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Lights, camera, action: since the pandemic, hybrid conferences have become the new normal, bringing many benefits — but also challenges.

THE RIGHT MIX: MAKING A HYBRID CONFERENCE WORK FOR ALL

Organizing events that can be attended in-person or online is tricky. Planning and communicating early will save headaches on the day. **By Benjamin Plackett**

Mark Carden has been running the Researcher to Reader conference on scholarly communication since 2016. When the pandemic hit, the conference went online, like many other large meetings. Now that the events industry is picking up again, organizers such as Carden are contemplating what lessons from the 2020 and 2021 lockdowns should carry over to their post-pandemic conferences. Hybrid conferences — a mixture of online

and in-person — seem to be the new standard, but they can present steep challenges for organizers.

Hybrid conferences are harder to set up and run, in Carden's experience, than those that are fully online or fully in-person. "Online is OK and in-person is OK, because you can curate the conference so that everyone has the same experience, but with hybrid it's difficult to create that equality and it's hard to have communication across the boundary,"

he says. "But I also think hybrid is essential for the future."

For one thing, hybrid conferences are accessible to many more people. "Over the last two years, data from conferences has shown a sharp increase in the diversity of attendees for online meetings," says Elizabeth Tasker, an astrophysicist at the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency in Chōfu. Tasker helped to organize IR2022, a conference on the future of ground-based infrared observatories, which

was entirely online. “Removing the need to travel plummets the cost of attendance, makes the meeting far more accessible for those with disabilities or illness, and typically makes it easier to balance caring or other local commitments,” she says. Closed-caption technology, which displays a text version of the spoken part of a presentation, helps to make talks and question-and-answer sessions more accessible to participants with hearing loss. Virtual meetings also have lower carbon footprints because they reduce attendees’ air travel.

It’s important to consider time differences, remembering that the online audience could be dotted across the globe. Tasker recommends scheduling some sessions at the beginning of the day and some towards the end of the day, to include attendees both east and west of the host country. Doing so also allows the in-person audience a chance to get out and explore the host city, she says.

Carden, although reluctant to take on the extra work, is keenly aware of all these benefits. “The idea of saying ‘let’s go back to normal’ seems retrograde and unfair, so now I’m stuck with doing hybrid because it’s the right thing to do, but it costs twice as much. We actually lost money in the 2022 conference,” he says.

Balancing the budget for a hybrid conference – while ensuring that neither online nor in-person participants feel short-changed – can feel overwhelming. But there are a few things that organizers can do to make their lives easier and increase their chances of success.

Define what you mean by hybrid

The term hybrid conference can mean different things. People frequently think it amounts to nothing more than putting recordings of in-person talks online. But that’s an outdated approach, says Vanessa Moss, an astronomer at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Australia’s national science agency, based in Canberra. Moss leads a collaboration called the Future of Meetings, which has been publishing resources on improved virtual interaction in online and hybrid meetings.

“The fly-on-the-wall idea is too often people’s impression of hybrid, but a good hybrid conference gives both audiences equal agency to ask questions and follow the content and interact with each other,” she says. “You have to put digital first. That means when you’re designing hybrid conferences you don’t think of it as an in-person event with some online attached to it.”

Others are opting for a slightly different approach, in which only some parts of a conference are accessible both to in-person

and to online participants; other parts are tailored to each specific audience. That’s what the organizers chose to do for the Astrobiology Science Conference, held in Atlanta, Georgia, in May this year. They took this approach because the logistics and expense of providing hybrid platforms is a challenge, explains Jennifer Glass, a geochemist at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta who helped to organize the event.

Regardless of how you define hybrid for your conference, it’s important that you do so before you start planning, and that you communicate your definition clearly before attendees purchase tickets. That will help you to manage expectations; it will also reduce the chances of disappointment.

Think carefully about pricing

With all this in mind, ticket fees deserve serious consideration. If access to content and participation is genuinely equal for in-person and online attendees, it might be appropriate to charge the same amount for both types of ticket, says Carden. Some will disagree, however, and will expect online tickets to be cheaper or even free. “My posi-

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tion is that we’re offering the same value and it’s costing the same or even a bit more to do hybrid, so the price should be the same,” he says. “But quite a lot of attendees said their conference budgets had been cut recently, and their bosses said it’s not worth the cost for an online ticket.” Finding a way to assuage these concerns, perhaps with a thorough explanation of all that’s on offer for online attendees, could prove helpful.

By contrast, if the online and in-person experiences differ – as with the event that Glass helped to organize – then online tickets should probably be cheaper. “We charged differently for online versus in person,” she says. “It was US\$575 for in-person and \$375 for online.”

