

# Freeman Trends Report

Unpacking XLNC: The future of adult learning at conferences and tradeshow

**Part One**

# In this edition

➤ Introduction	06
➤ Where Learning Happens	07
➤ How Attendees Define the Value of Learning	11
➤ How Event Learning Falls Short	22
➤ What Effective Event Learning Looks Like	34
➤ Learning Beyond the “Classroom”	48
➤ So, What Now?	52
➤ Appendix	56

# Within this report

Total number of  
respondents 4,914

Total number of attendee respondents: 4,729

- Attendee margin of error: +/- 1.4%
- 65% of respondents from Conferences
- 35% of respondents from Tradeshows

Total number of event organizer respondents: 185

Organizer margin of error: +/- 7.0%

## Callouts you'll see



NowGen Event Goers (NGEG), aged 23-46, are shaping trends, driving innovation, and redefining what value means. This callout represents NowGen data segmentation.



Throughout this report, we've modified a few charts to highlight the top responses. When you see this callout, it means that the full dataset can be found in the appendix.

**Attendees**  
**Organizers**

We use blue and green when comparing attendee and organizer data side-by-side.



These callouts represent differences between conference and trade show attendees.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# The in-person learning advantage

We live in the most informed era in history and yet, learning can be harder than ever. Attention is fragmented. Content is endless. Insight is everywhere. **Here's the good news: Live events have a built-in advantage.**

Research shows what many organizers already know: When people gather face-to-face, engagement rises, attention sharpens, trust builds faster, and ideas stick longer.

**Human energy possesses something screens can't replicate, and bringing people together is only the starting point.**

If learning remains lecture-heavy and passive, the advantage of being in-person erodes. The stage becomes just another screen.

Today's attendees don't measure learning by how much content they consume, but by what changed after they attended. Did they gain something usable? Did their thinking shift?

Will they do something differently after they leave? That's the new standard.

**This report examines how attendees best learn inside traditional event learning sessions, where current methods fall short, and how organizers can design sessions that turn engagement into application.**

The opportunity isn't simply to host conference room sessions—it's to design learning that sticks and keeps attendees coming back.

# XLNC Framework

If you're familiar with [Freeman's previous trends reports](#), you're familiar with Freeman's XLNC Framework.

If you're not, allow us to catch you up. XLNC (pronounced "excellence") stands for **eXperience, Learning, Networking, and Commerce**. It's an objective-based framework that examines the four main reasons folks attend (or exhibit at) events.

**This year, we're taking a different approach to our research and double-clicking on each XLNC element.**

This chapter is all about traditional learning, and we'll explore what organizers can do to help participants walk away with the most valuable takeaways.



## EXPERIENCE

Have fun, achieve my objectives, enjoy the environment



## LEARNING

Be inspired, learn something new, receive training



## NETWORKING

Make connections, socialize with new and existing contacts



## COMMERCE

Evaluate vendor offerings, build awareness, discover new products/services





## PART ONE



**Learning is a big topic.  
So, we've chosen to  
explore it in two parts.**

**This report is Part One.**

Here, we focus specifically on learning that happens inside conference room sessions and general sessions, since these environments remain the primary places where organizers intentionally design learning experiences.

In Part Two, we'll turn our attention to the other moments and environments where learning happens.

# Where Learning Happens



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

Select the top 3 sources where you go for professional education, training, or to learn something new?  
Select all that apply.

# In-person events remain the primary destination for professional learning

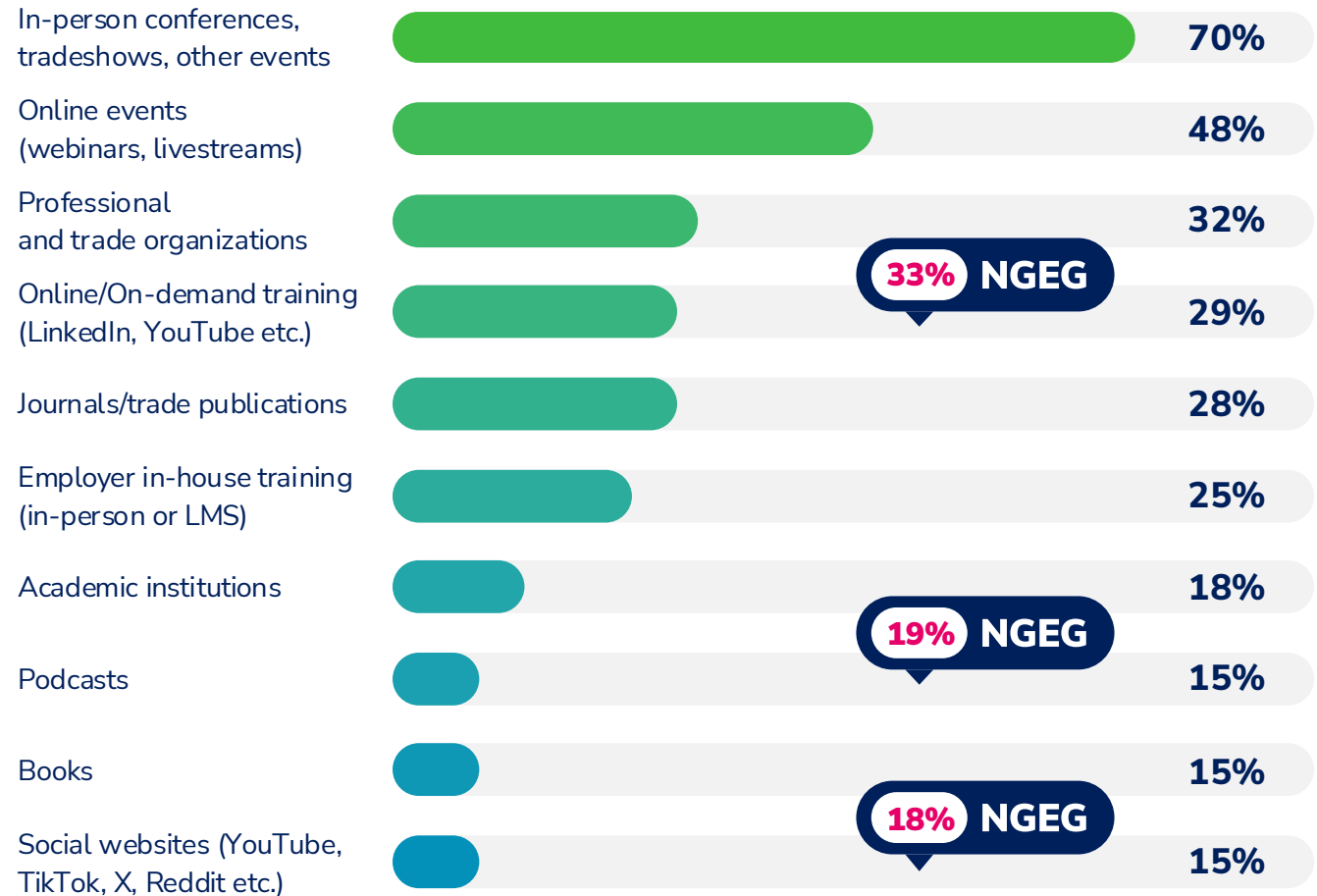
Live events outrank webinars, LinkedIn, podcasts, and social platforms as the top source for education and training.

Why? Because **in-person events deliver what digital formats cannot: face-to-face interaction.**

However, digital avenues are an undeniable part of the modern learning experience. NowGen professionals are more likely to engage with podcasts, social content, and on-demand learning compared to previous generations—and these channels aren't going away. That's why in-person learning experiences need to look significantly different than what digital platforms can offer.

**It's not an either/or; it's a both-and.**

## Sources for learning



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

What is one thing that makes in-person professional event learning/education sessions unique compared with online learning/education?

## Top 4 comment categories

**65%** **Better interaction**  
Face-to-face, interactive Q&A and dialogue, better energy and vibe, more practical

**36%** **Forming connections**  
Relationship building, serendipitous meetings, sense of community, rapport

**24%** **Impact and enhanced engagement**  
Retention of what was learned, exposure to diverse ideas, more immediate feedback and clarification, better focus, less distraction and multitasking

**19%** **Format preference**  
Hands-on opportunities, peer-to-peer, live demos, and product interaction

What attendees are saying about face-to-face differentiators



“There tends to be more engagement, which leads to more questions, solutions, and authentic connection.”



“Conversation, the ability to ask questions and ask for clarification.”



“Harder to stay focused/interested looking at a screen versus the interpersonal interaction. Learning from peers, asking questions, discussions are better in person.”



“It's a more personal connection. The relationship building adds to the experience and the openness of the participants.”

# Why Learning Lands Differently In-Person



Research from the Association for Psychological Science offers an important clue about why face-to-face learning environments remain so powerful (and we recommend giving it a read yourself). But here's the gist: The power of face-to-face interactions cannot be replicated through a screen.

When people interact through technology, psychological engagement measurably drops. It's not just that the experience seems flatter, data shows it's flatter. Positive emotional responses are reduced. Physiological signals that show your brain is genuinely paying attention are lower. Processing information becomes a shallower dive. This combination slowly erodes group decision-making, trust, and a sense of community.

Research consistently shows that screen-based socializing simply cannot match face-to-face interaction in several ways. People unconsciously pick up on tones of voice, body language, facial expressions, and other cues that technology cannot fully transmit. The lack of these signals makes experiences feel colder and ideas feel less memorable.

In a modern, hybrid professional world this reflects something broader about how people learn. Professional development has shifted from an attention economy driven by content volume to a connection economy built on shared human experiences. **The real power of event-based learning activates when people are in the same space together.**



# How Attendees Define the Value of Learning



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

Are either of the following necessary or preferred for your role or profession?

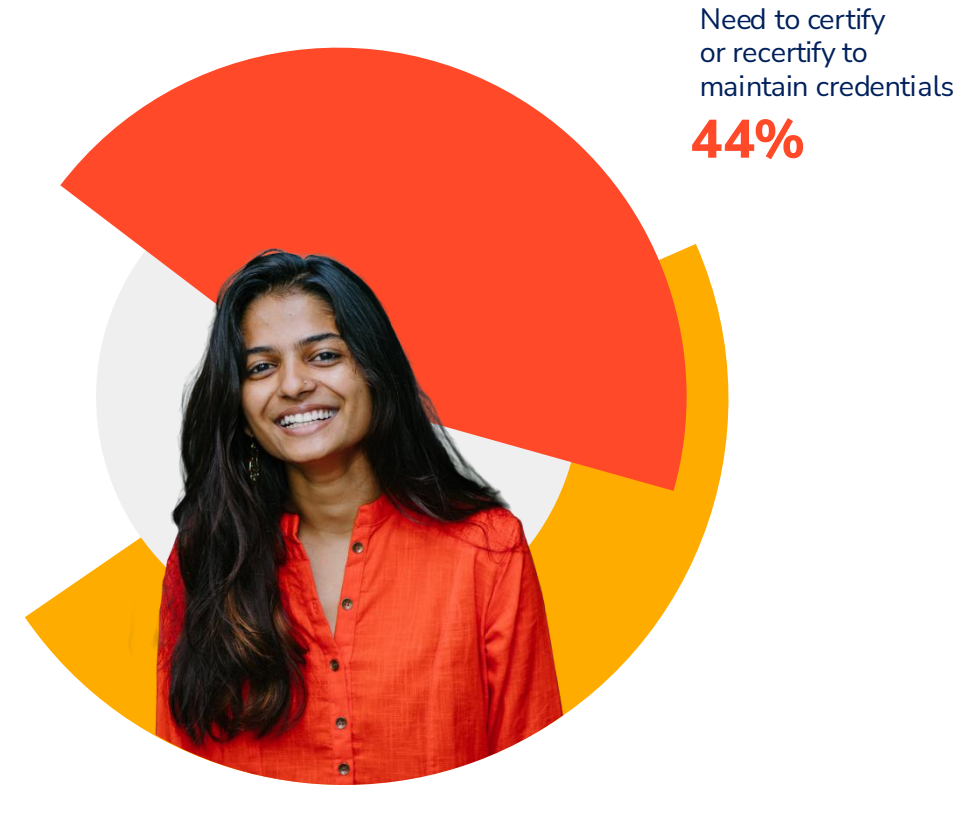
# Nearly half of attendees say their profession requires some form of certification or continuing education credits

For many professionals, **continuing education isn't optional.**

Many attendees must earn certifications (44%) or continuing education credits (47%) to maintain their credentials and professional standing.

It seems logical, then, that these attendees would seek certifications or continuing education credits at the events they attend. However, the research tells a different story (keep reading).

## Certification & CE credits for role



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

How valuable is it for you if a professional event offered certifications based on training or session attendance to validate skills relevant for your role, career ambitions, or professional growth?

# Many attendees don't consider event certification opportunities to be very valuable

In another era, the majority of certifications and education credits came from events. Since then, circumstances have changed.

