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Don't Fear the Reaper

Digital transformation in Singapore's MICE industry.

by Candy Mak and Poon King Wang

When business ground to a pandemic-induced halt in February 2020, the Singapore Association of Convention & Exhibition Organisers & Suppliers (SACEOS) immediately got to work to keep the country's Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) industry afloat. In the first month, it worked with the authorities to triage the situation. Within eight months, they produced a roadmap for a new hybrid business model which the rest of the industry could adopt. Less than two months later, they witnessed the new model being deployed on the global stage at the 2020 Singapore Fintech Festival (SFF) in December, which was broadcast live to 60,000 attendees and around the clock for over five days.

Is there a secret to the successful turnaround, one that is exclusive to the personalities that make up this industry? Perhaps a propensity for change, or a hardened resilience from living day-to-day under Murphy's Law? While that could be true for many MICE professionals, we also pay heed to the tireless efforts of many, as well as the unfortunate casualties, including event businesses that were shuttered when they could neither partake in the digital transformation nor outlast the pandemic.

In this article, we discuss the lessons learned from the MICE industry in the context of managing change, mobilising talent, and building resilience.

WHEN MICE MET THE REAPER: FROM TRIAGE TO TRIUMPH

Empty spaces, what are we living for?¹

On February 7, 2020, the Singapore government's Multi-Ministry Taskforce raised its COVID-19 risk assessment, sounding the ostensible death knell for the MICE industry. One by one, organisers saw events being postponed or cancelled. Event halls became uncharacteristically still, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) started to bleed out.

Even organisers that had pivoted to the digital space were finding their new basis for generating revenue dissipating quickly.



The hit taken by the MICE industry was particularly severe. Businesses had made heavy investments for a robust line-up in what was possibly their most stellar year yet. When the need for these facilities, trusses, and furniture evaporated, they were left only with hefty bank loans and dwindling cash flow that they could not replenish in time. International visitors were not coming in. Domestically, they were restricted by safe management measures rolled out by the Singapore government to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission among its residents and visitors.

With the help of the government and some quick reflexes, MICE players bought themselves some time. They mounted intensive discussions and engagements with the authorities for monetary support, resulting in measures such as the Jobs Support Scheme,² moratoriums on loans, and tax reliefs. To facilitate a return to business, they worked to translate regulations into operating protocols like safe distancing and sanitation practices that companies could follow when reintroducing physical events, albeit on a much smaller scale. However, given the long gestation period of six, nine, or even up to 12 months to prepare for each event, companies continued to struggle.

Even organisers that had pivoted to the digital space were finding their new basis for generating revenue dissipating quickly. Initially, their research showed that companies were keen to carry on engaging their customers during lockdown and there was a willingness to pay for digital participation. However, just as quickly, participants started questioning why they should pay the same amount as they did for physical events when they were interacting on platforms that cost close to nothing.

Digital was their lifeline, but now it simply highlighted their inability to deliver value in this domain. The MICE industry earnestly re-examined its case, reframing its fundamental questions from “How do we survive this?” to “How do we intensify engagement?” and “How can we mimic

and replicate digitally what we find in face-to-face meetings—the serendipitous moments?”. These questions propelled the industry players on a reflective journey that culminated in the development of the Event Industry Resilience Roadmap (IRR) together with the relevant government agencies, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and Enterprise Singapore (ESG).³

I'll soon be turning, round the corner now⁴

Launched on October 8, 2020, the IRR formalised the MICE whole-of-industry approach⁵ to recovery and beyond. Drawing from the collaborations between government and industry stakeholders, it delivered new guidelines and made a case for hybridisation for the rest of the industry. The hundred-page document was comprehensive. It included sections such as “How to Get Started”; comprehensive checklists such as those for programming, cybersecurity, networking, and metrics; re-engineered educational pathways for new areas such as broadcasting and analytics; and a new Events Community Network to bring stakeholders together for growth opportunities.

