
11 Agility in the Events Sector: A Case Study of a Business Event in Finland

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Introduction

The events industry was estimated at \$1,100 billion in 2018 and was expected to grow to reach \$2,330 billion by 2026 (Allied Market Research, n.d.). Year 2020, however, turned out to be perhaps the most transformative year in the industry in the last decades. Numerous events, from smaller family occasions, like weddings, to major events of the likes of the Wimbledon tennis tournament, the UEFA EURO 2020, Glastonbury Festival and the Cannes Film festival, had to be cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The combined economic impact is not yet known but will be a loss in the hundreds of billions of US dollars (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2021). This shows the vulnerability of the events industry to major crises.

Despite the negative impacts of crises on events, there is a paucity of research that explores organizational responses under unusual, unprecedented or critical circumstances in the events sector. This chapter applies the concept of agility in event organization within volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, so-called VUCA, environment (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014) that dominated year 2020 due to the unfolding pandemic. The agile approach is often seen as a stream of new ideas leading to elegantly simple solutions. It requires a high energy level of the team involved due to the tight constraints and deadlines. The authors introduce a case study of a business festival organized in Turku (Finland) and discuss the decision-making process, stakeholder involvement, introduction of a new *modus operandi*, and the new event format that was chosen.

2020: A crisis or a VUCA situation?

It is generally accepted, and has been discussed in previous chapters in this volume, that crisis is an unexpected and unpredictable event, characterized by lack of control and need for action; it can cause significant negative results, including instability of organizational processes and, potentially, threaten an organization's viability and survival (e.g., Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmur, 1998; Selbst (1978) in Faulkner 2001; Williams & Treadaway, 1992). Related terms – disaster, incident, problem, event – also feature in the literature, and some authors would argue that what differentiates 'crisis' is the extent to which management structures cope, or do not cope, with a situation and the level of control over the changes (Faulkner, 2001).

Crisis management can be conceived of as an art more than a science, because it relies on human beings, their actions, an array of emotions and skill set (Vanvactor, 2015). The way organizations, their managers and leaders respond to crises, disasters and incidents are, therefore, critical (Saleh, 2016; Useem, Cook, & Sutton, 2005). It has been suggested that creative thinking can be helpful, particularly in two ways (Pearson & Sommer, 2011):

- ◆ *Novelty*, a decision that is unconventional or unique as compared to previous decisions, and
- ◆ *Value*, a decision that is acceptable and effective.

If either is missing, then creativity cannot be deemed useful. Thinking creatively, in unconventional ways can be valuable when the purpose is clear and shared within an organization or a team, and there is the desire to achieve that purpose.

It has been argued that three conditions contribute to higher levels of creative thought (Paul & Elder, 2012, p. 14):

- ◆ A minimal level of innate intellectual capacity;
- ◆ An environment that stimulates the development of that capacity;
- ◆ A positive response and inner motivation on the part of the person.

Leaders of event organizations can foster creative thinking by creating a favorable environment within the team; one that would unlock the potential of each team member and use their inner motivation to discover a range of opportunities and possible actions.

Scholars have suggested various stages for a crisis lifecycle: from pre-crisis through to 'emergency' to recovery. Contrary to some natural disasters and previous epidemics, such as the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003 and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak in 2015, Covid-19 has proved to have a significantly longer-term effect

on the events industry, affecting, in one way or another, all scheduled business, cultural and sporting events. Due to the geographical spread and time span of this pandemic, it may be reasonable to suggest that starting from February 2020 the events sector operated within a VUCA environment. This is especially valid considering that many events were eventually organized in a virtual format, which testifies to the ability of the sector to adjust to the external environment and proceed with the core business – events.

The VUCA abbreviation stands for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment. It comes into the business world from a military one where “*confusion is part of the game*” (Johansen & Euchner, 2013, p. 10). Key characteristics of such environment have been summarized by Bennett and Lemoine (2014):

- ◆ *Volatility*: The change is unstable and unpredictable, and may be of unknown duration, but it is not necessarily hard to understand; knowledge about it is often available.
- ◆ *Uncertainty*: The situation’s basic cause and effect are known. Change is possible but not a given; the scope of its effects is unknown.
- ◆ *Complexity*: The situation has many interconnected parts and variables. Some information is available or can be predicted, but the volume or nature of it can be overwhelming to process.
- ◆ *Ambiguity*: A lack of knowledge; causal relationships are completely unclear. No precedents exist.

