



# The invisible workload

Surviving the  
always-on culture

**C&IT SURGERY**

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Event planners are renowned for working long hours and being time-poor. But what can be done to eliminate “the invisible workload” and create more time for strategic thinking? Industry experts looked for answers at the *C&IT Surgery*, a one-day forum held in association with Cvent.

**T**he invisible workload and emotional labour are scorching hot topics rising up the business agenda. But what exactly is it all about and why is it so relevant to event planners? Definitions vary but emotional labour is the suppression of feelings and expressions to fulfil a job. It’s those moments when we put on a warm smile, exude calm and give the impression that everything is under control, even when faced with last-minute complications and criticism. Sound familiar?

This ties in with the notion of the invisible workload – the mental load of planning, co-ordinating, monitoring and anticipating. It is the unseen tasks that organisers undertake to deliver events to budget, to their objectives and, frequently, within an extremely tight timeframe. Often it is the jobs – the details – that superficially appear unimportant but, in reality, hold an event together and ensure it is a success. These efforts remain “unseen” on CVs and unrecognised in the workplace by senior executives and event industry outsiders.

At the *C&IT Surgery* roundtable at Etc. Venues Monument in London, Charlotte Boaden, engagement and events consultant at Nationwide, kicked off the discussion by sharing her experiences. Addressing fellow planners in attendance from Walgreens Boots Alliance, DRPG, Sledge, G4S and FIRST, among others, Boaden said: “In our roles, it is expected that we are busy and time-poor, but many do not realise the mental stress of the job. My brain is always ticking over with small details that I need to remember. The events industry has an ‘always-on’ culture and it is difficult to switch off. We have to put long hours in to deliver events to deadline – it is all-consuming and we take a lot on emotionally. Senior management in organisations and people outside of the industry do not realise or recognise the level of work that goes into an event.” >>



Industry outsiders may also be surprised to learn that event co-ordinator is ranked as the sixth-most-stressful job after army personnel, fire-fighters, airline pilots, police officers and broadcasters, according to research conducted by US job site CareerCast. Stress in any role is unavoidable. But what puts event planning on the stress list is the intensity organisers face when dealing with consistently tight deadlines and pressure to meet all stakeholders' objectives, combined with a lack of time, resources and budget.

Lisa Eastman, events co-ordinator at BMJ, summed it up: "There is a mentality in the industry that as an event planner, you are the best person to ask, as you can do everything."

However, even when additional staff are drafted in, problems remain. Bodean explained: "With new staff, even though you think it will be an extra pair of hands on-site – it's not. I don't have the time to be training them while trying to run my event."

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# Tech – friend or foe?

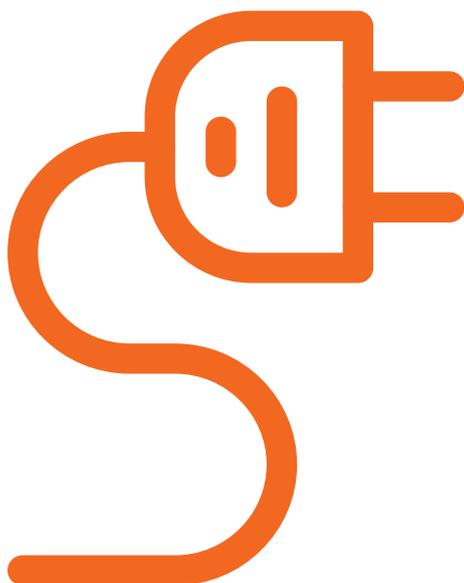
In search of a solution, event managers at the roundtable discussed the role of technology and whether it can help to minimise the load and increase productivity.

The most popular apps used by organisers are WhatsApp and Slack. “We’ve gone past email now,” said Bodean. “We have a WhatsApp group for every event we do. Everything is instant now.”

Of course, while these apps can streamline event management, they contribute to the “always-on” nature of the industry. Having a second phone or putting your phone away as soon as you arrive home sounds obvious, but it is a potential solution. “It is a hyperconnected world that we live in,” said Felicia Asiedu, content marketing manager at Cvent. “Work is on my phone. Work and home life are blending. Technology can help to make events less stressful.”