Because the IRR was not a theoretical exercise but a collection of learnings⁶ from actual pilot projects⁷ by key players, the document also contained precise and just-in-time recommendations that businesses could implement immediately, such as programming “four to six hours of content per day... with short breaks and each session not exceeding an hour”.

Several of these pilots were run by SingEx Holdings (SingEx)⁸, whose then-chief executive officer Aloysius Arlando was also the incumbent president of SACEOS at that time. In a phased approach built on the technology industry practice of design sprints, SingEx pulled off increasingly complex hybrid events, with the high-profile 2020 SFF marking a clear breakthrough for its own transformation and a key milestone for the industry (refer to box story for how SingEx’s journey contributed to the MICE industry’s transformation efforts).

THE SINGEX EXPERIENCE

Starting Small

CAREhab GO

(July 2020)

SingEx started a small pilot with the Society of Rehabilitation Medicine (Singapore) to test-run user journeys during the virtual run of a healthcare conference, CAREhab GO, for a group of 100 to 200 medical professionals. In terms of manpower needed to organise the event, it was not a one-size-fits-all approach. The company partnered with global consultancy firm Accenture to analyse what to do with different groups of staff: those who can change, those who cannot change, and those who needed more time. Those who could move on to new roles received training while others were redeployed to care roles at the Singapore Expo COVID-19 Community Care Facility that was set up in April 2020. It subsequently adopted the learnings from the first pilot for the second run, which was already being planned during this period.

Stacking Skills

Industrial Transformation Asia-Pacific

(October 2020)

SingEx went on to host the first hybrid version of the Industrial Transformation Asia-Pacific (ITAP) conference for up to 5,000 participants while concurrently activating its plan for the third event, which was its largest experiment. The opening ceremony for ITAP was held before a live studio audience while simultaneously being broadcast in real time on ITAP Connected⁹, the digital platform designed by SingEx. It prepared a special helpdesk and trained more people to help with troubleshooting. For physical attendees, it ensured a sterile environment and adhered to safe event protocols.

The process was bumpy. It was SingEx’s first attempt at executing 3D Learning Journeys and global payments. To ensure the digital platform was usable and up to standard, it was constantly in communication with the developers. It found it had to debug payment forms for extra zeroes when currencies like the Indonesian rupiah were used, and fight off hackers who were having a field day with its apps and websites. To manage this, it sought help from Singapore’s Government Technology Agency (GovTech)¹⁰, which worked with a pool of SingEx employees with the requisite skills and keen interest in this area. Meanwhile, Microsoft provided expertise and support on 3D and Teams, its proprietary business communication platform.

Going Global

Singapore FinTech Festival

(December 2020)

By the end of 2020, a hybrid, round-the-clock edition of the highly anticipated SFF was launched in various cities around the world, connecting physical attendees in Brunei (the only nation which was not locked down at that time) and over 60,000 virtual attendees in a week-long 'online city' experience. For its on-site operations, including those at the broadcast studios and the call centre manned by 15 staff, it had close to 400 people working on shifts.

With its experience from ITAP, SingEx was able to fortify its payment systems in time to neutralise close to 2,000 hacks. It built on its earlier experience in broadcasting, buffering half an hour for each presenter to be synced up with technical support. New skillsets in lighting, make-up, transition between different elements, and tech operations were again put to the test, but now it had become easier for teams on the ground to find that extra 20-second buffer for contingencies. Community managers—what Arlando called “court jesters”—were given the leeway to be creative and handle this big event on their own. They even came up with a ‘hit list’ of people to engage, including renowned personalities like Bill Gates. For additional manpower for SFF and several other events running in parallel at that time, they reached out to the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) colleges in Singapore, which are responsible for post-secondary vocational training, and the country’s five polytechnics. As many parents were reluctant to allow their children to work at the events for fear of contracting the COVID-19 virus, they deployed gig workers instead. By that point, SingEx was more confident of itself. Because it had been studying consumption patterns and other trends while running regional and international hybrid events, it could even start monetising these insights as new income streams.

