

# The Digital Redesign

Reimagining a marquee innovation event using a digital-first approach

We've all suffered through copy-paste events this year, as organizations have tried to port their in-person conferences into a virtual format, with little consideration of the unique benefits and constraints of an all-virtual gathering. This has led to unrelenting agendas, uninspired content, technical difficulties, and often high levels of employees tuning out.

**But becoming a conference Zoom zombie isn't an inevitability.** We worked with one company to redesign a beloved in-person innovation event for thousands of their employees to a virtual format that actually received higher marks on many dimensions than the in-person version. How did they do it?



## Context:

- ▶ The company had been holding an in-person, innovation-focused gathering for several years. The event was a major capstone of their innovation program, with keynotes and panels stacked with high profile speakers. Thousands of employees attended, with even more watching a livestream. It's an integral part of the CEO's work to build a culture of innovation at the company.
- ▶ The highlight of the event was the hundreds of displays (like a science fair for grown-ups) of employees sharing major innovation projects they had launched during the past year, culminating in a pitch fest for the top several projects. Senior executives, including the CEO, would walk the hallways of the event. It demonstrated the importance of innovation and gave employees of all levels the opportunity to showcase their work, learn from their colleagues, and share inspiration and information across the organization.
- ▶ When COVID hit, the company had to find a way to pivot the event and lower overall costs, while still ensuring that employees could be recognized, a broad base of the company would be engaged, and they would still be able to share new innovations and inspire change. The team leading the Expo scrambled into pivot mode, but set ambitious goals for themselves in a digital format. Still, they worried that the event might fall flat.



## How They Did It:

There were several key elements to the redesign. Critically, while the team kept their core goals of high employee engagement and excitement, we took a digital-first approach to the planning and were willing to make significant changes to the event to better suit an online-only version. This included:



**Radically redesigning the timeline.** They moved from a single day event in person to multiple days, with only a few hours each day. This had two benefits - acknowledging that attention spans are shorter online and allowing more employees than ever to participate.



**Pre-recording and editing panels and speakers.** This enabled them to maintain high production value, cut out less compelling parts of the discussion or speech, and create higher impact, more efficient presentations.



**Doubling down on pitches.** By moving to an online format, they were able to spend more time on one of the most impactful parts of the event - the pitches of the best ideas generated by the organization that year. More employees were able to pitch during themed pitch days with more in-depth judging and feedback. Live Q&A during the expanded pitches helped mimic the experience of chatting with someone in the display hall—and thereby sparked networking-style conversations that are usually difficult to recreate in a virtual setting.



**Gamification.** To encourage participation throughout the event, they gamified parts of the event, using quizzes, badges and awards to stimulate engagement and learning. “Easter eggs” were also placed in pages and videos for users to discover as they moved throughout the virtual event platform.



**On-demand content.** The content from the event was available asynchronously, allowing employees to catch up if they had conflicts during the main events, and also giving them more time over the course of the week to browse the virtual displays from the hundreds of projects.



## The Results:

The virtual event was a great success, and met or exceeded expectations on dimensions including:

- ▶ **Higher participation.** Nearly double the number of people watched the program vs. previous years, and it was finally accessible to many frontline workers who had never been able to travel to the event. **Sixty four employee teams were able to pitch**, vs. only six in previous years.
- ▶ **Leadership engagement.** The additional pitches also gave **more senior executives the opportunity to participate** by providing introductory remarks on innovation and serve as judges for each segment. Building this type of leadership engagement and visibility has been a key objective of the company’s innovation program.
- ▶ **Easier access to high profile speakers.** Although they had always had impactful speakers, it was easier to **manage the scheduling of key speakers** with the pre-recorded sessions and avoiding the travel necessary to be on-site.
- ▶ **More time to reflect and absorb the information.** The format **increased the availability of information** available to the organization, allowing employees to see more of the displays and other content than they would have been able to in person.
- ▶ **Cost savings.** The organizations realized **substantial savings in venue, hotel, food, and travel costs**. Even with the increased costs of the technology and video production, it was **a significantly less expensive event**.
- ▶ **Increased satisfaction.** Satisfaction of the event matched or exceeded previous in-person events.



## Summary

Of course there are some valuable elements of an in-person event that can never be replicated by a virtual format. But we don’t have to wait until thousands of people can gather together in person for high impact, engaging conferences. Organizers must, however, take a digital-first mindset and be willing to radically redesign their event approach.