

# in the final analysis

*“Y’all did great, it’s just sadly not nearly as exciting virtually.”*

*—Comment from TMS2021 Virtual Survey*

Out of pandemic-driven necessity, TMS took the unprecedented step in March of convening our signature event, the annual meeting and exhibition, as a virtual conference. In a practical sense, we knew it could be done as we had gained first-hand experience with large event virtualization during MS&T20 Virtual the previous October. Still, we had daunting unknowns to confront. MS&T is a smaller meeting than the TMS annual, and MS&T benefits from a division of labor among three partner societies. The TMS annual is a solo affair. So, TMS volunteers and staff had to wonder, can we . . . stand up a representative virtual version of TMS2021 and satisfy attendees, . . . improve those aspects of the MS&T20 Virtual experience that didn’t work especially well, . . . add value via virtualization that is not otherwise found in the live experience, . . . and avoid losing our shirts in the process? Finding out the answers would take reinvention of expectations, identification of suitable service providers, increased collaboration by all stakeholders, agreeing to many compromises, assuming greater risk for the Society, and taking an occasional leap of faith. Good times!

What answers did experience (and an attendee survey) provide us? Here’s my take.

*Can we stand up a representative virtual version of TMS2021 and satisfy attendees?* Mixed results here. As good as virtualization has become, there is a spontaneity factor to meeting in person that is very difficult to replicate via e-interface. That asymmetrical interpersonal experience and spontaneity is a tough unicorn to corral, and it remains as elusive as it is desirable. Commensurately, the highest dissatisfaction with the event was registered with roughly 40% of attendees being dissatisfied with the networking, social, and question-and-answer components. Where content counts, however, there were high marks across the board as satisfaction with the quality of the technical program was strong: 83% of survey participants rated the technical program as very or somewhat satisfying. That’s consistent with past performance and is the bedrock of our event.

*Can we improve those aspects of the MS&T20 Virtual experience that didn’t work especially well?* The answer here is yes, albeit it incremental rather than dramatic. The exhibition interface was vastly improved, a more engaging networking experience by topic area was deployed, and the Q&A experience was enhanced. Baby steps rather than a quantum leap, but progress was made and learnings acquired for next time, as there will certainly be more next times.

*Can we add value via virtualization that is not otherwise found in the live experience?* I can only summon anecdotal inputs, but I’ll posit that the answer is a strong yes. Among the value additions were volunteer committee meetings that were held “Zoom” style leading up to and following the meeting week. As a result, committee attendance was better than average and new members had more ingress. Plus, no one had to worry about conflicting time slots. Similarly, TMS2021 Virtual was open to registrants for three months, meaning time shifting at will so that no one had to select only one presentation out of four or five concurrent ones. See it all. Another bonus was the ability to pause a presentation, replay it, or fast-forward to a critical point.

*Can we avoid losing our shirts in the process?* Yes, virtualization is a very different business model. Revenue was down (we cut registration prices and had 3,000 attendees compared to the usual 4,500), but expenses were lower as well. It worked.

While we are all eager to return to meeting in person, I fully anticipate that in-person meetings with virtual elements are destined to become our new normal. There’s no reason why we can’t enjoy the best of both worlds, and I believe that we will with continued improvement at MS&T21 and TMS2022.

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