



# Virtual Events a new reality

The trends now driving EMEA event organisers



## Events have changed in the wake of unprecedented change. So where do we go from here?

For much of the last 12 months, the main focus has been keeping the lights on. That's true for many industries, let alone the people working in them, and the challenges and pressures involved in doing that simple thing have been immense.

As a result, brands have had to show up for their customers in a manner that no one had ever considered before. Virtual events have been one of the most important ways in which they have connected and supported people through the turmoil. They have also been a great leveller. A world class event no longer needs a huge budget, magnificent destination or an intimidating stage-show. Just an internet connection, a laptop and the kind of creativity that has now permanently transformed the way events will be done in the future.

That in turn has pushed traditionally big-spending organisations to offer something better. Without the distractions and physical interactions, the focus has

narrowed considerably onto adding value through stronger content. If the pandemic has done one thing for the industry, it's forced everyone to sit back and ask what it is they are trying to achieve with each event. I think that will remain once things return to some kind of normality. With the proven success of strong content, it may be that some of the event trimmings we all took for granted will be challenged in the future.

But virtual events have been a leveller in different ways too. Many who might not have the seniority, resources or time to attend physical events are now being given more access to the content they are passionate about.

Removing those walls can only be a positive thing for the future, helping to evolve ideas, challenge norms and democratise the process of creative innovation. That accessibility is key. I think brands will remember its value as we move onto the next stage of recovery, keeping the focus not just on sales or seniority,

but on engaging a more global audience. From the huge acceleration and investment in event technology, it's also clear there is a long-term faith in the future of virtual. That means skills will develop and roles will both change and grow as the industry matures.

But most importantly, it means that virtual events are no longer a substitution for anything. They are not a pivot. Now and in the future, many events will be born virtual. And that's a very new, very exciting prospect.



**Kelly Farrell**

Product Marketing  
[LinkedIn](#)



CHAPTER 01

# How virtual events grew from nice to necessity

This is how EMEA reacted to a  
rapidly changing event landscape

## There's no question: virtual events are here to stay

In a business landscape that has been permanently altered by the disruption of 2020 and beyond, virtual events have become one of the enduring global success stories.

For event organisers, the opportunity to facilitate safe human contact has been a lifesaver. Literally. And as the world begins to adjust to a greater sense of normality, it seems certain that virtual events will remain a permanent fixture.

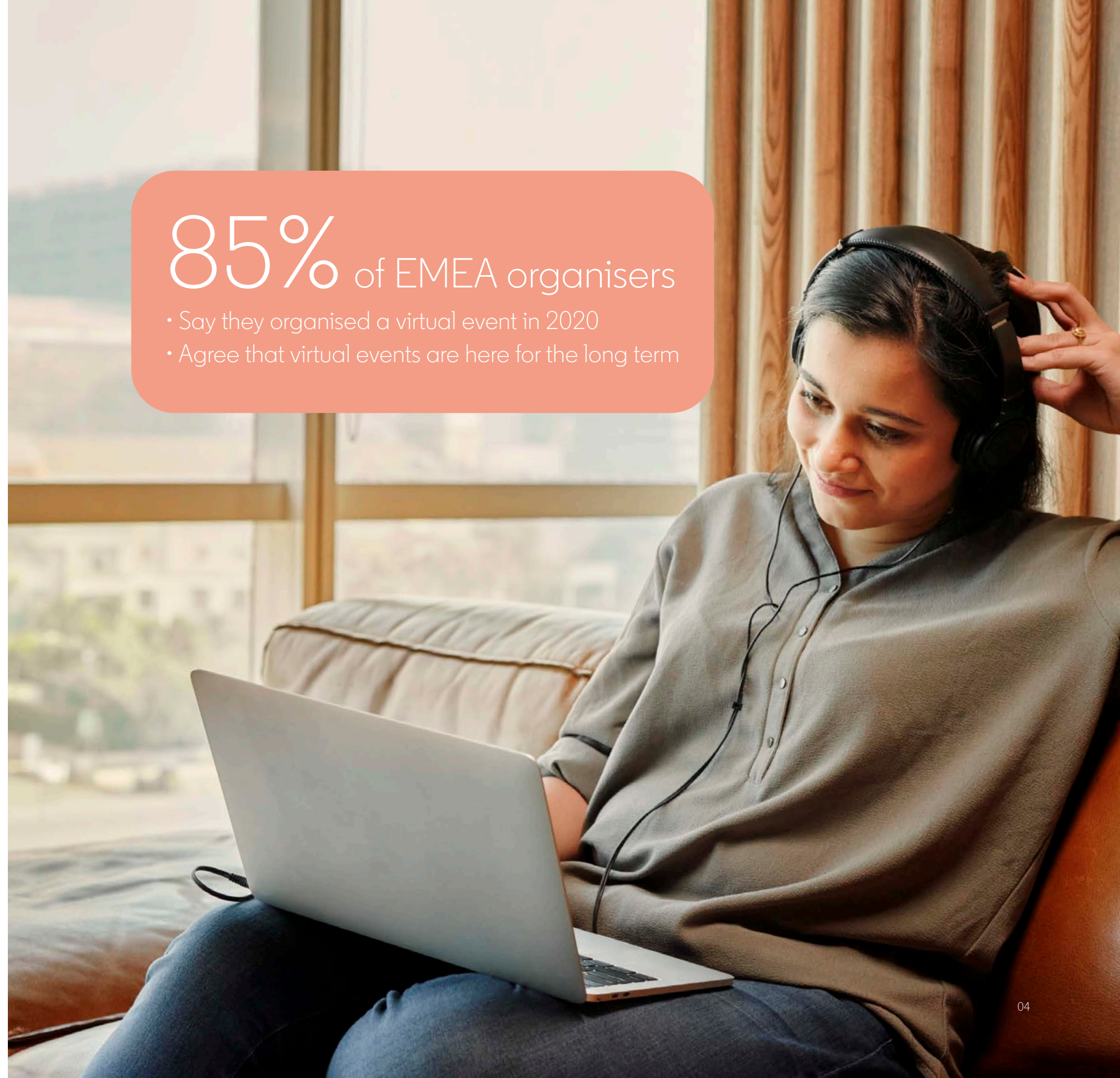
In this guide, we examine virtual event data taken from six countries across EMEA as a result of an in-depth study undertaken worldwide by Savanta.

