



MEETINGS OUTLOOK™



While this quarter saw the largest positive overall business projection in the history of Meetings Outlook, meeting and travel professionals must still contend with complicated prioritization (privacy vs. safety) and ongoing furlough and layoff challenges. Understatement of the year: It's a complex and stressful but thoroughly interesting time for meeting professionals.

VACCINE PASSPORTS

and Employment Challenges

The overall business outlook for the next 12 months is the most favorable seen in the history of the *Meetings Outlook* survey with 81 percent of respondents predicting a positive 12 months ahead. There's surely a lot of hope and optimism tied to that result, however, with more industry professionals clearly envisioning a post-pandemic business landscape as vaccine availability continues to grow and businesses begin reopening.



By **Michael Pinchera**

Is your staff vaccinated? Must your attendees be vaccinated? The debate *du jour* involves so-called “vaccine passports” and their place in the meeting and event industry.

In March, South Beach Food and Wine Festival organizers announced that participants of their event will have to provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test or proof of vaccination against the virus in order to enter. This was countered with the Florida governor’s executive order banning vaccine passports, which was signed several weeks later. Still, the event’s organizers intend to go forth with their planned safety precautions when the festival happens later this month.

Only 19 percent of *Meetings Outlook* survey respondents expect their employer will mandate COVID-19 vaccinations for staff. An even smaller percentage (12) expect their organizations will mandate such vaccinations for participants of their in-person

meetings and events. However, in both instances, there remains quite a bit of uncertainty—35 percent being unsure if their company will require staff to be vaccinated and 43 percent unsure if their company will require in-person event attendees to be vaccinated.

Vaccination requirements are nothing new to well-traveled business professionals. Still, pop-doc Drew Pinsky tweeted, “These vaccine passports segregate people and strip them of their freedom to travel internationally. Vaccinations are important, and I encourage everyone to get the Covid [sic] vaccine, but how would you feel if international travel also required other vaccinations?” He apparently did not realize that certain vaccinations have long been required for travel to and from specific countries. For example, the U.S. requires some incoming travelers to have proof of a variety of vaccinations prior to being eligible to enter the country. However, international travel and event attendance are not quite



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THERESE JARDINE
MPI Washington State Chapter

the same animal.

Metro Seattle-based Therese Jardine (MPI Washington State Chapter), principal at Strategic Event Procurement, noted in the survey that she was unsure if she’d start seeing mandatory attendee vaccination in the events with which she works. She explains some important distinctions between longstanding mandatory travel vaccinations and the situation with COVID-19.

“[The required] vaccines are well studied and have been in use for years, [whereas] the COVID-19 vaccines are all being used with Emergency Use Authorization and have not been fully approved,” she says, while noting her support for vaccinations, including those for COVID-19. “[However], requiring someone to receive a treatment that might be considered experimental rubs many the wrong way.”

Additionally, Jardine explains, vaccines for meningitis, polio,

yellow fever, etc., are not in short supply, while COVID-19 vaccines aren’t yet fully available worldwide.

