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Vision & Intelligence

EVIDENCE BRIEF
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EVIDENCE BRIEF · MARKET AND CAPITAL

# Hybrid Is a Layer, Not a Successor

## Will hybrid formats replace live events?

Spending on business events is back above its 2019 level, while exhibition space and visitor numbers are not. Surveys of exhibitors and organizers show that the gap is not a shift to hybrid formats: digital fairs save money, but exhibitors expect and want the physical event back.

By Eventamin · How we work 12 November 2026

Worldwide, UK, Greece, Australia, Poland, Indonesia

**5 studies** · 4 industry sources

hybrid events | virtual events | future of events | digital trade fairs | in-person events | exhibitor survey | trade fair market | conference industry | face-to-face meetings | event recovery

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|---|---|
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KEY FINDING

Hybrid formats add reach and kept events running during closures, but the industry does not expect them to replace live events. Exhibitors weigh the loss of face-to-face contact more heavily than the savings.

Five studies, 399 respondents and interviewees, 2018–2023; industry data 2026

## Key findings

- **Exhibitors want physical fairs back.** In 2022, 71.8 percent of exhibitors at the Thessaloniki International Fair wanted a return to physical trade fairs, 22.9 percent preferred hybrid fairs and 4.8 percent digital fairs [1].
- **Lost contact outweighs the savings.** 93.1 percent of these exhibitors rated the lack of face-to-face contact a strong disadvantage of digital fairs, while 74 percent rated the money saved a strong advantage [1].
- **Value has recovered faster than volume.** Direct spending on business events worldwide stood at 112 percent of its 2019 level in 2025, while exhibition space rented reached 96 percent and UK exhibition visitors around 75 percent [2–4].
- **Support for hybrid depends on the business model.** Technology suppliers backed hybrid conferencing, while venues, convention bureaus and associations were the most reluctant [5].
- **Hybrid served as a bridge during closures.** Two-thirds of the Indonesian event organizers studied switched to hybrid formats to keep operating during the pandemic [6].

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FOR THE MARKET

## Market outcomes

What the studies mean for each part of the industry.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Organisers & associations** | Hybrid works as a product layer with its own price and audience rather than as insurance against the live event. Exhibitors are unlikely to pay for a digital stand at the price of a physical one. |
| **Exhibitors & sponsors** | Digital formats extend reach and pre-show contact at low cost. The stand budget remains tied to meetings and product contact, which exhibitors rate as the elements digital fairs cannot provide. |
| **Venues & destinations** | The data support the venue's core product. Streaming capacity is a service to add, while the room remains the scarce asset to price. |
| **Investors & advisers** | The recovery is visible in spending and in the number of events, not yet in average event size. The data point to more, smaller events rather than to attendance moving online. |