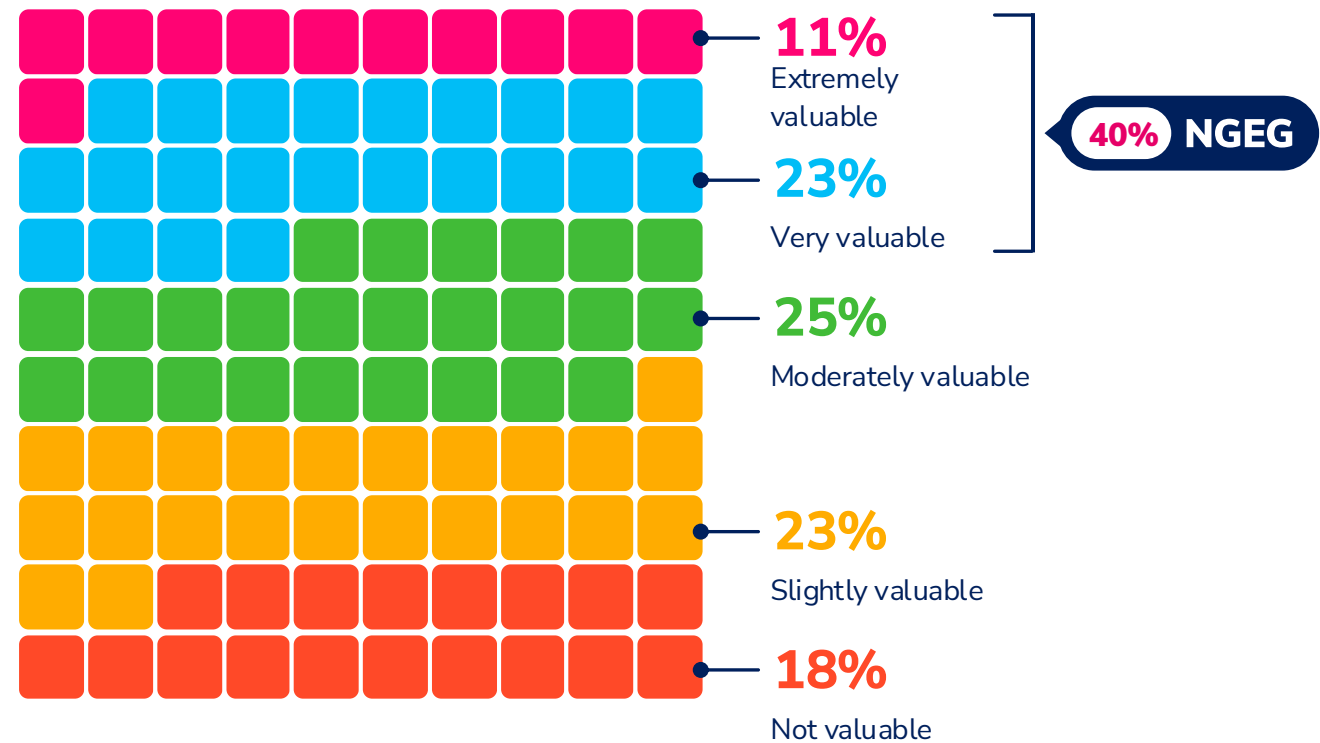
Today, **only about one-third of attendees find certifications offered at events to be very or extremely valuable.** Does this give event organizers reason to ditch credential opportunities altogether? Certainly not.

Among NowGen professionals, 40% rate certifications highly—suggesting that earlier-career professionals place greater emphasis on these opportunities as tools to support career growth.

Certification opportunities are still important. However, they're a dime a dozen *online*; they're not a primary driver for in-person event attendance. Instead, **events should be positioned as a setting for richer learning.**

## Value of certifications

Certification Value for Role/Career



## ATTENDEE / ORGANIZER QUESTION

Think about all aspects of the event where you/attendees learn. Which of the following best describes what you/attendees hope to gain from how you/they learn at the event?

# Attendees prioritize ideas they can apply over credentials they can collect

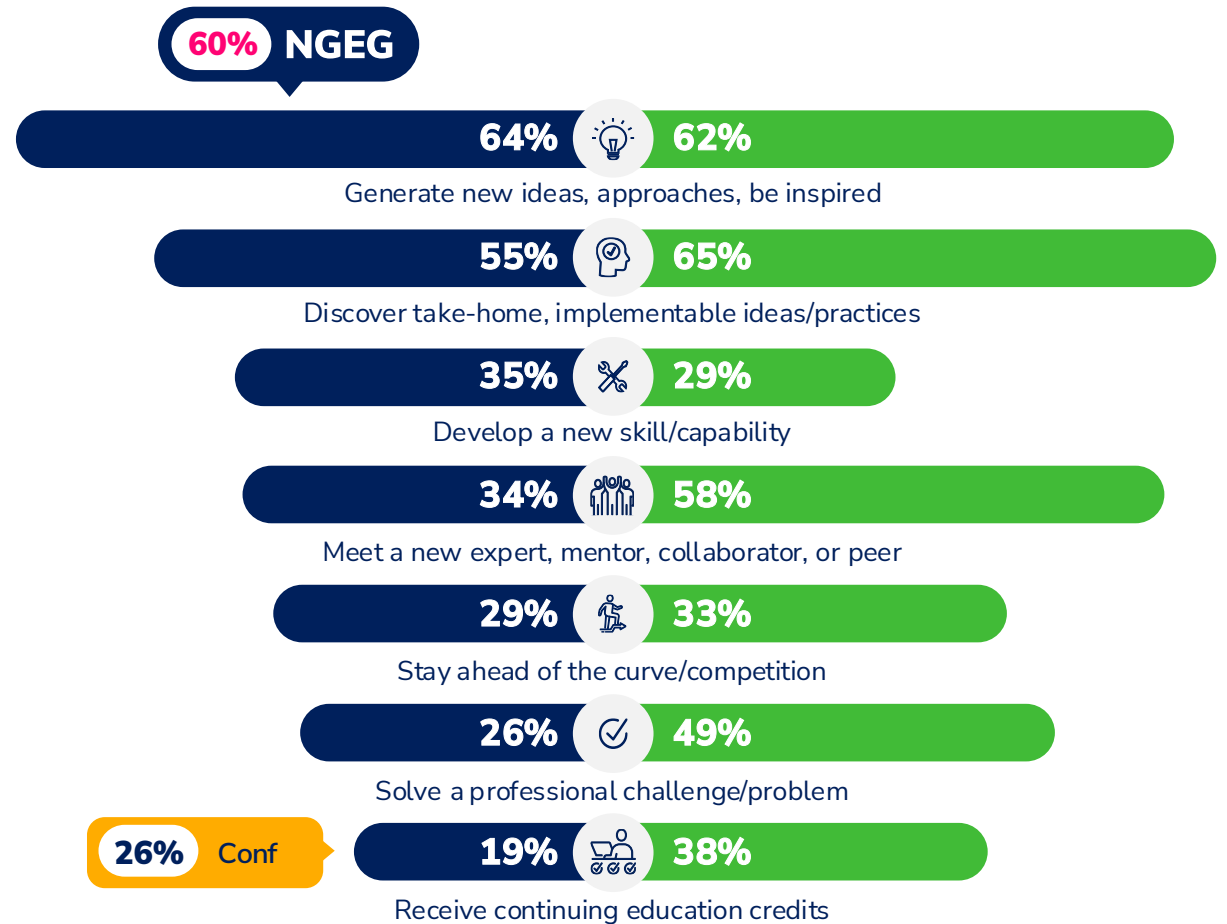
Fewer than one in five attendees (19%) say they hope to gain continuing education credits at in-person events.

Although this number is higher for conference-goers (26%), we still see that nearly two-thirds of attendees prioritize inspiration (64%) and more than half want practical, take-home ideas (55%).

Interestingly, NowGen attendees care slightly less about new ideas and inspiration (60%) than Gen X and Boomers do (67%).

The takeaway: Different audiences want different outcomes. Credentials may matter to some, **but real-world application matters more**. As we discuss on the next page, this is especially true of keynote speakers.

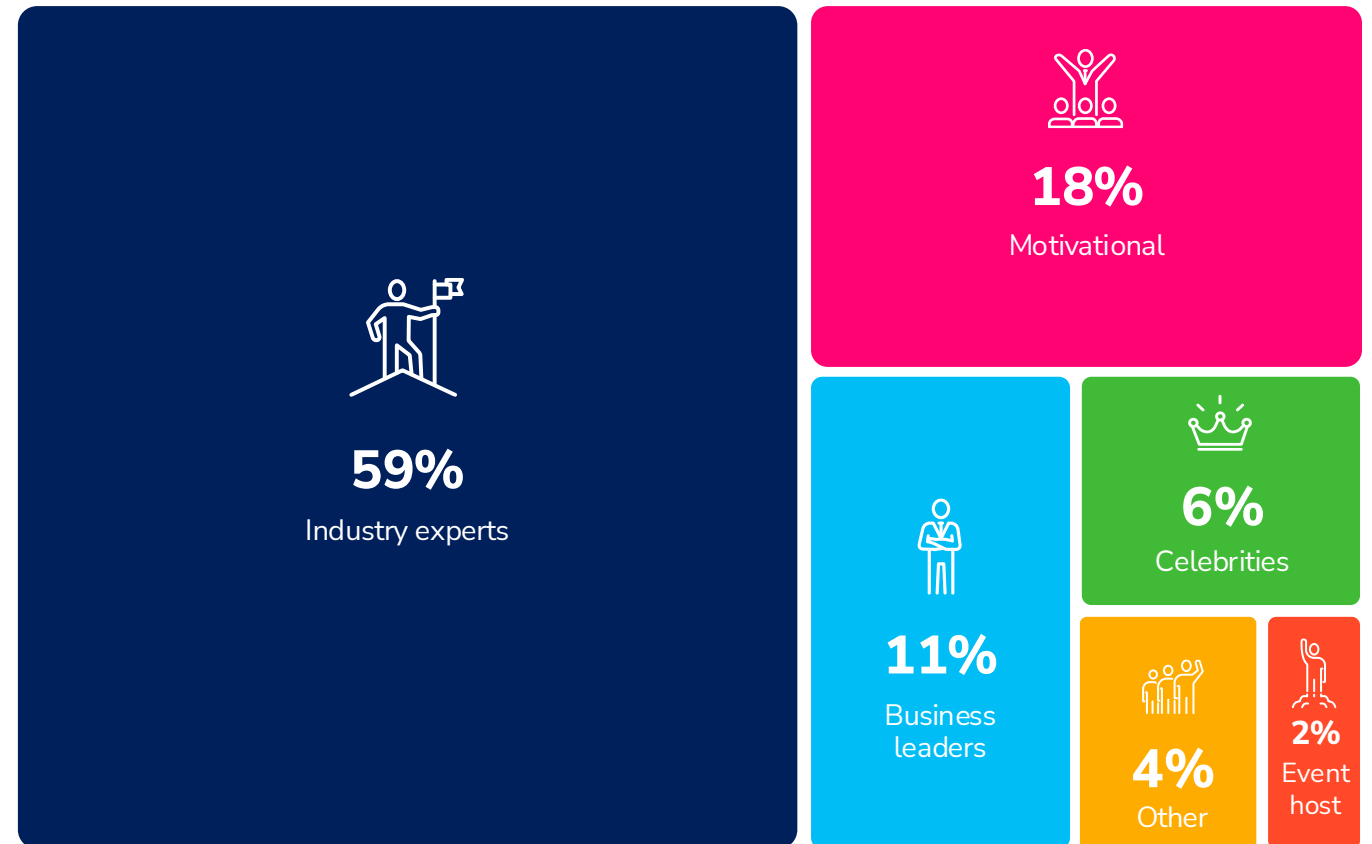
## Goals for learning at professional events



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

What type of keynote speakers do you prefer the most for a general session/plenary address?

### General session speaker type preference



## Attendees would rather hear keynotes from industry experts than celebrity speakers

Event organizers continue to tell us that they think celebrity speakers are worth the investment. So, we asked attendees *once again* about the type of keynote speakers they prefer. And once again, attendees overwhelmingly said that **expertise outweighs celebrity status**.


While big-time name recognition may seem like a draw, **attendees would rather hear from industry experts**.

This shouldn't come as a surprise given how clearly attendees place a premium on real-world ROI to their time investment.

### ATTENDEE QUESTION

**Question 1** - Think of the speakers, presenters, and/or panel members from the conference room sessions at the most important in-person event you attend. How important is it that the speakers do each of the following during their session(s)?

**Question 2** - In general, how effective were the session speakers at doing each of the components you considered important in the prior question?