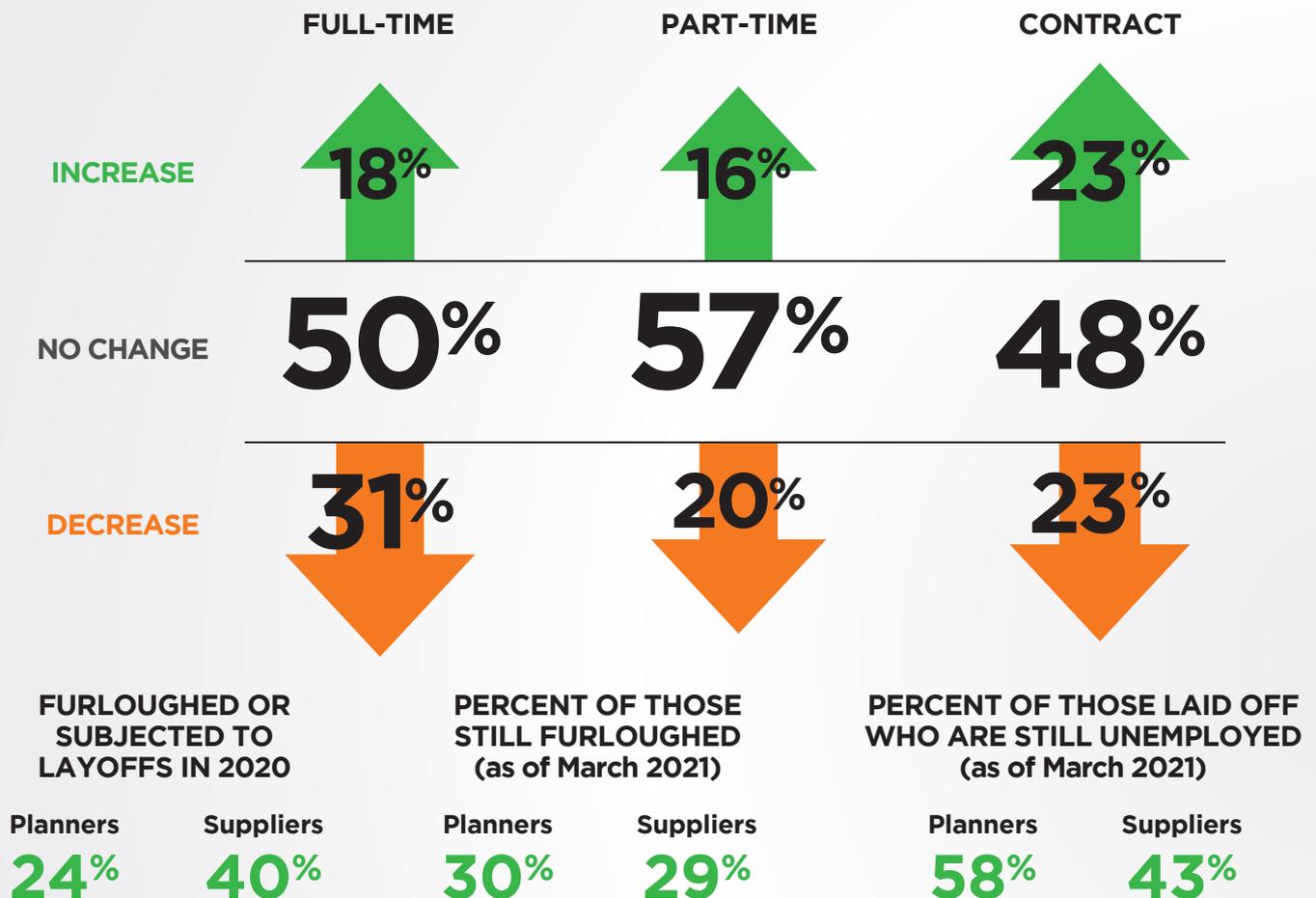
“Finally, the conversation around COVID vaccines spans beyond foreign travel, and into daily life activities here at home—sporting events, concerts, conferences,” she says. “We’ve never had to produce a health certificate to attend [those], so I think it hits a nerve.”

Healthcare privacy concerns as well as the practicalities of mandating vaccination for event attendees but not for consumers shopping, dining out or going to movie theaters all add to the disconnect.

“Over the course of a single day of business, any of these establishments could have just as many people coming through as at a small- to medium-sized event,” Jardine says. “I don’t think these are inherently less risky than an event.”

GLIMPSE AT CURRENT EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

The positive trend for employment continues at a slow rate. Despite many meeting pros remaining on furlough or still seeking employment, more are getting back to work. In fact, as discussed during the State of the Industry panel during MPI's Global Meetings Industry Day live broadcast, industry leaders expressed some concern about the massive amount of hiring activity with which they could soon be tasked.



ON VACCINES

In the previous quarter, 53 percent of respondents said holding their next in-person event was contingent on the distribution of a safe and effective vaccine. Yet, the latest survey found that only 12 percent of respondents expect their organizations will mandate participants of their in-person meetings and events be vaccinated against COVID-19.

Do you expect your organization will mandate COVID-19 vaccines for staff?

19% YES 46% NO 35% UNSURE

Do you expect your organization will mandate COVID-19 vaccines for attendees/participants at in-person meetings/events?

12% YES 45% NO 43% UNSURE

*“Just like a smoking policy, a vaccination policy is not just about the individual, but about **responsibility for everyone around you.**”*

SVEND DALGAARD
MPI Scandinavia Chapter

Because of all of those points—and more—she believes it would be difficult to mandate vaccination for attendees. It’s worth keeping in mind also that the research is not yet conclusive as to whether or not vaccinated individuals can still spread COVID-19. Jardine shares a less controversial middle ground that would still bolster safety of participants.

“I think a decent compromise is voluntary proof of vaccine and/or proof of a negative COVID test within x days of arrival,” she says. “COVID tests are now generally available, and, as far as I know, pose no danger to anyone’s health. There are a lot of examples of destinations requiring testing, and there doesn’t seem to be the push-back like we’ve seen with mandatory vaccines. If the goal is to prevent the spread of disease, I think testing goes a long way toward that.”

Other *Meetings Outlook* survey respondents contacted for follow-up details similarly mentioned testing as more likely to be used onsite rather than mandatory proof of vaccination.

Mariella Irivarren, CMP (MPI Toronto Chapter), manager of event-based marketing for BMO Financial Group, and other respondents say that since their companies aren’t mandating vaccinations for staff, they don’t see how such a requirement could be successfully placed on event attendees.