## Recovery in value and volume

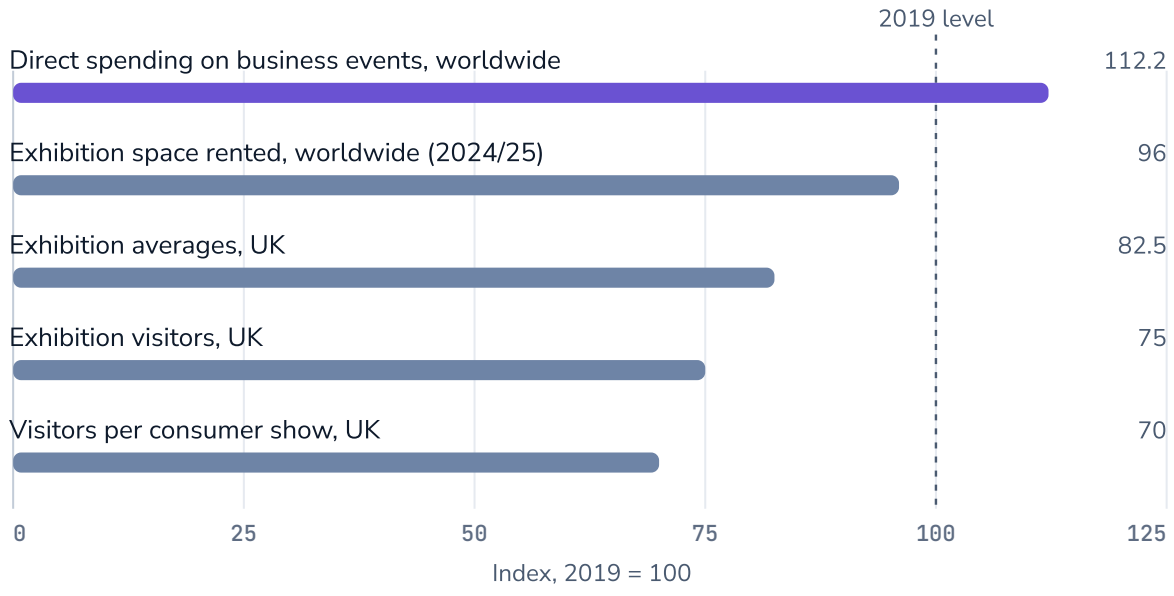
Business events have recovered in value but not yet in volume. According to the Events Industry Council and Oxford Economics, direct spending on business events worldwide amounted to around 1.29 trillion U.S. dollars in 2025, 112 percent of its 2019 level[2]. UFI counted around 138 million square meters of exhibition space rented worldwide in 2024/25, compared with 143.7 million square meters in 2019[3].

The United Kingdom shows the same pattern in more detail. The Events Industry Alliance counted more exhibitions in 2025 than in any year since 2015, but total visitor numbers reached only around three-quarters of their pre-pandemic level[4]. Average exhibition size, duration and attendance stood at 75 to 90 percent of 2019, and consumer shows attracted around 70 percent of their former visitors per event[4].

Vendor forecasts link the gap to hybrid formats. Market Data Forecast projected annual growth of 13.4 percent for the mixed and hybrid segment of the exhibition market, without disclosing its method[7]. Surveys of exhibitors and organizers show whether the industry itself expects attendance to move online.

### Business events and exhibitions in 2025 compared with 2019, by indicator

Index: 2019 level = 100. UK averages cover size, duration, visitors and exhibitors (midpoint of 75 to 90).




Sources: Events Industry Council; Oxford Economics; UFI; Events Industry Alliance · Release dates: April to May 2026 · Regions: Worldwide; United Kingdom

