

SPRING 2025



THE POWER OF EXPERIENCES:

REDESIGNING EVENTS FOR HUMAN CONNECTION

iMEX | **iMPACT2.0**

There's never been a time that's more critical for the events industry.



People are yearning to connect...bringing people back together to have the right conversations shifts how the world interacts and shifts the challenges we face in our world. No pressure on the events industry but your work has never been more critical.

Dr. Vumile Msweli, author, global speaker, philanthropist

INTRODUCTION: EVENTS AS A CATALYST FOR SOCIAL RECONNECTION

In a world increasingly plagued by loneliness, dislocation and social anxiety, the call for face-to-face events isn't just important – it's urgent.

Events are no longer just about economic return, brand-building, bonding or communication; they're essential for repairing our social fabric and addressing the silent epidemic of disconnection.

The pandemic didn't just disrupt our industry; it created a deep fracture in how we relate to and trust one another.

Remote work, a rise in video calls and online platform usage plus other always-on digital interactions may have kept businesses running, but they've taken a toll on our collective social well-being.

In 2023, the **World Health Organization (WHO)** launched the **Commission on Social Connection**⁽¹⁾, calling loneliness a pressing health threat. According to WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus:

⇒ **High rates of social isolation and loneliness around the world have serious consequences for health and well-being. People without enough strong social connections are at higher risk of stroke, anxiety, dementia, depression, suicide and more.**



The workplace is no exception.

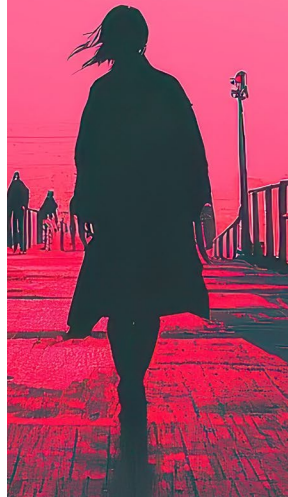
The shift to remote and hybrid models has amplified feelings of isolation, reduced camaraderie and eroded team cohesion. In April 2021, 145 million people were using **Microsoft Teams**⁽²⁾, 26% up on when usage first peaked in October 2020. By early 2024, there were 320 million monthly active users of the Teams app.

According to Cigna's, **The Business Case for Addressing Loneliness in the Workforce**⁽³⁾, "Lonely employees demonstrate higher rates of avoidable (stress-related) absenteeism, missing more than five additional workdays per year than those who do not identify as lonely. They also express a greater intention to quit their job within the next 12 months, nearly twice as likely as other workers." Equally, research by the **Co-op and New Economics Foundation**⁽⁴⁾ estimates that loneliness costs UK employers £2.5 billion annually through decreased productivity and higher turnover rates.

The message is clear: social disconnection is bad for business and well-being alike.

And there is compelling evidence that social connection is directly linked to positive social transformation.

In his January 2025, Parting Prescription for America, (former) US Surgeon General, Dr Vivek Hallegeri Murthy, said "Community is a powerful source of life satisfaction and life expectancy. It's where we know each other, help each other, and find purpose in contributing to each other's lives. These core pillars of community—relationships, service and purpose—are powerful drivers of fulfillment. They can also significantly influence health outcomes... Community also gives us strength and resilience when facing the big challenges and countless paper cuts that come with moving through the world."



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THE EVIDENCE FOR CONNECTION



**ANYONE — FROM THE YOUNG
ENTRY-LEVEL WORKER TO THE SEASONED
CEO — CAN FEEL LONELY ON THE JOB**

Gallup's 2024 State of the Global Workplace report ⁽⁵⁾ highlights that only 23% of employees worldwide feel engaged at work, while 21% report feeling lonely and disconnected on a regular basis. This lack of connection has led to significant drops in productivity, innovation and retention.

Gallup also found that employees who have a "best friend" at work are seven times more likely to be engaged and perform better.

