



Innovate + Network

WITH GREAT TALENTS COME GREAT RESPONSIBILITIES

Turning the exhibition industry
into a talent magnet

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INTRODUCTION

Establishing why talent is such a critical resource in the post-COVID exhibition industry

If you work within the exhibition industry and have not lived under a rock for the past few months, you will have recently read, heard, or discussed about the challenge of attracting and retaining talent. It seems increasingly difficult to keep the best people and an even greater challenge to attract new talent. Why is this and what can we do about it?

“People are being called almost EVERY DAY by head-hunters. We need to up our game both in terms of package, benefits, image, etc.” – Exhibition Industry CEO

“We are already losing talents. Keeping our talent and upgrading them is the way to keep our industry going.” – Senior Exhibition Manager

As a group of like-minded event professionals who love to learn and share, the members of the VaPOR Group of the Exhibition Think Tank (ETT) embarked on a journey to identify some of the keys to unlock the talent problem. In this paper, we want to share our findings with you, provoke discussion, and present a roadmap for change.

This is not a survey

Everybody does surveys nowadays; it's easy to put up a questionnaire online and ask for the quick answer on LinkedIn. Therefore, most surveys are wrong, both mathematically and in their conclusions. As volunteers, we don't have the resources, reach and time to conduct a proper survey at scale, so we decided to go for Quality instead of Quantity and reach out to the most interesting experts in our networks.

The VaPOr group members set out to interview them and collect their expertise and views on specific questions and topics with the purpose of discovering the best, most original, and sometimes controversial ideas and suggestions and present them in this paper.

Interviewees were not only from the HR area: there are consultants, teachers, CEOs, event makers, students and more. They are not even all from the exhibition industry, because we wanted to "broaden the horizon" and see how things are done elsewhere. What they are, however, is people who care about the future of the exhibitions industry, and overwhelmingly they confirmed our initial thesis that the industry has a talent problem.

We collated the answers, analysed, and categorized them. This paper represents a synthesis of our findings. Some of our interviewees provided their answers on a confidential basis, whereas others were comfortable being named.

We asked all interviewees six focused questions

1. With the current changes in the exhibition industry and everyone going "hybrid", how much do you feel we are missing key skills in our organisations to satisfy the new needs of our customers?
2. What completely new skills does the exhibition industry require post-pandemic?
3. What specific sectors should we be 'fishing from' for those talents? (e.g., Tech, Finance, Retail, Real estate, Banking/insurance, Other), What are the pros and cons of each sector?
4. What tactics and approaches should the industry be using to attract talent from other sectors?
5. Do you agree or disagree that exhibition organisations need to revamp their retention strategies? What are the best-in-class retention strategies you have seen?

QUESTION 1

With the current changes in the exhibition industry and everyone going “hybrid”, how much do you feel we are missing key skills in our organisations to satisfy the new needs of our customers?



As a “kick-off” to the interview, this validates the need for a change in the industry. There is a problem with talent. When justifying their score, the interviewees gave two main reasons why talent is a problem now:

“We lost a lot of good people during the pandemic who went away to less impacted industries.”

“Pre- and post-COVID exhibition industry are two different “beasts” and the Hybrid world that unfurls requires a whole other set of skills.”

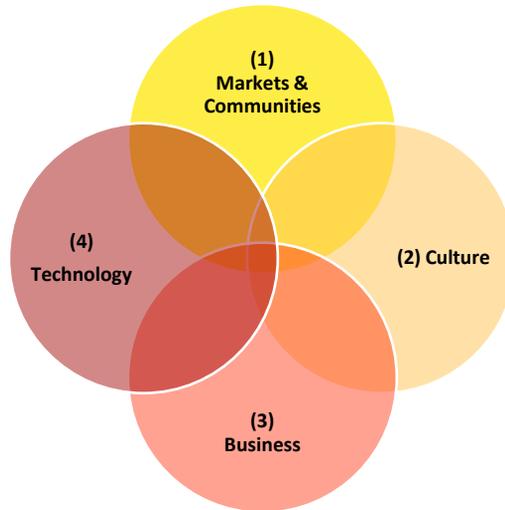
As a mitigation factor, finding partners that have those skills and outsourcing to them seems a viable short-term alternative to some interviewees. But on the longer term, if we consider that Hybrid will be part of our core business, having those skills in-house seems a priority, at least for larger organisations.

QUESTION 2

What completely new skills does the exhibition industry require post-pandemic?