Throughout year 2020, event organizers had to deal with numerous questions pertinent to all four components:

Volatility – the events sector faced an unstable situation. Although the information about the Covid-19 virus was available to some extent, it was still unclear how long the pandemic would last for and how the situation would be unfolding in each country. Changes could happen quickly and affect various regions, cities or countries. It was clear that the change was likely; however, its magnitude across locations could vary.

Uncertainty – there was a lack of knowledge about the impact of the pandemic on the motivation of event attendees, their behaviors and attitudes towards events in general, as well as about the wider regulations that might be introduced by the Government at any stage. Will there be any changes in guidance or regulations by the scheduled event’s date? If a new format was introduced, would the usual audience attend? Would that new format be able to maintain the event’s identity, interest and commitment from stakeholders?

Complexity – the complexity of organizing an event during the pandemic. This includes the changes in the ways an event organization used to work previously during preparation and delivery. Several levels of complexity could

be identified; for instance, for the team dynamics if the event team members were used to working in an office environment and having regular conversations and discussions; for the logistics of an event; complexity associated with exploring various software and their applicability and viability for the existing event; complexity with implementing a new format or introducing media that previously had not been used, e.g. online or virtual software. All those parts were interconnected, and event organizations had to review and restructure their processes to respond to that complexity.

Ambiguity – the situation was new to the events sector. In the absence of a historical precedent of the same scale, it was challenging for the organizers to establish possible outcomes of causes or actions. How would event participants and attendees feel about attending an event if the decision would be to organize it on-site during the pandemic? Would the change in the original dates help in attracting the audience? And, overall, what would happen next? Experimentation with various options is required, but the price of a failed experiment can be detrimental for the event's future.

It is evident that under the circumstances such as above, the onus to steer organizations both strategically and on a day-to-day operational level falls on leadership and management.

Agility

Even in non-VUCA times, organizations, arguably, need strong visionary leadership and effective management (Morden, 1997). A style that could embrace both was termed 'visionary management'. *"The vision speaks the language of the people, the company's employees. It is a means for the company to communicate to its own people, its clients and other parties about its prospects, interests, trust in the future and its way of doing business"* (Malaska & Holstius, 1999, p. 356). A vision can serve to work on specific management tasks, empower and engage people, and leads to the commitment. Competent management is also critical as decisions need to be timely and effective. Leading and working under time and/or resource constraints is one of the differentiating features of agility.

In VUCA times, the agility of organizational leaders, their ability to lead into the uncertain, unexpected, complex and unknown, becomes critical. As a concept, agility comes from flexible manufacturing systems and automation, further expanding to the wider business context, more as an organizational orientation (Aitken, Christopher, & Towill, 2002). Organization agility is a so-called dynamic capability that represents the capacity to sense opportunities and threats, and solve problems, when changing circumstances require it (Winby & Worley, 2014). Agility has been conceived of in various ways,

but, in essence, in business operations, it is often associated with the speed in responding to changes (Gong & Janssen, 2012). Van Oosterhout et al. (2006, p. 53) define business agility as:

the ability to sense highly uncertain external and internal changes, and respond to them reactively or proactively, based on innovation of the internal operational processes, involving the customer in exploration and exploitation activities, while leveraging the capabilities of partners in the business network.

An agile organization has a sense of shared purpose, an identity and intent (Winby & Worley, 2014). The shared purpose is the one that extends beyond monetary profit and is shared by the key stakeholders of the organization; the identity encompasses the organization's culture and brand; while the intent is the market position and the company's unique selling proposition (USP). These three components are essential when leadership decisions on innovation are made.