However, as **We're Still Lonely at Work (Harvard Business Review December 2024)** ⁽⁶⁾ declares: "To villainize remote work as the culprit for loneliness is to miss the nuances of the problem... Myths about employee loneliness – that it can be solved with in-person work, for example – have induced organizations to adopt policies and practices that are unlikely to succeed and that might even backfire.

"The solution includes not only measurement of loneliness and designing slack into work-flows but creating a culture of connection (and) building socializing into the rhythm of work."

The article reminds us, "As our prior research has shown, anyone – from the young entry-level worker to the seasoned CEO – can feel lonely on the job."

By incorporating these insights, event professionals have the opportunity to reposition events not just as networking opportunities but as essential interventions to combat workplace loneliness, reignite human connection and creativity, and contribute to a strong P&L.

As author and vulnerability researcher, Brené Brown, stated at PCMA's Convening Leaders 2025 in Houston, "Humans are neurologically wired to be together. You (event organizers) are doing important work, and your skill set will be needed in the transition to AI. We have to build our muscle memory around being human."

EXPERIENTIAL DESIGN: THE FUTURE OF EVENTS

We believe the global events industry is having a moment – one that demands reflection and reinvention.

In this report, we explore how experiential design can shift from a tactical tool to a force for healing at both a social and a business level. The global events industry is not just a stage for connection – it can become an engine for rebuilding trust, fostering meaningful relationships and addressing disconnection.

This moment is an invitation for event professionals to accept responsibility: to create environments where people rediscover the joy of meeting face to face, learning together, taking part in open dialogues, and simply being human in shared, safe spaces.

If you need additional context for this, consider **Accenture's Life Trends 2025 Study**⁽⁷⁾ which introduces the concept of the “cost of hesitations” – a phenomenon where distrust in online platforms is driving people to seek genuine, real-life interactions. Fake reviews, scams and disinformation erode confidence in digital spaces, prompting the need for real-world gatherings where trust and authenticity are more easily calibrated.

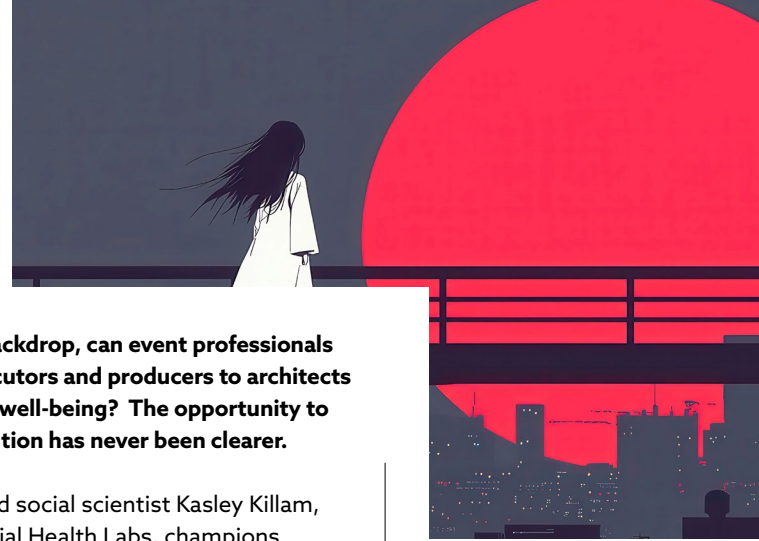
Could live events be the antidote to disconnection and mistrust? As Jessica Turek Weickert, VP of Strategy at XDA, states in her article **The Healing Power of Experiences**:⁽⁸⁾

There's a medicine that has the power to heal us, transform us, and ultimately give us the resilience to combat loneliness. This medicine is what I like to call: experiences. ”

Against this backdrop, can event professionals shift from executors and producers to architects of healing and well-being? The opportunity to lead with intention has never been clearer.

Harvard-trained social scientist Kasley Killam, founder of Social Health Labs, champions the idea that “social health is the missing dimension of well-being.” She focuses on promoting social health in workplaces, communities and products. While her work does not explicitly frame events as interventions for human repair and resilience, her advocacy highlights the broader importance of fostering meaningful connections in all areas of life. This perspective can inspire event professionals to rethink their role in designing gatherings that prioritize trust, belonging and well-being.