Those can be clustered in four main areas:

1. Markets & Communities
2. Culture
3. Business
4. Technology



1. Markets & Communities

Organising a 2- or 3-day event that happens once a year (or every 2 or 3 years) is like running a 100 meters sprint for which you train the whole year. A high-intensity, high-stress, high-stakes moment in time, where everything needs to be perfect, prepared, rehearsed and under control (at least in theory). But growing and animating a community which is alive 365 days a year is another kind of sport, probably more comparable to a marathon. This requires another skillset.

Community building. Many organisers need to start from scratch. We should look at the existing live event as a good 'breeding ground' to grow that community. Additional avenues must be explored to attract more people to our communities.

"(We need) all skills necessary to develop, run and maintain a platform attracting and serving a defined community, multidimensional multichannel management of platforms 365/24/7." – HR Director

Market understanding. How we structure those communities may vary from organiser to organiser. Some may be very vertical and specialized, whereas others may be horizontal and large.

Sustained community management. Once people are there, we must keep them engaged. We must keep the ball rolling. We must continuously create the necessary buzz.

Content curation. Finding interesting content is not the same as recruiting exhibitors. It is important to draw a line between "paying content providers" (sponsors, etc.) that might not be very interesting for our audience, and "paid-for content" that costs us as organisers, but is of high interest for our audience and exclusive to our community.

QUESTION 2

1. Markets & Communities (continued)

“Content and community management is very important because they must blend a knowledge of social media with a knowledge of the industry, so content is both ENGAGING and RELEVANT.” – CEO

A more agile approach. If we want to keep those communities alive and engaged, we must keep abreast of the latest trends. We need to develop the ability to ‘pivot’ quickly towards new topics and developments. Agile is about “failing fast”: trying a lot of things, but being even better at stopping when they don’t work than at starting them. How do we foster such a culture? We need to understand the metrics that tells us without a doubt, what works and what doesn’t. In other words: we need to stop being “gut-driven” and become “data-driven”.

“Employees are needed who can define, sell, and support digital services for specific customer’s needs.” – Unnamed, interview by Andreas Zuege

2. Culture

We have all seen the cartoon where a crowd being asked “Who wants change?” cheers “We all do!” as one. But when the speaker then asks “Who wants TO change?” he just gets silence.

To instil change in our organisations, culture needs to evolve. At present, we lack the skills to make that culture revolution:

We must use innovation and the entrepreneurial mindset as problem-solving tools. Our industry has a long history of trying to solve problems by doing more of the same.

Creating a “learning” mindset that drives people to evolve: it is often much easier to train existing staff for new skills than to replace them with difficult-to-find new talents.

Creating an atmosphere of trust has never been the forte of the exhibition industry, we see it in the market studies done by UFI and Explori. From open and honest communication (on visitor numbers, for example), to transparent data management practices and “just-as-needed” registration forms, there is much we can learn to do, to inspire more trust from our customers.

More generally, establishing a real, heartfelt customer-oriented mindset. Nobody will ever say: “I don’t care about my customers.” But most organisations will still place their interests or beliefs ahead of the customer experience: long registration questionnaires, opaque pricing models, lengthy Terms & Conditions written in “legalese”, obfuscated or difficult opt-out procedures, dubious data practices.

3. Business

The industry might still not be very sure about what the definition of “hybrid events” is, but we completely lack the skills and experience to define the new hybrid business models:

- How to design hybrid and **community-based products**
- Identifying the best **format**

QUESTION 2

3. Business (continued)

- **Monetization models.** Deciding who pays – the people who access the content, or the people who publish it, or both
- **Pricing models.** Subscription, paid by advertisement, sponsored, Freemium, or another pricing model entirely. We also have the choice between a large user base at a low price, or a more elitist approach with high-priced content for interested professionals

4. Technical

Technology is probably the area that was the most impacted by the pivot to digital and will still be in the hybrid model. Here too, we lack an important set of skills:

Online event production. Creating content that also works in a hybrid environment requires a different skillset: animating, filming, sound, editing, publishing, streaming, etc. Most organisers either outsourced those tasks at a very high costs (which seems unrealistic in the longer term and has a very negative impact on most hybrid business models) or tried to do it themselves with, well, less than professional results. Customers have been used to very high-quality content they can get for free (look at some of the best content providers on YouTube), so a sub-par experience coming from us is probably not something they will want to come back to with a smile.

UX and touch point design. Gathering the right exhibitors, locking them in a hall with visitors and waiting for the magic to happen is not enough anymore. We need to create memorable experiences and multiply the touchpoints between our visitors, exhibitors and us. Creating those new touch points is a hard task that we are not very experienced at, nor do we have the necessary experience (yet) of making them memorable.