People are moving away from email, so we need long-term strategies that will last

But Bodean warned: “Technology has to be used in the right way. Test new tech to find the right solution. If you get it wrong, it will only be a hindrance and a waste of money. Invest time in learning the new tools, too.”



# Open conversations

Another way for planners to manage both the physical and invisible tasks is to communicate with their employer. Use data, be diplomatic and be honest. Charlie Hepburn, managing director of BE Vivid, suggested: “Younger people coming through need to have a voice and, with a heavy workload, they need to manage the expectations of managers. Talk to management and negotiate hours. It is the responsibility of leaders to take away the fear of open conversations. The next generation has new ways of working. If we embrace it, we will get more out of people.”

Many planners commented on the generational divide. For Bodean, it is about saying no at the right time: “When dealing with a client or an internal board, you can’t say no. Companies need to build integration between different generations so they can work together in the workplace. They need to upskill employees.”

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Asiedu added: “It’s not only a question of how we deal with this challenge, but it is also a question of who can help – can we offload some of that invisible workload to the right suppliers?”

A lighter load, or one that is simply handled better, can free up time for organisers to be more reflective on past events and more strategic about future ones. This, in turn, will save time and lead to more effective event management. Skipping a debrief can be a huge mistake.

Charlie Hepburn underlines the importance of reflection time. “A debrief with trusted suppliers and all stakeholders is so valuable. Learn what the supplier found challenging. Try to get the client to open up in front of you. It is our role as an agency to breaking down that insular island feeling. The only way we can all improve what we do is by having open and honest conversations.”

Tackling the indiscernible duties isn’t only about eliminating or reducing the burden. It is about making the invisible visible. >>

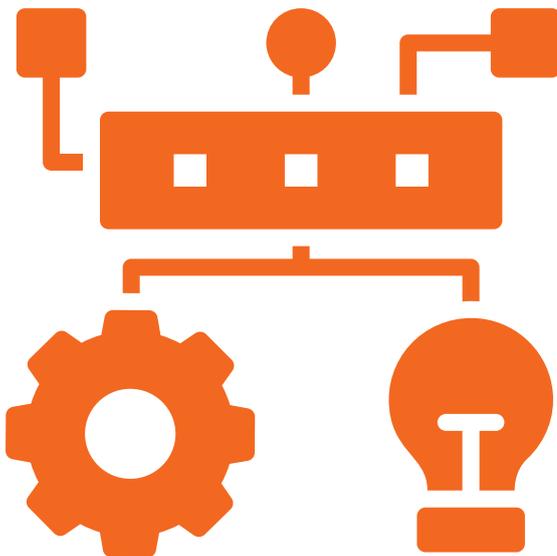


Tracy Gold, sustainability consultant and founder of Brave Retail, noted: "The majority of the things we do are unseen. Normally, that is because you're good at it and it's all done by goodwill. But how can you make that visible? How do you show this for people to realise? And this applies across all industries."

Be your own ambassador, recommended Curtis-Johnson. "If you don't ask, you won't get it. You have to be your own ambassador. Regardless of generation, people are more vocal about what they want and in offering their opinions."

For agencies, it is crucial that last-minute changes or additional work is recognised, and even remunerated by the client. Agencies fear they will not get repeat business, however they cannot afford to be a charity either. Agency DRPG has come up with a way to combat this. Curtis-Johnson explains: "We have built in a cost implication if clients come back with last-minute changes that fall into poor planning on their side."

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# Reward the invisible

It is paramount for management to recognise and reward the invisible, too. Gold suggested thanking staff for the invisible and organising motivational team-building days to reward them and build the team. "Use your WhatsApp group as a place to thank them and to encourage people to shout about it," said Gold. "Give the experience back to the team and make it personal. We are all passionate about events and it needs to be fuelled by thanks and appreciation."

Gold added: "We need to do what they do in France. At lunch, they all take an hour at the same time and have lunch together. It means productivity levels in the afternoon are high."