David Allison, the CEO of The Valuegraphics Research Company, leads a team who have conducted a million surveys in 152 languages across 180 countries to isolate the core values that unite people everywhere. **Among these, five values – Family, Friendships, Belonging, Community and Relationships – consistently stand out as universal.** Some combination of these “Togetherness Values” appears in every Valuegraphics audience profile ever created, whether for event attendees in Mexico, Wall Street hedge fund investors, shopping mall patrons in the Middle East, or members of international industry associations.



As David explains,

No other values are present across every dataset, underscoring a profound truth: being together is essential to all of us, regardless of background, culture or profession. For event professionals, this insight is transformative – it highlights the immense power of designing experiences that foster human connection, bridge divides, and unite people in a world that deeply craves it.

DAVID ALLISON
CEO, THE VALUEGRAPHICS
RESEARCH COMPANY



THE SHIFT EVENT PROFESSIONALS MUST MAKE

Global advisor and author on cities and urbanization, Greg Clark, a speaker at IMEX, also challenges event professionals to consider their “license to operate.”

Why do we do what we do? And how can our choices positively shape society?

Greg’s point is a simple one. If our industry doesn’t start to flex and respond to a series of growing challenges and pressures, then others will make those changes for us, be they governments, NGOs (non-governmental organizations) or citizens.

As an example, he asks us to consider the financial collapse of 2008. A lack of self-regulation by the banks resulted in their license to operate in the way they always had being substantially revised. What followed was a suite of regulation and scrutiny that changed the banking sector forever. He invites us to consider that without a more impactful, socially or environmentally conscious approach, the events industry might find itself legislated against in the future.

So, could the ultimate value of live events in 2025 lie in their ability to foster fulfillment and happiness through shared experiences?

And let’s not forget the positive economic impact.

The 2023 **Global Economic Significance of Business Events**⁽⁹⁾ study by the Events Industry Council and Oxford Economics took the “high water mark of 2019” to delve deeper into the full scope and economic significance of the \$1.6-trillion global business events industry. The findings showed that “business events supported a total global economic impact (accounting for indirect and induced impacts) of \$2.8 trillion in business sales; 27.5 million jobs; and \$1.6 trillion of GDP (representing contribution to global gross domestic product). For the first time, the study addressed the critical role business events serve in knowledge sharing, innovation and employee engagement – critical impacts beyond direct event spending, called “catalytic effects.”

This represents a significant sphere of influence. Imagine if an enhanced sense of connection were to become a measurable catalytic effect.

According to the **Heart of London Business Alliance**⁽¹⁰⁾, **“The Experience Economy, now representing over 14% of Gross World Product, is fueled by younger audiences prioritizing experiences over traditional purchases. In the UK, consumers aged 18 to 34 spent 67% more than the national average on experiences between July and September 2024. Worth over £10 billion annually to the UK economy, the Heart of London’s vibrant ecosystem includes immersive theater, competitive socializing, casinos, cinemas, hotels, restaurants and live events.”**

Within the scope of a whole events portfolio, should we now be looking at event deliverables very differently?

Cvent’s 2025 **Meetings and Events Trends**⁽¹¹⁾ highlights a Return on Relationships (ROR) as key to success in 2025. “In an industry built on relationships, the strength of those relationships will be recognized as a marker of



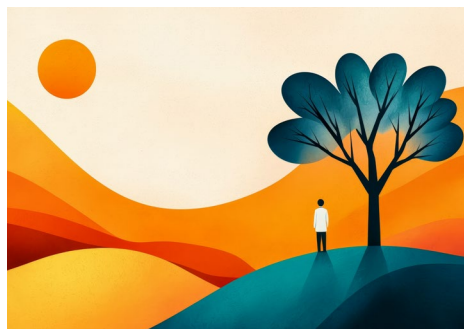


success... **Events help build trust, leading to greater brand loyalty, better customer retention, and a higher lifetime value for each client.** Plus, the more you know your audience, the more you can personalize their experiences, creating stronger emotional connections with your brand."

