

Planners Want Pain-Free Reconciliation to Paint More Robust Meeting Spend Pictures



Mention meeting payments and reconciliation, and you'll often see meeting planners and stakeholders wince. Whether due to a lack of consistency or standardization of invoices, an inability to use technology to automate the reconciliation process, or the frequency of billing errors as compared with contracted; budgeted; and expected charges, few planners claim to find much value in today's meeting payment and reconciliation process.

When it comes to meeting payment and reconciliation pain points, about one-quarter of respondents to a BTN Group survey, sponsored by American Express Meetings & Events, said the reconciliation process takes too long to gain an accurate picture of costs and expenses versus budgets. While respondents offered hundreds of complaints about, and ways to streamline, today's meetings payment and reconciliation processes, they frequently cited challenges and frustrations with reconciliations far more than payments. Several respondents cited their own internal systems as a source of inefficiency and frustration.

The following provides a glimpse of some of the pain points and suggested ways that planners and suppliers could devise solutions to address these issues. As strategic meetings management practices mature, so too must payment and reconciliation. Could meeting program strategists use meeting payment and reconciliation to garner compliance to policies and programs? Read on for that and to learn which meeting spend categories prove most challenging to respondents and what planners wish suppliers would do to streamline meeting payment and reconciliation processes.

PRODUCED BY:

BTNGROUP
CONTENT SOLUTIONS

MARY ANN MCNULTY
Director, Content Solutions
mmcnulty@thebtngroup.com

LOUIS MAGLIARO
Senior Vice President and Group Publisher
lmagliaro@thebtngroup.com

ANTHONY CARNEVALE
Publisher
acarnevale@thebtngroup.com

MARIZA MOREIRA
Group Design Manager

SPONSORED BY:



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SOLUTION

Review hotel bills in a post-con meeting whenever possible to remedy any billing errors as quickly as possible.

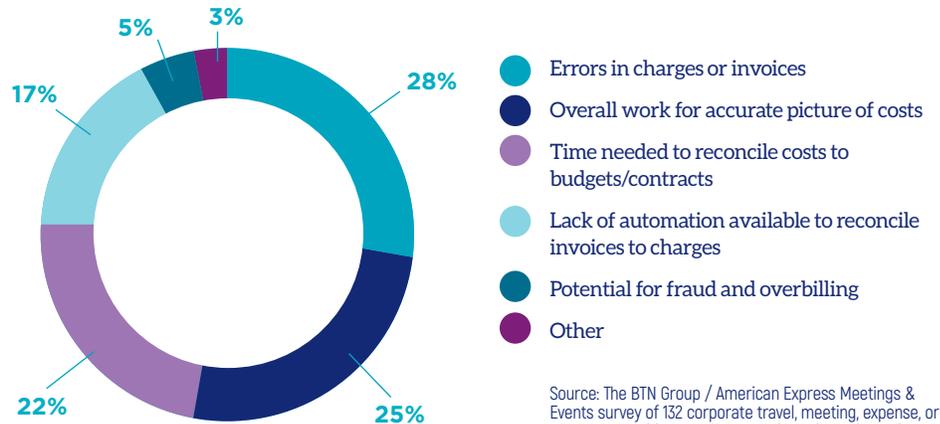
The biggest concern in meeting cost reconciliation, cited by 28 percent of respondents, are errors in charges or invoices, most often on hotel, food, and beverage bills. Errant billings take time to identify, planners noted. Often, planners said, they must physically look at contracts and engage in back-and-forth communications with suppliers to rectify such issues.

To eliminate billing errors, some planner respondents have asked hotels to review invoices more carefully and compare them with contracts and/or banquet event orders or offer post-con meetings to review and remedy any issues.

Other meeting invoices that challenge respondents were for value-added tax reclaim management, audiovisual bills, and ground transportation. Air invoicing was consistently rated as the least challenging spend category by survey respondents.

