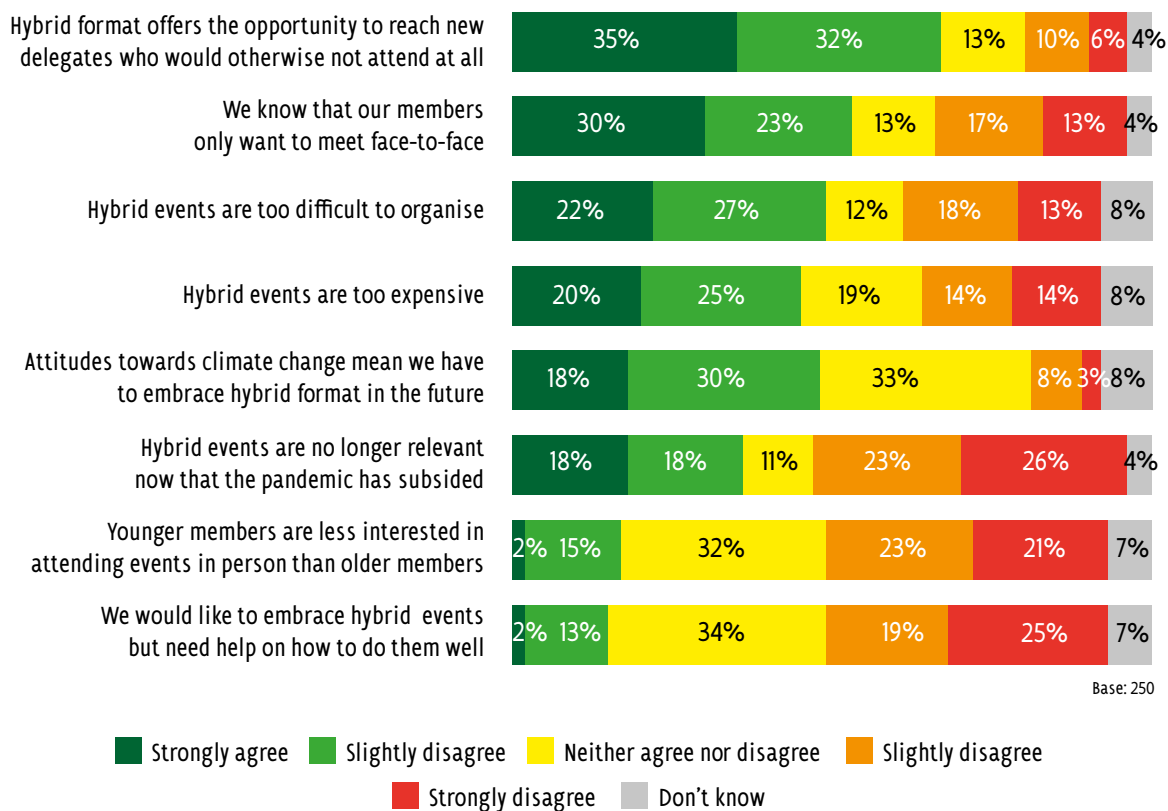


Chart 9: organisers' attitudes towards hybrid events

Attitudes towards hybrid events are not clear-cut

Most organisers admit that hybrid events have considerable advantages, yet they face some significant challenges and most still lack experience and knowledge.

36% declare that hybrid format is **no longer relevant post-pandemic**, while **49%** think it is!

Opportunity to reach new delegates

67% of respondents agree that hybrid events offer the opportunity to reach new delegates who would otherwise not attend at all. Even about half (47%) of the organisers who say they are not interested in hybrid events, agree that this is a benefit of hybrid.

Knowing what members want

53% of the respondents agreed with the statement ‘we know that our members only want to meet face-to-face’. Interestingly, of this group, only about half of them actually surveyed their members. To the statement that “younger members would be less interested in attending events ‘in person’ than older members”:

- 44% of the respondents do not agree
- 39% are neutral or don’t know
- 17% agree with this apparent age divide in attitude.

As this will have significant impact of future format of events, this is definitely a subject for further research.

“Our younger members especially are desperate to meet face-to-face. Some of them only got involved during Covid due to age and have never been to an in-person event.”

- Association, Europe outside Belgium, European scope -

Difficult and expensive

The extra cost and time required to organise hybrid events was already mentioned as a challenge and puts off +/- 47% of organisers from attempting hybrid events in the future.