Hugos (2009) suggests a three-steps process for agility and innovation in business: Define (2-3 weeks); Design (1-3 months); Build (2-6 months). During the first step, Define, business goal and performance requirements are being defined, conceptual design suggested, and initial plan and budget developed. The second step, Design, involves the introduction of a new business process design, a system prototype and actual plan and budget. The final step, Build, is characterized by launching a working system with supporting technical documentation and manual. The pre-determined deadlines and timeframe for completing each step underscores the urgency to both the decision-making process and actions.

The model, albeit suggested in a context that is different to events, can be applicable, with variations, to the agile organization of events: Define – Design – Deliver. During the first step, Define, an event's goal, vision, resources, and target audience are defined; conceptual design of the event suggested; action plan and budget developed. The second step, Design, involves the development of an event's program, format, venue/platform, and actual plan and budget. The final step, Deliver, is characterized by working on the delivery of the event, including the technical aspects, specific program elements, working with event participants and attendees, partners and other stakeholders.

Agility embraces a wide range of processes and activities, including marketing, design, organization, management, and people (Aitken et al., 2002). Beyond processes, agility can also be seen as an integrated set of behaviors (Hallenbeck, 2016) and it starts with a frame of mind (Hugos, 2009). Agility is grounded in one's own experiences but requires versatility and adaptability under novel and complex circumstances; the ability to see new and challenging situations as opportunities of growth and new learning. Curiosity and willingness to experiment characterize this approach and prompt to explore

a range of available options and their applicability and practicality. Thinking and acting differently can lead to a range of innovations – from adoption of new technologies to new business models or formats (Doz & Kosonen, 2008).

New technology and virtual events

The technological advancement of the last decades made a significant impact on the MICE sector across the world, in particular in the areas of information and communication (Locke, 2010). Despite the fact that technologies had been emerging and continuously implemented in events of various formats over the past decade, the pandemic caused by Covid-19 forced most events to embrace new ways of management and organization. Event organizers had to explore and employ technologies, including the ones that provide an opportunity for an event to take place in a virtual space. As a result, the use of the online or virtual platforms, such as 6Connex, Google meet, Hangout, Zoom, WebX, experienced significant growth. Virtual meeting software market is estimated to more than triple from \$12.1 billion in 2019 to \$41.58 billion in 2027 (Fortune Business Insights, n.d.).

Online and virtual events have received some attention in the events literature. The words, online and virtual, have been often used somewhat interchangeably (e.g., Getz & Page, 2016; Seraphin, 2021); however, they denote different formats. Online is associated with the use of the Internet, i.e. available, done, bought, used, as well as “*using a computer to communicate with other computers, or of or about a computer that is connected to another computer*” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021a). The term ‘virtual’ has got several meanings to it, including, as per Cambridge Dictionary (2021b):

- ◆ created by computer technology and appearing to exist but not existing in the physical world;
- ◆ done using computer technology over the internet, and not involving people physically going somewhere.

The focus of ‘virtual’ becomes more on the technology and a non-physical word, or reality. Virtual world has been defined as “*an imaginary space often manifested through a medium*” (Sherman & Craig, 2019, p. 8). According to the authors, the key elements in experiencing virtual reality are the following: the virtual world, immersion, interactivity, and the people on the creating and receiving side of the medium (Sherman & Craig, 2019). Therefore, watching a lecture via a YouTube stream, for instance, or attending a conference via Zoom, or a team meeting on Microsoft Teams can all be considered online ways of participation, and the format for the said events is online, too. A virtual event calls for additional software and attributes, and a different experience for the attendees.

Case study: Overview of SHIFT festival

SHIFT Business festival is an annual two-day networking event that combines speaker line-up, workshops, round-table discussions, and expo-like business visibility opportunities. It was founded in 2015 in Turku, Western Finland, by a group of like-minded people interested in promoting innovative ways of doing business. It is a non-profit organization, and the stakeholder support is carried out by the Board of both SHIFT Association and SHIFT Events Ltd. Participants of the Board have various backgrounds, such as multi-entrepreneurs, digital business pioneers, and event industry experts. The festival has been supported by the City of Turku, Turku Science Park, Turku Technology Properties, and University of Turku, among other partners over the years.