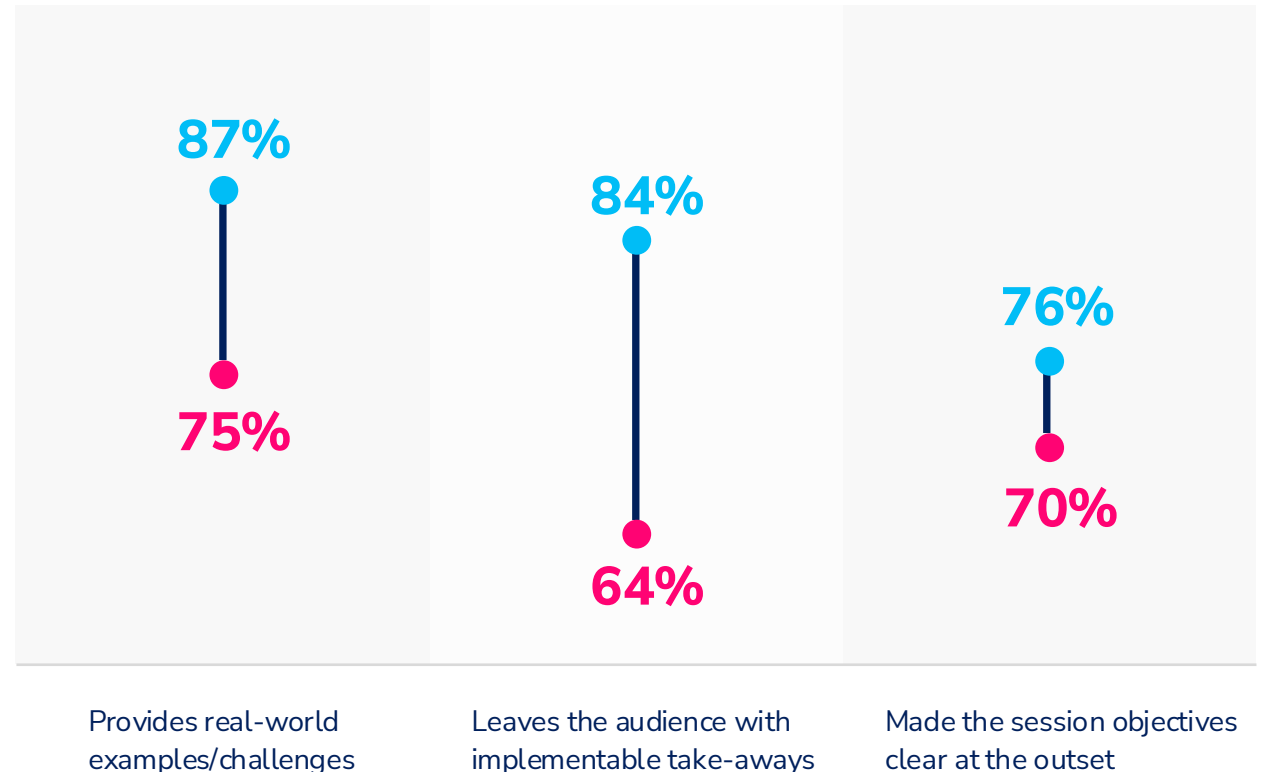
 More data in appendix

### Session speaker attribute importance & effectiveness

## Attendees want speakers to lead with clear objectives, real-world examples, and practical takeaways

When asked what makes for the strongest speakers, attendees shared that providing clear objectives, real-world examples, and implementable takeaways made the biggest difference in a successful message.

The good news: Speakers just need to nail the basics. **The challenge: The basics are hard, and attendees say speakers have room to improve.**



● Attendee Importance    ● Attendee Effectiveness

# Action Item

## Build best practices into presentation templates

Strong conference room sessions often come down to structure. While speakers bring expertise, they may not always design their presentations with learning outcomes in mind.

The right templates can help ensure sessions deliver the value attendees expect by prompting speakers to **state clear objectives upfront, incorporate real-world examples or case studies, and conclude with actionable takeaways.**

At their best, templates must go beyond a branded title slide and QR code to give clear guidelines that speakers can use to elevate their message.



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

Rank-order each of the following based on where you find the most compelling learning opportunities at in-person professional events. 1 = top ranked (i.e., where you find the most compelling education/learning opportunities).

# A plurality of attendees say the best learning happens in conference room sessions

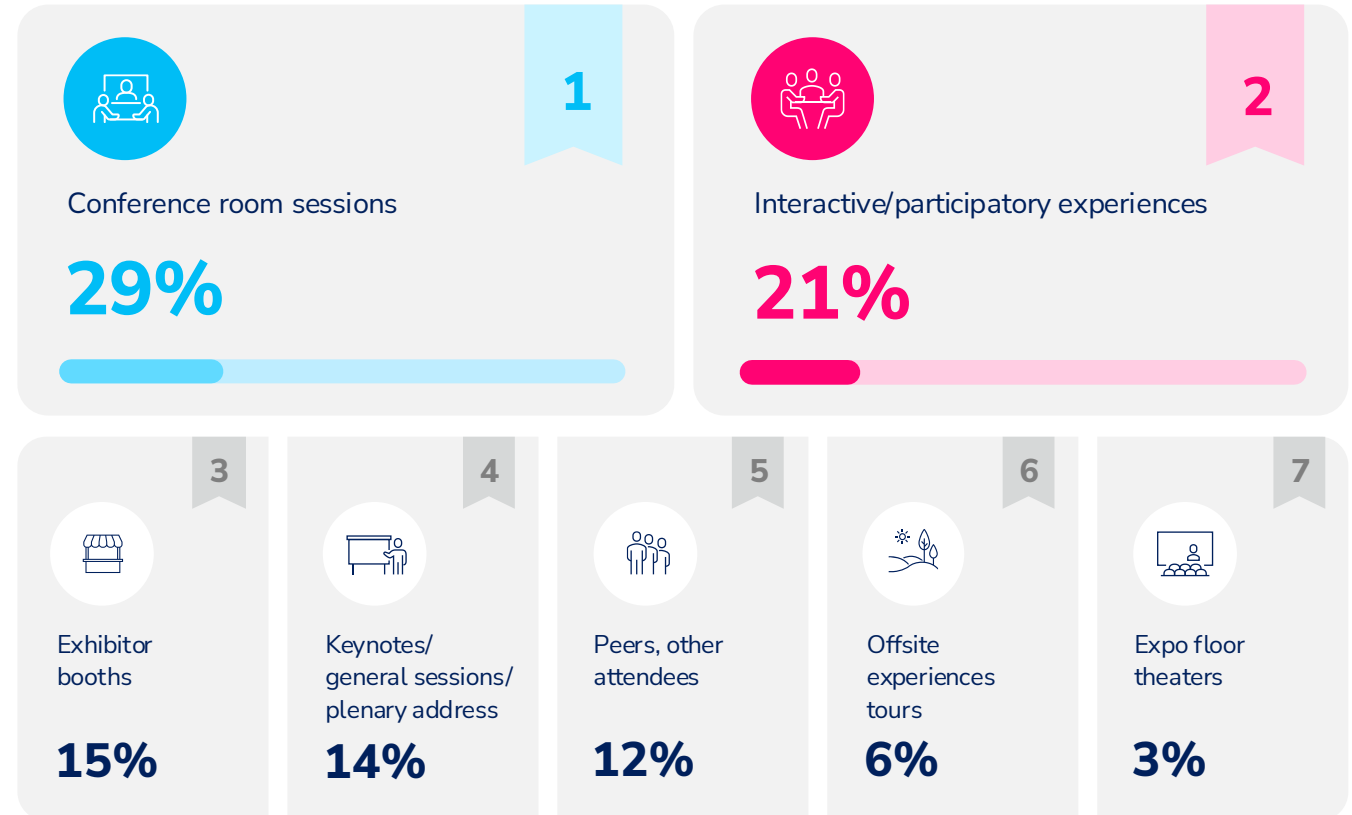
Conference room sessions rank above all other event learning areas, but not by much: 29% of attendees.

That insight is important for organizers who often face pressure to reduce or consolidate education programming due to budget constraints. While these sessions require investment, they remain a core environment where attendees find the most compelling learning opportunities.

Don't get us wrong; this doesn't mean you should add more conference room sessions to your event agenda. Attendees are already frustrated by the sheer amount of options (more to come on that).

So, rather than maximizing the number of sessions, **make the most of the ones you have and drive attendees to them.**

## Most compelling learning at professional events



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

At the most important in-person professional event you attend, what are the key indicators that you received value from the education sessions you attended? Select all that apply.

# Conference room sessions create the most value through insights, application, and connection

How can organizers optimize conference room sessions?

Attendees value **content that creates real change through new insights, tools, or contacts.**

Across the top responses, value spans practical takeaways, new perspectives, skill-building, and meaningful connections. This reiterates the fact that attendees come with different objectives and define value accordingly.

And that requires designing learning experiences—not just presentations—**where attendees can engage in ways that match their goals and leave with something they can apply.**

## Measuring value from education session attendance



**ATTENDEE QUESTION**

At the most important in-person professional event you attend, what are the key indicators that you received value from the education sessions you attended? Select all that apply.

**ORGANIZER QUESTION**

At your organization's most important in-person event, what are the key indicators that your audience received value from education sessions? Select all that apply.

Measuring value from education session attendance

42%

Made me want to return to the event

83%

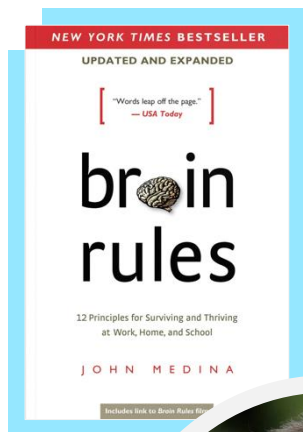


● Attendees ● Organizers

**Organizers overestimate the impact education sessions have on retention**

Zooming in on the connection between education sessions and retention gives important insights for event organizers. In particular, organizers are twice as likely to say that valuable learning sessions make attendees feel eager to return to their event. This disconnect isn't rooted in attendees' disinterest in learning, but rather in a lack of clear objectives for learning session design, content, and evaluation.

According to our recent research, only 27% of attendees return to an event, which means that **the more intentionally learning sessions are designed, the stronger a retention pull they'll have.**



**JOHN  
MEDINA,  
BRAIN RULES**

# “The brain doesn’t pay attention to boring things.”

Neuroscience offers a helpful reminder for anyone designing learning experiences: the brain isn’t built for long stretches of passive listening.

Research from neuroscientist John Medina’s Brain Rules shows that attention naturally drops after about 10 minutes (“the ten-minute rule”) without a change in stimulus. In other words, extended lectures and slide-heavy presentations can quickly lose their audience, no matter how interesting the topic.

The brain is evolutionarily hardwired to remember information when it feels **relevant, practical, and emotionally engaging**. Stories, real-world examples, and meaningful applications help learners connect ideas to their own experience, making insights far more likely to stick.

Participation matters too. Discussion, problem-solving, and interaction help the brain process information more deeply than

listening alone. And when learning environments mix formats—shifting between explanation, demonstration, conversation, and reflection—attention resets and retention improves.

**Taken together, the science is clear: People learn best when they are engaged, involved, and able to apply what they’re hearing.**

Freeman’s research shows the same pattern. Attendees consistently place greater value on sessions that deliver practical takeaways, real-world examples, and ideas they can use immediately.

Designing learning with the brain in mind may be one of the simplest ways events can improve **both knowledge retention and attendee retention**.

# How Event Learning Falls Short



### ATTENDEE QUESTION

Select your level of agreement with each of the following statements. The conference room education sessions...  
(% agree/strongly agree)

### ORGANIZER QUESTION

Select your level of agreement with each of the following statements. The conference room education sessions at my organization's most important in-person event...  
(% agree/strongly agree)

## Conference room sessions foster learning, but execution gaps exist

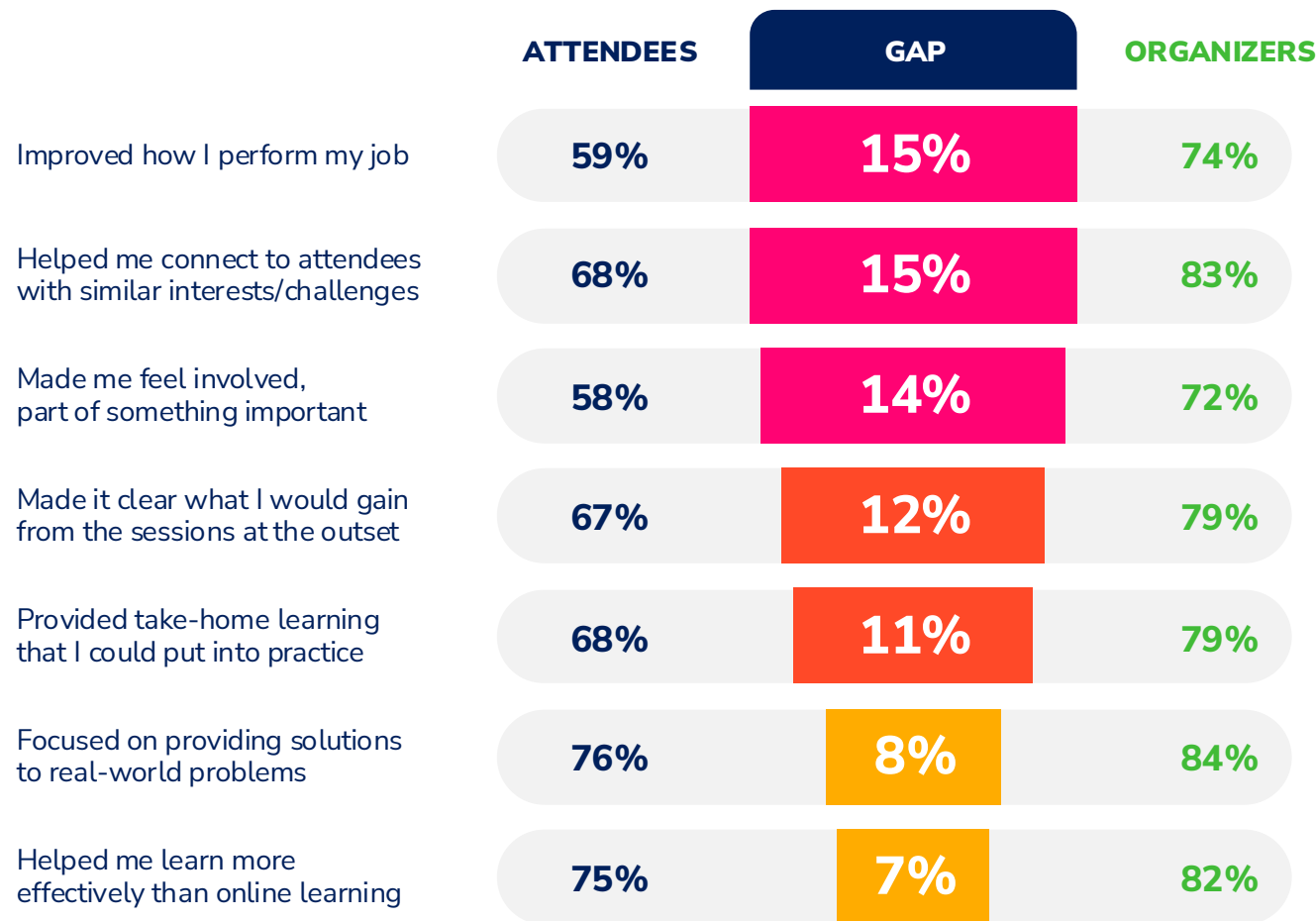
When reflecting on their education session experiences, attendees most often say sessions **focused on real-world solutions, helped them learn more effectively than online alternatives, and provided take-home insights they could apply**. That's a win.