“(We need to start) creating truly memorable experiences using the latest tech, trends and focusing on sustainability.” – Unnamed, interview by Baptiste Boulard

Data management and path. Privacy laws are important, but even more important is our customer’s trust. Gathering data is relatively easy nowadays, but we need to do better at making sense of it. We must use it in a way that is both effective and non-intrusive. With legal changes like the disappearance of third-party cookies and the push of the public and some industry leaders, like Apple, pushing hard against, or even totally disabling tracking by default, we need to quickly identify the remaining options to make relevant but respectful digital marketing.

Data analysis and modelling. Data silos remain a big obstacle to being really data-driven in our industry. And it’s only the first step: once the data is collected and consolidated, we still must use the right tools and techniques to make sense of it and be able to use it either as a decision tool, or as a product. Data Engineers, Data Analysts, Data Scientists and AI experts are amongst the most sought-after profiles not only in the exhibition industry, but in the whole professional world.

“(We need people in) Data Management, Data Path Architecture, Platform Design, UX Design, Touchpoint Design (immersive connections between online and offline).”

– Immersive Event Designer

QUESTION 3

**What specific sectors should we be 'fishing from' for those talents?
(e.g., Tech, Finance, Retail, Real estate, Banking/insurance, Other)
What are the pros and cons of each sector?**

“Everywhere! As opposed to salespeople or event managers, digital skills can come from everywhere, they don't need a deep understanding of the sector. It's even better as they come with a fresh approach.” – HR Consultant

Yes, there is a certain amount of poaching happening within the industry. But we still need to find 'new blood' elsewhere. There are not enough (digital) talents in the room. So we asked our respondents where we should look.

“The skills depend more on the person and not the industries... The skills we need can be found in different industries; I don't think there is a specific industry.” – Unnamed, interview by Jorgelina Guandalini

Tech industry is the obvious first choice. If you want tech talents, look in the tech industry! But it's also most probably the hardest place to get them from: high salaries, very attractive benefit packages, a certain “coolness” factor. The “salary problem” is a major concern with most of the interviewees. We will come back to it later.

Retail industry. Especially in the e-commerce world, we should be able to find people who know how to gauge interest, find the right content and format, attract people and convert them into customers. In other words: build effective attraction and conversion pipelines.

Media. Creating or curating content, driving engagement, moving towards subscription-based business models. It seems undeniable that the exhibition industry is getting more and more common practices (and skillsets) with the media industry. Also, there is a long history of ties between media and trade show companies, so those talents might be more within reach if we look in that direction.

Hospitality. Hotels, travel, restaurants. All require a high level of customer orientation.

Gaming. Close to the tech industry we discussed above. Community building and engagement through gamifications are standard practice for the game industry. However, the cultural shock and the salary gap might prove difficult to overcome.

“We have been successful with new hires that come from technology, start-ups, retail and consultancy businesses.” – HR Vice-President

“TV, sports and news all have to be incredibly responsive and fast-on-their-feet to stay relevant and maintain a loyal following. They already learned how to mix media and deliver take-aways in a variety of formats and speeds.” – Anonymous, interview by Baptiste Boulard

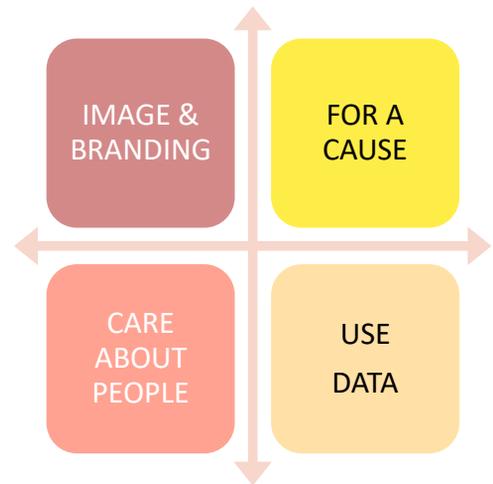
“So many talents fled our industry, we must look everywhere, we can't be picky.” – CEO

QUESTION 4

What tactics and approaches should the industry be using to attract talent from other sectors?

We can group the responses in four main categories:

1. Image & branding
2. For a cause
3. Care about people
4. Use data



1. Image & branding

There is no denying that the exhibition industry is sometimes seen under a bad light. Especially after a pandemic during which there has been a lot of scaling down and layoffs. We need to work on our image and show how dynamic of an industry we are.

Branding can be a starting point suggested by some respondents. Not a lot of regular people are excited by a “tradeshow”. It sounds dull and part of work. Why not speak of “Live events”? Make people think about Burning Man, Coachella, the World Cup or concerts.

In the same vein, rebranding ourselves from “trade show organisers” to “Community builders”, which is more in line with the hybrid vision of the industry anyway, might prove more attractive for talents.

