

Mastering the Pivot: How Local I-O Groups Are Responding to Modern Organizational Challenges

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At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations large and small were required to adjust in new ways they never previously faced. Mask mandates, virtual work, social distancing, and the like complicated how organizations operate and engage their workforce. Local I-O groups, which are grassroots organizations maintained by volunteers to further the study, practice, and community of industrial-organizational psychology, were no exception. In this article, we will explore how local I-O groups have shifted their practices in response to the pandemic, what is changing again now that people are returning to in-person work, and what they anticipate will change in the future. Organizational agility has become an important consideration for the survival of many organizations, as the past several years have not thrown just one curveball but several. To maintain membership and engagement, local I-O groups are continuing to evolve and remain responsive to emerging challenges. We spoke with several local group leaders across the country to understand how their local groups are mastering the pivots required in today's world and offer ideas for creating community and connection in local organizations.

When the pandemic hit, many organizations had already planned their event calendar and member engagement strategy for the year. Past President of the PTCMW **Robert Calderón** shared

Personnel Testing Council of Metropolitan Washington (PTCMW) had been conducting in-person monthly speaker events for decades, up until March of 2020 (including our final in-person session on March 11th, 2020). Then everything began shutting down. The traditional SIOF Annual Conference was paused, and PTCMW took a minute to determine what could be done to continue providing valuable services and offerings to its membership.

Like many local groups, PTCMW started by examining their monthly meetings, which could no longer be held in person.

PTCMW had a schedule of presenters already lined up for several months, so the first step was to pivot and offer a virtual option for those presenters that had already been scheduled. PTCMW had always offered a virtual option when there were in-person events, so we expanded the virtual platform and offered the events virtually.

The Georgia Association for Industrial-Organizational Psychology (GAIOP) similarly had to pivot. GAIOP usually has at least four 3-hour workshops that are cosponsored with SIOF and offer continuing education credit. Workshops were held in spaces provided by a local university or corporate headquarters. In 2020 GAIOP had to pivot. After COVID hit, the spaces typically used were no longer available. GAIOP decided to offer workshops virtually and successfully did so. For two of these workshops, SIOF and GAIOP also worked together to distribute the workshops to SIOF member and nonmember audiences.

Calderón provided further insight into how they adapted. "When it was determined that virtual events would likely remain the norm for some time, PTCMW looked for ways to benefit from this," Robert shared. "To begin, the set of potential presenters for the monthly events was expanded to include individuals outside of the DC area and allowed for members to attend sessions with presenters they may not normally have the opportunity to hear and interact with." This was a common practice of local I-O groups pivoting to virtual events during the pandemic. Local leaders were able to reach a wider range of presenters as geographic distance did not pose the same barriers as before. Many local I-O groups saw increased participation in virtual events, as I-O enthusiasts from around the globe could join their virtual meetings. Other groups began to attract members from outside their local areas. Local I-O groups previously based on geographic proximity pre-pandemic had opportunities to expand participation beyond their local area with virtual meetings, quickly building a national presence. SIOF's Local I-O Group Relations Committee also supports local groups in maintaining a calendar of events all SIOF members can access, hosting forums for local group leaders to learn from each other and using a listserv for local groups to share their events and activities with other groups, creating more opportunities for increased engagement and attendance.

There were also opportunities for additional programming to be explored in the new environment. Robert Calderón of PTCMW described, "A mentoring program was also launched (or relaunched) with great success given the ease in which mentors and mentees can meet in a virtual environment. And there have already been three 6-month mentoring sessions that have already occurred during the pandemic."

The pivot back to in-person and hybrid events offers new opportunities for people to connect. Many local I-O groups have had successful informal happy hours and events as some people are eager to see their colleagues face to face. PTCMW notes, "In spring, following the SIOF Annual Conference, PTCMW held an in-person happy hour. It was a well-attended event that allowed members to meet and interact in a relaxed setting and to provide some PTCMW-branded collateral to those who attended." New York Metropolitan Association of Applied Psychology (METRO) is also returning to in-person. President **Daniel Simonet** said:

METRO is returning to on-site events with catering, cocktails, and live speakers for most of the year. After 2.5 years of virtual events, we plan to retain hybrid presentation options including live streaming, recording events for later consumption, and offering one to two virtual speakers per year to extend our available options. We are also planning more annual social events, online workshops, one to two SIOF fellow presentations, and new student sponsorship offers to revive our membership pipeline.

Some event types are more effective in person versus virtual, groups are finding. "We are dedicated to mixing our programming to get more members participating. Because of the large area, it can be challenging to get everyone face-to-face for each session. We have found that live "networking" sessions seem to be well attended and educational sessions seem to be better attended virtually," said **Riza Leak**, president of the Chicago I-O Psychology (CIOP) group. In November, GAIOP will also pivot and offer a hybrid workshop in a specially designed classroom at Emory University's Goizueta Business School. This will be the first time participants can attend a GAIOP workshop either in person or virtually. A social hour will follow—the first since 2019.

Recently returning to in-person and hybrid programming has also presented its own challenges for local groups. Finding locations for events, following safety protocols, and ensuring an engaging hybrid experience are all issues local leaders are tackling. Leak shared, "Our biggest challenge is finding venues (within budget) to host events, especially in the city." Meeting and event spaces across the country have increased costs to offset for lost revenue during the pandemic, and other locations are not accepting outside groups to limit guests for safety purposes. "One unanticipated challenge of shifting back to on-site is the tortuous vaccine verification process," noted Simonet. He added

The site requires advanced approval of attendees, individual uploads of vaccine verification into a centralized system, and downloading a specialized app which verifies both the person's name and vaccine status. We are preparing communication plans, backup lists, and on-site checks to help members adapt, but we

anticipate some attrition due to the extra hassle and difficulty with same-day registration.

Looking ahead, local I-O groups are prepared to continue to shift. For example, GAIOP is now planning for 2023 and surveyed its community about their meeting preferences. Respondents indicated a preference for virtual delivery. When questioned about their concern about COVID, a majority of GAIOP members indicated it was not an issue. From an initial review of the results, it appears that GAIOPs audiences appreciate the ease of virtual attendance. It's not clear how much the avoidance of metro Atlanta traffic influences this preference. PTCMW is also planning for the future: "In 2023, PTCMW will look to balance the virtual events that have allowed for a much wider range of both presenters and attendees at monthly events with in-person events that allow for easier and more intimate opportunities to interact with each other," says Robert Calderón of PTCMW. No matter when and how events are delivered, local groups continue to further their missions of creating community in the field. "What has stayed the same throughout this time is our dedication to build a strong networking community and marketing I-O psychology insights to the Chicagoland business world," notes Leak. Seeing the differences in how these local groups will meet moving forward, local groups should gather input from members as to their specific preference between virtual and in-person format, realizing that everyone's preferences may not be met. As a result, local groups will need to remain flexible to appease members (e.g., shift between virtual and in-person events; provide a virtual option for in-person meetings). Local groups may also want to consider alternative venues for in-person events (e.g., open air venues for social events during the warmer seasons). Last, local groups should ensure they have documentation and lessons learned from what did and did not work during the pandemic so that future leaders will be able to pivot as needed should similar circumstances arise again.

If you would like to get involved with or start a local I-O group, reach out to SIOP's Local I-O Group Relations Committee, and visit the committee website under the Membership category on SIOP's home page: <https://www.siop.org/Membership/Local-I-O-Groups>