We compare how the attitudes, objectives and priorities of event organisers have changed in each country. We explore how virtual events are already being adapted for the near, medium and long term future.

And we include insights from global brands, as well as tips on how to improve your own response to the new reality of organising events in a post-Covid world.

85% of EMEA organisers

- Say they organised a virtual event in 2020
- Agree that virtual events are here for the long term



## Every country adapted at its own pace

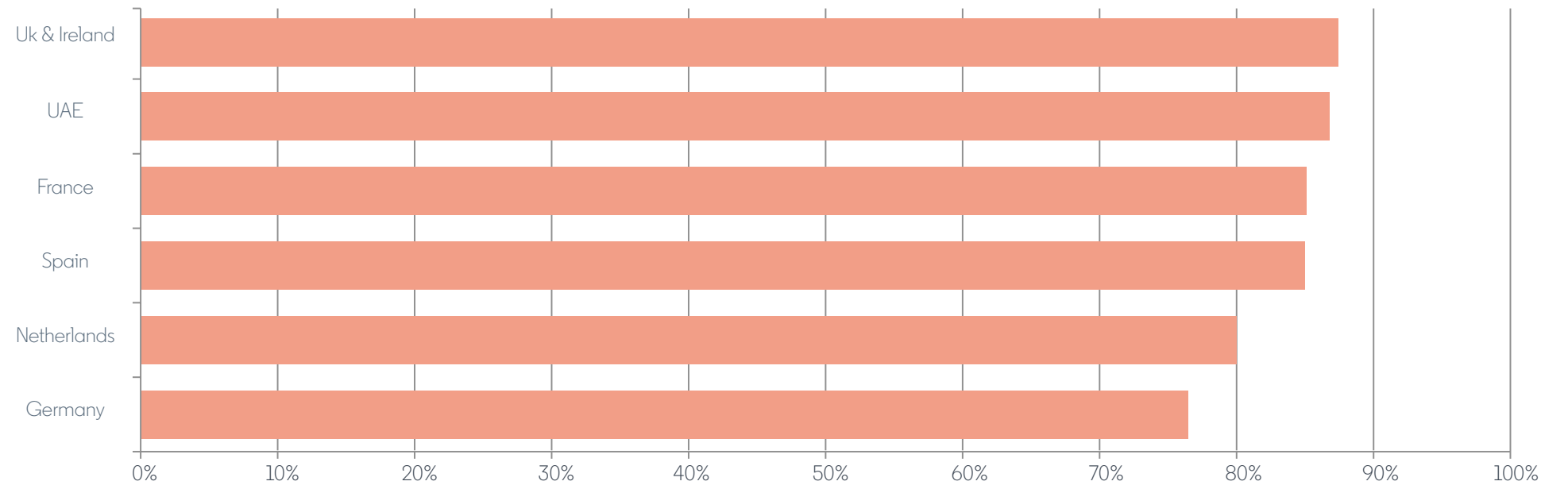
While countries across EMEA were facing similar challenges in 2020, the speed and scale of their pivot towards virtual events varied dramatically.

At one end was the UK and Ireland, which adopted virtual platforms more comprehensively than anywhere in the world. France, on the other hand, took a much more considered approach. While uptake was high, organisers appeared to use virtual events as a surgical tool rather than a universal antidote.

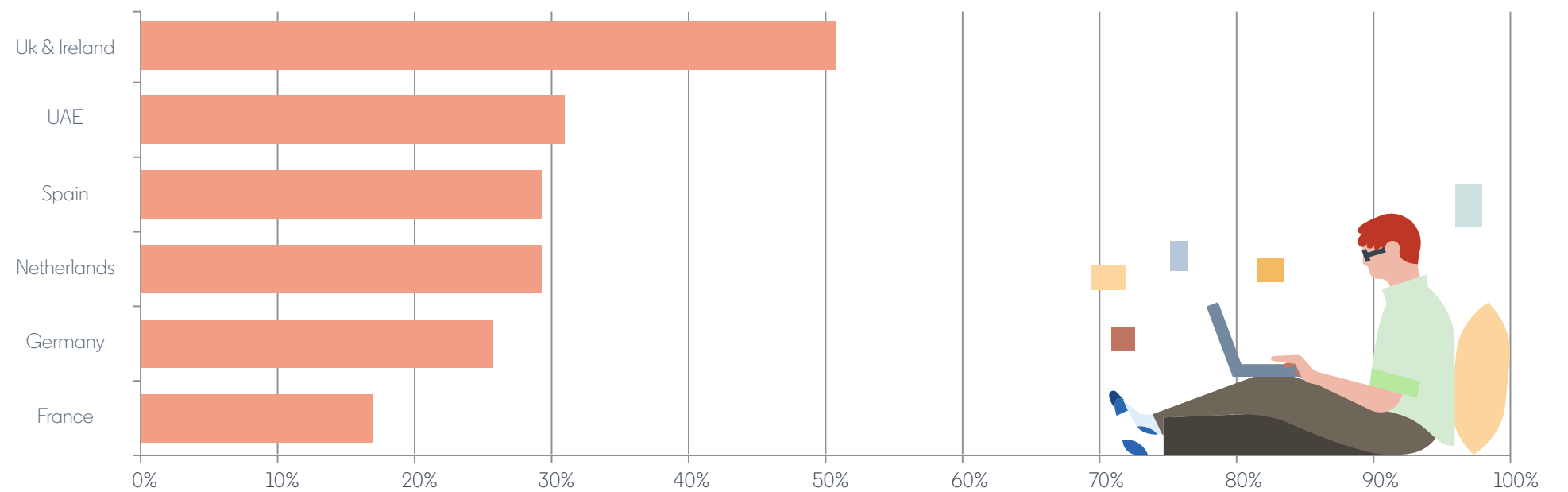
This is in stark contrast to Spain, which accelerated their pivot to virtual events faster than any other country. The same percentage of Spanish organisers went entirely virtual in 2020 as in the Netherlands, despite the latter being far more comfortable with virtual events pre-pandemic.