“BMO, as an organization, is not mandating that all employees be vaccinated (even though they are encouraging it), so I don’t expect it will be mandatory for event attendees,” she says. “A vaccine is a very personal choice for some, and some attendees may refuse to get vaccinated and/or claim discrimination if these become mandatory.”

That said, Irivarren does believe the near term will see some vaccination-mandatory events.

“Depending on the type of event, I do expect some may require proof of vaccines,” she says. “Especially [immediate] events when the risk is still high and not everyone is vaccinated. Personally, I would feel safer at an event where people are vaccinated.”

Irivarren adds that currently, U.S.-based in-person events with which her company is working still require attendees to sign a liability waiver—and, accordingly, some attendees may not want to attend because of that.

“If there are local or federal vaccination mandates, it’s out of the meeting owner’s hands,” Jardine says. “They’ll need to communicate the requirement to all attendees and be prepared to turn people away at the door or risk punishment for violating the law. It’s kind of like ‘21 and over’ to enter a bar in that sense.”

Essentially, if there’s to be a proof of vaccination requirement for attendees, the greatest chance for successful implementation would be regulation by local authorities, not at the event-organizer level. It appears likely that in many countries, any meetings or events mandating proof of vaccination for attendees will be outliers.

Like with many aspects of life, the meeting industry and business in general, the perception and practicalities of vaccination mandates will vary

Business Conditions

The overall business outlook for the next 12 months is the **most favorable seen in the history of the *Meetings Outlook* survey.**

Summer 2020

36% of respondents predict **FAVORABLE** business conditions

5% of respondents predict **NEUTRAL** business conditions

59% of respondents predict **NEGATIVE** business conditions

Fall 2020

58% of respondents predict **FAVORABLE** business conditions

8% of respondents predict **NEUTRAL** business conditions

34% of respondents predict **NEGATIVE** business conditions

Winter 2021

65% of respondents predict **FAVORABLE** business conditions

9% of respondents predict **NEUTRAL** business conditions

26% of respondents predict **NEGATIVE** business conditions

Spring 2021

81% of respondents predict **FAVORABLE** business conditions

7% of respondents predict **NEUTRAL** business conditions

12% of respondents predict **NEGATIVE** business conditions

ATTENDANCE FORECASTS

AS EXPECTED, PROJECTIONS FOR IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE CONTINUE POSITIVE GROWTH, WITH AN INCREASE OF MORE THAN 25 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS INDICATING SUCH, COMPARED TO LAST QUARTER. CORRESPONDINGLY, THOSE ANTICIPATING GROWTH IN VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE HAS DROPPED 19 PERCENT AS THEY LOOK AHEAD TO A FULLER RETURN TO IN-PERSON GATHERINGS.



Projected Live Attendance

59%
POSITIVE

6%
FLAT

34%
NEGATIVE

between countries and cultures.

One respondent based in Ireland who initially answered that he expected to see mandatory proof of vaccination for attendees of his client's events said, when contacted several weeks later, that he had become unsure about that prospect due to the fluid situation. In that same time frame, a respondent based in Washington, D.C., who initially expected his events could require attendees to be vaccinated also changed course when reached for follow up, noting uncertainty as to how organizations would be able to successfully enforce such a mandate.

(By and large, respondents who do not expect mandatory proof of COVID-19 vaccination for staff and/or attendees were more willing to speak on the record than those expecting vaccination requirements. For meeting pros in many countries, making attendance contingent on COVID-19 vaccination would be an unprecedented move and, therefore, one they may be hesitant to discuss with the media.)

Meanwhile, Svend Dalgaard (MPI Scandinavia Chapter), event designer for Bedre.Events and a member of the MPI European Advisory Council, has remained unwavering with his opinion on this matter—and glad to discuss it.

"Organizing large gatherings of people requires utmost care

and responsibility for both our own employees [and attendees]," he says. "Just like a smoking policy, a vaccination policy is not just about the individual, but about responsibility for everyone around you.

"While not requiring a vaccination might seem the sure way to higher attendance, speaking to clients and delegates shows a continued concern about contracting COVID-19. Asking delegates to show proof of either a completed vaccination or an updated test result will demonstrate your concern for their well-being."

