Meeting Platforms:
Choose your own Adventure

Like so many things in the post-pandemic world, the challenges and requirements of meeting management have fundamentally changed. We moved from having fully in-person meetings, to fully digital, and then landed somewhere in-between with hybrid events. Now, it's a mix of all of it.

Current collaborative arrangements are more complex than they were when we were all online. Now, we need to make a conscious choice of how to engage. There are lots of trade-offs to assess. Here's what needs to be considered as you plan your events.

Decision Factor	In-person	Digital	Hybrid
Cost	Can be high depending on the need for travel, venue/facility rental, catering etc.	Low, as most people have the needed technology and there are numerous low-cost digital collaboration tools available.	Highest, as there are usually the same costs as in-person plus additional costs for extra tech and facilitation support.
Ease	Low, as people need to travel to get there, bring supplies etc.	High — press a button, wear your stretchy pants, stay home!	Depends. For most participants, it's as easy as digital. For organizers, it's the most complex by a lot.
Equity of experience	High, assuming people can get there in the first place.	High unless people struggle with or have low comfort with technology.	Low unless expertly facilitated, in which case moderate at best. The energy in one format doesn't match the energy in the other.
Expectations	People pine for this, but don't make attendance a priority.	Sick of it — people are Zoomed out.	Necessary evil — people don't expect it to be good.
Inclusion	Lowest due to barriers to attendance (ranging from travel costs to health concerns to accessibility limitations to unexpected traffic jams to…).	High, unless participants lack reliable internet access.	Perceived to be highest, but trades off with quality of experience. Ironically, in trying to include anyone, you may lessen the experience for everyone.

Decision Factor	In-person	Digital	Hybrid
Need for skilled facilitation	High, as always! ;)	High but requires different skills and tools than in person.	Very high — plus significant limitations on the collaborative processes available.
Predictability	Moderate — traffic and weather can affect driving time; people's plans change, and they expect a hybrid option; can be difficult to plan room size and catering; venue quality can vary…	High, unless internet connection fails.	High and low — high because people can participate either way, but low because you won't know how many you'll get in each format. It is often likely that in-person attendance will be lower than you expect. It is more difficult to plan room size and catering.
Presence	People are likely fully present, but can get impatient with only doing one thing, so it better be good.	People are likely multi-tasking, but are used to it.	Mixed — digital joiners are more likely doing several things at once while in-person folks aren't.
Productivity	High if well-facilitated, especially if some digital tools used.	Highest — can get the most done in the shortest time.	Variable — dependent on facilitation quality.
Quality of experience	Very high if well-facilitated, but not automatic.	High if well-facilitated, but usually moderate at best.	Lower than either single format.
Relationship building	High — usually best for building trust and strengthening connections.	Can be high but usually low, unless skillfully facilitated to build social connection and/or if relationships are pre-existing from in-person collaboration.	Mixed, particularly across formats as it is difficult for in-person participants to engage relationally with those joining digitally and vice versa.
Tech/set up requirements	Can be very low	Depends on what participants have access to.	Highest — depends on both the venue and participants' set ups.

You can see there's no clear winning format — each choice depends on too many factors for the answer to be that simple. But you can also see why I'm not a fan of hybrid.

Here's how I summarize

1. Hybrid meetings are more inclusive, but they are more expensive to do well. Even when well-resourced, the overall quality of the experience is generally lower for everyone. They require a level of facilitation skill that few people possess. Most facilitators I know prefer to avoid them. Most meeting designers see them as a necessary evil.

2. In-person meetings are not the "gold standard" and digital the "consolation prize." Both can be outstanding, and both can be awful. The quality of facilitation matters.

3. If you are inviting people to an in-person gathering, make the experience worth their investment of extra time to be there. The venue and opportunities to connect relationally between formal segments should both be excellent. If it is a conversation that could have happened equally well online, host it online.

4. Unplanned hybrid is usually terrible. If you are hosting an "in-person-preferred" gathering, the likelihood of full attendance is low. Be clear and consistent about how you will answer messages about people not attending. Will it be "I'm sorry you can't make it — we'll catch you up some other way afterwards" or "Here is the link to attend digitally"?

5. If equity in the quality of experience is your highest value, fully digital is your best bet.