And while organisers in Germany lagged behind other countries in overall uptake, they were still far more inclined towards going fully virtual than France.

**Organisers who organised a virtual event, webinar or online talk in 2020**



**Organisers who pivoted entirely to virtual events <sup>1</sup>**



<sup>1</sup> 91-100% of events held virtually.

## What is driving the switch to virtual?

Given the circumstances of 2020, that may sound like a fairly simple question. But we found that just as uptake has varied considerably across EMEA, so do the motivating factors in each country.

Naturally, the pandemic-proof nature of virtual events is a major factor in their growth throughout the region. But in Spain, that comes second to their ability to reach a global audience.

In both the UAE and Germany, the fact that going virtual is a more environmentally friendly alternative is also a strong influence. And for Ireland and the UK, cost effectiveness is a big consideration.

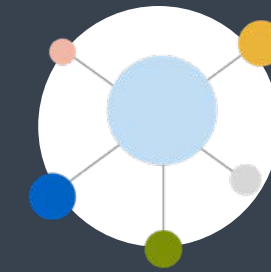
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*“At the beginning of last year, we saw a big spike of interest in virtual events, then a gradual fatigue. But we’ve found that if an event is well communicated and well planned, then people will come. The key for us is keeping attendees engaged with shorter sessions, multiple speakers and more interaction.”*



**Gerd De Bruycker**  
Marketing Director EMEA, Cisco

1. They are pandemic proof



64% UK and Ireland  
52% Germany  
51% France  
47% Spain  
46% Netherlands

2. They offer an opportunity to attend global events without needing to travel



54% Spain  
49% UAE  
47% UK and Ireland  
40% Netherlands  
38% France

3. They're more environmentally friendly



52% UAE  
45% Germany

4. They're a crucial part of the future of the industry



49% UAE  
42% Germany  
41% Spain

5. They're cost effective

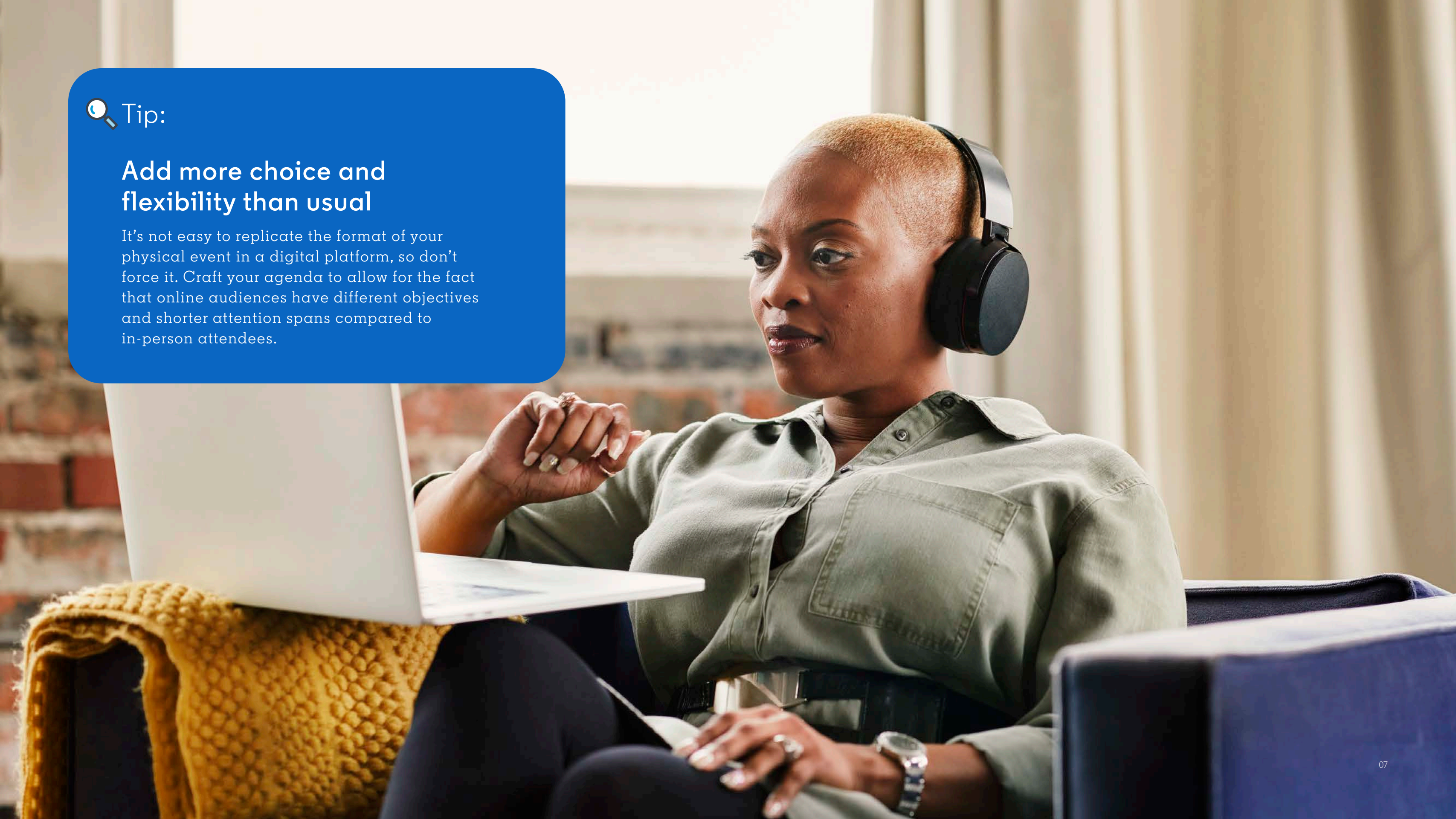


51% UK and Ireland  
39% Netherlands  
37% France

 Tip:

## Add more choice and flexibility than usual

It's not easy to replicate the format of your physical event in a digital platform, so don't force it. Craft your agenda to allow for the fact that online audiences have different objectives and shorter attention spans compared to in-person attendees.





