



Virtual Events a new reality

The pocket guide to virtual events



Contents

1. How virtual is the future for events?

Five predictions for the next three years

2. Seven principles of a successful virtual event strategy

The lessons we've learned about what works... and what doesn't

3. Anatomy of a virtual events marketer

The most important new skills to learn

4. The most exciting technologies for the future of events

Today's challenges will drive tomorrow's innovation... here's what we're most looking forward to

Introduction

Events aren't what they used to be. The business of planning, organising, promoting and executing them hasn't just been temporarily disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It's been reinvented. We've always known that events can build excitement, strengthen relationships and start high-quality conversations. Now we know that they can reach far wider audiences and build awareness in ways we never imagined. Events aren't what they used to be – but if we can identify the right opportunities, they could be so much more.

This pocket guide brings together new LinkedIn data on the rise of virtual events with practical advice from event marketing experts on how to plan and deliver them. We're sharing our key learnings from a tumultuous year for events, the insights we've gained into what works and what doesn't, and how we see the role of virtual events evolving in a post-pandemic world.



Rebecca Harmer

Head of Events LMS EMEA & LATAM at LinkedIn

CHAPTER 01

How virtual is the future for events?



Back in the distant-seeming world of 2019, an event was something you went to. It could be large or small, intimate and exclusive or impressively huge, but its value came from the experiences that are possible in-person. It was the benefits of gathering people together in one place that gave events their unique role in marketing strategies.

New research from LinkedIn reveals how rapidly this has changed. We interviewed 1,830 marketers with responsibility for events across 13 countries and every region of the world. Of these, 85% had held a virtual event in the last year and 28% said that between 91% and 100% of their events are now virtual.

However, this doesn't mean that virtual events will have the future to themselves. Although 75% of event marketers anticipate continuing to host virtual events over a year from now, 78% said they wanted in-person events to return to a primary role once it's safe for them to do so. This raises a vital question for marketers planning their future events strategy: how virtual will that future really be?

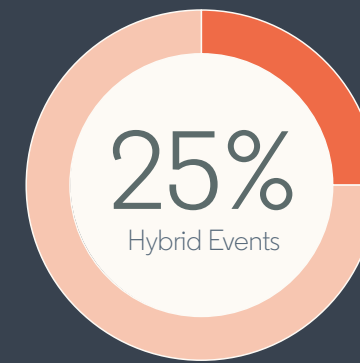
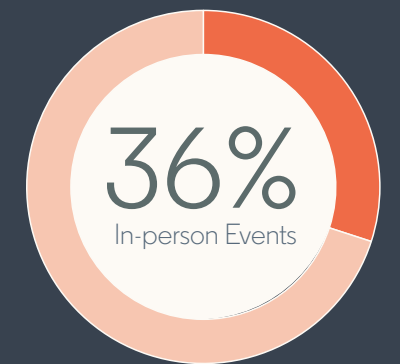
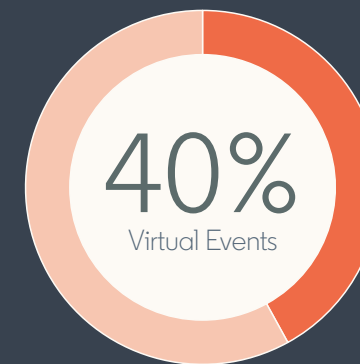
Here are five predictions for the next three years that we're using to guide our own event planning:

1 Virtual events are here to stay

There's much that marketers and sales teams miss about in-person events: serendipitous encounters, organically generated opportunities, the extended attention you get from attendees and the excitement generated by sharing a room with big-name speakers.

However, businesses don't want to give up the benefits of virtual events either: scalability, accessibility, dream line-ups of speakers that are easier to book, and an extended lifetime for on-demand content. Our research backs this up. Even after the pandemic, marketers anticipate holding more virtual events than in-person ones.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, the average event marketers anticipate that...



40% of their events will be virtual, compared to 36% in-person and 25% hybrid

2

The virtual event experience will continue to evolve

Very few audiences are willing to settle for being talked through static slides on traditional webinars. They demand concise, video-driven experiences that are imaginative, entertaining and come with TV-standard production. Competition to stand out has driven rapid innovation in virtual event formats. As filming restrictions are lifted, event marketers will have many more creative options available to them.

