

LATEST NEWS

SKILLS 2021: At last, a virtual conference format that works (and is FUN?!)

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Virtual [conferences](#) are like buses: you jump on them every now and then, often when you don't have a choice. But the chances of you actually 'going' to a virtual [conference](#) and staying at it? Unlikely. Enjoying it? Don't make me laugh. Until SKILLS 2021.

SKILLS is a [knowledge management conference](#) that has traditionally fallen within the Legalweek [tech conference](#) in New York. It is led by [Oz Benamram](#), who in 2020 joined Simpson Thacher and [Ron Friedmann](#), who also last year joined Gartner. Despite demand, SKILLS is a closed and fairly exclusive [event](#) by necessity, so as not to become too big and unwieldy. Of course, that means it is the place to be.

Cue COVID, and this year, for the [first](#) time, the SKILLS team decided that, while it will retain closed sessions on 21 January, it would throw the virtual doors [open](#) on 22 January. Speakers had to pitch their ideas to the SKILLS committee, and, well in advance of the [conference](#), record their talk on Gather Voices in [case](#) of [tech](#) issues on the day. You were given an option whether to present live or use the recording on the day.

As the [event](#) got closer, we started to receive emails about a [platform](#) called [Shindig](#) – Benamram sent out emails warning that the [platform](#) takes some getting used to, and Simpson Thacher provided familiarisation sessions in advance of the [event](#).

Shindig was used for the closed session on 21 January and on the morning of 22 January, the breakfast networking was **hosted** on Shindig, which shows thumbnail **photos** of attendees that you can click on to join in a **video** chat. You can gather in groups of up to six, creating a live and spontaneous networking group. Unlike in person, you can also lock the group if you are having a private conversation, although that arguably defeats the object. **Another** fun feature (as Ab Saraswat from **Litera** found out by testing on me), is you can double click someone's picture and eject them from the group. You can also raise your hand to stand on the virtual podium and make an announcement to all the attendees. How we will all behave in real life networking experiences after this is anyone's guess.

The **event** itself was **hosted** on Zoom, where all the attendees were visible throughout as they would be in an auditorium. This did mean using a different link to the breakfast session, but given that the **information** was all in **one** calendar invite is was simple to go from **one platform** to the other and, let's face it, we're all pretty used to this **platform** hopping now.

Benamram says: "Shindig was great for day **one**, when we wanted a lot of intimate opportunities for people to connect **one-on-one** or in small groups. Zoom was better for day two, since we had many more invitees (200 vs 80) and a fast-paced day. It gave us better control in putting people into breakout rooms and getting them back quickly. It allowed for surveys. And it allowed anyone to unmute and speak (in Shindig you have to be invited to the stage, which only has six podiums.)" Zoom also has better UI and is known by all.

The day-two showcase sessions were divided into segments: a 15-minute speaker; followed by a 'shark tank' of three seven-minute product-focussed talks; followed by break out rooms in which you discussed the sessions you had just seen (or just chatted). Once back in the main 'room' you voted on which of the three shark tank demos you would be most likely to implement yourself.

I spoke about **tech** developments and **innovation** in 2020 and you can watch that **video** here at around 3.48minutes in: <https://youtu.be/D8W4V-0xXA>

The entire **conference** is available using that link and it's pretty easy to find the talk you're looking for by looking at the agenda: <https://skills.law/showcase>

The after-[conference](#) drinks were [hosted](#) on Shindig, and – glass of wine in hand – I actually looked forward to seeing people and catching up. I did some conversation hopping and ended up, as usual, being among the last to leave.

At last, this is a format that provides genuine networking and (in the [case](#) of [vendors](#)) lead gen potential. I spoke to a consultant after the [event](#) who says he has three viable new leads. Surely this has to be a better format than those awful, static exhibitor halls that everyone avoids like the plague?

In any [event](#), congratulations and thank you to the SKILLS team, you made my week, and at the rate 2021 is going, possibly my year!

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