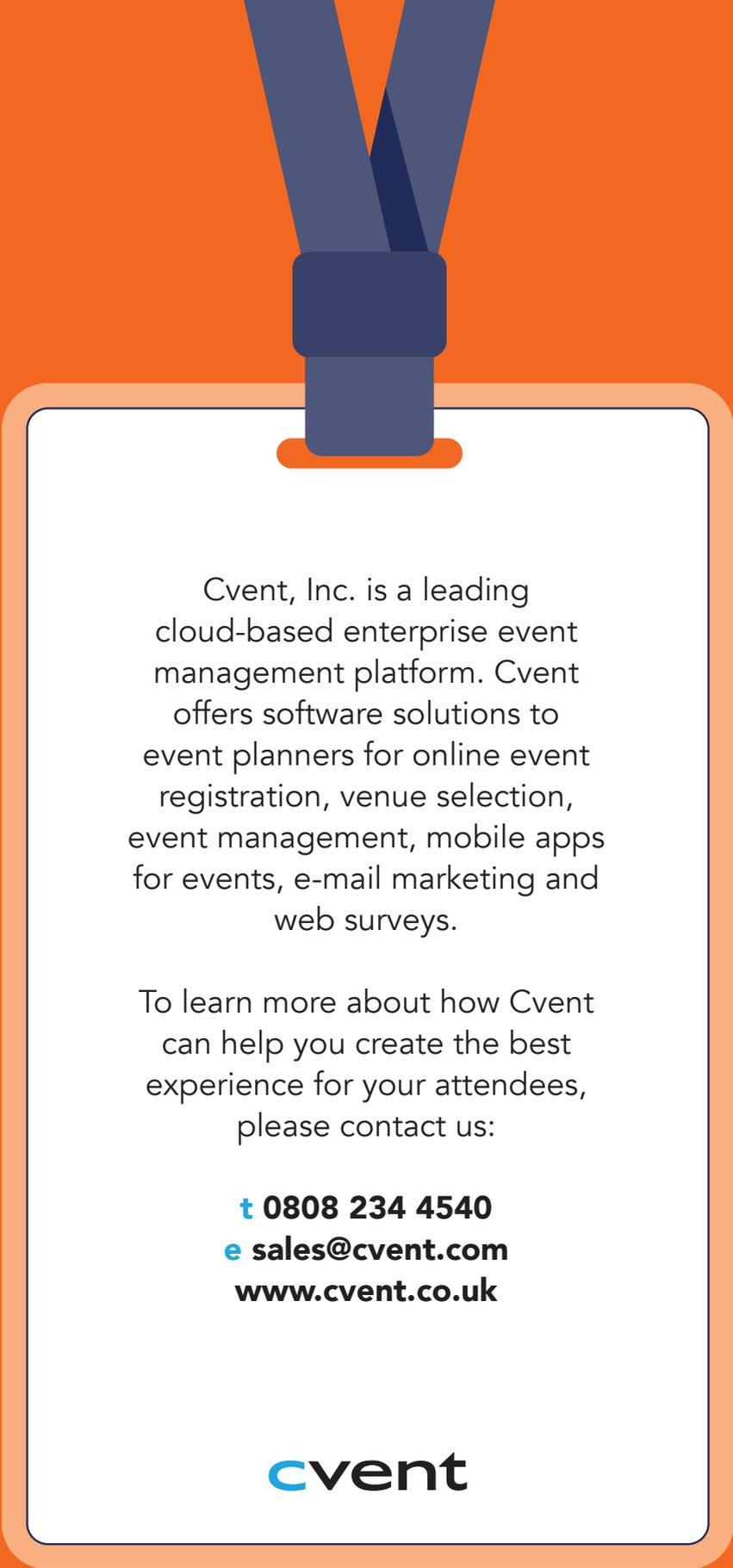
Flexible working is also becoming increasingly important to a healthy work life. Different generations work in different ways. Curtis-Johnson admitted: "Sometimes I find it easier to work later when my inbox isn't moving. I can work in my own time. This varies from generation to generation, though. Some people go home and look at their emails, while others don't."

Bodean added: "You're either a morning lark or a night owl. Businesses need to understand that. If the working culture is good, people will stay, they will put in the hours without thinking about when they are going to get them back and, as a company, you will attract the right people. However, if it isn't a good working environment, staff will burn out because it's not sustainable."

"Ultimately, the events industry needs to move towards a more positive working culture where employees are given the opportunity for flexible and agile working. Younger generations now expect it so businesses need to adapt."

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