“In my experience, hybrid is the hardest to do. I would sooner go down the fully virtual route.”

- Association, Europe outside Belgium, European scope -

Attitudes towards climate change

Half of the respondents agree that we have to embrace the hybrid format in the future, in the interest of fighting climate change. Even 1 out of 3 organisers who are not interested in hybrid events admit they may have to embrace the format in the future.

Surprisingly, 4 out of 10 neither agrees or disagrees or does not know.

“We’ll definitely put our money on hybrid events. We promote alternative, environmentally sustainable energy. If we can reduce our carbon footprint via virtual participation, that’s a plus.”

- Association, Europe outside Belgium, European scope -

Mixed feedback on needing help

Of all 250 respondents ...

- 15% agree that they need help
- 44% disagree
- 41% don’t know whether or not assistance would be useful

When looking specifically at those interested in hybrid 28% agree they would appreciate help and 30% disagree. Again 4 out of 10 don’t really know.



3. Organisers' future interest and plans

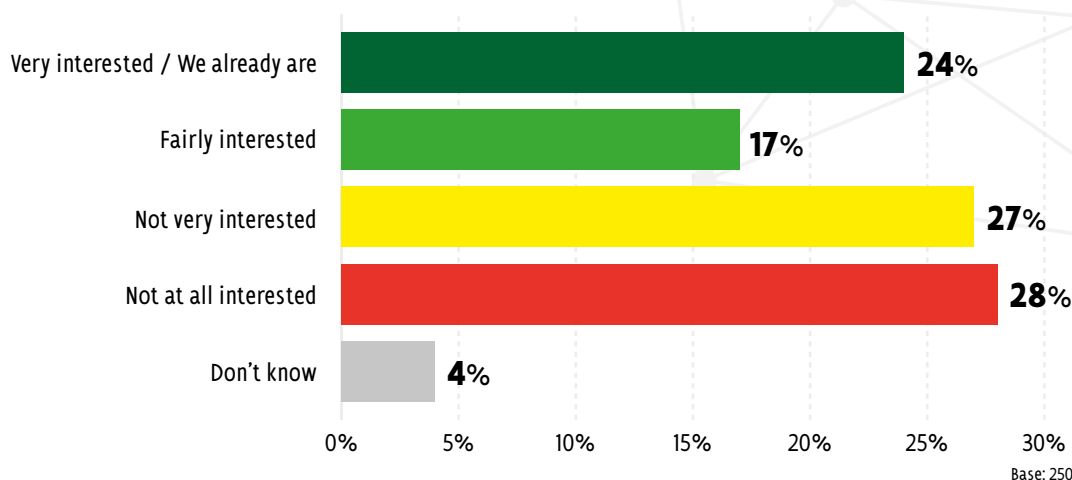


Chart 10: Organisers' future interest in hybrid

Very divided interest

Organisers are very divided over their future interest in hybrid events.

41% seem to be interested, 55% not very or not at all. Answers do not vary much according to whether associations have asked their members for their preferred event format or not. Many organisers believe they know what their members want even without formally asking them.

Reasons for being interested or not, have been discussed above. If they are interested, it is because they see that the benefits outweigh the challenges.

“We’re very happy with the way our hybrid events are going. Attendance and interest in our events has increased. We’re looking into expanding our range of hybrid events. We had good tech support from the word go and won’t look back. No challenges, smooth sailing and getting better.”

- Association, Europe outside Belgium, worldwide scope -

Some organisers are proud to have figured out how to organise hybrid events well. They expect to continue in the same vein.

“We’ll just continue what we’ve been doing for the past 15 years. We’re very happy with our format. We first started with online streaming of our events, then we integrated virtual attendance and the opportunity to ask questions online. We’ll improve things going along with the development of AI and technology, but with 10,000 plus participants, I think we’re on the right track.”

- Association, Europe outside Belgium, European scope -



Mixed event offering

Some organisers will be offering a mix of events with different sizes and formats, and not necessarily combine both 'face-toface' and virtual in one format. This way, members will be able to find events which they can attend in their preferred format.

"We're still working out the types of events, the target audience and focus of each meeting and trying to match the right format for each purpose of event."

- Association, Belgium, worldwide scope -

Need technology to improve

Some organisers have been put off by bad experiences of trying to organise hybrid events in the past. They are willing to try again if they are convinced that the technology has improved.