However, across these outcomes, **organizers consistently rate conference room sessions as more effective than attendees do**, revealing a gap between how sessions are intended to perform and how they're actually experienced.

One surprising finding: **Only about half of attendees say that conference room sessions improved their job performance**. This suggests an opportunity to more clearly connect session insights to real workplace impact.

 More data in appendix

### Education session evaluation



## ORGANIZER QUESTION

Relative to the total professional attendee count at your event, approximately what percentage attend your primary keynote/general/plenary session?

## General sessions attract only half of event attendees, on average

General sessions also have room to improve, particularly in participation.

Organizers report that among professionals who attend their events, **only about half choose to attend the general (keynote) session.**

With all the investment organizers place on general sessions, **it's critical to solve this attendance dilemma!**

### General session attendance compared to total event attendance



\*of total event attendance

## ATTENDEE QUESTION

Select your level of agreement with each of the following statements. The general/keynote sessions...  
(% agree/strongly agree)

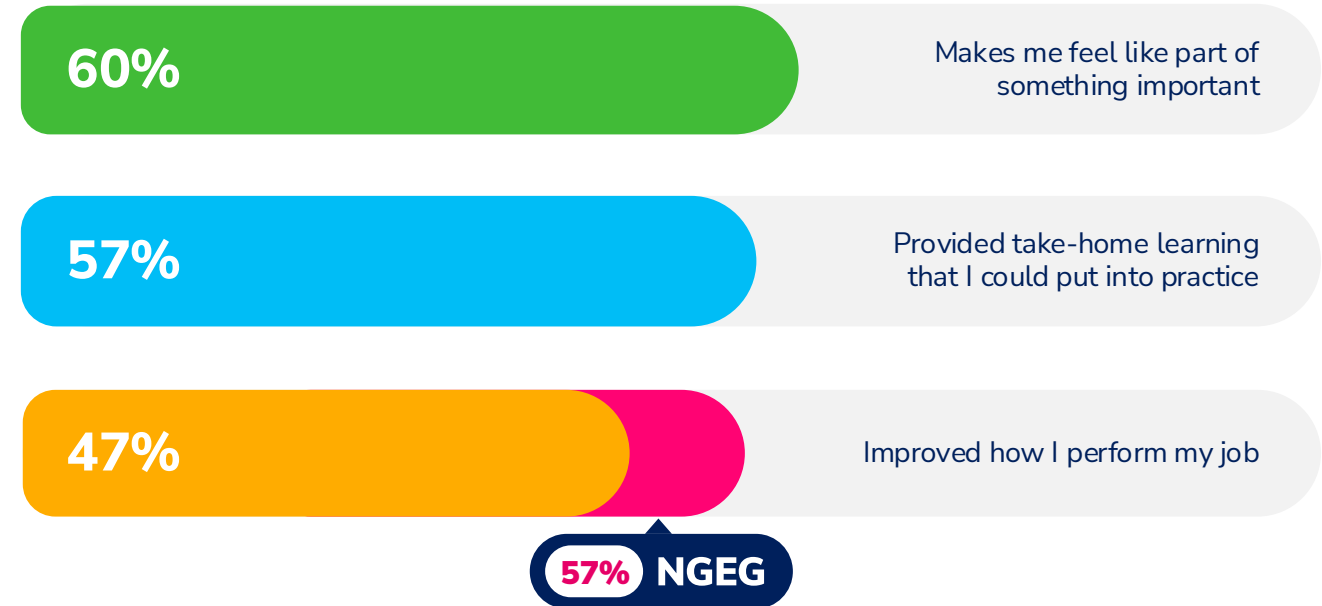
# General sessions can deliver more practical value

General sessions' low attendance rates make sense when attendees report feeling underwhelmed by a keynote's ability to make them feel like a part of something important, provide take-home learning, and once again, improve how they perform their jobs.

Notably, NowGen attendees are more likely to say general sessions improve how they perform their jobs. As seen with their higher interest in certifications, this may reflect a career stage where learning is closely tied to advancement, and a wider range of content feels immediately useful.

Instead of orchestrating visual appeal alone, **organizers have an opportunity to design general sessions that resonate with the immediate, pragmatic value that attendees crave.**

## Value of general sessions



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

Rate your overall perception of the speakers of the general/keynote sessions you attended on the below areas.  
(% very good/excellent)

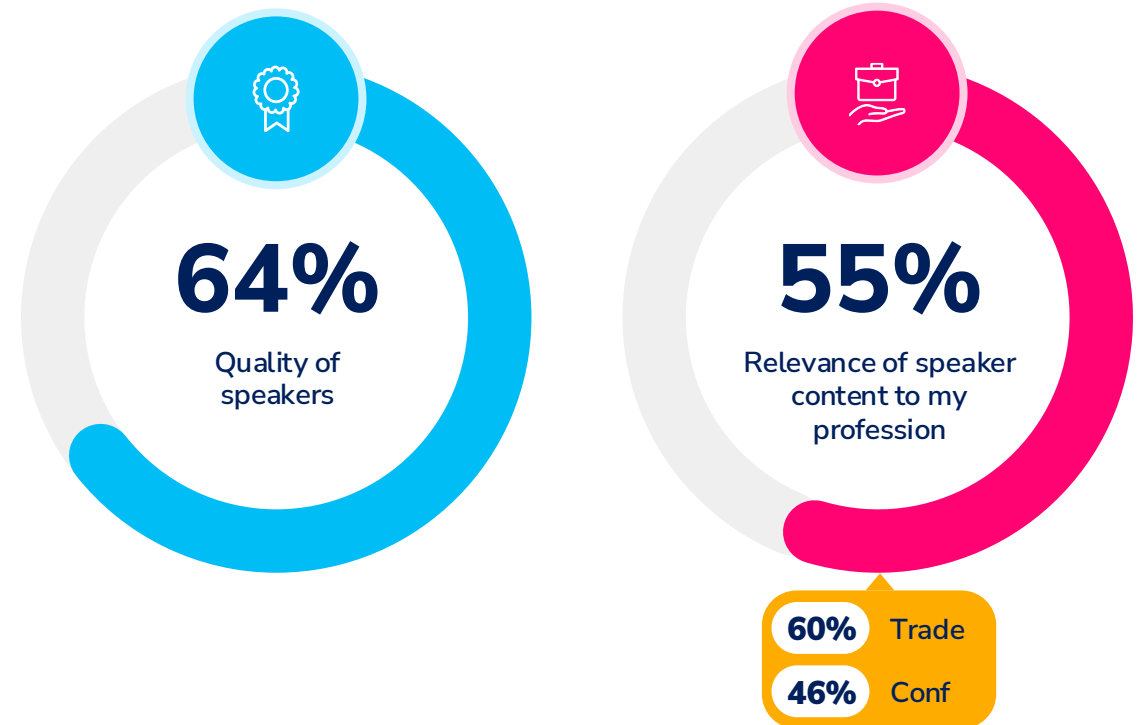
### Perception of general session speaker quality and relevance

## Attendees want keynote speakers to be more professionally relevant

Good speakers aren't enough if the content doesn't connect.

While 64% rate keynote speaker quality highly, only 55% say the content is professionally relevant to them. The gap is even wider for trade show audiences.

This suggests that **the challenge isn't finding better speakers but helping speakers deliver content that connects directly to attendees' work and industry priorities.**



## ATTENDEE / ORGANIZER QUESTION

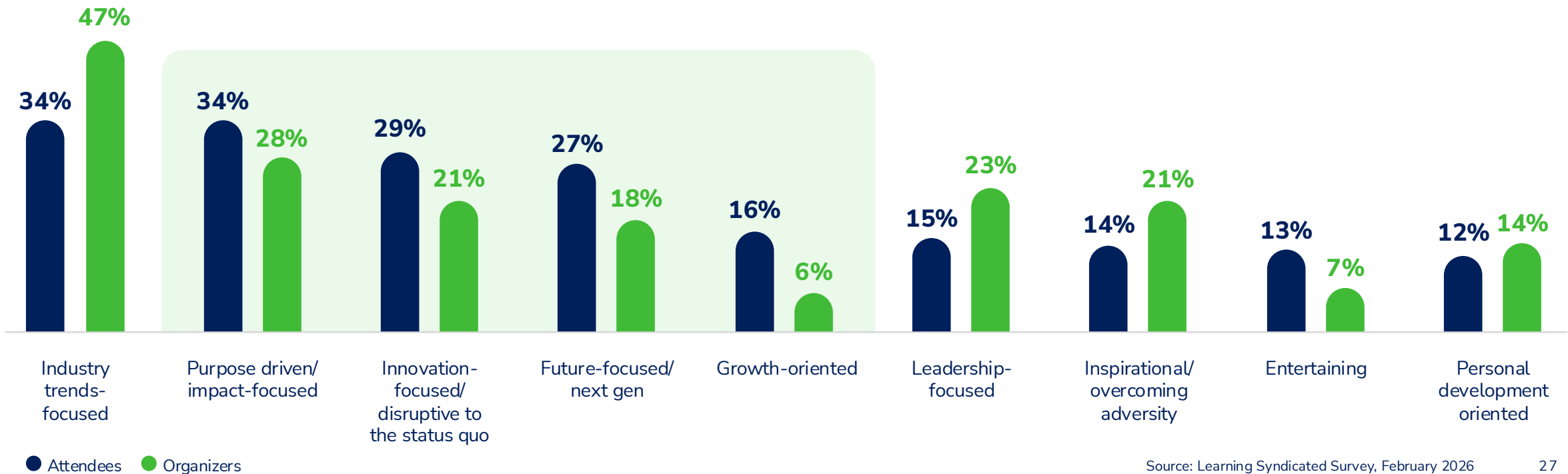
What type of session topics or themes do you consider most important for a keynote/general/plenary session?  
Select up to 2 options.

# Organizers think keynotes closely align with attendee priorities... but there are some notable gaps

To make keynote topics more relevant, organizers should curate speakers and messages that focus on industry trends, purpose-driven work, and innovation, along with future-focused or growth-oriented topics.

Keynotes that depart from the status quo will likely pay off as will keynotes that look ahead toward the future, since even a focus on present trends may quickly end up feeling behind.

### General session topic or theme preference





# Action Item

## Help presenters shape their message to the audience

As part of your presenter prep, schedule a short “Audience Download” with keynote speakers to share key attendee insights and help them tailor their message to your event audience.

### Cover three things:

**Who’s in the room:** Share key attendee demographics-industry segments represented, seniority levels, functional roles, and geographic mix.

**What matters right now:** Highlight attendees’ current priorities and mindset—such as the challenges they’re navigating, the opportunities they’re exploring, or the themes they’re most interested in (e.g., future trends, innovation, or industry disruption).

**Where past keynotes fell short:** Briefly share attendee feedback around relevance, practical application, or lack of clear take-home value.

## ATTENDEE / ORGANIZER QUESTION

Select your level of agreement with each of the following statements regarding keynote/general sessions.