3

The return of in-person will be phased, focused and (at-first) exclusive

With virtual alternatives available and event organisers carefully weighing the financial risks, in-person events are unlikely to return in a rush. A likely starting point is for sales teams to invite high-value contacts to the filming of virtual events, in a white-glove experience that includes meeting experts face-to-face, exclusive roundtable discussions and hospitality. From there, we'll see organisations gradually stretch into dedicated in-person events, but still with a focus on smaller venues and selective guest lists. It could be several years before we see a return to booking larger venues and gathering audiences at scale.



51%

of event marketers say they will continue to organise virtual events because they are “pandemic-proof”



42%

describe them as more environmentally friendly

4

Virtual and physical events will target different points of the funnel

We're likely to see virtual and physical events taking on distinct and complementary roles within marketing strategies. Virtual events work best for targeting the upper funnel, engaging a wider audience while making far fewer demands of their time, and doing so over a longer timeframe through live video and on-demand follow-ups. This will free in-person events to focus more on lower-funnel objectives, prioritising quality time with buyers.

5

Hybrid events will become the big bets in marketing strategies

Hybrid events are the big bets of future marketing strategies. They promise to combine the benefits of virtual and in-person, but they combine the costs of both formats as well. With the right audience and the right focus, they can act as powerful marketing centrepieces that can be spun into different campaigns, content assets and experiences – and deliver benefits all the way through the funnel. However, they will need investment, planning and commitment to play that role effectively.



Seven principles of successful virtual event strategies



Knowledge advances through experimentation – and for virtual events, there’s never been an experiment like 2020. LinkedIn’s own approach evolved rapidly over the course of the year as we discovered what worked... and what didn’t. Here are the seven key insights that we’ve taken from the experience – the principles that we’ll be applying to virtual event planning going forward:

1 Event marketing expertise still matters

Since almost everyone knows how to host a Zoom call, it’s easy to assume that anyone at your organisation can host their own virtual event. In the early stages of the pivot to virtual, we created ‘How To’ guides for our sales and marketing teams and encouraged them to set events up themselves. We ended up with our events marketing specialists being overloaded with requests to fight fires, solving last-minute technical issues and dealing with GDPR compliance. The demands of virtual events may be different to in-person ones, but that makes specialist skills more important – not less.

2 Don’t overload the audience – or your own team

One of the big upsides of virtual events is that they demand less of your audience’s time. However, this quickly becomes a big downside if you use it to cram more events into your calendar – and overload your audience with invitations. As the first year of the virtual events pivot went on, we found our attendee numbers dropping as people became overloaded with Zoom meetings, virtual drinks – and event requests from ourselves and others. We adjusted by looking at every campaign and asking if an event was really the best way to deliver on its objectives.

By the end of the year, we had reduced the number of virtual events we were running by half – and greatly increased the attendee numbers, show rate and dwell time. This also meant more planning time to get sales and marketing aligned.

3 Keep runtimes concise

Attention works very differently when someone is watching an event stream on a laptop to when they’ve set aside a day to attend a conference. Based on our initial learnings, we put a limit of two hours (and preferably 90 minutes) on every event that we planned, and asked most speakers to deliver what they had to say in 12 minute slots (think TED Talks but just a little shorter). We set aside breaks in the schedule to allow virtual attendees to take comfort breaks or grab a coffee too. When you’re delivering an event through video, your audience expectations are shaped by TV – and you don’t get many TV shows running for longer than 90 minutes.



4

Plan campaigns, not just events

Returning to a slower-paced events schedule helped us to create proper campaigns to maximise the value of each event. Many successful virtual events benefit from promotional campaigns running up to a month before the event itself. And one of the most worthwhile investments you can make is planning an extended life for event content through social video cuts and on-demand viewing hubs. It's not unusual for the number of views that an event generates to treble in the 48 hours following the event itself.



5

Keep sales pitches out of the event content – and plan for sales conversations instead

The dynamic of virtual events makes them particularly suited to the upper funnel, where they can reach, engage and entertain people at scale. However, to play this role effectively, you need to be disciplined about keeping sales pitches away from your event content – and focus on value for your audience.

