

Engagement First

The path to inclusive, engaging, and sustainable events

Quick context

This report is the result of a three month Innovate UK funded project asking a simple question: how can events be made more inclusive and sustainable?

The project partners are Broadsword Events House, Axis, DICE, the Events Marketing Association, Purple Goat, Realise and Private Goodness. To set the stage for what we did, found, and recommend it is important to be clear on where we focused and why.

By events we mean conferences, workshops, meetings, and roundtables: moments of sharing and discussion, which can be hugely influential from shaping what people think to defining how organisations act. Their importance is reflected in the amount invested in them, £18.3B is spent on conferences and meetings annually in the UK according to the Business Visits & Events Partnership.

With great influence comes great responsibility. And in our mind that responsibility manifests in a need to be both inclusive and sustainable so that events can harness the power of diverse thought and experience whilst minimising their environmental impact.

Central to this is engagement – whether attendees are motivated, heard, and included – in the context of COVID and the sudden shift to virtual events. Attendees environmental footprint is slashed, attendance can be made more affordable and accessible and yet engagement can be much more challenging.

In this project we focused on a specific part of virtual, live and hybrid events – the breakout. Breakouts are particularly salient as they are the big opportunity for increased engagement and can be tricky in a virtual setting.

An event breakout session is where attendees split into smaller groups to collaborate. Often, breakout participants return to the main plenary to present or discuss their collaboration. Useful and enjoyable event breakout sessions are often related to the event theme with a clear objective or problem to solve. The breakout distinguishes itself from more passive conference moments, such as the keynote and panel discussions. It is the moment for the attendee to be heard. For the attendee to share their experiences and insight and do their bit to shape the event outcome.

The challenge

"After 20 years of working in a loud, creative industry, where most of my bosses are talkative men, my confidence is at rock bottom. I don't even attend brainstorming anymore, because it's just embarrassing. I won't be listened to anyway. I much prefer email."

The big challenge for breakouts is that they get dominated by a subset of attendees, crowding out the voices and thoughts of others. You can't harness the power of diversity without inclusion and you are at risk of groupthink, a process where everybody ends up saying the same things, for the sake of conformity.

If you think a little differently, or you're less brave, or less bold, or *less loud*, or less likely to be listened to, or more likely to be interrupted, or more likely to be critiqued, then you may not say anything at all. Your voice becomes invisible.

And too many invisible voices can result in limited ideas, designed by committee. Maybe even psychologically *unsafe* spaces, where the most extroverted personalities determine the outcome.

Imagine all the brilliant thoughts, excellent suggestions and powerful ideas that have been left unsaid, because people didn't think their voices would be heard. Because they were worried about being interrupted, or disagreed with, or even worse, laughed at.

DICE - diversity and inclusion at conferences and events – conducted research amongst game-changing event organisers and DEI professionals across the media, academic, retail, tech, and charity sectors to better understand these dynamics and their implications generating four key insights:

1. The value of voices: very rarely are audiences and participants told their voices are of value, and even rarer is any measurement that makes this case. We were told that an inclusive event should feel like the opposite of a social media feed: people should be told their opinion is required and essential.

2. Facing the fear: fear is often an unavoidable evil at events. Fear of tech breaking, fear of saying the wrong thing, fear of looking foolish, fear of being misinterpreted. This is enhanced for people of colour, and minority communities.

3. The Gender listening gap: we found both statistical and anecdotal evidence that women's opinions are more likely to be disregarded and have their ideas stolen (over 50% of women have experienced this).

4. Neurodivergent solutions: this is more than just 'personality' types. Neurodiversity is an area that has been under-represented until recently, and can include autism, ADD, dyspraxia, hypersensitivity, and other often 'invisible' conditions. The way the session is designed and run can have a massive impact on inclusion.

On accessibility specifically Purple's Goat identified a series of barriers for both physical and virtual events. Barriers to virtual events are generally easier to overcome than those seen in physical events. For people with physical disabilities, virtual events often remove the biggest barriers, as well as barriers often not considered, such as networking, when using a wheelchair without a riser function, people are at a lower height than everyone else, meaning it can often be difficult to be seen or heard in busy places. Virtual networking removes this barrier as height is not a contributing factor to being seen or heard.

But virtual is not a panacea. For visually impaired people, the screensharing function that is widely used is not accessible. This is because screen readers pick up the screen share as an image, and therefore do not give the person all the information being presented. And for people with hearing impairments, the provision of subtitles, or a BSL interpreter are not often available. Some online platforms, such as Google Meets offer a built in subtitle feature, whereas other platforms have to be used alongside other software in order for subtitles to be provided.

For neurodiverse people, virtual platforms have both positive and negative attributes when it comes to accessibility and inclusion. The positives are that they are able to attend from home, in an environment that they are comfortable in. However, often social cues, such as when someone is about to speak, are more difficult to read on online platforms, therefore people can struggle to contribute and take part.

Recommendations

Imagine what could happen if every event was truly inclusive, with breakouts that allowed everyone to have their voice heard whether run live, virtually or hybrid. This is how we think this can be made the reality

1. Accessibility should be designed into the event from the start working with those who live and experience the barriers every day. Don't assume that a virtual event solves the problem. Ask people what accommodations or

adjustments they need, listen to the requests, and recognise that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to accessibility and therefore flexibility around accessibility is vital

2. Recognise the value of engagement and inclusion on event impact and return on investment. It is true that people want to listen to experts but wholly passive events miss a huge opportunity. Many people want engagement and they want to be involved. At least give them the opportunity and create a meaningful output that has value after the event
3. Apply simple principles for better breakout collaboration (adapted from best practice for the neurodivergent)
 - **Speed:** give people longer to think and digest information
 - **Space:** allow people space to write their ideas down and edit, before sharing with the group
 - **Silence:** people need space free from distraction to think. Dominant voices crowd out both the voices and thoughts of others. Provide periods of silence
4. Make use of structured facilitation with a clear journey and a step-by-step process to co-creation and problem solving that is simple and easy to follow. You don't want people to get lost in the process and hence unable to fully contribute. Spend time selecting the right approach and activities given the number of attendees, time available and what you want to achieve
5. Talk about it. Diversity, inclusion, and sustainability are key issues that should be embedded into the event and openly acknowledged and discussed. Bring to life what has been done to increase inclusion and why and allow attendees to enter the debate and share their experiences and insights as part of a process of continuous improvement