

An Insider's View Of 2021: Event Design And Production

Posted on July 27, 2022

View this essay online:

<https://academic-master.com/an-insiders-view-of-2021-event-design-and-production/>

Post-2021 Event Design

The event industry entered 2021 trying to answer questions that had barely existed at scale two years earlier. Could conferences, weddings, trade shows, festivals, and corporate events function when travel was uncertain, venue capacity changed rapidly, audiences had different health risks, and organizers might have to move online with little notice? The original “insider’s view” correctly identified hybrid events, smaller gatherings, outdoor programming, flexible contracts, safety planning, and digital participation as major themes. What is clearer from the perspective of 2026 is that not every 2021 practice became permanent. Some were emergency responses to COVID-19, while others revealed weaknesses that event professionals should have addressed long before the pandemic. Current research shows that hybrid access, sustainability, accessibility, digital engagement, and contingency planning have remained important, but the industry has largely returned to valuing in-person interaction where it adds something that virtual delivery cannot reproduce easily (Abdallah, 2024; Lalor et al., 2024). The lasting lesson from 2021 is therefore not that all events should become smaller, virtual, or socially distanced. It is that event design must be resilient enough to change format without losing its purpose.

Purpose and Format

During the first phase of the pandemic, format often came first: a cancelled physical event was moved to Zoom, livestreamed, postponed, or reduced in size. Mature event design reverses that logic. Organizers should first identify the outcome the event is supposed to create. A leadership retreat may depend on trust and informal conversation; a product launch may need spectacle and media reach; a scientific conference may require presentation, networking, and archival access; a wedding may prioritize emotional presence over scale. Only then should planners decide whether the event should be in person, virtual, hybrid, distributed across several locations, or recorded for later use.

Research on the post-pandemic event landscape supports this more deliberate approach. Abdallah (2024) found that hybrid formats can support inclusion, accessibility, and resilience, but their value depends on technology and stakeholder needs rather than on the format itself. Lalor and colleagues (2024), reporting on the return of a 2,500-person scientific meeting, similarly noted that virtual

participation remained useful for delegates affected by travel, caring responsibilities, or environmental concerns, while in-person attendance better supported some forms of professional connection. The lesson is that hybrid should not be treated as a mandatory badge of modernity. It is one design option among several, justified when a meaningful audience would otherwise be excluded or when asynchronous and remote participation adds real value.

Hybrid Production

One of the most persistent mistakes from 2021 was to treat hybrid production as an in-person event with a camera at the back of the room. Remote participants need their own production pathway: clear audio, readable presentation materials, moderated chat, online networking, technical support, accessible captions, and an intentional way to ask questions or contribute. At the same time, in-person attendees should not feel that every session has been slowed down to accommodate technology. A successful hybrid program therefore requires choreography between two audiences rather than duplication of one experience.

This has financial consequences. Hybrid events can carry the costs of both in-person and digital production: venue, food, staging, travel, cameras, streaming platforms, technicians, bandwidth, remote moderation, and content management. Lalor et al. (2024) describe this dual burden directly in their analysis of scientific conferencing. Event producers should therefore decide which sessions genuinely need simultaneous remote access and which can be recorded, summarized, or offered in a different format later. A smaller number of well-produced hybrid sessions may create more value than streaming an entire multi-track program poorly. Technology-facilitated event research published in 2025 likewise argues that engagement should be designed across phases before, during, and after the event rather than reduced to one live digital platform (Li et al., 2025).

In 2021, risk planning often revolved around vaccination status, masks, distancing, testing, ventilation, and cancellation caused by public-health restrictions. Those considerations remain relevant when disease outbreaks occur, but the wider professional lesson is resilience. Events are vulnerable to extreme weather, transport disruption, cyber incidents, supplier failure, power outages, protests, labor shortages, security threats, speaker cancellations, and sudden changes in venue availability. The correct response is not to predict every crisis but to identify critical dependencies and prepare alternative pathways.

Contracts became especially important during the pandemic because event organizers discovered that ordinary cancellation language did not always address government restrictions, travel bans, or widespread public-health emergencies. Modern planning should define cancellation, postponement, force majeure, insurance responsibilities, deposits, rescheduling rights, and supplier deadlines before money becomes difficult to recover. Producers should also identify which functions are mission-critical. A backup keynote speaker may be simple; replacement power for a large production may require a generator and technical crew; loss of a catering supplier may require pre-approved

alternatives. The 2023 research on post-pandemic destination resilience similarly argues that event systems should retain the capability to switch formats and respond to crises rather than rebuilding the pre-pandemic model without contingency planning (Seraphin et al., 2023).

Accessibility

Remote participation revealed how many people had previously been excluded from conferences and professional events because of disability, caregiving, pregnancy, visa barriers, cost, distance, or inability to travel. A 2024 analysis of hybrid academic conferences argues that in-person-only events systematically exclude some participants and that hybrid access can create more inclusive spaces for knowledge exchange (Brown et al., 2024). Yet virtual access does not automatically create accessibility. Registration systems, livestream platforms, slide decks, chat tools, and recorded content can all create barriers.

Current accessibility research shows that blind and low-vision professionals may encounter inaccessible websites, insufficient signage, poorly designed stages, presentations without image descriptions, inaccessible posters, and transportation barriers in both physical and virtual event environments (Swenor et al., 2024). Event design should therefore consider access from the planning stage: captions, transcripts, sign-language interpretation where required, wheelchair routes, quiet spaces, accessible transport information, high-contrast signage, dietary needs, readable digital documents, sensory considerations, and clear procedures for requesting support. The principle is broader than legal compliance. An event cannot claim to be well designed when part of the intended audience cannot meaningfully participate.