Use your virtual event as the trigger for sales conversations rather than a substitute for them. Incorporate breakout rooms with account director experts, add follow-up roundtables for exclusive exec audiences – and encourage sales reps to invite their contacts for virtual follow-up coffees and chats. The more closely you involve sales in the planning of your event, the easier you'll find it to integrate these elements within the overall event campaign.

6

Add interactivity wherever you can

How can you replicate the experience of being at an event when your audiences are watching from home? The short answer is, you can't. It's a far more productive use of your time and resources to design different experiences that are unique to virtual events, but still elevate the live experience above simply watching a video. We've found that you can often deliver a more personalised experience for someone watching on-screen than you can for hundreds of people sitting together in a room.

We've sent personalised mugs and coffee-making kits in advance, set up game shows with attendees competing for the best Halloween outfit, asked live DJs to warm things up before we get started, invited audiences to vote on what we should cover and included real-time polls throughout events. And we're not the only ones. Nike created personalised welcome pages for attendees of one of its recent virtual events – complete with a tailored message from keynote speaker, Serena Williams.

7

Set the right targets – and plan the right nurture streams

Because virtual events contribute to revenue in a different way to in-person ones do, it's important to adjust your approach to measuring effectiveness and ROI – and respond to metrics in a relevant way. We've focused on reach and engagement KPIs that reflect their top-of-funnel role, such as registrations, live and post-event views and peak concurrent views. NPS is a key metric and we often add qualitative questions on the event experience to help optimise our approach.

Virtual events can generate Marketing Qualified Leads (MQLs) at far greater scale than in-person events do. However, these are likely to need more nurturing and qualification on their journey towards becoming opportunities and revenue. We measure MQLs from our virtual events, but also monitor carefully the rate at which these convert into sales-accepted opportunities.



Expert View:

"Replacing in-person events is the wrong way to think about virtual events. It's like eating diet ice cream. It's not so bad, but it may just remind you of what you're missing. It's better to go back to the drawing board and ask yourself, what does my audience most need right now, and how can I deliver that? Start with empathy and remember that surprise and delight is a constant."



Kaitlin Bellay

Head of Channel Marketing, LinkedIn Marketing Solutions

"Start with asking 'why?' Why is this event important to my audience? The key is to understand the audience value proposition and why they should give us their time for each and every event. The focus should always be on what our audience needs and not what we think they need."



Heidi Olson

Global Head of Third Party Events, LinkedIn

"Attendees are looking for thought leadership, focus your content around industry trends and solutions, with virtual events it should not be used for a sales pitch. Offer opportunities for people to go learn more, schedule a meeting with a rep after the event, but use the event as a way to add value to a conversation."



Rena McGrath

Senior Executive Producer, Strategic Events, LinkedIn

CHAPTER 03

Anatomy of a virtual events marketer



42%

of event marketers worldwide, would like better technical knowledge of event platforms,

38%

want to grow social media skills to help increase their events' impact

A successful virtual events marketer doesn't just organise events. They produce and direct video content, grasp the pros and cons of different technical platforms, know how to moderate online comments and discussions, and put together digital marketing campaigns that amplify the impact of their content. Here are the most important new skills that the rise of virtual has added to the event marketing toolkit:

Video production expertise

The quality of sound and visuals has a huge impact on the engagement levels that a virtual event generates. It's often worth investing in external production expertise to help with setting up shots, advising on lighting and camera angles and monitoring sound and picture quality. However, you'll get so much more from these resources if you have a decent understanding of video production principles yourself.



Expert View:

“As a virtual event marketer, you can become a virtual show producer. You'll need to put together a technical run of show to manage tight turnarounds between speakers, integrate multiple video streams, design the lower thirds of your screen and prepare branding for your virtual event experience, and speakers in advance.”



Dania Riad

Events Marketing Manager, EMEA,
LinkedIn Sales Solutions



Platform knowledge

A technical knowledge of event platforms helps you to choose the right option for different objectives, ensure you have the capabilities you need for interactive Q&A sessions, breakout rooms and other elements, and manage stakeholder expectations on the metrics you'll have available.

Event moderation

Virtual events take place on several different levels simultaneously. A live panel discussion will involve guests answering one set of questions from the panel host while audience members post their own discussion on an event page – or share comments as part of the live video stream. Your skills as a moderator help to link these simultaneous experiences together: answering audience questions directly – and feeding them into the main event discussion.