CHAPTER 02

# Climbing the learning curve

Attitudes to change in unique circumstances



## Hindsight is 2020

The popularity of virtual events now belies just how difficult many found the transition from the well-established routine of hosting in-person.

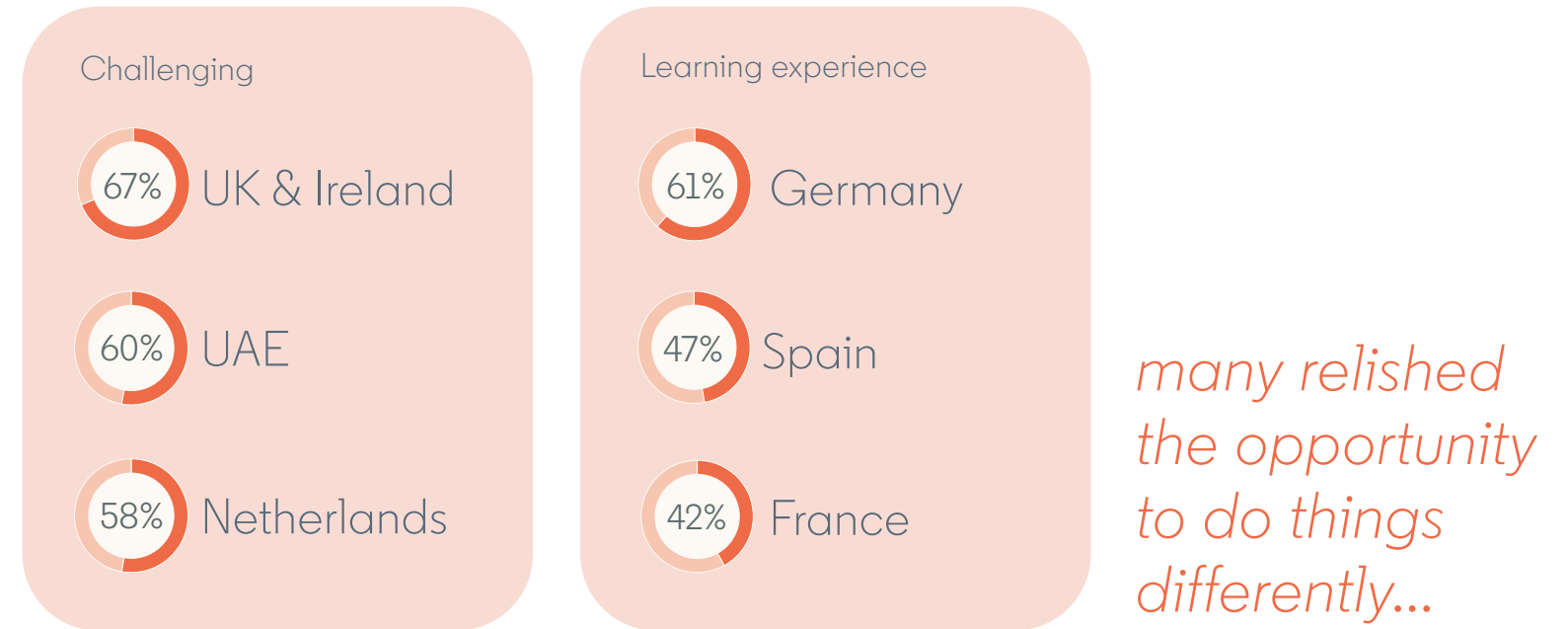
Five out of six EMEA countries chose 'challenging' as the top word to describe event management during the pandemic. The outlier? Spain's most popular description was 'a learning experience', which continues the trend of its organisers taking a more positive, long term view of the value of virtual events.

*"The difficulty we have is when Covid started and we went only to virtual events, we lost the reason we used to go to events in the first place, which was to meet and exchange. The context of virtual events obliged us to concentrate on quality and creativity of the content in order to be pertinent enough for our audience to focus and listen. With any event I first look at the communities discussing the subject and then construct the event using this information. It's about having a data-centric approach and then finding the influencers and integrating them, often either as invitee or moderator."*



**Marie Sophie Joubert**  
Global Head of Social Media & E-Reputation, BNP Paribas

## Top words to describe experiences of event management during the Covid-19 pandemic



While it was the first choice in Spain, 'a learning experience' was also EMEA's second most popular description overall. This is clearly demonstrated in the diverse range of positive reactions from organisers in different countries.



## But not everyone found new technology easy

Unsurprisingly, the most common reason why organisers found 2020 challenging was the necessity of finding new ways to work effectively. But Germany, Ireland and the UK all cited having to get to grips with new technology as the main reason why they struggled.

This can be seen in how long each country took to feel confident hosting a virtual event:

Spain's position as fastest learner tallies nicely with virtual events' meteoric rise in popularity in the country, while Germany's position correlates with its comparatively low take-up compared to EMEA. However, Ireland and the UK found things just as difficult as Germany, despite having the most organisers worldwide who went entirely virtual.

We think the answer to this seeming contradiction lies in how each country approaches its event budget. But more on that later.



### *Most reported length of time to feel confident hosting a virtual event*

Already confident:  
Spain

Already confident:  
UAE

Confident in two weeks:  
France

Up to one month:  
Netherlands

Up to three months:  
UK & Ireland

Up to six months:  
Germany

CHAPTER 03

# Doing more with less

How EMEA redefined value as  
the pandemic took hold



## The squeeze of a crowded market

In the face of a rapidly shrinking economy, the reaction of 47% of EMEA companies was to cut their events and marketing budget in order to maximise their chances of survival. But with every organisation now pivoting towards virtual event platforms, the crowded market forced countries to react in different ways.