4. Influence and support of intermediaries

Support from intermediaries

As hybrid events are difficult to organise well, this gives some associations more reason to seek the help of an intermediary, especially an intermediary which is based in the country of the event.

Some associations have been put off using intermediaries because of previous adverse experiences. Others also comment on the unaffordable costs.

Influence from intermediaries

Some intermediaries will organise an event in any format that the client wishes for. They do not see it as their place to push one format over another.

But whilst some intermediaries sit back and let their client prescribe the format, others have a preference for a particular format and try to push it.

Having a long-term relationship with a client tends to increase the chances that the intermediary will be listened to because they are considered as a trusted advisor.

Managing clients' expectations

Some intermediaries have talked about the challenges they face in managing the expectations of their clients.

'Hybrid' is a buzz word for some associations, whereby they feel they have to offer it, but do not fully understand what is involved.

There are a lot of differences in what 'hybrid' actually means in terms of how passively or actively the virtual delegates are treated.

It can definitely **not easily be offered as a late addition** or without much time and thought into how it will work.

"Part of my role is explaining to clients what hybrid is and how it can be anything from recording a session and making it available afterwards to people voting and interacting with each other in person and online. It can be either all bells and whistles to very basic ... So many clients have heard this buzzword [hybrid] and feel they have to do it. We've seen a lot of these hybrid events fail and they've had to scale it back."

- Intermediary, Europe outside Belgium -

5. Support needed in the destination

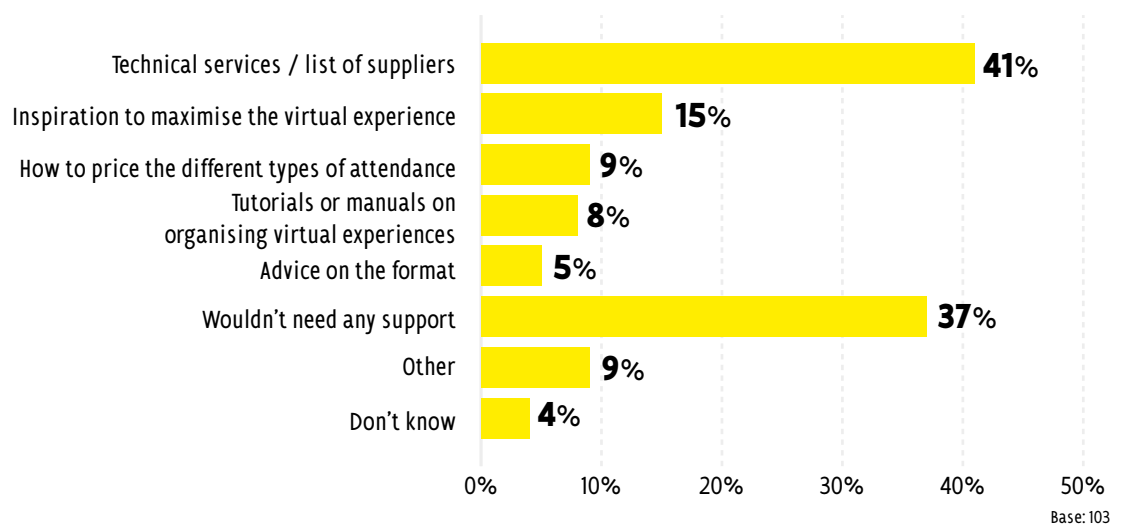


Chart 11: Organisers' need for support in the destination

Technical services / list of suppliers

As mentioned before, finding suitable technology has been the biggest challenge with hybrid events. It's therefore logic that the search for the right technical services is number one on the list of support that organisers need.

"AV is crucial and venues don't always have it. They need to invest in better quality AV. Our clients are put off if it's too expensive and we lose the clients then. It needs to become more affordable."

- Intermediary, Europe outside Belgium -



Inspiration to maximise the virtual experience

Having **the right technology and know-how** could help to improve the event experience for virtual delegates. More detailed information is described in the next chapter 'improvements'.

Some organisers are convinced that virtual experiences of the destination could make the virtual delegates more involved in what the in-person delegates can see and experience of the destination.

Popular ideas include view of the venue as backdrop, virtual city tours, virtual field trips.

