

Industry Report

Face-to-face events finally start up – but how will attendance fare?

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CHEM UK, one of the first UK exhibitions to open up as a face-to-face event, recently took place at the NEC. GAMBICA members, like others in the lab industry, were interested to see how the event would go, as the programme of late autumn and spring meetings start to open up. Jacqueline Balian, GAMBICA's head of lab tech reviews the event and the future landscape for laboratory specialists.



A well-known exhibition for those in the supply chain for the UK chemical industry, CHEM UK was one of only a handful of events taking place at an otherwise empty NEC at the end of September. Despite requirements to produce vaccination certificates before being admitted, a good number of visitors turned out (more than for the other shows being run at the same time it seemed) with a total of over 2400 visitors over the two days, more than attended the launch event in Harrogate in 2018.

The first day was busier than the second. Visitors did appear slightly thin on the ground largely because the aisles had been made substantially wider than usual to avoid overcrowding.

It was surprising to see that this very well-organised and well-publicised event was rather let down by the NEC venue. Apart from the attention to checking certificates at the entrance, the NEC appeared to have done relatively little to make the event COVID-secure. There was some messaging about face masks, but in fact almost no-one wore them. The venue appeared very shorthanded with queues for catering and rather poor levels of hygiene at the catering stations and in the loos.



It appears that this is rather the norm now. I also went to a Henning Wehn comedy-night at a large London theatre in September. No-one was wearing masks and there was no social distancing at the bars or facilities.

This made me think that the last 18 months in lockdown may have made me over-sensitive to potential infection. An acid test would be, was there a spike in COVID cases after Chem UK? Well the answer seems to have been no - not among GAMBICA members anyway.

And confidence in attending events seems high; over 90 GAMBICA members are going to exhibit at Lab Innovations in November, and we have sizeable groups booked for Medica in Dusseldorf in November, MedLab in Dubai in January andACHEMA in Frankfurt in April.

As an event organiser, we have found great keenness to get out and meet people again. Members have encouraged us to re-instate the GAMBICA annual conference as a face-to-face event, and the speakers have all been happy to appear in person. Indeed, we have been able to gain some particularly high-profile contributors including Anand Menon, one of the UK's foremost commentators on Brexit and the future of the EU.

Anand makes the case that Brexit is the result of long-term trends that have been in motion for decades. He will provide delegates with a deep dive into the trade impacts of Brexit and how this might impact on future UK politics.

The high profile speakers include:

- Mark Fish: on Accenture's new Scientific Informatics Services Business
- Dr Nick Wright: of the Digital Catapult on innovation for your business
- Stuart Wanfor: of Astra Zeneca on what clients want
- David Shukis: of Pfizer on what clients need
- Martin Farley: of University College London on what university buyers are looking for on sustainability
- Helen Dent: of BIVDA on the upcoming NHS sustainability procurement requirements

The conference will be held at the Stapleford Park Hotel near Melton Mowbray. There will be a gala dinner on Monday 21 March where former England cricketer, Matthew Hoggard, will be the after-dinner speaker.

Although the GAMBICA conference is primarily for our senior members, we do have some spaces for non-members to attend or exhibit. If you would like to come along, drop me a line at jacqueline.balian@gambica.org.uk

So while some members are clearly still concerned, particularly about events overseas, the overwhelming majority seem ready to spend money on exhibitions and conferences, and appear to have relative confidence that the audience will be there to make it worthwhile.

That was the sentiment of those who spoke in the GAMBICA session at ChemUK: "I don't think any of us knew what to expect this year, with the whole pandemic situation, but the event was superb. One of the important factors for Asynt was the variety of people through the door.." said Dr Kerry Elgie, Director of Asynt.

GAMBICA ran two seminar sessions at the event. This allowed members who spoke to gain additional prominence in pre-publicity both before and at the event itself, and we were pleased with the attendance numbers. Speaker Steve Freeman of Anton Paar described the sessions as; "Well-attended and well-received". So, as comedian Henning Wehn said the other night, maybe we just need to view this as: "Good practice for if we get a real pandemic."