### Biggest effect of budget cuts in EMEA

**Running events more cost-effectively**  
44% of the UK and Ireland

**Coming up with more creative solutions to connect with customers and prospects**  
43% of UAE

**Cutting the number of events being held**  
42% of Germany  
40% of Spain  
36% of France

**Trimming the size of their events team**  
37% of Netherlands

## Meet the three kings: Content, marketing and platform

With everyone sharply focused on extracting maximum value from their events budget, two thirds of EMEA prioritised content development as a way of winning greater audience share. Two more countries opted instead to prioritise event promotion and advertising.

### Event budget priorities

**Content Development**  
44% UK and Ireland  
38% Germany  
31% Netherlands

**Promoting and advertising events**  
45% UAE  
44% Spain  
30% France

**These dual priorities resulted in 43% of EMEA's event budget being spent on virtual event platforms, production and digital marketing:**  
24% on virtual event platforms and production  
19% on digital marketing tactics



Tip:

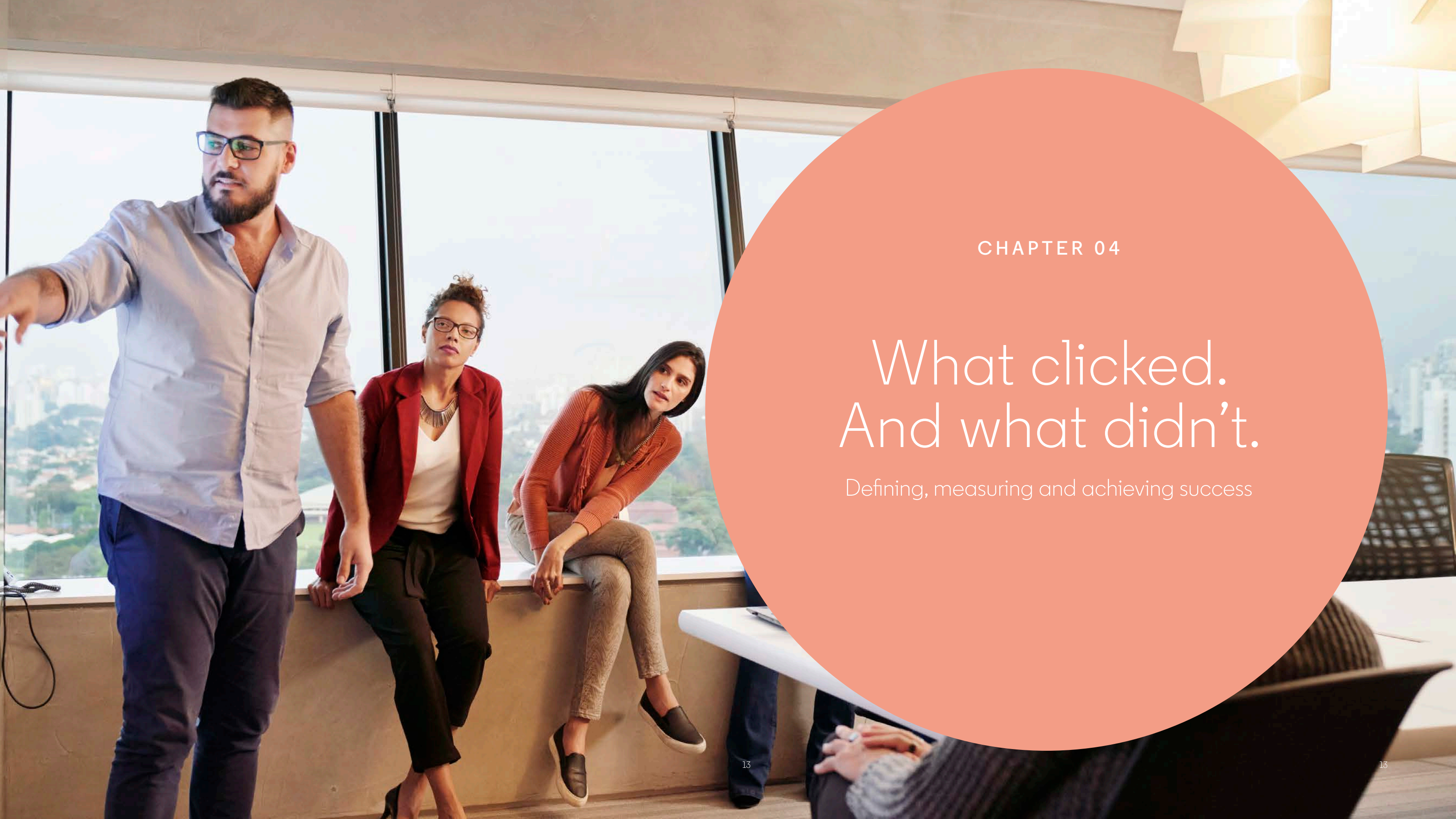
### Have a defined events budget

Despite going all-out on virtual events, Ireland and the UK took about as long to get to grips with the new platforms as Germany, which was far less involved. What did they have in common? The countries which adapted faster were all more likely to have a dedicated budget for events, which means more effective planning, training and contingencies.

*"I think the quality of the content has improved so much. In my company, people are considering running webinars that would have never done so previously. With physical events, there was always the possibility that visitors would be coming for the perks of attending any event – drinks at the bar, flights paid for by their company etc. But now with virtual events it's all about the content."*



**Philip Behnke**  
Head of Social Media, Celonis



CHAPTER 04

# What clicked. And what didn't.

Defining, measuring and achieving success

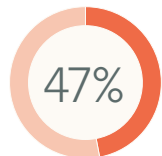
## Metrics maketh measurement

In days past, you could be forgiven for lacking a certain amount of sophistication when it came to measuring the success of an event. Mostly because any type of deep analysis seemed both prohibitive and unnecessary. But 2020 has changed that too. Around 76% of EMEA respondents say they have been able to make wider use of metrics to create a more refined assessment of what constitutes a productive event.