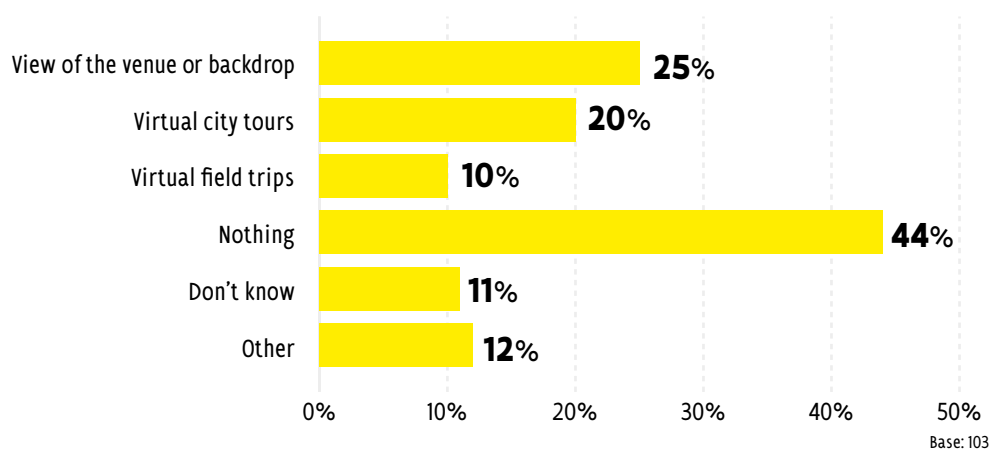


Chart 12: which virtual experiences of the destination can improve virtual delegates' experience?

Others feel that such ideas are not effective. Main reasons include:

- "if the delegate wanted to experience the destination in person, they would have travelled there to attend"
- previous experience of these ideas being ineffective
- there are more important virtual engagement challenges to address, i.e. how to get virtual delegates more involved in discussions and networking

No support needed

35% of associations and 9 of 20 intermediaries who are interested in hybrid, believe they don't need support.

6. Expectations from organisers

Both in the quantitative and qualitative research phases, we asked organisers about their needs on how to improve hybrid experiences.

Virtual delegates engagement

The lack of smooth engagement with virtual delegates is a key weakness of many hybrid events. Delegates who are present in the venue tend to get prioritised by speakers and moderators. Virtual delegates do not have the same engaging experience of being able to ask questions, network and participate in discussions.

If the virtual experience is not engaging, delegates may find other things to do on the side, and so their engagement in the event decreases further.

Most organizers agree that for hybrid events to become the preferred format in the future, changes need to be made.

“The level of engagement is not the same. They are at home and are probably writing emails on the side.”

- Association, Belgium, European scope -

Some organisers however admit that they don't actually care about the virtual experience. If delegates insist that they want to attend in that way, they are welcome, but the organiser feels that they should have chosen to attend in person if they wanted a better experience.

Connecting the two formats

Similar to the above, organisers would like to not only engage better with the virtual delegates but also help the face-to-face and virtual delegates to relate better to each other so that the event comes across as one rather than two separate events.

Improving engagement does not just concern the virtual delegates. It involves making the experience less 'clunky' for the face-to-face delegates too.

Technology needs to improve and become more affordable

Many organisers are aware that technology they have used for hybrid events has been inadequate for that purpose, and say that technology needs to improve greatly.

“Technology needs to improve on a major scale ... giving the participants a more natural feel – not just being a tiny tile on the screen but an ‘around the table notion’.”

- Association, Europe outside Belgium, European scope -

Some say that the most important technology aspect which needs to improve is internet Connections – not just for the venue, but also for the virtual participants, wherever they are.

Others say that the technology already exists, but it needs to be affordable for associations with modest budgets. The biggest cost is not necessarily using the technology itself but paying the technicians required to operate it.

“If there was a demand, a very important aspect would be to show the location, have several cameras so that it's not just that person on the screen but a more life-like appearance by switching camera angles. All of this requires a team of expensive professionals which our organisation simply couldn't afford.”

- Association, Europe outside Belgium, worldwide scope -

Accessibility and inclusion

Some organisers, not just those with members in multiple continents, would like solutions to the time zone challenge of hybrid events.

On top of trying to make two attendance formats work in tandem, organisers also have to make their events accessible for a variety of needs, languages and disabilities. Hybrid can add to the challenge of doing this.

Recording vs. live streaming

Some organisers feel that trying to engage live with virtual delegates is a lost cause and therefore the money for hybrid events would be better spent on high quality recordings.

“My personal opinion or observation is that there is so little appetite for participating live via online platforms in major events that on the spot customer care is not really needed. We've noticed a massive increase in data traffic for podcasts and on-demand recordings of the live events. If at all, money could and should be invested in high quality podcasting platforms and software.”