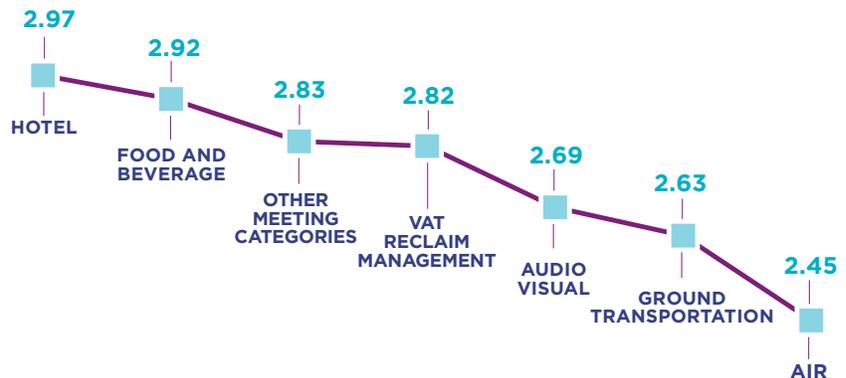
However, nearly half of all respondents cited, as among their top concerns, the time and effort it takes to reconcile to paint an accurate picture of meeting costs versus their budgets.

Biggest Concern in Meeting Cost Reconciliation?



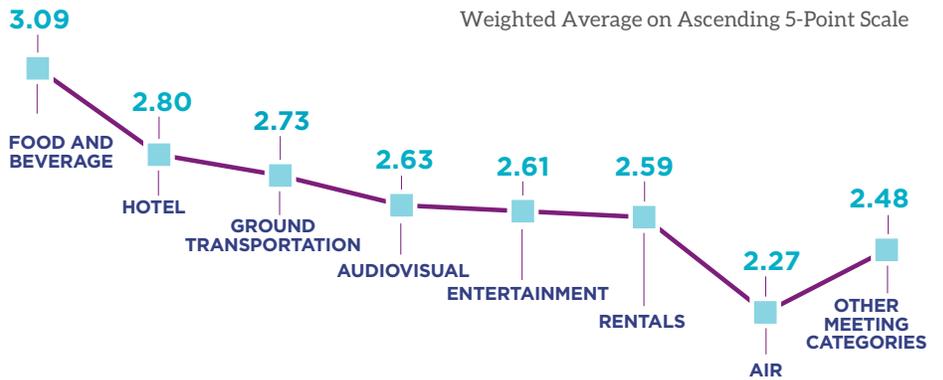
How Challenging Are Meeting Billing Categories to Reconcile?

Weighted Average on Ascending 5-Point Scale



Meeting Spend Categories With Most Errors

Of the following categories of meeting expenditures, how often do you find problems with charges billed when compared to contracts?



Source: The BTN Group / American Express Meetings & Events survey of 132 corporate travel, meeting, expense, or accounts payable executives, conducted March–April 2019.

Few Use Technology to Reconcile

Part of the reconciliation challenge could be the lack of technology and automation used by respondents for reconciliation efforts. Respondents were able to identify more than one technology used, but the most prevalent cited was Microsoft Excel, identified by two-thirds of respondents. Just one-third said they use of a meetings management tool, while 23 percent use corporate accounting tools. Some said they rely on internal tools, financial systems, or expense systems. One respondent answered that they processed “old school, by hand.”

While some respondents acknowledged the availability of tools in the industry, they cited challenges to integrate those tools and the transactional data into their financial systems. “While possible, this integration never seems to garner enough attention to get technical resources and assistance. Something that was more of a ‘plug and play’ solution would be interesting,” noted one. Several respondents complained of their inability to integrate card, expense, and meeting technology systems in all countries or regions.

Others noted that meeting technologies—including payment and reconciliation integrations—simply were cost-prohibitive for those with limited budgets and multiple small meetings.

Another challenge to automating processes, noted respondents and planners at The BTN Group’s recent Strategic Meetings Summit in New York, is that meeting expenditures are often paid by various methods, ranging from traditional invoices and checks, to wire transfers, meeting cards, single-use meeting cards, declining-balance meeting cards, virtual or ghost cards, or perhaps even via corporate travel or procurement cards. Organizations rarely use just one solution, so reconciliation processes often are “messy.”

SOLUTION

Review internal or external tools that could help automate billing reconciliation or integrate credit card and billing data feeds with meeting, accounting, or expense tools to streamline.