According to **Mintel's 2024 Global Consumer Trends** ⁽¹²⁾ report, "Relationship Renaissance" was a widespread response to the pandemic; a new eagerness for consumers to seek connection with purpose. "A lull in forming new social connections is driving a desire to reconnect with others, even inspiring a playful spirit that is extending childlike joy well into adulthood. In the face of inevitable change, people are looking to form stronger, sustainable and long-lasting connections to help them grow resilient to whatever life throws at them."

For example, at IMEX America 2024 we introduced the Community Table. This space allowed for intimate conversations between people with shared values or life experiences. Topics included Parenting: So Fun, So Hard, facilitated by Johnny Earle of Johnny Cupcakes and Conversations on How We Can Best Live Together in Community, led by Victoria Chance of My Neighbor's Voice.

Similarly, Tough Talks about menopause, cancer and suicide allowed attendees to step away from business for a while to share a more vulnerable part of themselves in a safe, supportive and compassionate space.



HAPPINESS AS A SKILL



Dr Sonja Lyubomirsky's research on happiness reveals that it is often driven by intentional activities rather than external circumstances. In her book **The How of Happiness**, Sonja emphasizes that up to 40% of our happiness is shaped by intentional actions and habits, reinforcing the idea that fostering meaningful connections can significantly enhance well-being.

This begs the question, where does this leave our traditional models of networking? Many argue that networking receptions, drinks and canapés in hand for 1,000 people, have had their day. What if we reframed the value of networking practices as a chance to foster genuine connection and increase human happiness?

Author and speaker, Simon Sinek admits to currently being obsessed with friendship,

There's an entire industry to help us be better leaders... better parents... an entire industry to help us eat better, exercise better, sleep better, and yet there's barely anything on how to be a friend. And yet friendship is the ultimate bio hack.



If we take these arguments on board, how do they shift our design thinking? What would our meeting spaces and events look like?

Take **Storycraft Lab's Experience Profiles™**⁽¹³⁾ for example. Created to help event designers understand their attendees at a deeper level, moving beyond demographics and psychographics, they allow planners to identify the engagement tactics most likely to create more meaningful and lasting outcomes.

By answering a series of pre-event questions, individuals end up with a personalized profile which helps them better understand their learning and networking preferences. Combine these with tailor-made event journeys or trail guides and each attendee now has autonomy. Be they "creator", "harmonizer", "explorer", "igniter", "adaptor" or "thinker" each has the information and tools to experience their own personalized version of the same event. An added benefit is that like-minded attendees can seek out their tribe and connect over common values and personality traits.

CAN TECHNOLOGY HELP?

Great event professionals understand that experiential design is about more than just aesthetics – in 2025 it's about creating environments that prioritize psychological safety, engagement, learning and belonging.

However, in a data-dominated age, it's also about demonstrating a meaningful return on those metrics in the language of the CFO and the Board.

Technological advances may hold some of the answers.

The rise of facial analysis technology is already changing and improving brand perception metrics. Not to be confused with facial recognition, facial analysis tools can measure and track facial expressions to determine human emotions.

According to IMEX Group UX and Experience Designer, Oliver Bailey,

Sentiment scoring using facial analysis has proved to be a useful tool for obtaining qualitative feedback, particularly for sponsors. We only use it where an uplift in sentiment is a key part of the success criteria though. Facial analysis is a great way to show emotional change, linked to a place and time and can add substance to other qualitative performance metrics.

Imagine being able to report that your carefully designed community-building experience for 100 of your premium clients registered 79-81% on a happiness and contentment scale? Or the light, art and music-saturated opening moment you invested in so heavily made 75% of your audience feel instantly uplifted?

