

Convention - 2021

This past week your blogger went to his first “in person” COVID-era professional meeting since January 2020. It was a two-plus hour car ride, and a stay at a nice hotel. The convention organizers did a stellar job of attempting to protect the health of the attendees. They made special arrangements to find a room for YB to give a scheduled class lecture via Zoom, for which he is most grateful. All that said, in-person conventions are very different than they were pre-COVID.

- According to attendees of previous conferences, attendance was down at least 50 percent from pre-pandemic levels. Lots of people are obviously uncomfortable traveling and/or staying at hotels and/or mingling with large numbers of other people.
- Attendees were asked to “attest” to their level of vaccination prior to arriving. Those who had not done so were reminded to do so on arrival. It was a health-related conference, so one would presume that the number of unvaccinated people was very low.
- Attendees were asked to mask except when eating and drinking. It is hard to drink a Pepsi with a mask on.
- Attendees were given badges with bar-codes which were scanned when entering and when exiting sessions. YB presumes that this scanning will allow contact tracing if one or more session attendees report to them that they have come down with COVID-19. There were holes in the net, however. Badges were not scanned in restaurants or at private functions.



- Attendees were given colorful wristbands to indicate preferred level of contact. Several chose to wear them around their name-tag lanyard. This was clever and YB would like to see the custom proliferate, at least for the next year or so. By the way, YB chose the yellow wristband.

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Conferences have always existed to get people together for presentations and interviews. Skype® and Zoom® had replaced at least the first round of in-person interviews for many purposes, even before COVID-19. Major associations are uncertain what to do with their in-person meetings. The American Public Health Association (APHA) is meeting in Denver in late October. At this writing, they still plan to meet in person. YB's daughter plans to attend, and YB will be interested in how APHA handles safety issues.

The American Economic Association (AEA) has converted its entire January 2022 meeting (originally scheduled for Boston) to virtual mode. They argued that the logistics of gathering large groups of people, as well as the problems with domestic and international travel, dictated their decision. These conferences are scheduled years in advance, and there are significant financial risks regarding hotel and Convention Center rentals. Economists are fully capable of understanding financial losses.

Clearly, neither conference travel nor attendance have “snapped back” to pre-COVID levels. At the meetings, there is less hand shaking, back-slapping and hugging. There is a certain wariness in meeting new people. Attendees stand further away from each other, and speak more loudly.

YB achieved his objectives by going to the meetings, and feels they were successful for him. They are just so very different from the past, and it is hard to know when, or if, things will return to “normal” any time soon.

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