The staging of three concurrent tracks with increasing intensity and new elements at each stage had proven successful. You could even say SingEx was too successful: many of its employees were subsequently talent-scouted by top companies for their unique portfolio of skills, such as sales combined with digital skills. That said, it remains noteworthy that SingEx did not have to lay off any employee; people saw that they could sustain themselves and their livelihoods, and even see new possibilities ahead.

SEASONS DON'T FEAR THE REAPER¹¹: LESSONS FROM THE MICE INDUSTRY

There are three lessons from the Singapore MICE industry's transformation that we find worth highlighting for other industries to consider.

Lesson 1: Show the rest what 'amazing' looks like

In the face of crippling fear, small successes demonstrated by role models can inspire change and snowball into big wins. From the MICE industry's experience, we saw change had taken hold globally—within the industry and across national borders—when local role models upended assumptions about what could or could not be done, inspiring further success and growing a critical mass of change agents. By showing what 'amazing' looks like, the exemplars can help industry players become more confident about adopting new models, and more stakeholders can join the ecosystem as demand for new products, services, and partnerships grows.

Being one of the first movers, SingEx was able to enthruse its stakeholders to be part of a sophisticated and intense change process. The process was challenging, but this was precisely what kept the company going because, as Arlando shared, all they had was a sense that they were “all at the same starting line, because it's never been [done] before”. We observed that the camaraderie and tight feedback loops among employees, customers, and partners helped SingEx to adapt more quickly.

Lesson 2: Having a strategy to beat competitors is only half the battle won

To win the other half, be prepared to collaborate with your competitors.

In the MICE industry example, businesses that wanted to stay and ride out the crisis had put aside their differences and banded together. Event organisers of every stripe—from sports to entertainment and other experiential, live events—met together with the authorities to discuss workable and commercially viable ways to carry out events safely. Their calibrations and collective insights were eventually captured under the SG SafeEvent Standard and rolled out through the IRR, along with learnings from companies that had been piloting various digital and hybrid concepts. These moves encouraged the rest of the industry to try new things and forge new partnerships for an evolving landscape.

The MICE industry is likely to live by this spirit of cooperation even as it recovers from the pandemic, seeing how it still needs to rely on industry players to tackle ongoing issues like manpower challenges and high operating costs.

Lesson 3: As you change, keep your people in sight and safe Safe spaces to learn as you grow into your new identity

It seems counter-intuitive to think that the deeper into the virtual world we go, the more attention we need to pay to the non-digital, material, and corporeal aspects of the learning experience. In fact, we crave for these elements when we are learning and adapting to change in today's world of work.¹² By introducing solutions like phasing plans and pilots, we create safe spaces that allow newly-configured networks of employees, partners, customers, and machines to, in Arlando's words, “go through the shocks” together, and then keep iterating towards more efficient and effective versions. As



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individuals try new roles and technologies, the process of articulating what they do and who they are now also helps them rehearse and embody who they are becoming.¹³

Consider Uncle David, an elderly sales representative who responded to a call for staff to man the helpline for an international hybrid conference. To help callers troubleshoot their issues, he had to pick up skills in navigating digital platforms and technologies. While he was on the line with one young, frustrated attendee, Uncle David was gentle and encouraging: “Let me walk you through... By the way, I am 67 years old. If I can manage to do it, I’m sure you can too!” In this exchange, both customer and employee were articulating and growing into their new identities (such as from the unfamiliar to familiar, and from physical event provider/attendee to hybrid event provider/attendee), with positive spillover effects on the rest of the team as they were also negotiating change and uncertainty (that is, progressing from challenging to doable).

Safe spaces to be yourself and make choices


On a broader level, the fears and ambivalence that people face in times of change are also felt viscerally. It is thus important to hold space for one another to process emotions and choices without judgment.