The program topics have been changing from one year to another, and event organizers endeavored to cover both global mega-trends and the specifics of regional business environment. In the first year the festival was organized, 2016, the key themes were health, education and energy industries. Subsequently, in 2017, the topics were human-machine and human-human collaboration. The 2018 festival focused on the ethical tech and artificial intelligence (AI), as well as maritime industry and mobility. In 2019, the event's main topics were circular economy, AI, and maritime industry.

The themes for each year had been chosen based on the relevance and currency of these mega-trends for both local and international businesses. For example, the maritime industry featured repeatedly for 2 years in a row, 2018 and 2019, because Turku is a port city and a part of maritime cluster in South-western Finland and is, therefore, critical for the economy and overall vitality of the Turku region.

A distinct feature of SHIFT has been its unusual venues. For the first two years the festival was held in the medieval Turku castle – a historical monument with more than 700 years of history. In 2018 the festival was moved to a former prison building that nowadays hosts a hotel and commercial property. The event's 2019 venue was an old shipyard in Ruissalo, once the biggest boatyard in the Nordic countries.

The number of participants has been rising gradually. Over 1000 people attended the event in its first year, 2016. In 2017 the festival attracted over 2500 visitors and in year 2019, SHIFT hosted over 3000 visitors from more than 40 countries. The attendees represented such sectors as business and finance, technology, industry, academia, and public and third sectors. The attendees' job roles varied from university students to C-level executives and company founders.

Organizing an event during the pandemic: Key decisions

With the pandemic unfolding in 2020, all large business events in Finland and worldwide were faced with a choice of whether to find a safe way to organize the event, postpone till 2021 or to cancel the event altogether. The SHIFT Business Festival team was determined to find an option that would not just allow the event to happen, but also provide the value and experience for attendees compatible with the high standard that it had become known for. In this effort, the event team demonstrated their commitment to the shared purpose, although pursuing it required high energy level of all members of the team and creative thinking while facing a lot of ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty.

At the Define and Design stages, the questions about the dates, event concept, and topic of the festival were on the agenda. Traditionally, the festival was held in August. As the restrictions were changing throughout spring and summer, it was decided to, first, move the festival from August to October, in the hope that by the end of the year the restrictions could be eased. Second, the organizers came to the decision to switch to a hybrid event format, so SHIFT would combine features of online and on-site events. That way it could be possible to create some real-life experience for a limited number of participants and, at the same time, provide an opportunity for others to join online.

Even before the pandemic started, it had been decided to introduce a broader topic for the event – Intelligent business, i.e., doing business both sustainably, profitably and with the help of new technologies. The rationale was that the festival had been growing in both the number of attendees and their profile characteristics, and that introducing one overarching theme would allow for a wider variety of keynote speakers and topics, thus, offering greater value to attendees.

Another important event design decision was to change the format from a two-day event to a two-month's series of events that would start with a kick-off in August on the original dates of the festival, continuing with bi-weekly expert webinars delivered by the festival's partners, and culminating in the main event in October. Maintaining the original dates was deemed important to retain the regular audience of the festival and maintain their interest. This way, attendees could still get a sense that the event was organized in August, as it normally would. The follow-up webinars were aimed at teasing out the contents of the main festival and giving people more time to familiarize themselves with the new format – online instead of on-site, and the new, broader theme of the festival, as compared to more specific topics in the previous years. That helped prospective attendees to experience the unique value of the festival, get more insights into the Intelligent business area and to decide if they wanted to attend the main event. The capacity to sense opportunities and

pursue innovative solutions in programming demonstrates an agile approach to event management of the festival.

While many other business events in 2020 were getting canceled, the SHIFT team decided to respond proactively to changes and do the opposite. The solution to change the format of the festival and make it happen in 2020 in a new format, despite the ambiguity of the situation, was a unanimous opinion of the event team and its management and was supported by key stakeholders. The idea of a virtual event had not been considered before the pandemic in 2020, so that was a truly novel format forged as a response to the changes in the event industry and the external environment.

The inspiration for the event's format came from looking at the essence and identity of SHIFT Business Festival, in particular, to create an environment for people from different industries and roles to come together and meet each other. This diverse and co-creative atmosphere facilitates both learning and networking across geographical and industry borders. In this sense, the festival's ambition differs from sector-specific events where the players generally already know each other.