Social media marketing

Social media skills go a long way when it comes to virtual events. They'll help you to select the right platforms to amplify your event, co-ordinate promo campaigns, generate organic reach through hashtags – and add interactivity to the event content itself.



Expert View:

It comes down to understanding the platform options and the technical limitations that may exist, ensure your event strategy aligns with the capabilities of the virtual tools you're using – and map out the audience experience.”



Rena McGrath
Senior Executive Producer,
Strategic Events, LinkedIn

“During a live event, managing real-time Q&A from the audience becomes especially important. It helps to keep the momentum of the conversations going, avoids losing the audience and ensures that the content lands well.”



Michele Tan
Marketing Manager, APAC,
LinkedIn

“In our experience, it's the importance of social media skills that differentiates virtual events from in-person ones. They help to build a full journey for your participants, creating stand-out and excitement and adding important elements of fun. For one game show-themed event, we organised an entire three-week calendar of social media content in advance.”



Giulia Vianna
Associate Marketing Manager, LinkedIn
Marketing Solutions, LATAM

Project management

Virtual events involve managing the expectations of a range of different stakeholders regarding technologies they're not necessarily familiar with. This brings your project management skills to the fore. You'll need to be able to understand the full implications of every ask and creative idea, from the supply chains required to deliver gifts and event packs to people's homes – to the question of how to pass audiences between keynote speakers and breakout rooms.

Speaker coaching

Presenting virtually requires subtly different skills to presenting in-person – and that could mean that your speakers need additional support. Aim to give clear briefs around what the audience will be looking for – and the timeframe that your speakers have to get their points across. Suggestions on how to edit down runtime, incorporate storytelling elements and incorporate visual elements could help as well.

GDPR compliance

Engaging audience members at home can create a range of new compliance requirements. It's important to understand how you can ask for address details and send event kits in advance, without falling foul of GDPR and other regulations.



Expert View:

“It's about understanding the platform capabilities, setting expectations with wider teams and being honest about the limitations. People assume a virtual event will work in the same way as a physical event. It's important to explain the complexities of jumping between different speakers, video, panels and Q&As.”



Rebecca Harmer

Events Manager, LinkedIn Marketing Solutions, EMEA and LATAM

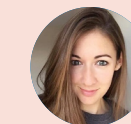
“Be prepared to manage speakers more proactively. Coach them through how to position themselves onscreen, how they can set up lighting to the best effect, even little details like avoiding chairs with wheels – because everyone tends to fidget!”



Grace MacDonald

Marketing Manager, Content and Social, LinkedIn Marketing Solutions EMEA

“It's a great idea in principle to send breakfast boxes to clients' homes and add to the experience of a breakfast roundtable – but you have to understand the GDPR implications in advance and plan around them so that everything goes smoothly.”