Sustainability

In 2021, reduced travel made the environmental cost of events unusually visible. The return to in-person gatherings has made sustainability more complicated because the largest impacts often come from attendee travel, accommodation, freight, energy, food, and temporary infrastructure rather than disposable cups. A 2024 life-cycle assessment of a 2,500-person conference found that intercity transport accounted for roughly two-thirds of the event's global-warming impact, demonstrating why travel strategy can matter more than cosmetic sustainability gestures (Aronson et al., 2024). Hybrid access, regional hubs, rail-friendly locations, fewer long-distance trips, and longer but less frequent meetings may therefore create greater reductions than simply changing catering materials.

The event industry now has a stronger formal framework for this work. ISO 20121:2024 updates the international event-sustainability management standard and explicitly integrates environmental, social, and economic impacts, stakeholder engagement, inclusivity, and event legacy (ISO, 2024). This encourages organizers to define sustainability objectives, assign responsibility, monitor outcomes, and improve over time rather than create a one-off list of green actions. Sustainable event

design should also include labor conditions, community effects, accessibility, local procurement, waste, water, energy, and the long-term value or disruption created by the event.

The digital acceleration of 2020–2021 led many planners to adopt event apps, QR check-in, virtual platforms, livestreams, online polling, digital networking, and cloud-based production tools. Some of these technologies remain useful because they reduce friction. Mobile event apps can centralize schedules, maps, messages, networking, and program changes, and research has found that perceived usefulness and social exchange are important factors in whether attendees continue using them (Lee & Kim, 2023). Digital ticketing and QR entry can reduce queues when infrastructure is reliable. On-demand content can extend the life of a conference beyond the event dates.

Technology becomes counterproductive when it is adopted because it looks innovative rather than because it solves a problem. Requiring attendees to download several apps, create multiple accounts, navigate unstable Wi-Fi, or use unfamiliar tools can increase cognitive load. Producers should ask a simple question before adopting any platform: what friction does this remove for the attendee, speaker, exhibitor, or staff member? The 2025 review of technology-facilitated engagement emphasizes that event technology should support engagement and inclusion throughout the attendee journey rather than exist as an isolated novelty (Li et al., 2025).

The biggest post-pandemic changes do not eliminate the traditional craft of event production. Guests still notice whether the room is too hot, audio is clear, registration is fast, food arrives on time, restrooms are accessible, signage makes sense, chairs are comfortable, staff know what is happening, and the schedule leaves enough time to move between spaces. Lighting, décor, music, staging, pacing, food, and hospitality continue to shape emotional experience. Technology and resilience planning should protect these fundamentals rather than distract from them.

Smaller guest lists and outdoor events were major 2021 strategies because they reduced health risk, but they also reminded planners of the value of scale appropriate to purpose. Intimate events can create stronger conversation; large events can create energy, visibility, and network effects. Outdoor environments can be beautiful but introduce weather, noise, power, accessibility, and contingency problems. There is no universally “better” format. Good design comes from matching audience size, venue, production level, and atmosphere to the experience being created.

Conclusion

Looking back from 2026, the event industry did not permanently become virtual, socially distanced, or dominated by small outdoor gatherings. Instead, 2021 accelerated changes that made professional event production more adaptable. Hybrid participation remains valuable when it expands meaningful access, but it must be designed as a separate experience rather than a livestream afterthought. Accessibility is increasingly treated as a core design responsibility. Sustainability has moved toward measurable management systems such as ISO 20121:2024, while research on conference emissions

has made travel and logistics central environmental concerns. Technology remains useful when it reduces friction and increases engagement, but the quality of an event still depends on human fundamentals such as hospitality, pacing, sound, food, comfort, and clear communication. The most durable lesson of 2021 is therefore resilience. Modern event producers should know the purpose of the gathering, identify which elements are essential, design for diverse participants, understand environmental and operational impacts, and prepare credible alternatives when conditions change. That is a more valuable legacy than any single pandemic-era trend.

References

- Abdallah, A. (2024). The immobility of event mobilities: A new norm of events or a short-term change in dynamics? *Journal of Smart Tourism*, 4(4). <https://doi.org/10.52255/smarttourism.2024.4.4.3>
- Aronson, J. N., Giammar, D. E., Yao, Y., & Lee, T. (2024). Confluence of sustainability and academic conferencing: An environmental life cycle assessment of the 2022 AEESP Conference. *Environmental Engineering Science*.
- Brown, N., et al. (2024). The unheard voices of academia: Overcoming systemic barriers and fostering inclusive spaces for knowledge exchange. *Disability & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2024.2312220>
- International Organization for Standardization. (2024). *ISO 20121:2024 Event sustainability management systems—Requirements with guidance for use*.
- Lalor, F., Cameron, S. L., Selak, T., Dieleman, S. J. M., et al. (2024). Maximising environmental sustainability on the return to in-person conferencing: Report from a 2500-person anaesthesia meeting in Sydney, Australia. *Anaesthesia and Intensive Care*, 52(6). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0310057X241264576>
- Lee, J., & Kim, M. (2023). What drives event attendees' intention to continue using mobile event apps? The role of app attributes, social exchange and social-image. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology*, 14(3), 476–489. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHTT-04-2022-0097>
- Li, X., et al. (2025). A critical review of technology-facilitated event engagement: Current landscape and pathway forward. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*.
- Seraphin, H., et al. (2023). Post-pandemic lessons for destination resilience and sustainable event management: The complex learning destination. *Tourism and Hospitality*, 4(1), 7.
- Swenor, B. K., et al. (2024). Accessible scientific conferences for blind and low vision professionals and researchers: A necessary step for achieving STEMM equity. *Disability & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2024.2412269>