Nevertheless, most countries continue to fall back on the tried and tested standards when it comes to overall success. Once again though, Spain distinguishes itself from EMEA as the only country to focus on either engagement levels or leads as its main measurements.

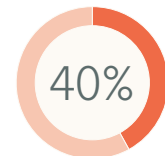
### Internally measuring success of virtual events

#### Attendance Rate



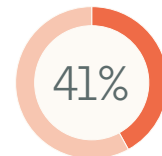
UK and Ireland

#### Number of attendees



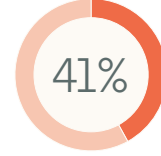
Germany

#### Engagement levels

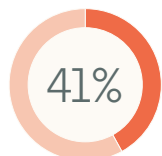


Spain

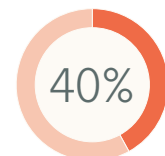
#### Sales leads created



Spain

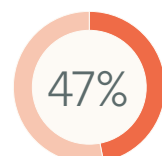


France



Netherlands

#### Source of attendees



UAE



Kim Vigilia  
Head of Strategy & Experience, WIRED

*“Marketers should continue to measure the volume of pre-registrations vs the number who show up on the day, as well as the drop-off rate of attendees during the event, and the feedback following the event – all very similar to an onsite event. In addition, post-show video views could also be helpful to organisers who want a bigger picture of reach and engagement. For those using platforms with more engagement tools, reviewing the activities in the chat box or polling responses are also a good way to access more context to your specific audience.”*



## A quantum leap in new skills

For an industry which had only needed to make incremental adjustments to its skill set previously, the sudden switch to virtual events presented its own challenges. While many organisers were already comfortable with budgeting, social media promotion and coordinating remotely, more than 1 in 3 considered themselves a beginner or novice in some of the core skills needed for going virtual:

### The most in demand virtual event organisation skills



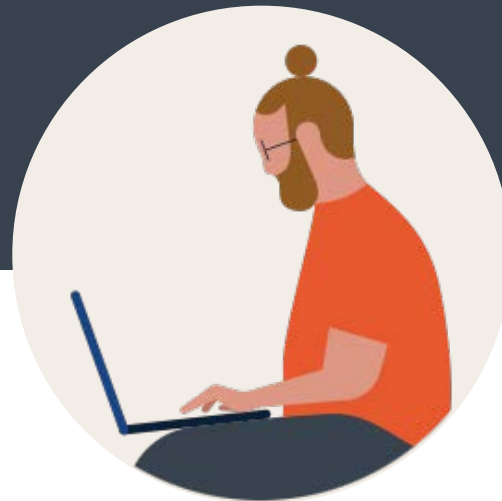
36%

Design skills for eye-catching visuals



35%

Platform troubleshooting



34%

Technical knowledge of events platforms



34%

Technical ability to offer networking over video chat



33%

Online advertising skills

## What did success look like?

Well, for the majority of respondents in EMEA, the main goal when holding a virtual event was audience engagement. This also explains why such a large proportion of the event budget was spent on getting the platform and content right.

Spain, again an outlier, prioritised being able to connect with attendees throughout the event timeline, which was also joint top priority in France. Germany took a more utilitarian approach, with events designed to provide a service or benefit. German respondents were also significantly more likely to say that their focus was on generating immediate sales.

### Event team's main goal

#### Creating an engaging attendee experience

41% UAE  
34% UK and Ireland  
26% Netherlands  
24% France

#### Being able to connect with attendees before, during and after the event

30% Spain  
24% France

#### Providing a service or benefit to clients

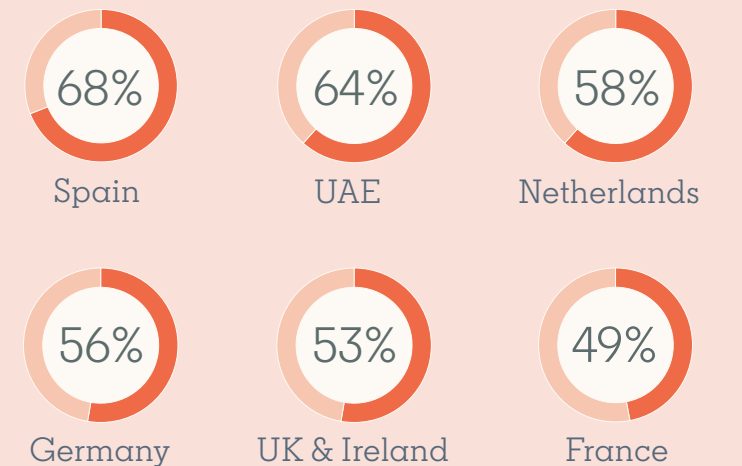
28% Germany

## Which country succeeded in achieving its goals?

Obviously, this isn't a competition. But if it were, then Spain would be the outright winner. It was the most likely to describe 2020 as 'productive' and a 'learning experience,' and the data backs up the sentiment. As well as coming out as having achieved more of their goals than any other EMEA country, 1 in 5 Spanish respondents also increased their sales, profits or new customers. That is nearly double the global average.

Bringing up the rear was France. But considering their reticence to fully commit to holding virtual events in comparison to the rest of EMEA, it would have been difficult or French event organisers to overcome many of the restrictions imposed by lockdown.