Rebecca Harmer

Events Manager, LinkedIn Marketing Solutions, EMEA and LATAM

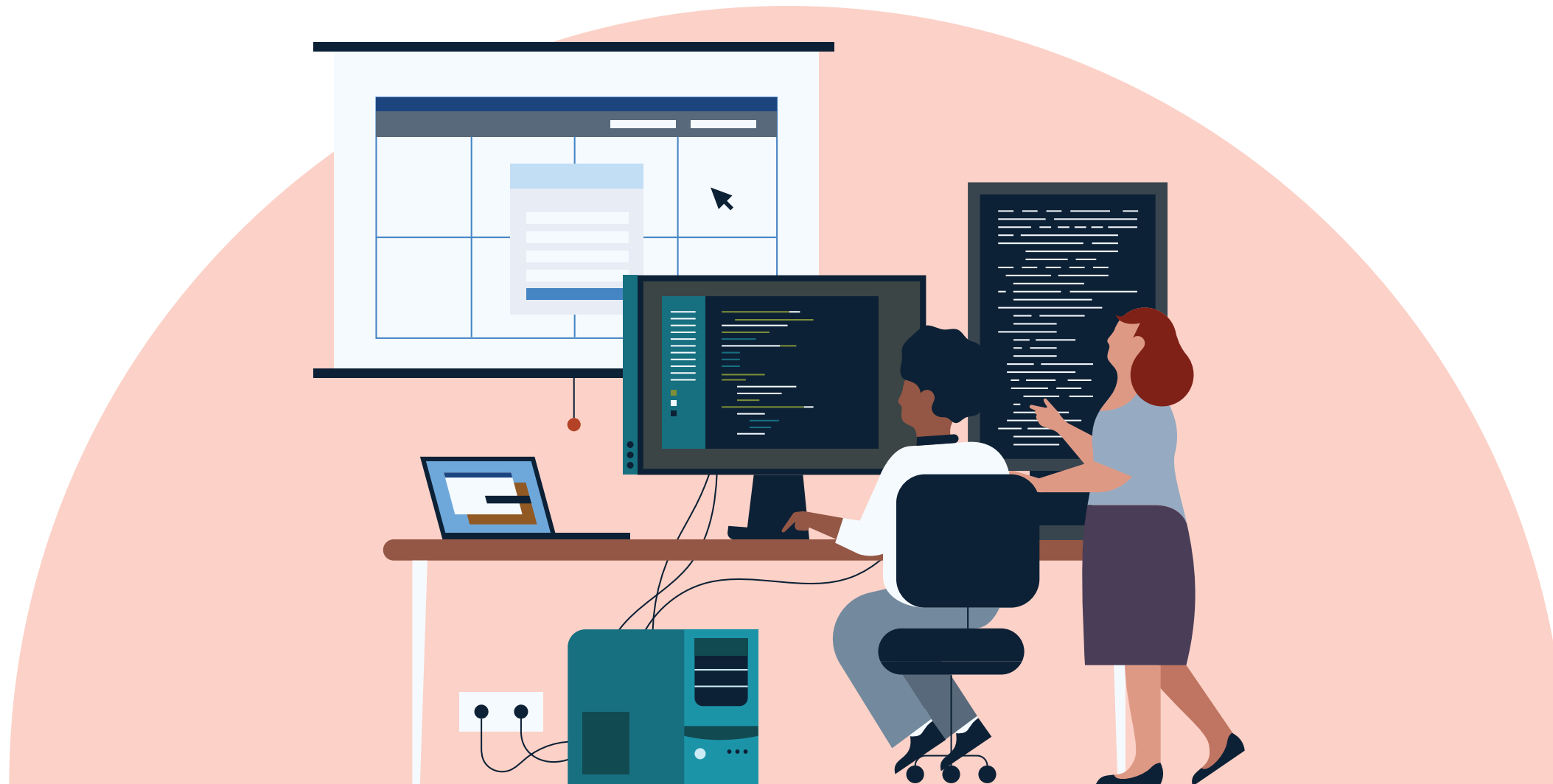
Learn the skills with these
LinkedIn Learning courses:

1. [Live Video Streaming: Essential Skills](#)
with John Dudley
2. [How to Create and Run a Brilliant Remote Workshop](#)
with Dave Birss
3. [Executive Presence on Video Conference Calls](#)
with Jessica Chen
4. [GDPR Compliance: Essential Training](#)
with Mandy Huth



CHAPTER 04

The most exciting new technologies for the future of events



The most exciting new technologies for the future of events

Virtual events have come a long way in just 12 months – and that innovation is unlikely to stop any time soon. These emerging technologies could further transform their potential by increasing accessibility, dialling up excitement and blurring the boundaries between virtual and the experience of being there. Imagine what you could do with them:



1 Virtual Reality

Many virtual event organisers have already discovered the value in sending event kits and goodie bags to attendees' homes – and making the experience feel that bit more exclusive. Could we see more marketers sending VR headsets in the same way, and inviting high-value contacts to immerse themselves in the virtual event experience?

2 Holograms

Hologram technology has come a long way in recent years – and increased accessibility through technologies like HoloGen could make it a compelling part of the virtual event experience. Imagine your attendees projecting 3D images of speakers into their kitchens, Princess Leia-style. If nothing else, hologram technology could enable future in-person events to tap into one of the key advantages of virtual ones: doing away with the need for high-profile speakers to travel.

3 Accessibility innovations

Awareness of audience members' diverse needs should play a growing role in the evolution of virtual events, with technology to tailor the experience for those with dyslexia, visual or hearing impairments or attention deficit disorders. This could range from shutting down intrusive aspects of the experience to including sign-language interpreters.

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.

Get Started with LinkedIn Events.

For more information, visit events.linkedin.com