Most Prevalent Meeting Payment Options

When asked to rank the use of various meeting payment options within their organizations, 55 percent of respondents rated checks as the most prevalent or sometimes used—the top two

SOLUTION

Work with financial or other internal stakeholders to identify and prioritize payment options for various types of meeting expenses to streamline reconciliation, extend float, maximize rebates, or achieve other goals identified by your team. Then communicate the preferences to all internal and external stakeholders.

categories. However, 23 percent of respondents said checks were not allowed as a meeting payment option within their organizations. Companies also use virtual cards, meeting cards assigned to planners or departments, or T&E cards to pay meeting expenses today. While the panacea for one respondent is an "individual payment means for each meeting so you have a total cost of spend associated with that meeting," the reality today is that "payment means are fragmented."

Outside the United States, planners cited an array of payment options led by wire transfers, meeting cards issued in the foreign currency of the host city, and virtual cards. Others use T&E cards issued in the foreign currency of a foreign subsidiary. For 38 percent of respondents, all their meetings are held in the United States, so they faced no challenges about the best way to pay for meetings to avoid foreign currency transaction fees or other implications.

Who Reconciles Meetings?

For nearly two-thirds of respondents, meeting planners are tasked with reconciliation of expenses to budgets, followed by accounting staff assigned to meetings, payment cardholders, and third-party planners hired to reconcile (just 8 percent of respondents), among other tasks. At BTN Group Strategic Meetings Summits during the past year, several planners mentioned that they have outsourced meeting billing reconciliation to meeting or travel agencies to streamline processes within their organizations.

Ways Meeting Expenditures Are Paid

Respondents rated whether the following payment means were most to least prevalent, or not allowed, for meeting expenditures in their organizations. The weighted average shows the prevalence of payment options.

	Weighted Average On Ascending 4-Point Scale	Not Allowed
Checks	2.54	23%
Corporate meeting cards assigned to each planner	2.41	29%
T&E cards issued to individual planners/meeting owners	2.26	37%
Personal cards of planners or executives	2.25	38%
Corporate meeting cards assigned to each meeting	2.17	34%
Corporate meeting cards assigned to each department	2.13	37%
Virtual cards/accounts	2.08	43%

Source: The BTN Group / American Express Meetings & Events survey of 132 corporate travel, meeting, expense, or accounts payable executives, conducted March-April 2019.

Solutions Planners Have Considered

To streamline meeting payment processes or reconciliation, 43 percent of respondents said they considered virtual cards or accounts, while 26 percent said they looked at integrating

payment cards to meeting planning tools. About 20 percent said they looked at meeting payment providers, while 13 percent said they considered outsourcing all payment and reconciliation to a third-party provider. Nearly 10 percent of respondents said they looked at whether bitcoin could solve their woes, but one-third of respondents said they hadn't looked at other solutions.

Streamling Payment and Reconciliation

One automated solution that GE SmartMeetings Senior Operations Manager Brenda Crocker-Pierce is anxious to use is integration of an American Express Meeting card, Cvent, and Concur to allow planners to reconcile meeting card charges in both Cvent and Concur with just a few clicks, she noted at a recent BTN Group conference. If planners source or contract through GE SmartMeetings, reconciliation will be completed for them in Cvent by an assigned Sourcing Reconciliation Specialist, she added. Others have tweaked Concur drop-downs or general ledger codes to tie expenses to specific meetings, said Estee Lauder Global Travel and Meetings Services Director, Jami Stapelmann. "In some instances, employees are finding solutions on their own, with Apple Pay, Venmo, or whatever," she said. "When that happens, you lose control. You have to be ready to explore new options, because there is no one solution."

Indeed, some companies are exploring streamlined payment and reconciliation processes to garner greater compliance with travel and meeting policies or improve employee satisfaction. For example, at GE, a meeting planner who registers a meeting or sources through a designed tool or channel could be issued a virtual card number to pay for a meeting. Brenda Crocker-Pierce said she also plans to use the benefit of virtual cards to gain more adoption to GE's SmartMeetings program.