We’re adventurers! We all know it: our industry is very stressful, fast-paced and a constant flow of new and unprecedented challenges. But that’s not how it’s perceived. Let’s show the world that we are a diverse bunch of adventurers operating on the edge in a fast-paced, sometimes hectic environment. We may be stressed, we may be tired, we may be overworked, but we’re never bored. Especially with the new challenges we are facing (see question 2).

“We should try to only hire the best talents – this attracts other best talents and makes us more attractive.” – HR Business Partner

2. For a cause

Building communities is a noble purpose. But we need to make sure we also strive to make the world a better place. CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance), DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion), B-Corp, etc. They all need to be part of our mission and we should give our talent ways to contribute to those while they work for our industry.

QUESTION 4

3. Care about people

After a terrible period of pandemic that forced scale-downs and layoffs, it is essential that we make sure that, as companies, we take better care of people in our industry.

Development programs and career paths seem to be one of the cornerstones of attracting new talents.

Working environment. After years of forced homeworking, not everyone seems very pleased to start commuting again and get back to the office. Flexible working hours and locations, and adapted office spaces are a major plus when trying to attract talent.

Adapted benefit packages. As we cannot compete with other industries in terms of salaries, benefit packages are often a good and cheaper way to be attractive. However, one-size does not fit all, and more care should be put in crafting packages that fit people's needs at different stages of their life: what is interesting for a 20-something starting a career might be useless for someone raising kids and getting a mortgage.

“The exhibition industry is so desperate to re-hire that salaries have gone up significantly and there is a lot of 'poaching' happening between organisers. (..) (About benefit packages) Look at what's the best in the industry and match it (or top it). The impact is not that big financially, but it makes a big difference.” – CEO

4. Go to the source and use data

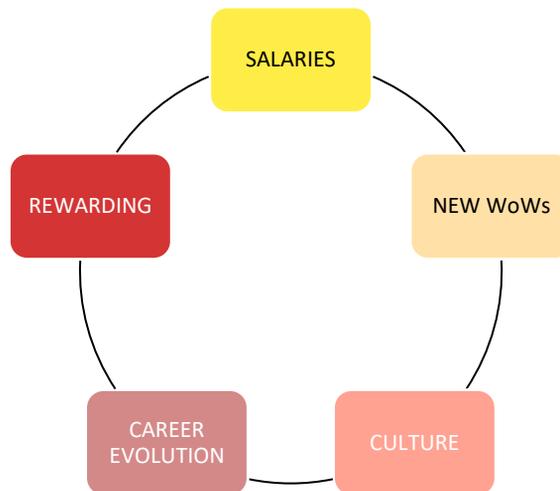
Working with universities and offering internships, mentoring programs or even an exhibitions-oriented cursus proved very useful for some of our interviewees.

Use data! We strive to be data-driven businesses, let's be so when recruiting too! From collecting more 'prospects' for hire to analysing applicants and existing talents and predicting attrition, HR is becoming a more and more data-driven domain.

“(Favour the use) of talent analytics: HR Mgt is data management!” – COO

QUESTION 5

5. Do you agree or disagree that exhibition organisations need to revamp their retention strategies? What are the best-in-class retention strategies you have seen?



Acquiring talent is important but keeping the ones we have is an even better option! We asked our respondents what strategies the exhibition industry should put in place to make sure we do our best to retain the most valuable talents.

“We have to make ourselves more exciting. We've been resting on our laurels because we never had problems hiring in the past because very few people were leaving the industry.” – HR Consultant

“I have 22 years in HR, 5 in event business and the main issue to me, compared to other industries I worked for, is that Talent has never been the heart of this industry!” – HR Vice-President

QUESTIONS 5&6

1. Salaries

Let's start by addressing the elephant in the room: **salaries**. Especially when looking for digital talents, almost all our interviewees had to agree that we are not a very well-paying industry. The gap is sometimes as high as 30% for comparable functions. Of course, we can compensate partially with other methods (see below). But we might need to sacrifice a bit of that precious Contribution to keep the best people, especially in the face of the growing inflation.

There's a great likelihood the industry will cannibalise itself by recruiting from within, based solely on increasing salaries, but without growth in experience from required skillsets and concluding in 'more of the same' delivery; we need to avoid utilising a short-term fix by patching our resource gap this way and keep commitment to the goal of recruiting staff with 'The Right Stuff' – if we do not, costs will increase, quality of delivery will diminish and increase our business or industry vulnerability.