A creative solution was required in order to maintain the traditional SHIFT atmosphere and to allow for people to 'randomly run into each other', as they would do on-site. A webinar format was considered not good enough for the main event due to it being a passive form of participation and not allowing for serendipitous meetings. Different options and media were evaluated by the event team. As a result, a 3D virtual platform as an event 'venue' was found to meet the key criteria for the uniqueness of the environment and the overall event experience. The previous years' events set the expectations bar very high, as the festival had been a combination of outdoor and indoor experiences and was held in unusual locations. In a 3D format, attendees would get to join the virtual part of the event as an avatar and would be able to move in the 3D world between locations, interact with other attendees through voice as well as through the chat. In addition, in order to make the networking for participants more convenient, a possibility of introducing a business-to-business 'matchmaking' tool was also explored.

Different 3D platforms and digital networking software options were carefully considered in terms of functionality, price and user experience. VirBELA 3D platform and Talque Event Matchmaking tool were chosen. Other options were considered but found less suitable for this particular event for various reasons, for example, their inability to get the functionality ready in time for the event or the technological requirements that were too high and would require hiring a technical partner and, thus, raise the costs. The price of these relatively novel technologies in combination with a smooth user interface and engaging features were major factors in the decision-making process.

Characteristically for the VUCA times, just three weeks before the main hybrid event, the restrictions for live events in Finland were tightened in a way that made it impossible to organize the on-site part of the festival. That was something the festival management team were prepared for as it was one of the scenarios developed earlier. In the first months of the pandemic, an assessment was made about how long the pandemic could last for and different scenarios were created and action plans for different scenarios and contingencies drawn, allowing for the possibility to adapt those plans in response to change. Three weeks before the event the festival was moved to a fully on-line mode. The event team demonstrated great flexibility with the process and the attendees were kept informed of the changing circumstances. Those who got onsite tickets joined the fully virtual event in 2020 and got complimentary pass to the 2021 festival.

During the final, Deliver, stage of managing the event, the focus was on its execution. In particular, the new and more sophisticated technical aspects, work with the speakers and attendees, as well as with the event's partners. The main event took place on 27-28 October 2020 on the virtual platform VirBELA (see Image 11.1). International speakers delivered their keynotes in live format remotely as avatars on VirBELA, whereas many Finnish speakers joined through a live broadcast from a studio in Turku and remotely. Twenty companies presented their services in the VirBELA expo hall through customized virtual booths of four different sizes.



Image 11.1: SHIFT 2020 Fair Artificial Intelligence session.

The format was new for the event organizers, and the production team had to tackle several unexpected technological challenges before the end of October and in the run-up to the event. For instance, less than a month before the event it became clear that the live stream was not possible to be brought directly into the platform, i.e., the professional camera stream was not compatible with the browsers in the platform, only streaming through personal

webcams from speakers' laptops was available. That posed a significant technological challenge, but it was successfully resolved by the production team through using a video mixer on a separate computer that 'tricked' the VirBELA platform into believing this was the webcam.

Getting all the speakers to submit their materials on time and in formats compatible with the software was another important task, and the production team had to work with the speakers individually to achieve it. Local presenters speaking live from a studio in Finland had their own technological set-up that had to be handled differently. It required significant efforts from the team to predict, mitigate and resolve all the technological concerns as they were emerging.

The festival and networking events were attended by over 1000 visitors from more than 10 different countries in two days, with more than 300 business meetings having taken place. The game-like, virtual reality format proved to be very engaging, and attendees stayed at the event platform for a longer time as compared to such formats as webinars, and, consequently, were able to meet more people and interact with each other more. Participants commented on the uniqueness of the experience, as they were able to do things that would not have been possible in an on-site format or in real-life meetings, due to the restrictions being in place at the time. For example, shaking hands and speaking in groups, or the entertaining side of the virtual environment – the opportunity to easily move between different event locations, the ability to virtually dance with the avatar at a beach after-party to streamed live music, or to virtually do a boat trip with other attendees.