### General session evaluation

## General session aesthetics matter less to attendees than organizers believe

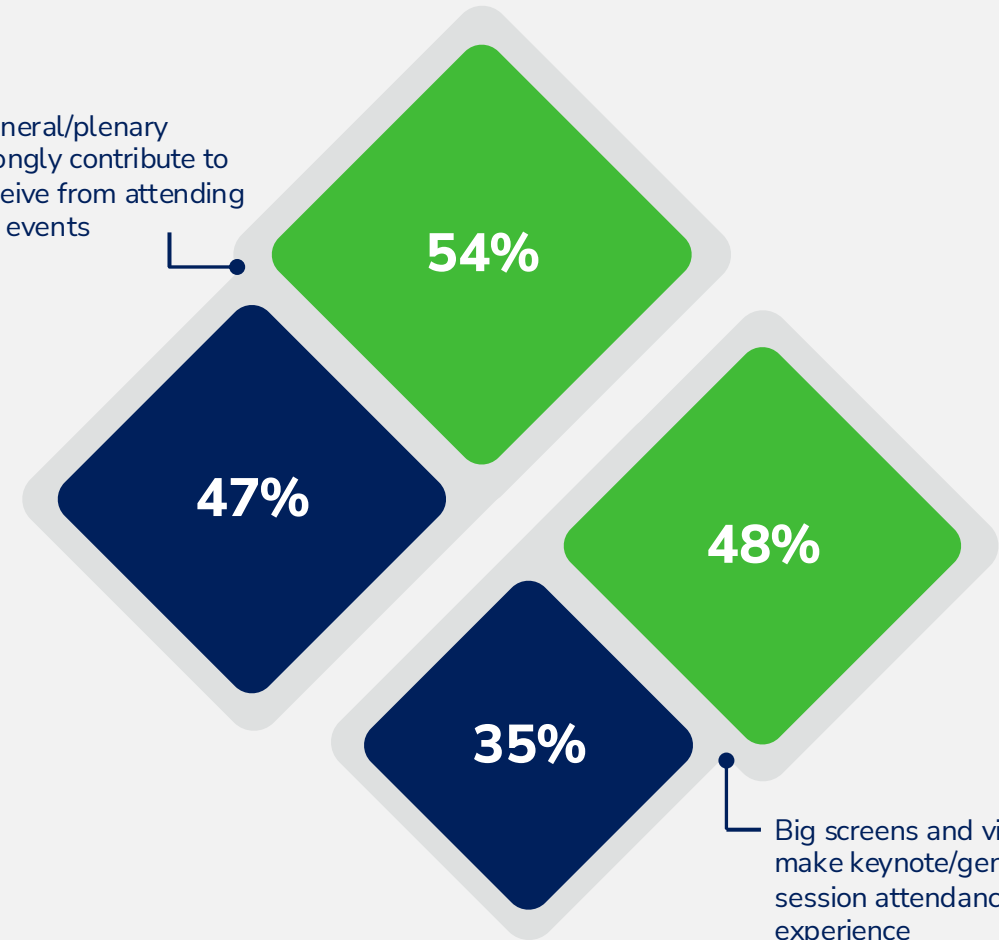
Sharp graphics and modern design will always be part of any successful event experience. **At the same time, attendees resoundingly share that they prioritize substance over style.** In fact, 65% of attendees don't believe that big screens and awe-inspiring aesthetics make keynotes better. **The real takeaway here is to focus first on content.**

It's all part of the message they're sending, loud and clear: Make this event worth my time and energy by making it as relevant as possible to my professional day-to-day.

Yet, right now, **more than half of attendees say general sessions *do not* add to overall ROI.**

 More data in appendix

Keynotes/general/plenary sessions strongly contribute to the ROI I receive from attending professional events



Big screens and visual appeal make keynote/general/plenary session attendance a better experience

# Action Item



## Take advantage of A/V partners in new ways

Audio-visual partners have traditionally been tasked with making the stage look and sound impressive, but their expertise can play a much larger role in shaping effective learning experiences.

AV professionals understand how people see, hear, and interact with content in a live environment. **Organizers can work with them earlier in the planning process to design sessions that support learning**—not just production value. This might include incorporating live demonstrations, innovative event technologies, visual storytelling, audience interaction tools, or dynamic transitions that help make messages stick.

AV partners witness hundreds of events each year, largely through the attendees' eyes. By engaging A/V partners as learning experience collaborators, not just technical operators, **organizers can create sessions that feel more engaging, memorable, and aligned with how attendees learn best.**

## ORGANIZER QUESTION

Do you think your event's keynotes/general/plenary sessions require changes to meet your audience's preferences for those sessions?

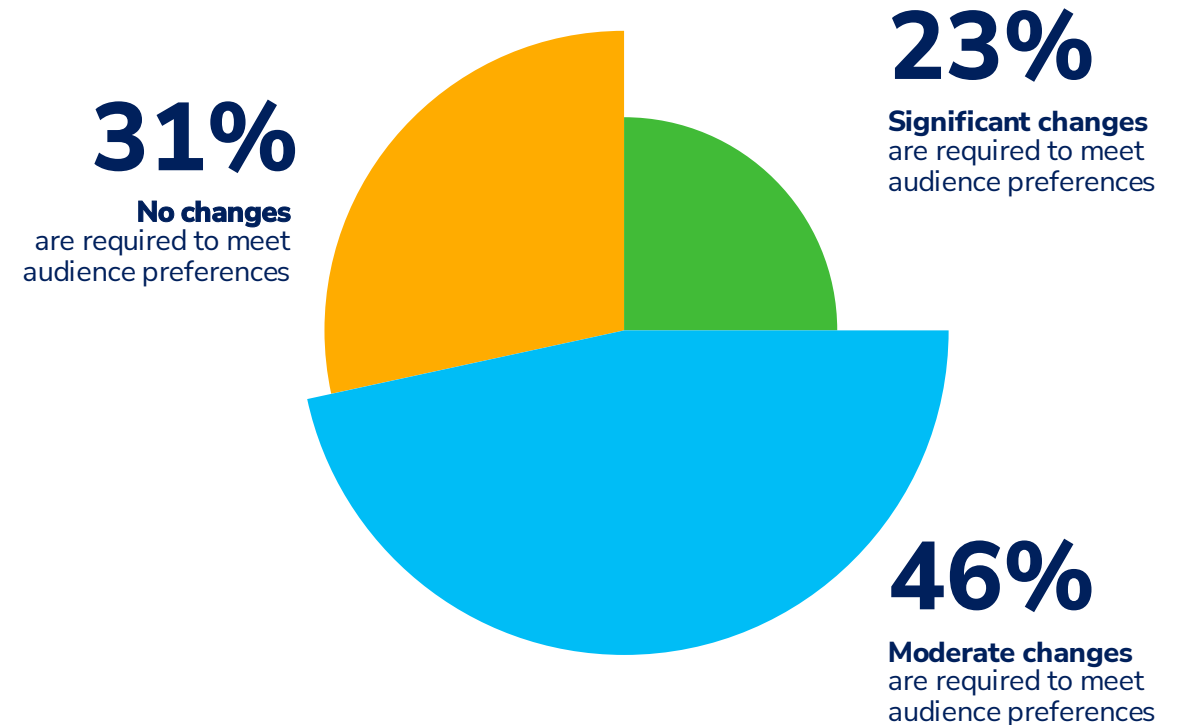
Organizer perspective – general session changes required to meet audience preference

## Nearly 70% of organizers recognize that changes are required for general sessions to meet audience preferences

Fortunately, the majority of organizers are already attuned to attendees' voices and acknowledge that **moderate to significant changes are needed to meet audience preferences.**

But this surfaces a question: why do the disconnects remain?

And to the small percentage of organizers who don't believe changes are required — for your sake — we hope you have a change of heart.



## ORGANIZER QUESTION

To what extent do each of the below areas prevent your organization from changing how keynotes/general/plenary sessions are conducted? 1 to 5 scale: 1= Not at all, 5 = To a great extent.

# Tradition and governance structures are slowing change

One significant barrier to changing general sessions? Other than the most obvious, budget, the “way we’ve always done things” mentality holds organizers back (and even more so for NowGen organizers).

On top of putting together a successful event, today’s organizers must also juggle the interests of event committees and event sponsors, which often come with their own set of bylaws, rules, or unwritten expectations.

For that reason, stakeholder management is a skill that every successful organizer should have in their toolkit.

## Factors preventing changes to general sessions



# Action Item



## Navigate stakeholders with purpose

Even if “the way we’ve always done it” feels comfortable to your stakeholders, attendees are seeking deeper changes. Here are a few simple tips for designing a process infused with purpose at every stage.

### **Leverage industry data**

Ground your recommendations in industry data and research to support the case for change. It's not data for data's sake, but to bring your stakeholders along for the ride.

### **Reframe change as risk mitigation instead of risk-taking**

Small adjustments can demonstrate progress without asking stakeholders to leap into the total unknown.

### **Bring in stakeholders early**

Engaging leaders early with brainstorming sessions, candid conversations about trade-offs, and opportunities for alignment can help shift stakeholders from gatekeepers to allies.

# What Effective Event Learning Looks Like



**ATTENDEE QUESTION**

Consider the session types that could take place in a conference room setting at the most important in-person professional event you attend. Allocate 100 points across the following session types for how you prefer to learn at the event. Assume each session type includes Q&A.

 More data in appendix

Learning session type preference



**24%**

Lecture/presentation delivered by speaker(s) to audience

**22%**

Hands-on or participatory interaction

**19%**

Facilitated workshops/roundtables with other attendees

**18%**

Demonstration delivered by speaker(s)

**17%**

Panel with a moderator

**Attendees demand a mix of learning formats**

Attendees seek learning through a variety of formats, from lectures and presentations to hands-on participation and facilitated roundtables. It's clear that no single learning style wins out. **Organizers and education leads must work together to make the event learning experience versatile and rewarding for every type of event attendee.**



# Attendee Personas

We've built the **XLNC framework** with the understanding that everyone shows up to events with their own primary motivations, which in turn shape how they learn best.

After extensive data analysis, we've generated three distinct learning personas that capture the nuances of attendees who come to events primarily for learning, networking, or commerce-related reasons.

We intentionally don't create a persona for "Experience" because it's our view that **experience is the X factor that comes to life when events are designed with attendee objectives in mind.**



MEET THE

# Learning-focused attendees



## What drives them

- Building new skills and capabilities that advance their career
- Gaining new perspectives that change their approach to work
- Leaving with ideas they can immediately implement
- Earning certifications or continuing education credits



## How learning resonates

- Structured sessions and topic-specific lectures
- Longer-form workshops that explore a topic in depth
- Speakers who provide real-world examples and actionable takeaways



## What can derail the learning experience

- Sessions that lack practical application
- Failure to group sessions by category, topic, or track
- Learning that could just as easily be delivered through webinars or livestreams

MEET THE

# Networking-focused attendees



## What drives them

- Meeting peers, mentors, and collaborators—especially those with different knowledge
- Exchanging ideas with others facing similar challenges
- Building a stronger sense of belonging within the industry



## Where learning works best

- Roundtables, panels, and facilitated discussions
- Peer-to-peer learning environments
- Opportunities to connect with speakers and experts before or after sessions



## What can derail the learning experience

- Lecture-heavy formats with limited participation
- Few opportunities to interact directly with other attendees or speakers

MEET THE

# Commerce-focused attendees



## What drives them

- Staying ahead of industry trends and competitors
- Solving real business challenges
- Discovering new products, services, or providers



## Where learning works best

- Product demonstrations and hands-on sessions
- Learning directly from exhibitors or solution providers
- 1:1 conversations about practical use cases



## What can derail the learning experience

- Theory-heavy presentations without practical relevance
- Learning formats that lack clear product or solution application
- Digital learning sources like on-demand training or social platforms

# Action Item



## Create a variety of learning environments and opportunities

Designing an event in which every attendee, across every learning preference, can find something valuable is no small task.

Here's how to start:

### **Give each attendee multiple pathways into the same idea**

Offer the same core content as a short talk, a small-group exchange, and a hands-on moment so each attendee can engage in the way that's optimal for them.

### **Use simple signals to guide attendees to the right sessions**

In-app labels (“Learn,” “Discuss,” “Do”) and brief recommendations help reduce friction, foster new connections, and streamline discovery.

**ATTENDEE QUESTION**

What are the most useful ways to direct you to the sessions you should attend? Select all that apply.

**ORGANIZER QUESTION**

What ways do you direct attendees to the sessions they should attend? Select all that apply.

# Attendees crave more personalized, real-time guidance when curating their event learning journey

Today's attendee feels swamped by the "choose-your-own-adventure" navigation required to maximize their event experience.

Instead, they want a deeper level of guidance, like real-time suggestions for which session to attend next, separate itineraries crafted for newbies and industry veterans, and more ways to share topics of interest during registration.

The silver lining is that organizers are heavily focused on these top priorities, and simply need to keep the momentum going by expanding to new, tech-savvy ways to personalize the learning experience even more.

## Guiding attendees on sessions to attend



**ATTENDEE QUESTION**

What technologies could be used in keynote/general/plenary sessions or other education sessions to improve your learning experience? Select all that apply.

