

## SAMPLE OP-ED

### OUR ECONOMY CANNOT AFFORD TO BACKSLIDE

This week's updated guidance from the CDC marked another chapter in our country's battle to defeat COVID-19. It is a potentially disappointing development for all who are longing for a return to normalcy, including a resumption of pre-pandemic professional life.

After a year of virtual business meetings resulting from the pandemic, it is clear that no real substitute exists for face-to-face professional meetings and events (PMEs). They are the arena in which deals are struck, relationships are forged, and brainstorming is at its best. Recent polls have shown them to be "[irreplaceable](#)," and they have finally begun to return, now that the science proves they can be held safely.

Research conducted following the Great Recession made it clear – in no uncertain terms – that businesses who delayed their return to business travel paid a hefty price. According to a 2013 Oxford Economics review of the role of business travel in the U.S. economy noted a strong correlation between business travel spending and productivity, specifically:

- Sectors that spent more on business travel as a share of industry output (called "business travel intensity") demonstrated greater growth in profits over the 2007-2011 period.
- Out of the 61 industries included in the analysis, 26 industries increased business travel spending and realized an increase in profits from 2007-2011.
- The six industries that reduced business travel as a share of output also experienced a decline in profits over this four-year period.

Clearly, business travel and PMEs are critical drivers of our economy. We cannot afford to backslide on our return to pre-pandemic levels of both. On average, COVID-19 restrictions cost states \$5.3 billion in 2020. In total, the U.S. saw a decline of \$211 billion last year in direct spending generated from business travel (\$97 billion of which was directly due to reductions in meetings and events), leading to the loss of nearly 1.5 million direct travel jobs and almost \$30 billion in tax revenue. The proof is in the numbers - we need to continue making progress toward bringing back business.

There is a silver lining. We know how to safely meet, in-person and in large numbers. An evidence-based [analysis](#) written by leading healthcare scientists at The Ohio State University offers a roadmap for Americans to continue to return to their professional lives, including attendance at large in-person PMEs by employing the science-based, tested and trusted safety measures we have been using thus far to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The authors note how PMEs differ from other large gatherings in that they offer a stronger mitigation capability by employing layers of safety measures, including vaccination and mask-wearing, in a controlled environment.

In fact, according to scientific modeling by the Exhibitions and Conferences Alliance and Epistemix, in-person PMEs pose a near-zero (0.001%) risk of COVID-19 transmission to attendees—even for large events.

Implementing layers of safety measures such as facial coverings, pandemic-curated food and beverage services, and large, well-ventilated physical spaces which, when paired with temperature checks and physical distancing, effectively eliminate transmission risk. And as vaccinations rise, that risk is diminished even further. Utilizing these measures and emphasizing a layered approach - belt and suspenders - significantly reduces health risks and fosters the health and safety of all in attendance, including those staffing the event.

While the landscape is ever-changing, there are some constants: these tested, trusted safety measures have helped keep us safe on planes, in airports and also at large, in-person PMEs. Guidance from healthcare professionals provides a clear path toward getting back to business safely. The travel industry will continue to navigate this changing landscape while adhering to updated guidelines and will continue to make the safety and comfort of our guests and staff our top priority.

It is now crucial for us to stay the course on the road to economic recovery. Domestic leisure travel has returned in strong numbers this summer and although business travel has lagged due to outdated guidelines, we are beginning to see the tide turn.

Americans do not have to choose between good health and business travel; both are possible simultaneously. The science has shown we **can** stay healthy while being productive, so we must keep moving forward.

After all of the progress we've made to reopen our economy, we simply cannot afford to backslide.