No other event in Finland nor the Nordic countries had done this specific format of the event before SHIFT. For example, the biggest Finnish start-up festival Slush was cancelled altogether in 2020, and so was another major event, Nordic Business Forum. The fact that the number of attendees was less than in 2019 highlights the fact that the new virtual format may have been found by some of the usual festival audience unfamiliar compared to the on-site event. This can also be a reflection of the tightened marketing budgets of some of the businesses as a response to the external volatility and uncertainty due to the pandemic. However, the attendance exceeding 1000 participants can be seen as a success under the VUCA circumstances and the associated challenges that the event team was facing. It was important for the organizers to keep the event running and relevant, maintain the value and spirit of the festival, as well as to keep the core audience engaged with the event.

Discussion and conclusion

In 2020, event managers and leaders were working under highly uncertain, volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous circumstances. This type of environment necessitates agility across a spectrum of areas, from event design to team management. Agility allows new products, services or operations to be created and is rooted in the processes and overall management of an event.

The model of a 3Ds process in agile event management, Define – Design – Deliver, is characterized by specific – and shorter – deadlines, an urgency associated with the decision-making, and the need to act under challenging environment. The case of a business festival demonstrates its applicability and indicates the focus of the event team on certain areas of event organization and execution at each stage.

The chapter explored the concepts of agility and the VUCA environment in the context of crisis management and recovery for events. The case of the SHIFT annual business festival organized in Turku, Finland, from 2016, evidences how the team used agility in the decision-making process and throughout the organization of the event as the situation in the events industry remained unstable and, overall, challenging. Thus, the event team demonstrated creative thinking and willingness to explore alternative formats, with the management providing support and motivation in the period of change. Without prior experience of working remotely or using virtual software, the festival had to adopt new systems and build on the expertise of team members and key stakeholders, and look for new partnerships outside of the existing network. Importantly, the event design and the program were developed in a way that would maintain continuity with the previous iterations, i.e., the decision to formally launch the event on the usual dates. The addition of workshops and webinars in the run-up to the main event was aimed at preparing the audience for the new version of the event, as well as developing their understanding of the key theme of the festival in 2020. The virtual platform had been prepared in advance for the off-line part of the event, although the decision not to proceed with any on-site activities was made three weeks before the start of the main event. The virtual platform and the b2b networking application were used to support the key element of the original event's identity, i.e., to provide attendees from all sectors, regions, and countries with an opportunity to meet and interact with each other in a serendipitous manner.

Aitken et al. (2002) suggest a framework of levels of activities and core characteristics in agile manufacturing. The activity levels are: marketing, production, design, organization, management, and people. Based on the analysis of the SHIFT event management, it can be proposed that all but one activity levels of the agile event management, i.e., programming instead of produc-

tion, remain the same. Several of the agile characteristics, however, will vary from the manufacturing context (Table 11.1).

Table 11.1: Core characteristics of agile event management

Activity level	Agile characteristics
Marketing	Audience focused, individualized combinations of products and services.
Programming	Deliver an enriching experience via a program that caters to the interests of target audience segments and stakeholders.
Design	An event design that takes into account event vision, stakeholders' interests, business processes, attendees needs and wants.
Organization	Ability to synthesize new event management systems and capabilities from expertise of event team and key stakeholders regardless of their internal or external location.
Management	Emphasis of leadership, support, motivation, and trust.
People	Knowledgeable, skilled and innovative event team.

Source: Adapted from Aitken et al. (2002).

The novelty in the application of business concepts, such as agility, and wider terms pertinent to the environment, such as a VUCA world, can prompt academics in the event studies to develop that line of enquiry further. Future research could investigate specific areas for agile event management, such as new technologies implementation, event operations, event leadership, as well as to apply the suggested core characteristics of agile event management to specific events to better understand the manifestation of those characteristics in practice. Scholars could consider the attributes of a VUCA environment and suggest a more comprehensive framework that could be used for the events industry.

With the proliferation of tools, applications and other technological advancements in events organization, both academics and practitioners will benefit from a typology for the events that are organized using digital software, online tools and/or virtual reality elements. This will have practical implications for the planning and marketing of events, as well as for the purpose of setting out realistic expectations for the attendees.

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