At SingEx, Arlando had taken time to engage in daily huddles with workers and even directors who found the work difficult to do under the extra pressure of the nationwide lockdown. He listened to their problems about children screaming at home and resized the workload for those who were facing depression. For those struggling to adapt, rather than using scare tactics, the management took their autonomy into account: “[L]et them decide if it is for them.”

CONCLUSION: THOU SHALT NOT WASTE A CRISIS

On page 87 of the IRR, the header reads in bold: “Never let this crisis go to waste”. It can be argued that the MICE transformation was successful because industry players did not allow fear to guide their decisions or paralyse them. Instead, the industry actively used the crisis as a teacher: to discover new value, stress-test new business models, and learn what makes them resilient for the long run.

And being resilient here means diversification. Like many other successful instances of digital transformation, the MICE industry did not simply do a linear pivot from the physical to the digital. Its digital pathways were set up to complement the physical ones, allowing the industry to diversify its offerings and put in place back-ups that it can confidently execute.

The hybrid model that was developed is deceptively simple but effective in helping the industry stakeholders ride this crisis and beyond. In an era of polycrises¹⁴ with threats around every corner,¹⁵ the MICE industry’s experience of transforming itself in ten months from a local, fully physical model into a global and hybrid one is a great example of how not to waste a crisis and how to gear up for the next one. 

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Endnotes

- ¹ From the famous 1991 song “The Show Must Go On” originally by Queen.
- ² The Jobs Support Scheme (JSS) was introduced in 2020 during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. It provided wage support for employers to retain employees who were Singapore citizens and permanent residents.
- ³ SACEOS, “Resources: Event Industry Resilience Roadmap”.
- ⁴ A continuation of “The Show Must Go On” by Queen.
- ⁵ Leila Lai, “SACEOS Launches Industry Resilience Roadmap for Mice, Events Sector”, *The Business Times*, October 8, 2020.
- ⁶ Investment Monitor, “Singapore Redefines Possibilities in Hybrid Events”, April 6, 2021.
- ⁷ Other pilots undertaken during this period include Web in Travel Singapore in September 2020 (conducted virtually over three days, and one day in hybrid mode at Marina Bay Sands’ new Hybrid Broadcast Studio which hosted 40 live audience members) and TravelRevive, a hybrid tradeshow by ITB Asia and STB which received 1,000 attendees in-person from 14 countries.
- ⁸ SingEx managed Singapore Expo, as well as provided solutions for venue management and consultancy, exhibition and conference organising, and related ventures in international exhibitions. SingEx has since merged with Singapore Press Holdings events subsidiary Sphere Exhibits to form SingEx-Sphere and is now known as Constellar Holdings.
- ⁹ It allows interactions between both physical and virtual attendees, as well as provides access to personalised content, business-matching opportunities, and digital showcases.
- ¹⁰ GovTech is a Singapore government agency that is responsible for delivering digital solutions within the civil service and to the public.
- ¹¹ From the 1976 hit song “(Don’t Fear) the Reaper” by Blue Öyster Cult.
- ¹² King Wang Poon, Willems Thijs, and William Liu, “The Future of Expertise: From Stepwise Domain Upskilling to Multifaceted Mastery”, in *Wing On Lee, Phillip Brown, A. Lin Goodwin and Andy Green (Ed.), “The International Handbook on Education Development in Asia-Pacific”*, Singapore: Springer, forthcoming.
- ¹³ Herminia Ibarra, “How to Stay Stuck in the Wrong Career”, *Harvard Business Review*, 80(12), 40–132, 2002.
- ¹⁴ A term introduced in the World Economic Forum’s Global Risks Report 2023 to describe a cluster of interrelated global risks which are interacting to create compounding effects that exceed the sum of each part.
- ¹⁵ World Economic Forum, “Global Risks Report 2023”, January 11, 2023.