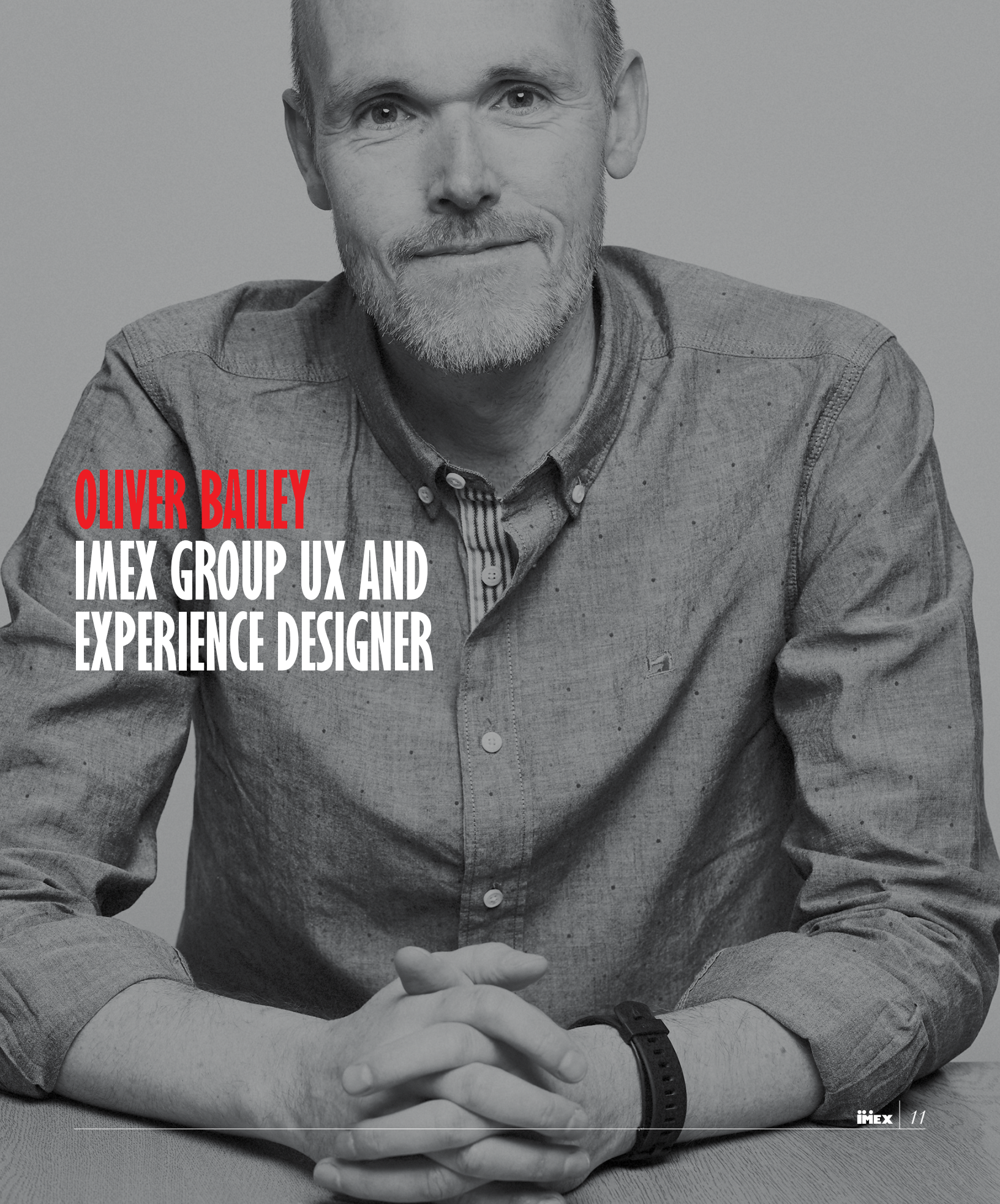
But there's a snag. What of the distraction device that never leaves our side? The mobile phone.

In **Stolen Focus**, Johann Hari examines how our devices not only detract from real-world experiences but alienate us from each other. He argues that our ever-decreasing attention spans are the result of systemic shifts in society intended not only to command our attention but also fixate our dopamine hungry brains.

