4 Steadying the ship:
Designing and delivering a hybrid conference in unchartered waters

Brendon Knott and Ubaldino Couto

Introduction and scene setting

Prior to 2020, there existed a generally sceptical perspective towards virtual events (Hamm et al., 2018). However, the Covid-19 pandemic forced significant upheaval and challenges for the delivery of all events, including conferences. While the use of technology in planning and hosting events is not a new phenomenon, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a dramatic shift from traditional events to virtualised ones, with virtual or hybrid events catapulted to the forefront of the events industry (Venske & Nkosi, 2022). Organisers had to adapt swiftly and innovatively, within a fast-changing and uncertain environment (Lei & Couto, 2022). Many in-person conferences switched to virtual or hybrid formats (Tao et al., 2021).

In the post-Covid-19 event landscape, hybrid conferences will certainly remain a consideration for conference organisers as they offer unique value and distinct opportunities. While acknowledging these benefits (Pearlman & Gates, 2010), hybrid conferences have varied significantly in their delivery and have been widely criticised for their lack of delegate engagement and inclusion (Hamm et al., 2018; Simons, 2019). Further criticisms have included issues of budgeting and pricing, heeding the call to create more sustainable meetings for the future and leave lasting legacies through event design (Tao et al., 2021).

This chapter uses the case study of the 5th International Conference on Events, held in November 2021 in Cape Town, South Africa, to examine potential solutions for successfully designing and delivering a hybrid conference through presenting the challenges encountered and the considerations given throughout the event planning process. This case was selected due to its unfortunate but opportune process, involving its conceptual, planning and implementation stages right through the pandemic.

Virtual and hybrid conferences

Colloquially, events are now either physical, virtual or hybrid, depending on where and how events take place. Physical events refer to 'traditional' ones where delegates converge in a particular space at a particular moment for a specific purpose. Despite attempts in defining different types of virtual events (Yung et al.,

2022), its essence remains unchanged, whereby virtual events take place entirely online via software such as Skype, Zoom and Teams. Hybrid events are ones which combine and have different elements of physical and virtual elements.

Despite the innovation and viability of virtual meetings, they were often not adopted for reasons that are mainly related to technological barriers. These perceived barriers range from the technical software support to a lack of industry professionals proficient in both internet applications and event planning (Pearlman & Gates, 2010). Just before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, Hamm et al. (2018) paint quite an opposite image of online and hybrid conferences compared to the situation nowadays. They claimed that physical conferences best deliver content, cost, engagement, and relevance, compared with online or hybrid modes. These studies suggest that the industry was sceptical towards virtual events, referring to it as "*digital immaturity*" (Ryan et al., 2020). Despite a relatively sluggish adoption of virtual and hybrid conferences in the business events sector (Hamm et al., 2018), Simons (2019) put forward the possibility of using technology in enhancing hybrid event communities – as opposed to the actual hosting of virtual events – by facilitating communications and engagements.

The unprecedented onset and effects of the Covid-19 pandemic forced organisations to adopt technology and reinvent daily routines to the 'new normal' (Langley, 2021; Seraphin, 2021). For instance, Couto (2023) concludes in a recent study of event management university programmes found that innovative and dynamic pedagogy is paramount amidst the challenges brought forth by the pandemic. Yet, limitations in the adoption of innovations still persist, mostly because of the reluctance to adopt a new technology, technical skills gaps of event professionals, the increased costs involved in acquiring the new technology, time and cost to train event staff and technicians, as well as the potential increase of risks associated in the running of virtual events. In the case of hybrid events, technology adaptability plays a critical role. For example, a live broadcast of an event with interactive delegate engagement requires significantly more financial and technical resources than a purely live or online-only event (Lei & Couto, 2022).

Researchers claim that the pandemic provided opportunities for resetting the industry by introducing more responsible and sustainable practices (Koh, 2020). In addition to building a more environmentally friendly industry, Rowen (2020) added that events in the pandemic era are catalysts for social outcomes such as encouraging shared values. Indeed, Davies (2021) predicted that governments in the future would be working together to reduce the number of attendees; on the one hand to reduce environmental impacts such as carbon footprint due to travelling and on the other, maximising the cost efficiency of holding and attending events by key participants. Earlier research shows that pro-environmental behaviour and attitudes in the business events sector are inherently linked to personal values (Mair & Jago, 2010), and possibly vary between cultures (Li & Liu, 2020). For example, adoption of environmental practices in a conference is largely determined by the event organiser, who in turn is influenced by their personal values.

In last five years, technology adoption in the events sector has become more common and increasingly sophisticated (Lei & Couto, 2022). For example, many events now rely on mobile technologies for paperless conferences and increasing