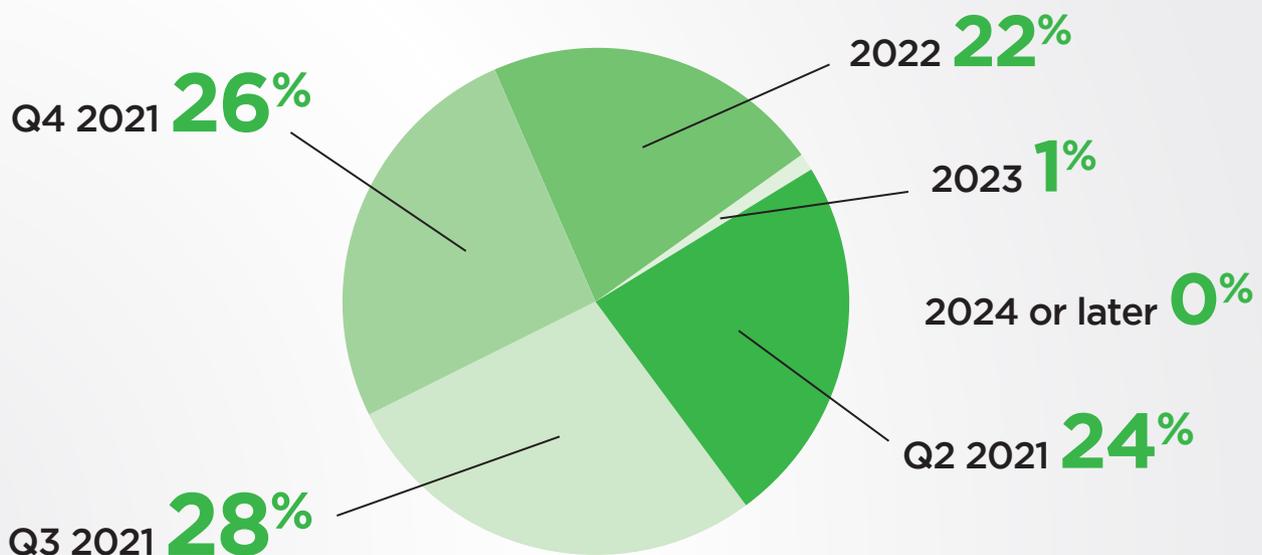
Approaching the topic logically, few could argue with his justification. However, the practicalities of implementing a vaccine passport are certainly not one size fits all, although there is some precedent for screening event participants. Dalgaard, who works on events worldwide, notes that some individual events in the not-too-distant past did have mandatory health checks for delegates from Ebola- and MERS-impacted regions.

"[A vaccine] passport is being introduced gradually in Denmark over the next few weeks and already many small business owners and restaurants are reluctant to check their patrons—they are willing to delay their reopening [to avoid addressing such requirements]," he says.

A more practical approach may be that mentioned by Jardine

BACK TO BUSINESS

While most meeting professionals still expect to hold their next in-person gathering during 2021, the greatest quarter-over-quarter change in this category was for those not expecting to meet again until 2022—the figure has more than doubled (from 10 percent last quarter to 22 percent this time around). That shift, however, is similar to what we've seen with each subsequent survey throughout the pandemic: There's hope blended in with the constantly fluctuating reality on the ground and the timing for a return to face-to-face events gets pushed back bit by bit.



and Dalggaard—that any such vaccine passport should offer passage to individuals with either proof of vaccination or recent negative test results since much of the world still has limited access to COVID-19 vaccines. For instance, Dalggaard says, in much of Europe (as of mid-April), these vaccines were still only available to senior citizens. He does remain confident, though, that the vast majority of people will take the vaccine when they have access to it.

Throughout the pandemic, he has been gauging the industry's view on the vaccine and how to potentially roll out a vaccine policy among onsite staff as well as in-person attendees.

"As long as the virus is still part of the community, precautions will need to be part of planning and executing events," he says.

Employment Woes and Trends

Beth Briant, CMP (MPI New Jersey Chapter), senior event manager at the Newark Liberty International Airport Marriott, is somewhat concerned about how any such vaccine passport challenges will play out.

"Being a meeting planner for a hotel, there are concerns about guests or attendees contracting COVID-19 at our location, however there are cleanliness and social distancing regulations in place to mitigate this risk," she says.

Briant also notes that since she's been on furlough for much of the pandemic—and still is—she's not 100 percent certain of the most current procedures being exercised onsite. She's certainly not alone as far as being furloughed or subject to layoffs last year.

In this latest *Meetings Outlook* survey, 24 percent of planners and 40 percent of suppliers said they were furloughed or subject to layoffs at some point during 2020. Thirty percent of furloughed planners and 29 percent of furloughed suppliers remain on the sidelines; of those subjected to layoffs last year, 58 percent of planners and 43 percent of suppliers remain unemployed.

Overall hiring, however, is continuing its upward momentum—albeit, slowly—and industry leaders are even already talking about the potential that a hiring whirlwind may be on the horizon as COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths, in many locations, begin receding and businesses reopen.

During MPI's Global Meetings Industry Day live broadcast last month, as part of the State of the Industry panel, Michael Massari (MPI Sacramento/Sierra Nevada Chapter), chief sales officer for Caesars Entertainment, noted the challenge of potential mass hiring in the near future.

"We're scared to death of that problem," he said. "But it'll be a great problem to have." ■



Meetings Outlook is supported in partnership with IMEX Group.