- Intermediary, Outside Belgium -



7. Suggestions for improvement

Roaming cameras

Organisers who have experienced the use of moving / roaming cameras say that this helps to engage the virtual delegates with what is happening in the venue.

“What’s really valuable is having moving cameras. We’ve used one where if someone speaks or interjects, the camera will automatically pick that person up and zoom in on them. It gives you a feeling that you’re part of the meeting.”

- Association, Belgium, European scope -

Handling online questions and discussion

Some organisers offer solutions on how to involve the virtual delegates with questions and discussion.

Ideas include ...

- having a moderator for online questions
- defining specific times for audience interaction
- facilitating the virtual delegates to have their own discussion

Time zone solutions

There are no particularly good solutions offered for time zone challenges, but some organisers try to reduce the impact by recording sessions or having a longer event day.

“Rather than live stream, record it, edit it and make it available afterwards. Everyone benefits.”

- Intermediary, Europe outside Belgium -





Technology set-up in venues

Some organisers feel that venues could be more helpful with the technology they offer for hybrid events, or the way they package and price their offering.

Organisers often bring their own equipment because the venue prices for use of their equipment are too high.

“Venues could have packages of ‘if you want this room to be streamed, it’s A; if you want it to be recorded and edited, it’s B’. Then I don’t have to get external AV partners to do it.”

- Intermediary, Europe outside Belgium -

One organiser sees the solution to hybrid engagement that delegates wear augmented reality (AR) glasses. The technology exists, and the price will come down if demand for this takes off.

The face-to-face delegates might also wear these glasses in the future to experience a presentation, rather than through PowerPoint.

“In a few years’ time, the virtual experience will become much better because everyone will be wearing these glasses. Then we can involve them in so much more of the event.”

- Intermediary, Europe outside Belgium -

However, several other organisers have also talked about a similar concept and have dismissed it as a possibility for events.





5 BE.DIGITAL.FLANDERS

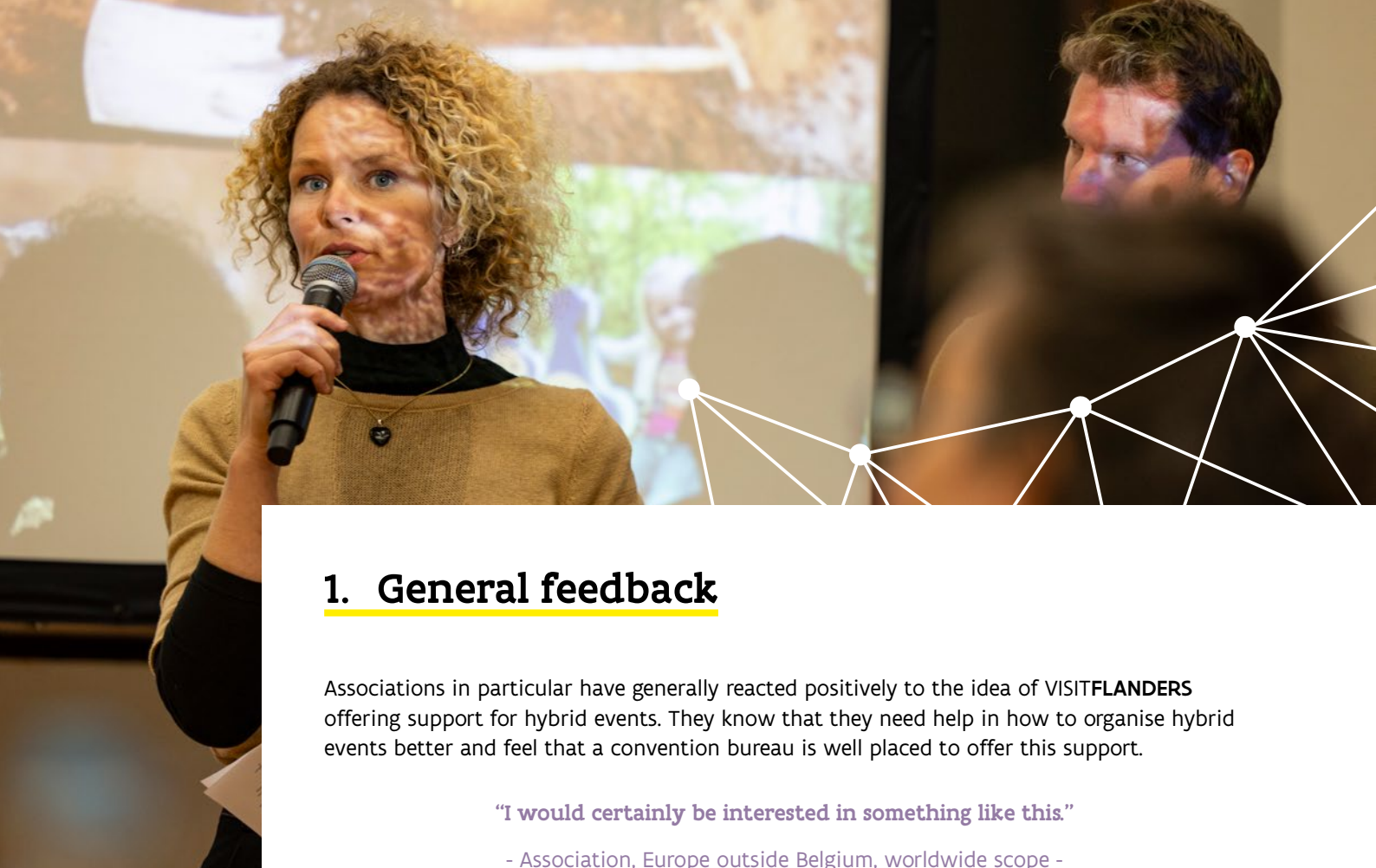
In the depth interviews, we have explored ideas of VISIT**FLANDERS** Convention Bureau's initiative **be.digital.flanders**, which aims at making the digital experience of physical and online participants at international conferences and events in Flanders state of the art.