**ORGANIZER QUESTION**

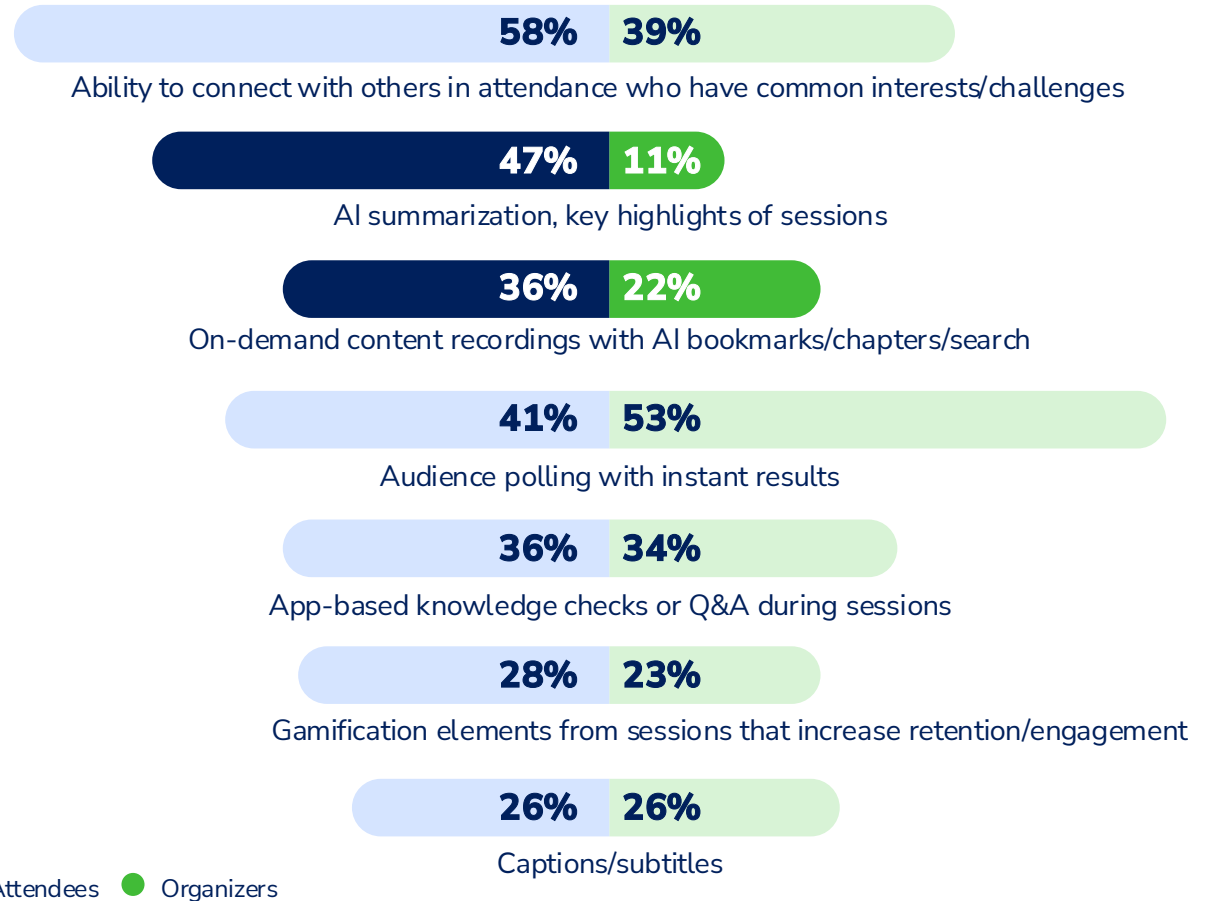
What technologies do you use in keynotes/general sessions or other education sessions to improve attendees learning experience? Select all that apply.

# Attendees expect AI to enhance how they learn at events

A big help to personalizing the attendee experience: AI. All attendees crave more technology that helps them connect with others who share common interests, summarize session highlights, and enhance on-demand recordings with AI-generated capabilities.

However, there's a major gap between what attendees want to see and what organizers report doing. **The possibilities are endless if more event organizers put down their outdated playbooks and polling technologies and embrace AI tools.**

## Technological improvements for education sessions



# Action Item



## ➔ Set aside time to learn how AI fits into your event

**AI won't replace the human heart of an event**, but it can remove friction and strengthen learning if organizers let it.

Since AI can feel intimidating, it helps to start small.

Set aside time to test simple uses, like drafting attendee descriptions, summarizing session content, or brainstorming new learning formats.

Hands-on experimentation helps demystify AI and shows how it can support the work you already do, making it easier to adopt over time.

## ATTENDEE QUESTION

Think of an instance where multiple sessions you would like to attend are occurring concurrently. How valuable is it for registration to include access to on-demand sessions you are not able to join?

## Availability of on-demand sessions provides peace of mind

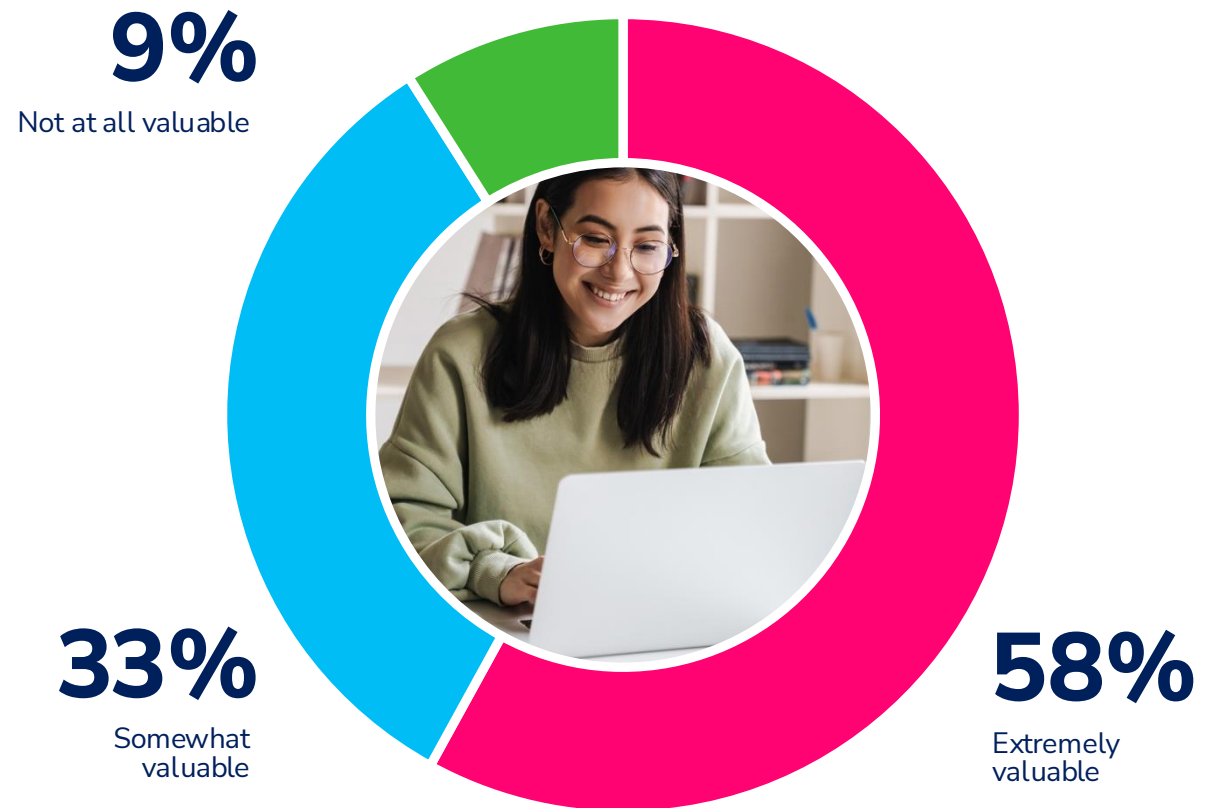
More than half of attendees report being unable to attend a session of interest somewhat or very frequently.

**It's clear that on-demand playback cuts down on FOMO** (the fear of missing out) for the vast majority, who say they value access to recordings (regardless of whether or not they go back and watch it).

Given that 91% of attendees say that access to on-demand sessions is important, organizers would be wise to prioritize this offering.

It's also worth considering how attendees spend their time when they know that on-demand content is available...(read on).

### Value of on-demand sessions playback



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

If an event you attend has any session available to view on-demand, how does that adjust how you spend your time at the event?

What attendees are saying about the value of on-demand content

## Top 3 comment categories

32%

### Prioritize most important sessions to attend live

Attendee non-recorded sessions, watch less important sessions later

20%

### Prioritize interactive sessions

Attendee hands-on sessions, those with live Q&A or interaction with speaker

15%

### Dedicate more time to networking

Prioritize networking-heavy sessions or connection opportunities elsewhere at the event



“There's less pressure/anxiety over missing out, so I can prioritize the best in-person experiences for the event.”



“It lets me focus my time on live interaction, Q&A, and networking, while saving presentation-heavy sessions to watch later.”



“It helps me prioritize without having to sacrifice and gives me a lot of clarity.”



“I would prioritize events that include participation and meeting other attendees.”

# Attention Isn't Shrinking, Content Is Competing for Bandwidth

The idea of a “shrinking attention span” has been overstated. As outlined earlier, the brain isn't built for long stretches of passive attention. It resets, filters, and prioritizes based on relevance. **But as live events researcher Victoria Matey notes, the issue isn't that people can't focus. They can and regularly do.**



**VICTORIA  
MATEY**

Whether it's reading, gaming, or watching long-form content, people sustain deep attention when something truly holds their interest. What's changed isn't attention itself. It's the environment around it. Attendees today are navigating more inputs, more interruptions, and faster flows of information than ever before.

**The real risk is cognitive overload.** When sessions lack structure, move too quickly, or introduce too much complexity at once, they exceed working memory. And when that happens, even motivated audiences disengage.

Here's what to consider when designing session content.

## **Earn attention before managing it.**

Make relevance immediate. Define what's at stake, promise a clear payoff, and connect the content to what the audience already cares about.

## **Reduce overload through structure.**

Organize content into digestible segments. Signal what matters. Build in pauses. Give attendees time to process and apply ideas before moving on. Introduce new concepts gradually, anchoring them in something familiar.

## **Design for behavior, not generations.**

Avoid assumptions about what different age groups want to learn. Research shows more overlap than difference. Instead, **design for how people actually behave: how they focus, when they disengage, and what helps them retain and use information.** Consider the full experience—how the environment supports attention, and what enables continued engagement after the session ends.

# Action Item



## Focus on the quality of sessions, not the quantity of sessions

Time and time again, attendees say that they don't need more sessions—they need better ones. With competing time slots and the growing expectation of on-demand access, quality is what drives learning, confidence, and retention. Here are a few ways organizers can shift focus toward higher-impact programming without adding more to the schedule.

### **Design fewer, higher-impact sessions**

Attendees often miss sessions because too many run at the same time, which makes the schedule feel overwhelming. Creating fewer offerings with clearer relevance and stronger take-home value helps each session land more effectively.

### **Build in more time for depth and interaction**

Attendees consistently say they value hands-on engagement, Q&A, and focused discussion. These experiences need time, not a crowded agenda. Spacing sessions out gives people room to learn, reflect, and connect.

### **Provide added structure for peer-to-peer sessions**

Attendee-led sessions designed for peer engagement are a great supplement to the learning experience but could use guidance to ensure they pack in the same value as organizer-designed sessions.

# Learning Beyond the “Classroom”



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

Think about how you learn at any in-person event. What are the top 3 environments that most positively influence your learning experience?

## ORGANIZER QUESTION

Think about how your attendees learn at any in-person event. What are the top 3 environments that most positively influence your attendees' learning experience?

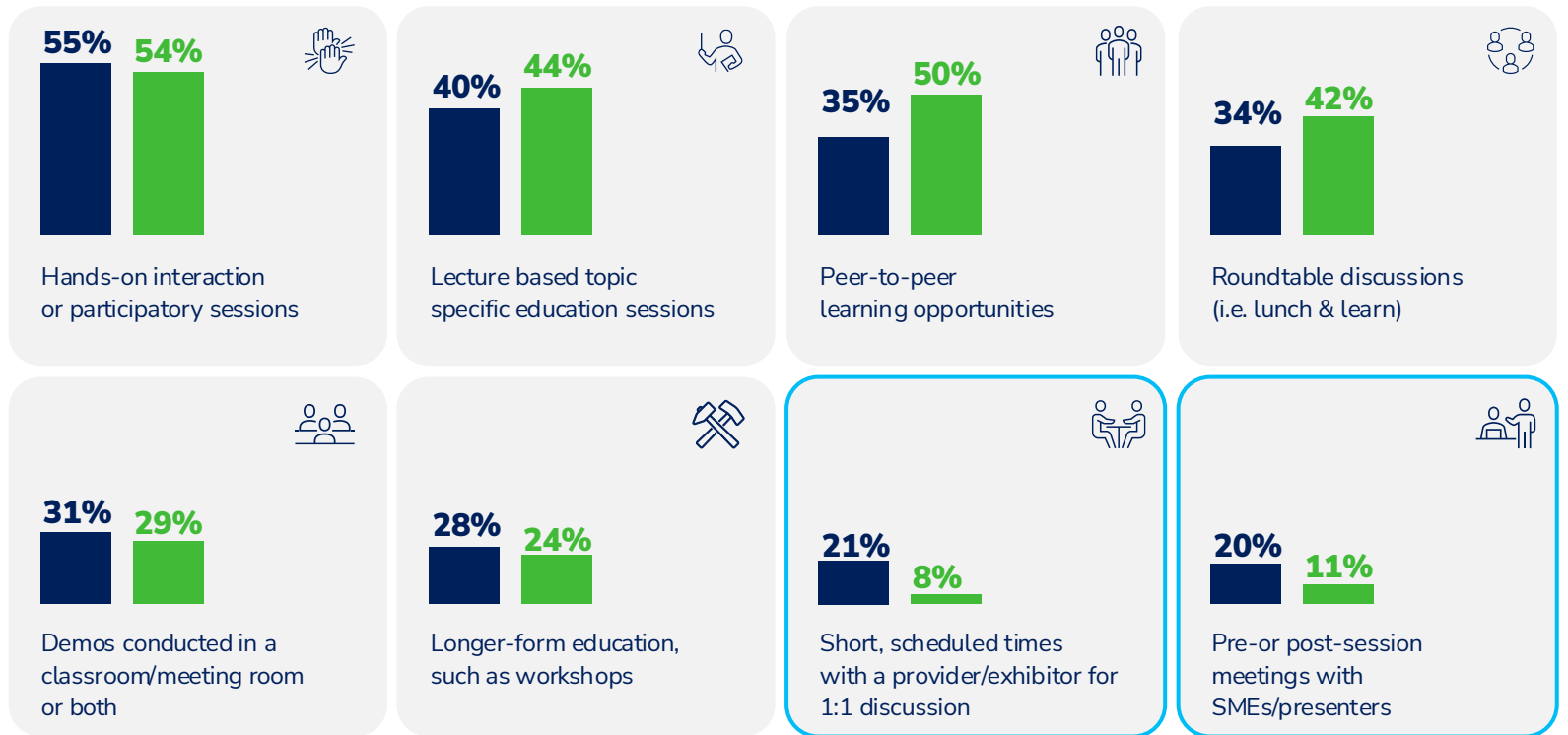
# Exhibitor and expert conversations deliver greater learning value than organizers assume

We already know that attendees experience learning through hands-on interactions, lectures, and peer-to-peer conversations.