It’s a delicate balancing act, because charging less for online tickets can have a knock-on effect for in-person participation. That’s the view of Lauren Sheppard, project manager of life sciences at Terrapinn – an events company with offices in London, New York, Singapore

and Dubai that organizes large conferences on scientific themes, such as the World Vaccine Congress. “You’ll find that you need to increase your registrations sixfold for a hybrid conference, to get the same critical mass of people showing up in person.”

It’s important, therefore, to think carefully about your pricing strategy. It depends mostly on what you want to achieve. It’s worth asking yourself a few questions: is in-person participation still as important to me as it was before the pandemic? Will I still cover my costs by offering cheaper tickets to those taking part online? How much value am I giving the online participants? Would I pay my own money to attend the online components?

Revisit your budget

Both Glass and Carden say hybrid solutions can rack up quite a cost. This is particularly the case when events are hosted in large conference centres, which often restrict what equipment is allowed on site and who can operate it. These centres might even insist that contracts be given to a select number of approved suppliers, which decreases competition for a lower price. “I initially thought it would be cheap,” says Glass. “But you’re quite limited in terms of what you can rent from whom.”

It’s important to make a checklist of the equipment you might need, and where it can be sourced, early in the planning process. If you want to get things right, says Carden, “you’re looking at two camera operators, a vision mixer, an audio mixer and two producers” – in other words, a team of six audiovisual (AV) specialists. “Having all those professionals doubles the cost.”

The lesson here is to make detailed plans: Sheppard advises starting a year before the conference date for large events. This will eliminate nasty surprises when it comes to managing the finances.

There are ways to keep costs down; as Glass suggests, the venue is an important consideration here. “If you’re doing it on a university or a non-profit’s campus, then that’s a totally different thing. Campus resources mean it can be done on a shoestring,” she says. “But you need to go into this with realistic expectations. Hybrid isn’t easy with large conferences in corporate event spaces, and I don’t think scientists know how much AV services can cost.”

Groups such as the Future of Meetings are also on hand to offer guidance on how to reduce the cost of going hybrid. This includes online resources and reports, but the organization also offers tailored advice to those who ask for it; on occasion, it has even helped with the technical and practical side of things.

Zoom works well enough for broadcasting a talk or lecture, but there's a world of other software products that help to elevate the online experience. Crucially, they can be cost-effective, says Moss.

Whova, for example, is an app through which questions can be put to speakers. It's especially helpful for engaging the online audience, but Moss advises that in-person attendees be asked to pose questions in the same way. That way, the two audiences are brought together and can see each other's questions. "You need to give the online people the same opportunity to speak," she says. "It's also nice because there's a record of the questions that were asked."

Spice up online networking

Perhaps the biggest argument in favour of in-person events is the opportunity to network and meet people face-to-face. It's hard to replicate that experience with large, multi-person conference calls; a select few people usually end up monopolizing a stilted conversation. But there are more sophisticated apps that seek to make online networking more enjoyable. "We used a relatively cheap tool called SpatialChat, which is basically a virtual room. Your photo is in a circle, and you move it around to other people's circle to meet them," says Carden. "That cost us £2,000 [US\$2,500] for a 200-person licence over the course of 2 days."

Tasker, too, is a fan of products such as SpatialChat. "They give you an avatar, and the sound from a conversation falls off as you move away from a group, so you can have a real conversation-like experience," she says. "Everyone always says how online conferences suck because there's no networking component, but it can be solved."

SpatialChat isn't the only game in town. Gather is another popular platform, in which the user experience resembles a pixelated video game. Gather also features collaborative whiteboards for users to sketch out ideas together in real time. If that sounds too complicated, there are less flashy, text-based options such as Discord and Slack.

All in all, organizing a hybrid conference takes extra time and can be stressful. Carden says that putting on a hybrid conference was "nightmarish and traumatic to organize. It felt like spinning plates to me." But the end result was worth the effort. "It's fabulous when it all comes together," he says.

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Woo your audience as you would a blind date.

WHY LECTURES ARE LIKE BLIND DATES

How I learnt to woo the audience after attending a public-speaking class. By **Nicholas A. Coles**

About a year ago, a friend outside academia attended a talk I gave on the science of emotions, a topic I research at Stanford University in California. I thought the talk went really well. My friend, who works in insurance, disagreed. She said that academics are experts at making interesting stuff boring and inaccessible – and that we should all be required to take a public-speaking class.

So, a few months later, I enrolled in a

public-speaking course taught by James Wagstaffe and Bruce Bean, authors of *Romancing the Room: How to Engage Your Audience, Court Your Crowd, and Speak Successfully in Public* (2002). Their book compares communication to a romantic relationship; it starts by getting someone's attention on a blind date and flourishes when you are attentive to their interests, respond to their feedback and avoid monotony. Since completing the class, I've continued giving research talks and have received