The plan with **be.digital.flanders** is to have a strong and inspiring community where partners together create added value and offer solutions and tools for digital experiences during conferences and events, with the aim to:

- have an equal engagement of the online and physical participants;
- stimulate the interaction and connection between physical and online participants;
- offer all participants (both online and physically) an attractive experience of the event and the destination Flanders;
- make sure the digital experience is of the highest quality and tailored to the different needs of all participants.

Business intelligence through continuous research and innovation, will allow formulating strategic advice to all key stakeholders.





1. General feedback

Associations in particular have generally reacted positively to the idea of VISITFLANDERS offering support for hybrid events. They know that they need help in how to organise hybrid events better and feel that a convention bureau is well placed to offer this support.

“I would certainly be interested in something like this.”

- Association, Europe outside Belgium, worldwide scope -

Some organisers based in associations have many other jobs to do besides just organising events. The proposed support from VISITFLANDERS could be particularly good for those whose main job is not to organise events.

Some organisers, especially intermediaries, have not reacted with the same enthusiasm as those in greater need of help, but they nevertheless say that the support would be useful to ensure they are keeping up with best practice.

“Even though I have a lot of experience in organising events, the industry is constantly changing. Keeping up with best practice is always useful.”

- Association, Belgium, European scope -

Organisers who did not react enthusiastically to the proposed support, give two main reasons:

- conviction that they can already do hybrid well
- perception that their events are relatively small and low key, so receiving external support feels a bit unnecessary.



2. Feedback on specific ideas

The ideas of producing tutorials, sharing practical support and inspiring examples were well received.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TUTORIALS



→ The basics for organisers with little or no experience of hybrid

Often, meetings are organized partially by the association and partially by volunteers. Amongst those volunteers there are quite a lot of people with little or no experience.

→ How to organise a hybrid event with minimal financial resources

This would be a very worthwhile tutorial. We discussed earlier that finding the right technical services is a key challenge of hybrid events, as is the extra cost.

Much of the technology required to run a hybrid event well, already exists. But the cost of using it is a major barrier for associations with limited budgets.

The tutorial should therefore focus on how to use effective technology at minimal cost and/or where to seek financial support for it.

→ Presentation techniques for hybrid events

Tutorial content on how to present at hybrid events would be useful. Some organisers are aware that they need help. Others seem unaware, but the virtual delegate experience suffers if presenters are not consciously engaging them.

Some association conferences involve voting / polling at the end of presentations, and help is sought on how to do this smoothly at hybrid events.

“The presentation techniques advice would be very helpful – how to incorporate voting and polls to the presentation and explain this to clients.”