There's another learning dimension that attendees crave, however—and it's one that organizers routinely underestimate. Amid the bustle of a large-scale event, attendees say **they place high value on short, scheduled 1:1 conversations with providers, exhibitors, or presenters.**

The takeaway here is that **the modern attendee views every moment as ripe for learning and connection.**

## Top learning environments





# Learning is not confined to conference rooms and general sessions

Some of the most valuable insights at events emerge in peer conversations, exhibitor interactions, and spontaneous exchanges with subject matter experts.

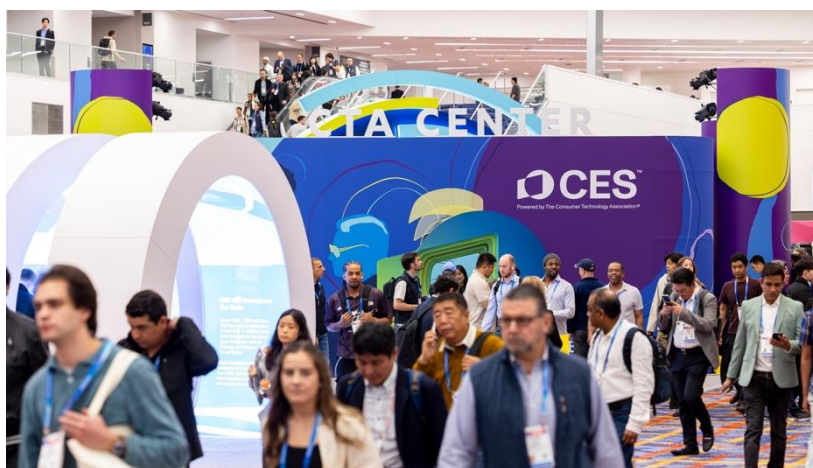
For organizers, this presents a new opportunity: to think beyond sessions and treat the entire event environment as a space for learning.

**In Part Two of this research, we'll explore how organizers can turn the entire event into a platform for learning.**





## PART TWO



## Stay Tuned for Part Two

As this report shows, keynote presentations and conference room sessions play a valuable role in fostering attendee learning. However, attendees crave an experience that treats every interaction as a learning opportunity.

**Many of the most memorable insights at events emerge between sessions**, whether through peer conversations, spontaneous discussions, hands-on experiences, or interactions with exhibitors and experts.

In the next chapter of Freeman's research, we'll explore how learning happens outside the classroom, and how organizers can design event environments that encourage discovery, knowledge sharing, and unexpected insights.

# So, What Now?



# When Learning Becomes Collective

Sociologists have long described a phenomenon called *collective effervescence*: the surge of energy and shared focus that happens when we gather around a common purpose.

When hundreds of professionals learn together in one room, all the right ingredients are there for collective effervescence to take shape. Ideas bubble up in real time. One person's questions spark another's new perspective. Conversations extend learning beyond the stage and into hallways, roundtables, and chance encounters. This shared momentum is difficult to replicate in digital environments, where learning often happens in isolation.

Freeman's research throughout this report points to the same conclusion: **Attendees value practical learning that changes how they think and what they do next.**

The role of event organizers, then, is not just to deliver content. It's to design environments where collective learning can happen, and where ideas rise and evolve in ways that wouldn't be possible online.

Our point? You have the unique privilege of helping attendees tap into a collective energy that's much bigger than any one individual learning experience. In this way, **live events can offer not just information... but transformation.**



# Action Items



## Build best practices into presentation templates

Provide templates that prompt speakers to state clear objectives upfront, incorporate real-world examples or case studies, and conclude with actionable takeaways.



## Help presenters shape their message to the audience

Share key attendee demographics, highlight attendees' current priorities and provide past attendee feedback.



## Take advantage of A/V partners in new ways

Incorporate them early in the planning process to elevate both attendee learning and production value.



## Navigate stakeholders with purpose

Leverage industry data, reframe change as risk mitigation instead of risk-taking, and bring in stakeholders early to help shift them from gatekeepers to allies.



## Create a variety of learning pathways based on who's at your event

Give each attendee multiple pathways into the same idea, and use clear labels (e.g., "Learn," "Discuss," "Do") to guide attendees to the right sessions.



## Set aside time to learn how AI fits into your event

Test simple uses, like drafting attendee descriptions, summarizing session content, or brainstorming new learning formats.



## Focus on the quality of sessions, not the quantity of sessions

Design fewer, higher-impact sessions, build in more time for interaction, and provide structure for peer-to-peer sessions.

# Connect with Freeman

Whether you need data-fueled direction or on-the-ground expertise, Freeman Strategy equips you with the tools to lead successful events.

For details, reach out to:

**Annie Malone**

annie.malone@freeman.com

**Ken Holsinger**

ken.holsinger@freeman.com

## **Insight-to-Action Strategy Session**

Facilitate a focused discussion with your team to translate participant insights into actionable networking design strategies that deliver purposeful networking experiences.

## **Community Needs Discovery**

Uncover unmet networking needs among past and current event participants through targeted surveys, helping you design networking experiences that align with what your community wants.

## **Maximize Value Drivers**

Pinpoint what matters most to existing and prospective attendees and exhibitors. Use this data to challenge assumptions and align your event more closely with everyone's goals.

## **Influencer and KOL Learning Network**

Partner with trusted industry voices to extend your event's reach and credibility. [mdg](#) identifies and collaborates with respected influencers and key opinion leaders to create authentic content, activate their communities, and drive attendance. These partnerships help build a year-round learning ecosystem that audiences already trust.

## **AI Event Concierge**

Help prospective and registered attendees determine whether your event is the right fit for their goals. [mdg's](#) AI-powered event concierge allows users to explore exhibitors, sessions, and networking opportunities based on their interests and objectives, validating the value of attending before they register. The tool then continues to guide attendees onsite by helping them build personalized agendas and discover the opportunities most relevant to them.

# Appendix

Methodology and complete dataset

# Attendee Demographics

# Attendee Demographics

## Job Title / Function

Corporate Management	31%
C-level	6%
Owner / Partner / President	10%
VP / SVP	3%
Director / Manager	12%
Healthcare	24%
Technical	8%
Sales/Business Development	6%
Production/Operations/Maintenance	5%
Consultant	4%
Marketing/Advertising	4%
Government	3%
Buyer/Purchasing	2%
R&D	2%
Other	11%

## Industry

Medical/Healthcare	24%
Education	15%
Government	7%
Industrial/Heavy Machinery and Finished Business Outputs	7%
Business Services	6%
Food/Beverage	5%
Consumer Goods	4%
Building/Construction/Home and Repair	4%
Technology/Communications/IT	4%
Raw Materials/Agriculture/Utilities	3%
Transportation	3%
Financial, Legal and Real Estate	2%
Retail	2%
Other	14%

# Attendee Demographics (Continued)

## Purchase Decision-Making Status

Key/sole decision-maker	27%
Significant influence	33%
Some influence	25%
No influence/end user	15%

## Decision-Making Status on Event Attendance

Sole decision-maker	38%
Significant influence	33%
Some influence	23%
No influence	6%

## Type of Event Attended

Conference	65%
Trade show	35%

# Attendee Demographics (Continued)

## Organization FTEs

1-100	50%
101-500	17%
501-2,000	9%
2,001-5,000	6%
More than 5,000	18%

## Gender

Male	48%
Female	48%
Non-binary/non-conforming	1%
Choose not to specify	3%

## Generation

Gen Z	8%
Millennials	38%
Gen X	37%
Boomers	17%

## Location

United States	91%
International	9%

# Organizer Demographics

# Organizer Demographics

## Organization Type

Association/society/not-for-profit exhibition or event organizer	33%
For-profit exhibition or event organizer	22%
Organizer of corporate events for my company	45%
Third-party event management company	0%
Other	0%

## Association Type

Trade	29%
Professional	55%
Both trade and professional members	13%
Other	3%

## Organization Scope

International	53%
National (US only)	32%
National (outside the US)	6%
Regional (within the US)	9%

## Frequency of hosting most important event

Annually	88%
More than once per year	6%
Once every two years	5%
Once every three years or less	1%

# Organizer Demographics

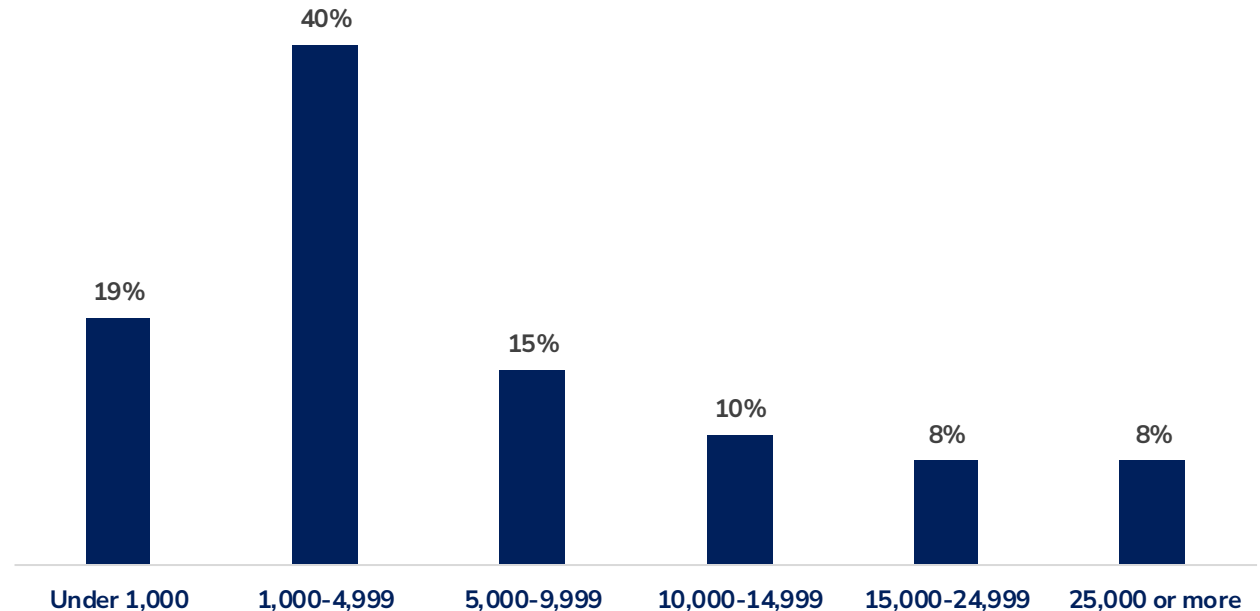
## Exhibit hall sq footage

Under 50,000	21%
50,000-99,000	12%
100,000 or more	41%
Not sure	26%

## 2026 expected sq footage change

Decrease by more than 10%	2%
Decrease by 5-10%	14%
Stay approximately the same	60%
Increase by 5-10%	15%
Increase by more than 10%	5%
Not sure	4%

## Total Verified Event Attendance



# Organizer Demographics

## Industry

Medical/Healthcare	29%
Education	13%
Technology/Communications/IT	8%
Building/Construction/Home and Repair	7%
Business Services	6%
Food/Beverage	5%
Transportation	5%
Financial, Legal and Real Estate	4%
Industrial/Heavy Machinery and Finished Business Outputs	4%
Raw Materials/Agriculture/Utilities	3%
Sports, Travel, Entertainment	3%
Government	1%
Retail	1%
Other	11%