SOLUTION

In multiple ways, planners asked for more streamlined processes and standardization of fields that would allow them to automate input. They want more efficiencies and less manual intervention required for meeting payments and reconciliation, along with more accurate bills delivered faster.

What Would Improve the Meetings Payment and Reconciliation Process?

A simple process or new payment vehicle that details all aspects of overall meeting costs tops the planner wish list of more than 60 requests offered in the survey. Others wish that integration would work in the meeting technology and expense systems they have. Some cited efforts to convince suppliers, internal technology, finance stakeholders, or others, to integrate systems as a means to solve their concerns.

Next Steps

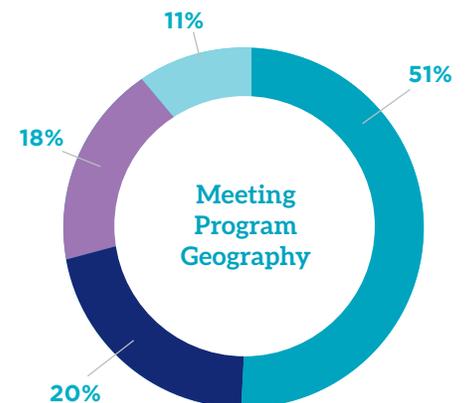
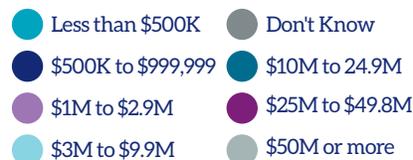
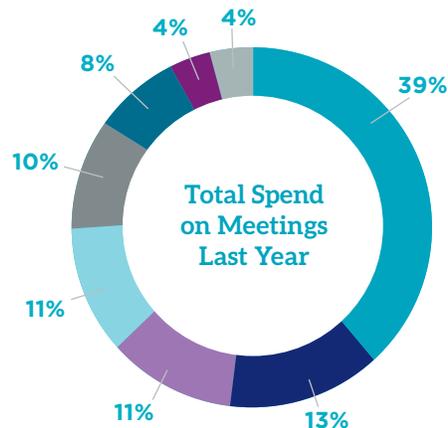
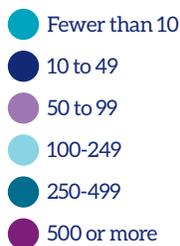
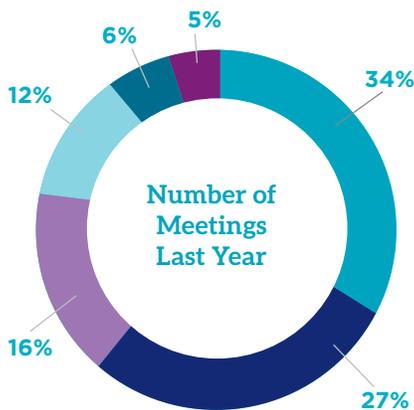
As meetings management programs mature, most industry experts agree that payment and reconciliation options will be an increasingly important method of driving compliance and collecting data about individual and overall meeting expenditures. The dozens of payment options and/or configurations available in the industry today are designed to provide the varying levels of payment controls and flexibility that finance or corporate executives demand. The trick for meeting program stakeholders is to match the levels of control, flexibility, rebates, or convenience required in their corporate culture with the options available. But they must also heed the advancements in product

offerings and application programming interfaces that should allow companies to embrace technology to integrate card, expense, meeting technology, travel, and other data for a more robust picture of corporate programs and spending.

Methodology

Data presented in this white paper are based on 132 qualified responses to an online survey fielded in March and April 2019 by The BTN Group and sponsored by American Express Meetings & Events. Respondents included travel managers, directors, vice presidents, or other corporate buyers (58 percent); meeting managers, directors, or vice presidents (27 percent); accounts payable, expense, or other corporate executives (14 percent); or travel management or meeting management company executives (1 percent) completing the survey on behalf of a specific client.

Most respondents (64 percent) said they oversee meetings, as well as other areas, such as travel or expense. Others cited responsibility for overseeing meetings only; planning and executing individual meetings; sourcing meetings; payment and reconciliation of meetings; issuing meeting cards; or specifying preferred, contracted travel providers.



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