## How exhibitors weigh digital trade fairs

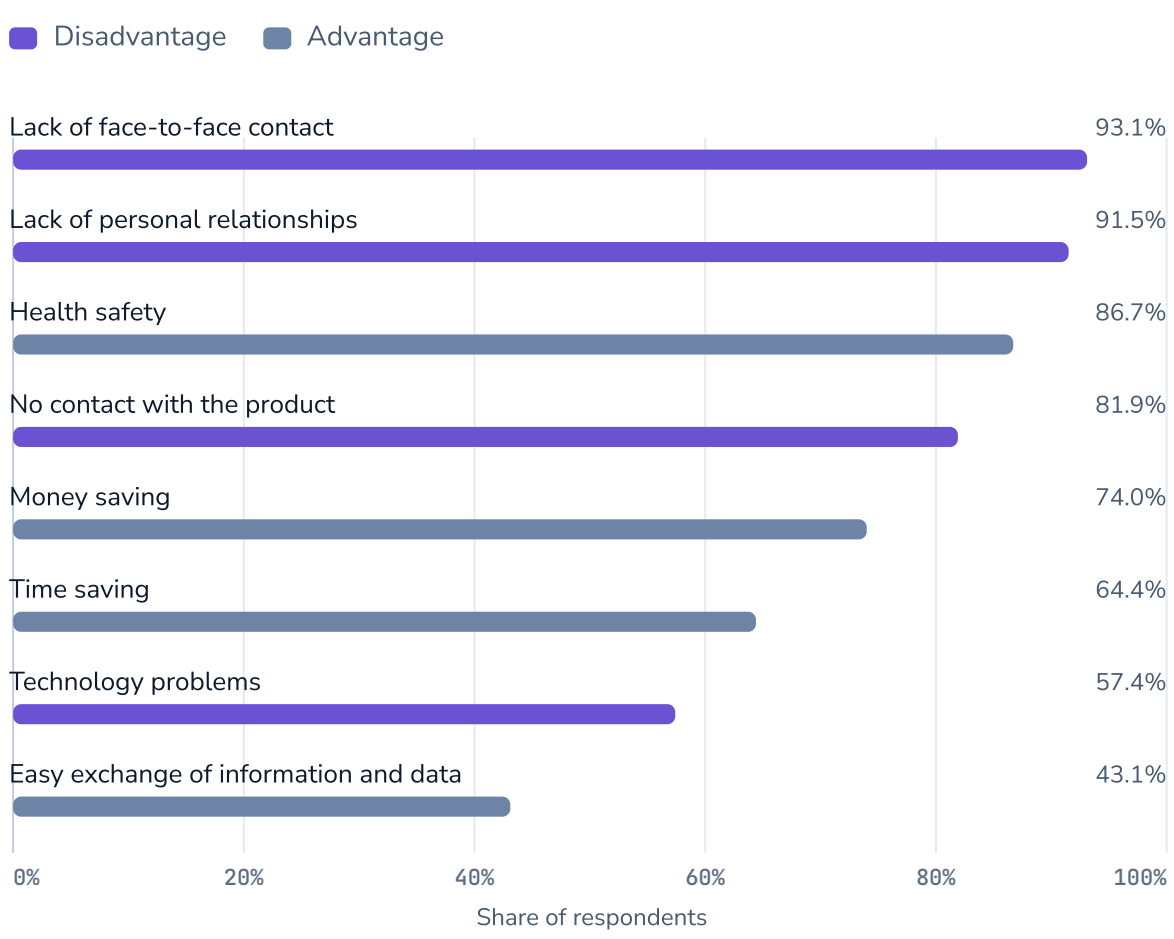
Exhibitors see the benefits of digital trade fairs but weigh the losses more heavily. Of 188 exhibitors surveyed at the Thessaloniki International Fair in March 2022,

86.7 percent rated health safety a strong or very strong advantage of digital fairs, 74 percent the money saved and 64.4 percent the time saved[1]. The lack of face-to-face contact was rated a strong disadvantage by 93.1 percent, the lack of personal relationships by 91.5 percent and the missing contact with products by 81.9 percent[1].

The three disadvantages concern the core functions of a trade fair: meeting buyers, building relationships and showing products. Technology problems ranked lower, with 57.4 percent rating them a strong disadvantage[1].

### Advantages and disadvantages of digital trade fairs according to exhibitors in Greece in 2022

Share of respondents rating each item a strong or very strong advantage or disadvantage.




Source: Kostopoulou et al. · Release date: 2023 · Region: Greece (Thessaloniki International Fair) · Survey period: March 2022 · Number of respondents: 188

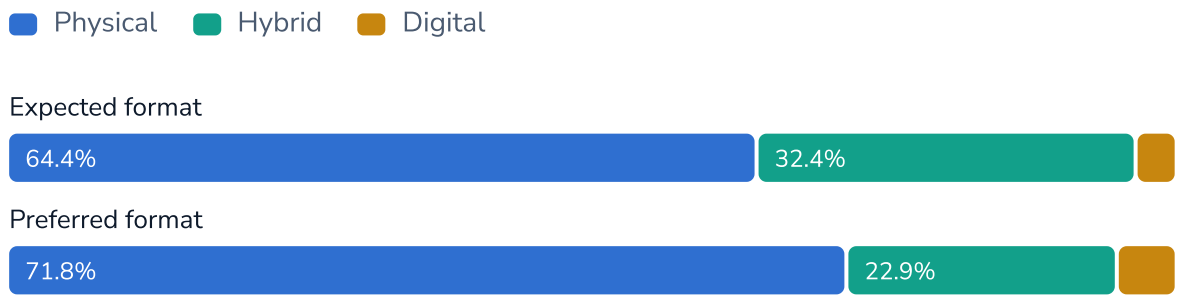
## Expected and preferred formats

Most exhibitors expect physical trade fairs to return, and more of them want it. In 2022, 64.4 percent of the exhibitors in Thessaloniki expected physical fairs to return, 32.4 percent expected a hybrid future and 3.2 percent expected digital fairs[1]. Asked about their preference, 71.8 percent chose physical fairs, 22.9 percent hybrid fairs and 4.8 percent digital fairs[1].