- Intermediary, Europe outside Belgium -

Presentations also involve questions and interjections from the audience. This is easier to manage when the delegates and speakers are in one place. Hybrid events are more challenging in this way – the speaker themselves might not even be present in the venue. Support is needed how to manage this key aspect of presentation sessions.

One association trains speakers for hybrid events, whereby an important aspect of the training is to look at the camera regularly.

→ How to promote hybrid events

Some associations would appreciate advice on how to promote their event, although this relates more to promoting events in general rather than specifically wanting help with promoting a hybrid event.

Hybrid events have obvious benefits, but some organisers feel that tutorial content on how to promote these would be useful.

One organiser says that they do not really want to promote the virtual aspect of hybrid events as ideally they would like as many delegates as possible to turn up in person as the interaction is better.

→ How to make hybrid events accessible

Some already view hybrid events as accessible, because they offer two possible ways of attending rather than just one. This makes them more accessible for delegates who would have difficulty in travelling.

“Hybrid format makes the event as accessible as possible. We have a client doing a fully hybrid event in 2027 and a lot of the attendees are carers so attending in person is very difficult.”

- Intermediary, Europe outside Belgium -

As for sensory impairments such as visual and hearing, few organisers know how to handle this with hybrid events. A tutorial would be informative to many.

Some accessibility needs such as hearing can be challenging to provide for; even without hybrid format as there may be different languages to consider and many different sessions within the event.

→ How to make the discussion more cohesive

Organisers would strongly welcome a tutorial on this aspect of hybrid events.

Properly involving virtual attendees in discussion whilst also not diminishing the experience for face-to-face attendees is a major challenge.

“At a hybrid event you have a community of people online and a community of people on site. It’s about how you cross those borders ... that’s something all organisers are struggling with and that’s why they don’t do it. They don’t know how to solve it.”

- Intermediary, Belgium -





→ How to handle technical hitches

Hybrid events involve specific technologies (e.g. streaming platforms, online interaction tools, and audio-visual setups) that might be unfamiliar to those without experience.

Technical glitches are almost unavoidable. A tutorial to teach organizers how to anticipate, prevent, and react to these issues, ensuring minimal disruption, would be very helpful.

FEEDBACK ON OTHER TYPES OF SUPPORT

→ List of service providers

Having a list of service providers would be welcomed by many, and some see such a list as a convention bureau's USP.

Organisers want to work with suppliers who have previous experience of organising hybrid events well, especially in regard to handling the technology.

In particular, finding suppliers who can provide the right cameras and sound set-up would be particularly valued.

→ Forum to ask questions / list of frequently asked questions

Many organisers are keen to receive advice from anyone who knows how to run a hybrid event well. Being able to ask questions would be very valuable.

Some of the more experienced intermediaries may be willing to make this shared experience two-way.

→ Media library of digital experiences

A media library of experiences such as virtual city tours is not a tool that many would find useful. Virtual tours gained some popularity during the height of the pandemic when people could not travel, but the novelty has mostly worn off.







6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Researching the needs of the market	<p>VISITFLANDERS knows that organisers vary in their attitudes towards hybrid events, with some embracing the format and others wishing to stay well away from it. Research was needed to understand the views and experiences of organisers and delegates towards hybrid format in greater detail to inform the development of be.digital.flanders activities.</p> <p>SRI, an independent market research agency based in Cardiff, UK, was commissioned to undertake the research on behalf of VISITFLANDERS.</p>
Quantitative phase	<p>The first research phase with organisers was a quantitative telephone survey. We have conducted 250 interviews with European-based organisers of international association events. The sample is split 200 associations / 50 intermediaries. Among the 200 associations, 81 have a substantial membership base in more than one continent, and 119 have members only in Europe.</p> <p>SRI sourced association data from the Union of International Associations and built lists of intermediaries through desk research.</p>
Qualitative phase	<p>The second research phase was qualitative depth interviews with organisers willing to engage in hybrid events. We have conducted 17 depth interviews by Teams and telephone – 11 with associations and 6 with intermediaries.</p>
Report format	<p>We base the structure of this report mostly on the quantitative findings. All charts, percentages and numbers quoted are from the quantitative phase. We highlight differences between respondent groups where statistically significant. Full cross-tabulations of quantifiable answers are available separately.</p> <p>We use the qualitative feedback to add understanding to the results in the form of interpretation and additional verbatim comments, as well as reporting on additional topics to inform the development of be.digital.flanders.</p>

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MORE INFORMATION

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