### Net goals achieved



*"I always recommend keeping your content short. Ask for light commitment from both your speakers and your audience, especially in the world of Zoom fatigue. It would have to be a very, very special subject for me to sit for an hour for a webinar. And don't be wedded to one subject. We've covered everything – we don't just focus on the financial industry. It's about real, human stories. Not just KPIs, products and data."*



**Rob Coble**  
Social Marketing Lead, EMEA  
London Stock Exchange Group (LSEG)

*"We've measured event attendees' engagement with articles hosted on the Financial Times website for the six months prior to an event and then for six months afterwards, to see the impact a single event might have. In the six months after their attendance, engagement on FT.com skyrocketed. In the past events have been seen as a revenue driver. Now we see them as an engagement driver. They have a big impact on our customers' lifetime value."*



**Tania Marshall**  
Global Marketing Director, Financial Times





Tip:

### Engagement breeds success

One consistent theme in Spain's outlook has been to focus on engagement at every point of their audience's journey. From prioritising promotion beforehand, to using engagement as an internal KPI during the event, to touching base afterwards. The event itself is simply a catalyst for increasing the number of touchpoints you can create with your prospects. It's also no surprise that having sales as an internal metric resulted in better overall sales performance. What gets measured, gets done.

CHAPTER 05

# The future is no longer on mute

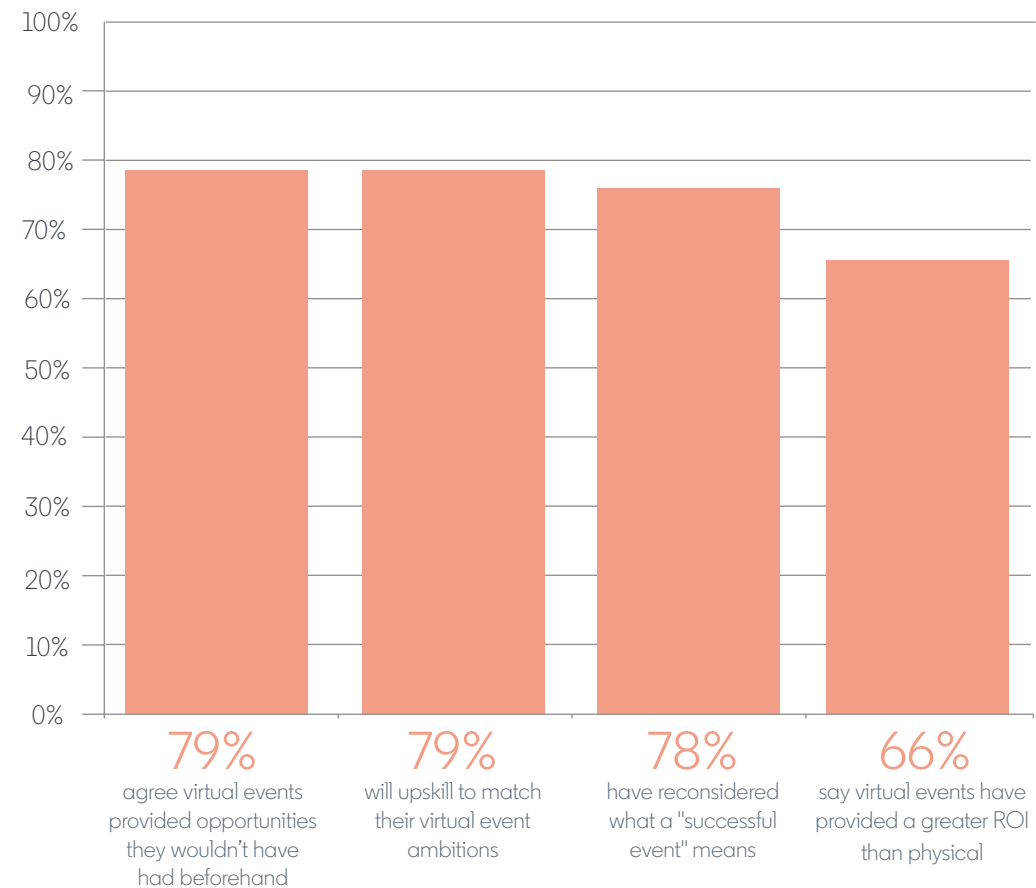
Planning events post-Covid



## It's all about perceived value

Across EMEA, more than 4 out of 5 respondents agree that virtual events are here to stay for the long term. While it's inevitable that more organisers are planning to maintain virtual events in the next six months, 75% also say they are likely to continue organising them beyond the next 12 months.

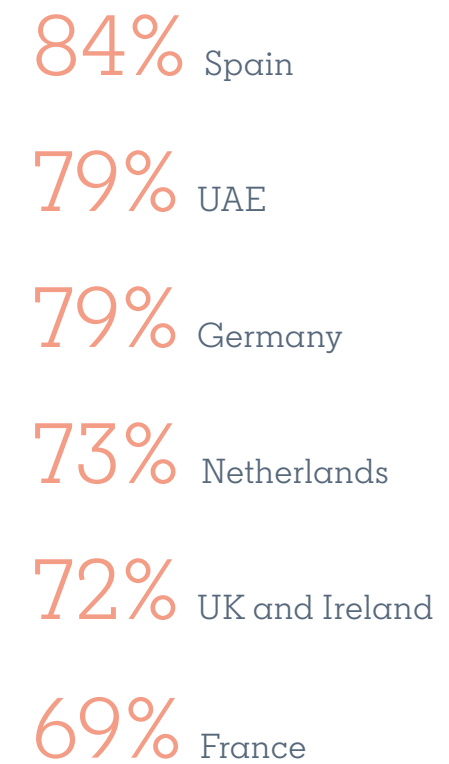
### And here's why:



## Enthusiasm is influenced by past results

It's perhaps no surprise that Spain's success led it to be most likely to continue, or that France's lack of results left respondents the least enthusiastic. The same correlation can be observed in the UK and Ireland, which also struggled to achieve their goals compared to the rest of EMEA.