Few exhibitors believed that hybrid fairs will replace physical ones: 26.6 percent did not believe it at all and 32.4 percent only a little[1]. Younger exhibitors were slightly more open to hybrid formats, and there was no difference between men and women[1].

**Expected and preferred future format of trade fairs according to exhibitors in Greece in 2022**

Share of respondents.




Source: Kostopoulou et al. · Release date: 2023 · Region: Greece (Thessaloniki International Fair) · Survey period: March 2022 · Number of respondents: 188

## Positions on hybrid across the value chain

Before the pandemic, hybrid conferencing was a niche. Australian convention industry stakeholders estimated in 2018 that 50 to 90 percent of their conferences were held face to face and that fully virtual conferences hardly existed[5]. Their view of hybrid formats depended on where they stood in the value chain[5].

Suppliers of the technology were the most optimistic, while the owners of the venue and of the delegate relationship were the most cautious. The difference

explains why advocacy for hybrid formats has moved faster than adoption.

| POSITION | STAKEHOLDER GROUPS | VIEW OF HYBRID CONFERENCING |
|---|---|---|
| **Supportive** | Audio-visual, IT and video production suppliers | A new revenue stream and the expected future of conferences [5] |
| **Neutral** | Professional conference organizers, some associations | Requires proof of cost, practicality and measurable benefit [5] |
| **Reluctant** | Venues, convention bureaus, associations | Still a long way off; the most to lose if delegates stay at home [5] |

## Hybrid formats during the pandemic

During the closures, hybrid formats kept events running. Two-thirds of the Indonesian event organizers studied adopted hybrid formats to continue operating [6]. Polish organizers surveyed in April 2021 acknowledged the advantages of online events, including wider reach, lower costs and independence from the weather, but did not expect them to replace traditional events, because people need to meet and share emotions in person [8]. Australian event practitioners described virtual platforms as a temporary pivot rather than a new business model [9].

The return to live events also had a cost. Polish organizers focused on resuming normal operations missed the chance to redesign events for lower travel and resource use [8]. Hybrid formats may therefore matter most where they reduce travel for participants whose presence adds little to the event.

## Notes on the data

The figures are based on five studies published between 2018 and 2023: interviews with 35 Australian convention stakeholders and 16 Australian event practitioners, a survey of 145 Polish organizers with 15 follow-up interviews, a case study of Indonesian organizers and a survey of 188 exhibitors in Thessaloniki [1,5,6,8,9]. The exhibitor survey covers one fair in one city, with a

response rate of 12.5 percent. No study measures visitors' choices between live and online formats, and none tracks attendance moving from the live to the online version of the same event. Market Data Forecast does not disclose its method, so its figures are estimates to be tested.

## Sources

● Study ○ Industry source

1 Kostopoulou, E., Avdimiotis, S., & Kourkouridis, D. (2023). The trade fair industry in transition: Digital, physical and hybrid trade fairs. The case of Thessaloniki [Book chapter]. *Tourism, travel, and hospitality in a smart and sustainable world (pp. 399–415). Springer*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-26829-8_25 First-hand

2 Events Industry Council and Oxford Economics. (2026, May). 2026 Global Economic Significance of Business Events [Report]. Retrieved November 9, 2026, from news.eventscouncil.org First-hand

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## The evidence

**5 studies** · 4 industry sources

SAMPLE

Five studies with 399 respondents and interviewees; three industry statistics releases

YEARS

2018–2023 (studies); 2026 (industry data)

METHOD

Exhibitor and organizer surveys and interviews in Greece, Australia, Poland and Indonesia

## About Eventamin

Eventamin reads the peer-reviewed research on events, exhibitions and hospitality, sets it against industry data and states what it means for the market. Every brief is published by Eventamin as an organisation: its sources, method and corrections are open.

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