## Purchase Decision Making Status

Key/sole decision-maker	30%
Significant influence	51%
Some influence	16%
No influence/end user	3%

## Level

C-suite/President	10%
VP/SVP/EVP	18%
Director/Senior Director	41%
Manager/Senior Manager	23%
Other	8%

# Organizer Demographics (Continued)

## Generation

Gen Z	1%
Millennials	31%
Gen X	53%
Boomers	15%

## Gender

Male	18%
Female	77%
Choose not to specify	5%

## Location

United States	93%
International	7%

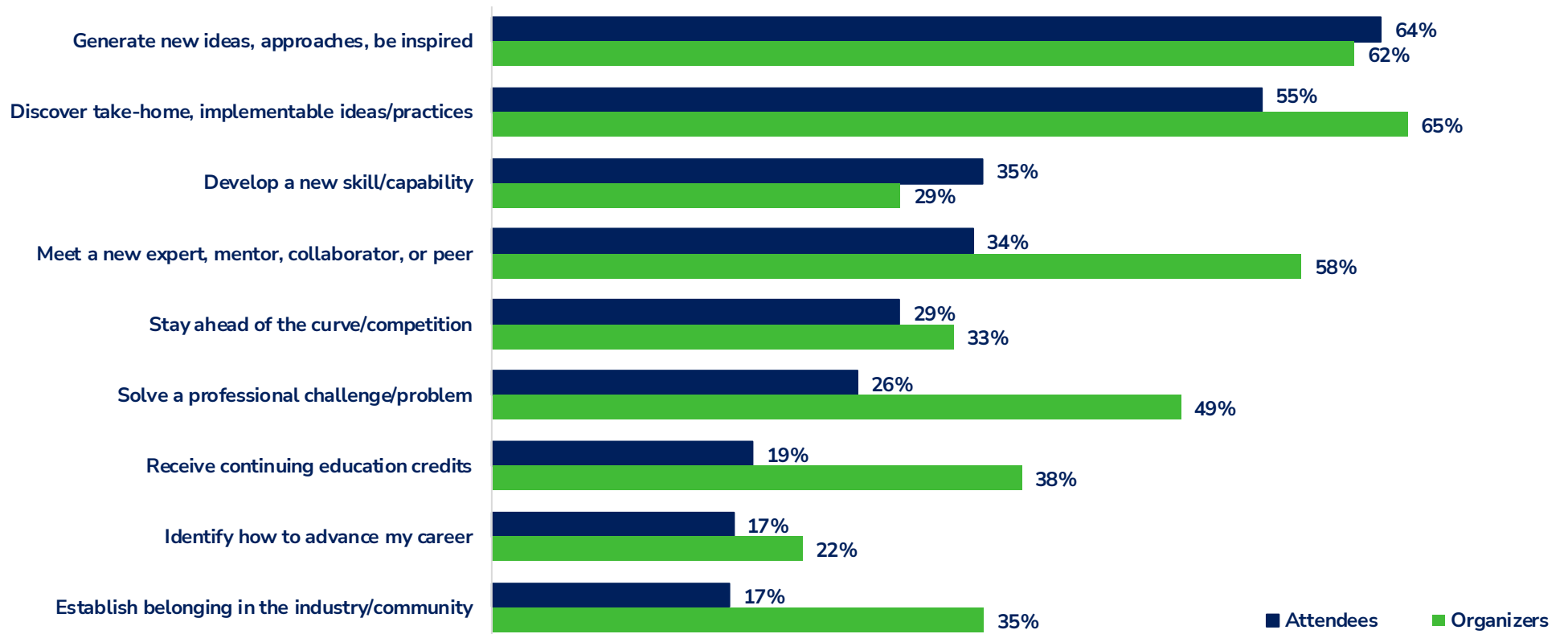
# Full Data Slides

## ATTENDEE / ORGANIZER QUESTION

**Question 1** - Think about all aspects of the event where you learn/receive education. Which of the following best describes what you hope to gain from how you learn at the event? Select your top 3.

**Question 2** - Think about all aspects of the event where attendees learn/receive education. Which of the following best describes what attendees hope to gain from how they learn at your event? Select your top 3.

## Goals for Learning at Professional Events

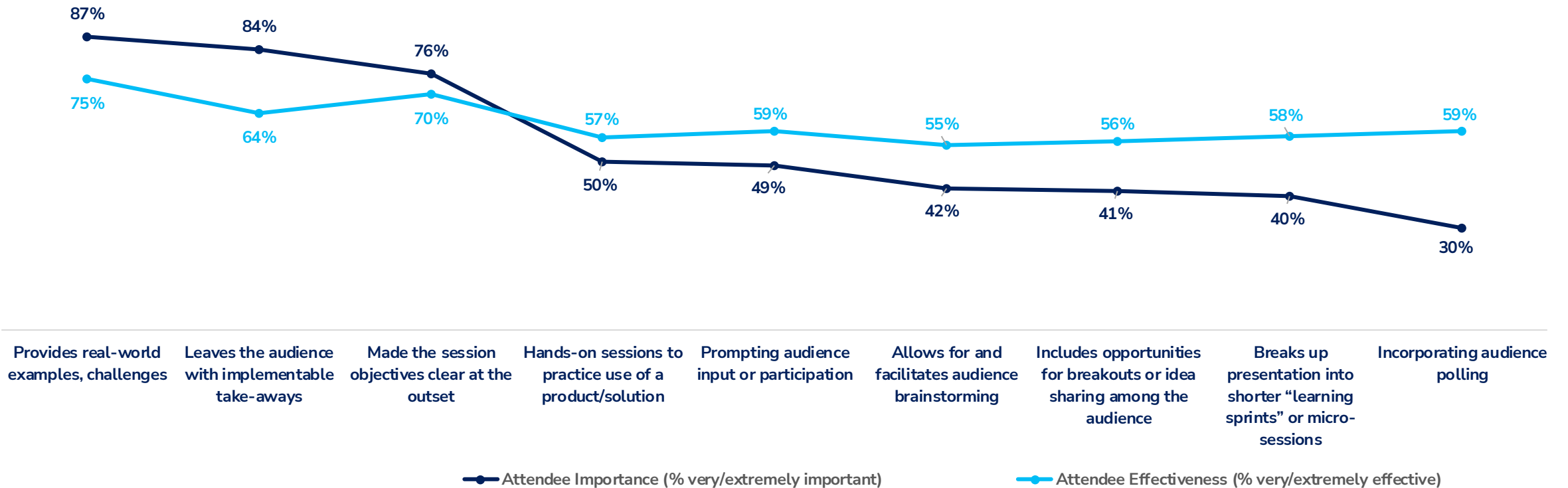


## ATTENDEE QUESTION

**Question 1** - Think of the speakers, presenters, and/or panel members from the conference room sessions at the most important in-person event you attend. How important is it that the speakers do each of the following during their session(s)?

**Question 2** - In general, how effective were the session speakers at doing each of the components you considered important in the prior question?

## Session Speaker Attribute Importance & Effectiveness

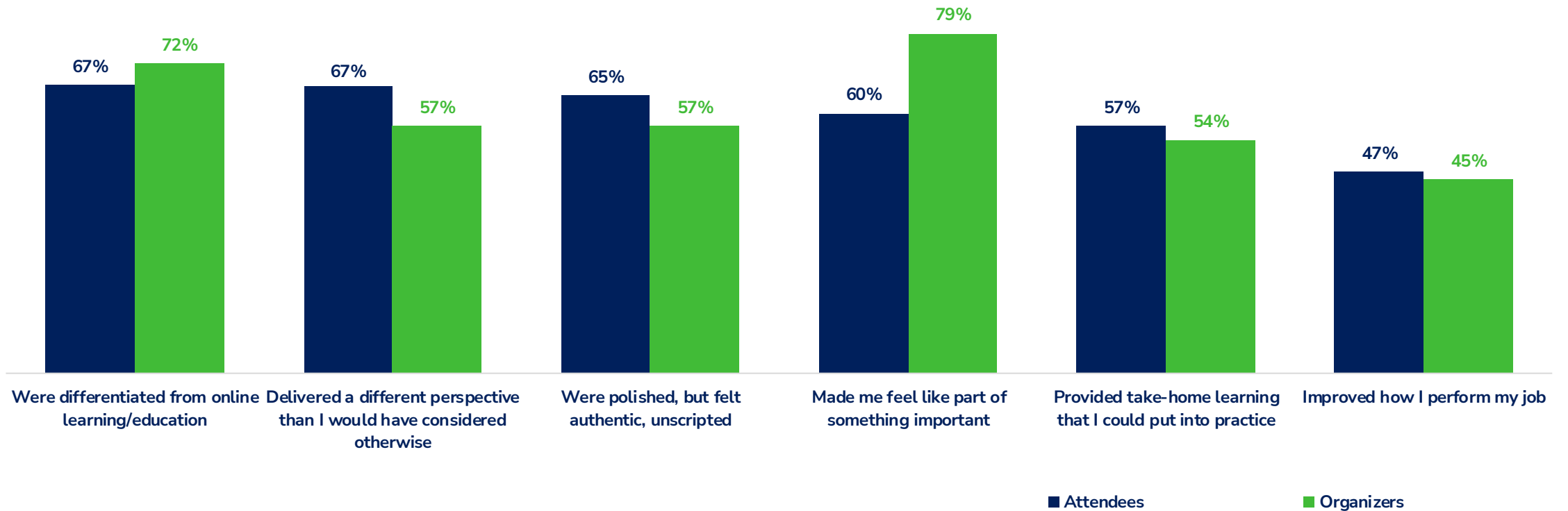


## ATTENDEE / ORGANIZER QUESTION

**Question 1** - Select your level of agreement with each of the following statements. The general/keynote sessions... (% agree/strongly agree)

**Question 2** - Select your level of agreement with each of the following statements. The general/keynote sessions at my organization's most important in-person event...

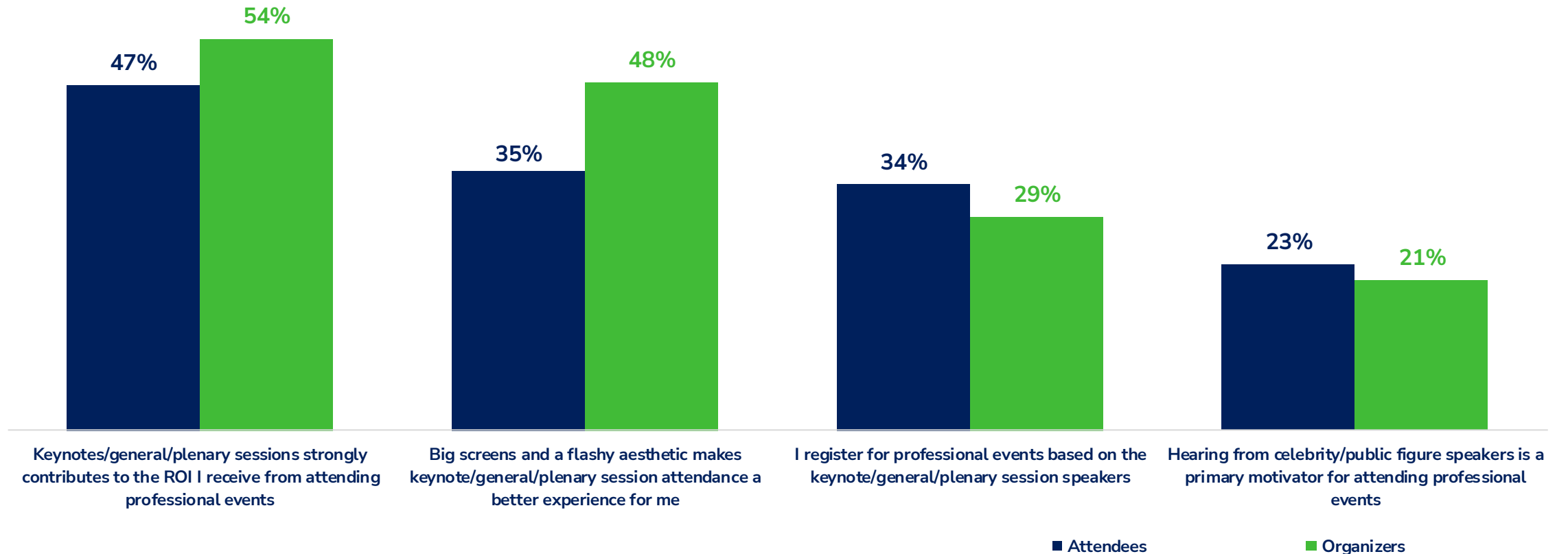
### Value of General Sessions



## ATTENDEE / ORGANIZER QUESTION

Select your level of agreement with each of the following statements regarding keynote/general sessions.

### General Session Evaluation



## ATTENDEE / ORGANIZER QUESTION

**Question 1** - Consider the session types that could take place in a conference room setting at the most important in-person professional event you attend. Allocate 100 points across the following session types for how you prefer to learn at the event. Assume each session type includes Q&A.

**Question 2** - Consider the session types that could take place in a conference room setting at your organization's most important in-person event. Allocate 100 points across the following session types for how your attendees prefer to learn at the event.

### Learning Session Type Preference