### Likelihood to continue organising virtual events in the long term:



 Tip:

**Size matters. Objectives matter more.**

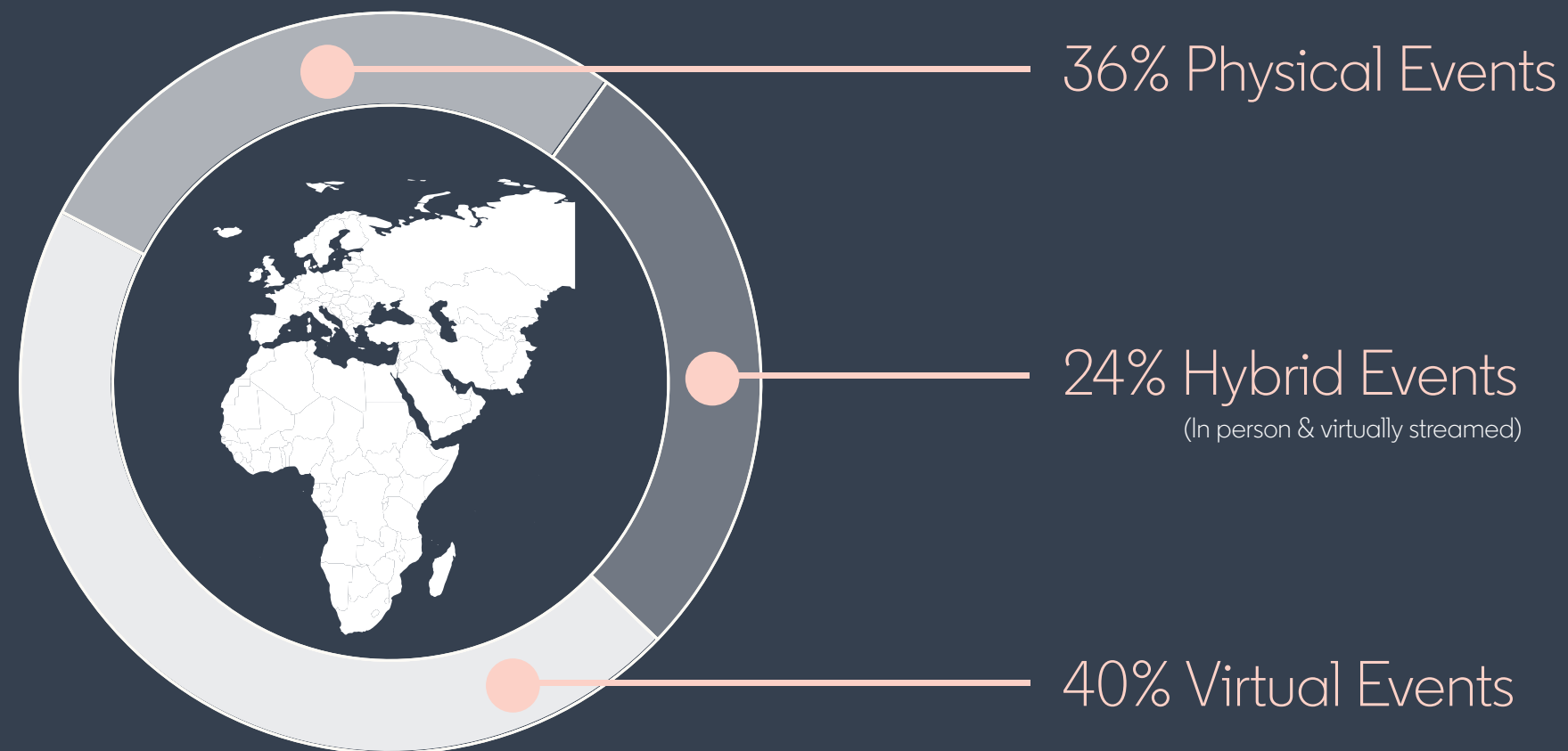
Many EMEA respondents said that the smaller the size of their audience, the more likely they would be to go entirely virtual. And for small ABM-style events the potential for personalised, exclusive content makes perfect sense. On a larger scale, physical and hybrid events make it easier for more visitors to interact more naturally.



## So are we going permanently virtual?

No one's saying the last 12 months haven't been fun. Well, almost no one. But it's okay to admit that we're all looking forward to a shift towards the old normal again. And for nearly 8 out of 10 in EMEA, that includes holding some physical events again. But in the future, around two thirds of events are likely to have a virtual element to them, with 74% of respondents expressing an interest in organising a hybrid.

Proportion of events expected to be physical vs virtual once the Covid-19 pandemic has subsided:



*“Businesses can’t go back to physical events on the assumption that it was what they did before. Online events have brilliant virtues, and they will continue because people’s eyes have been opened. The way they can bring together a concentration of world-level speakers and content – the bar has been raised. But we do have to harmonise how the physical and virtual domains complement each other. It’s a mistake to replicate content as they simply cannibalise themselves - they have to co-exist. Our task is working that out.”*



**Chris Howells**  
Head of Strategy and Performance, FT Live

## Conclusion

Marketing trends are usually anticipated, debated, researched and examined to death, well before they become accepted as part of the industry. But we saw none of that in the birth of virtual events.

Regardless of the levels of success each country had with their response, the one thing they had in common was that it was the people on the ground making things work. Or working around things that aren't possible. Or testing possibilities that would never have otherwise occurred to them.

Some of the resulting lessons are contained in this report; from adding more choice and flexibility, to shortening sessions, increasing the number of speakers, influencers and opportunities to interact. Other takeaways include making sure you work from a defined events budget and taking a data-centric approach to event organisation and success metrics.

One of the reasons why the quality of event content has improved was a greater willingness to focus on human stories beyond the data. And it's clear that success comes from taking every chance to grow audience engagement before, during and after your event.

While the decision to go fully virtual will depend on your audience size and objectives, the key to future events will be your ability to harmonise content across both the physical and virtual spheres.

2020 was a year of contradictions, where nothing happened and far too much happened at once. And where by being forced to stand still, event organisers probably pushed their industry forward further than at any time in living memory. It is a fitting response to a topsy turvy year. But it is also only the beginning. The knowledge gaps, practical difficulties and technical frustrations will inevitably give rise to more powerful and effective solutions.

So even though the way you organise events has changed forever, it hasn't stopped there. We can't wait to see what happens next.

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