2. New Ways of Working (WoWs)

Being more flexible. The pandemic has undeniably showed us another way to work and do business. Offering a flexible schedule, a sizeable amount of homeworking or alternative workplaces will go a long way in convincing our best people not to jump ship.

Career evolution. People rarely take on a job purely for the task at hand. At least not the ones who intend to stay with you for some time. Offering them a way to evolve, grow and thrive is important and must be clear and explained upfront. This goes through mentoring, blended learning and education sponsoring but also through a clear career pathing. However, this can prove difficult to implement in our industry as our biggest "talent vacuum" seems to be in the junior positions, there is an "oversupply" of medium and senior profiles, and the "management layer" tends to be very stable: places only become free when people retire!

"Make sure people can grow and keep their marketability. Make sure people can follow the trends and can experience an open-minded culture." – HR Director

Workspace redesign. With the adoption of hybrid work and homeworking, the workplace needs to be redesigned. It is no longer a place where people come to sit in front of a computer and answer emails or make phone calls: they can do these activities perfectly at home. It must become a place of exchange where people come specifically to interact and co-create, not to be surveilled and monitored.

Company structures need to evolve. Our industry seems to have favoured a very traditional and vertical way of organizing itself while the tendency in more 'adventurous' industries go towards flatter, more flexible and evolving organigrams.

"Build diverse teams and let them organize themselves. You have the unique chance to do that. Flatten all hierarchies you possibly can to build a true (not "authentic"!) team spirit." – Event Designer

QUESTIONS 5&6

3. Culture

Companies with an **entrepreneurial mindset** seem to be attracting the best talents. It is about empowering people to innovate. It means giving them time and resources but also allowing failure, even celebrating it. The famous “fail fast!” paradigm. Once again, it is about being more adventurous.

“What we are lacking in is a good culture where innovation is supported, and mistakes are seen as a chance.” – HR Business Partner

Empowerment. Steve jobs famously said: “It doesn’t make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do.” Our industry seems to favor a very directive style of (micro)management, while the best talents value setting their own goals. We need to learn to tell our people WHAT we want to achieve and WHY we do it (see next point, Purpose) but trust them with the HOW.

“(We need) another type of management style: by objectives, concentrating on output instead of input.” – COO

Providing purpose is also one of the best retaining strategies. See the same point in Question 3.

“Turn your employees into co-entrepreneurs. Give them the confidence, competence and the freedom and the trust. So, they will always act in the interest of the company.” – HR Business Partner

4. Career evolution

“Show the unique opportunity to learn different sectors and industries, unlimited career possibilities.” – HR Vice-President

The principles explained in Question 3 about talent acquisition are the same when we look at talent retention. Providing a suitable career path is very important while at the same time very challenging. The widest skill gap seems to be in the entry-level/junior people while the middle and senior management position are already held by people who tend to stay there for a very long time. What happens then is that the best people do not evolve quickly enough for their taste and leave the company. The average people will stay put. In conclusion, we’re “left with the rest” and we end up with the worst of both worlds.

Under these circumstances, it might prove difficult to solve the equation without creating new management positions (at the risk of creating an army of generals) or taking some harsh decisions.

“If you fall in love with events, the possibilities of crafting your path are innumerable!”
– HR Vice-President

QUESTIONS 5&6

5. Culture

Salary is a problem. But it's one of the most difficult to solve without creating a domino effect, especially in those post-pandemic days where companies in the trade show sector are often financially challenged.

Gender neutrality/equality seems to still be a challenge.

Flexible stipends

Creative and flexible benefit packages (adapted to the different individual needs vs one-size-fits-all), mobility packages, etc.

Restructure of the organizational chart by individual events or portfolios placed into the hands of the team, full P&L ownership and significant bonuses paid from profits; creating 'small businesses' within the corporate structure, encouraging initiative, creativity and commercial acumen – all making the workplace more attractive, rewarding and, in the long-term, more worthwhile.

"Let the people do what they do best: collaborate and innovate when they can't go back to daily business. Identify your eagles and let them fly – but make sure they come back with prey." – Event Designer

CONCLUSIONS

“It’s not only about salary, it’s about great culture based on trust, empowerment, fun and care, it’s about getting learning opportunities, it’s about offering hybrid/flexible working model, it’s about another style of management based on objectives where we measure the outputs (outcome) instead of the inputs (hours worked)...” – COO

Let’s face it, we work in an industry where we want people who work very hard, under a lot of stress, are facing (at best) a slow career evolution and are not paid that much. That is why we need to be creative and use our best assets. We hope that you got some ideas from the information in this paper.

If you are interested to discuss those ideas further or bring new ones to the tradeshow community, don’t hesitate to contact us, or [join the Exhibition Think Tank](#).

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