According to 25-year-old El Elson, Professor Scott Galloway's co-host on the **Prof G Markets** podcast, "Gen Z spends an average of 109 days per year looking at a screen. 80% of our waking hours are spent consuming information, up from 40% in 1980. We see 208 ads per hour – 10 times more than our parents did at our age. As a result, we are more anxious, distracted and depressed than any generation in history. We all know this but do not comprehend it. Like frogs in boiling water, we've been slow cooked by screens... We now spend 70% less time with our friends than we did a decade ago. There is no question: The phone has replaced our friends."

Which begs another question, where do mobiles, smart watches and a huge raft of wearable tech leave our event participants?



A black and white portrait of Oliver Bailey, a man with a short beard and mustache, wearing a denim shirt. He is sitting at a table with his hands clasped. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

OLIVER BAILEY
**IMEX GROUP UX AND
EXPERIENCE DESIGNER**

PEOPLE ARE IN THE MOMENT, THEY TALK TO EACH OTHER, THEY MAKE FRIENDS. THE PARTY IS BACK.



As reported in the UK Guardian⁽¹⁴⁾ (2024), "Many partygoers who attended Amsterdam's No Art festival this summer will have had the time of their lives – but you wouldn't be able to tell that from their social media channels."

At the gates of the all-day dance event at the Dutch city's Flevopark in July, ticket holders were told to drop their smartphones into provided envelopes, with the strict instruction not to retrieve the addictive electronic device until the end of the night.

Banning mobile phones from the dancefloor has made a tremendous difference, said one of the event organizers, Ruud Boymans. "People are in the moment, they talk to each other, they make friends. The party is back."

Our UX and experience designer, Oliver Bailey wonders if advancements in technology might elevate rather than hinder the richness of future event experiences, "Developments in augmented and mixed reality have the potential to fundamentally change our perception of the world on a person-by-person basis. And advances in spatial computing, such as Apple Vision Pro provide insights into how the laptop and smartphone could soon be superseded by connectivity which integrates perfectly with our array of senses and is – potentially – always on."

I know of some designers in the music and entertainment world who've chosen to embrace the fact that everyone has a phone, imaginatively weaving mobiles into the connection and artistic potential of the event. Phones don't always have to divide us. What's important is to meet people where they are."

TOGETHER WE CAN REDEFINE EVENTS

Is it fair to expect 2025 to be the year planners start to ask more intentionally: Are our event attendee's bodies in the room but their minds elsewhere? And, if so, what are we going to do about it?

As we navigate a landscape of rising social isolation, the events industry has an unprecedented opportunity - and responsibility - to lead the charge in reconnecting society. Events can and must be more than just polished productions or business hubs; they should be engines of healing, understanding and growth.

For too long, logistics have taken a lot of the glory - lighting, food, seamless transportation, brag-worthy swag and, more recently, glamorous or just plain goofy Insta walls.

But this moment demands a shift to something deeper. What if the true metric of success wasn't just attendee satisfaction, but the

long-term social well-being they leave with? The next generation of planners, driven by purpose and values, are already attuned to this shift. Many are not satisfied with surface-level impact; they seek to change the world, one gathering at a time.

Seasoned veterans - this is your call to action too. **Elevating social health and well-being isn't optional; it is the future of events. The next generation already sees it. Will you? The industry has the tools and talent to not only convene, but to heal, inspire and create lasting societal change.**

And, if we need a more compelling business case, the **Mintel Global Trends 2025** ⁽¹⁵⁾ report acknowledges that the coming AI avalanche will only compound the problem, "Brands will have to adopt a balanced approach to AI, ensuring it supports human self-expression to mitigate the risk of increased social isolation."



FINAL THOUGHT

Experiential design holds the power to reconnect a disconnected world. As event professionals, embracing this responsibility can elevate not just our industry, but the collective well-being of society. What if the future of events is about more than business - *what if it's about happiness and human connection?*

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Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky - The How of Happiness
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imexevents.com

Johann Hari - Stolen Focus, Why You Can't Pay Attention
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