

Tango Professionals and COVID Report

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“I practice my values of tango — grounding, balance, connection, listening, choosing my options, taking action, and expressing myself — in order to deal with the pandemic.”

“[The impact of COVID is] professionally and artistically catastrophic.”

For professionals, tango is woven into the fabric of their lives on multiple levels and in many ways. The Awaken Tango COVID-19 World Tango Community Survey (May-June 2020) reveals the extent to which tango is much more than income and a career for people who choose to make a living from it. Tango provides a social network and sense of community, and a path to personal artistic fulfillment. Through their professional activities in tango, many feel that they are helping others improve their lives. The sense of improving others' lives gives professionals a sense of purpose.

The sudden lack of tango created an existential void for many of the tango professionals who responded to the survey. But not all. Many people described great efforts to find or create something positive out of a difficult situation. And for a few people, the lack of access to tango actually improved their lives.

For everyone who responded, the survey brought them face-to-face with the huge challenges currently facing the tango community, challenges that impact each in a very personal way. Before I go further, I want to acknowledge the time and emotional energy invested by all respondents, the candor and openness displayed, and the willingness to contribute their own viewpoints and experiences in order to raise awareness about an extremely challenging time for the tango community, and especially for tango professionals. Thank you to everyone who responded!

RESPONSES ANALYZED IN THIS REPORT

In order to understand the way COVID-19 has particularly impacted tango professionals, this report looks at respondents who make at least 75% of their income from tango (or did so before the “tango pause” caused by COVID-19). Of the 2,052 total people who responded to the survey, 99 fit into this category.

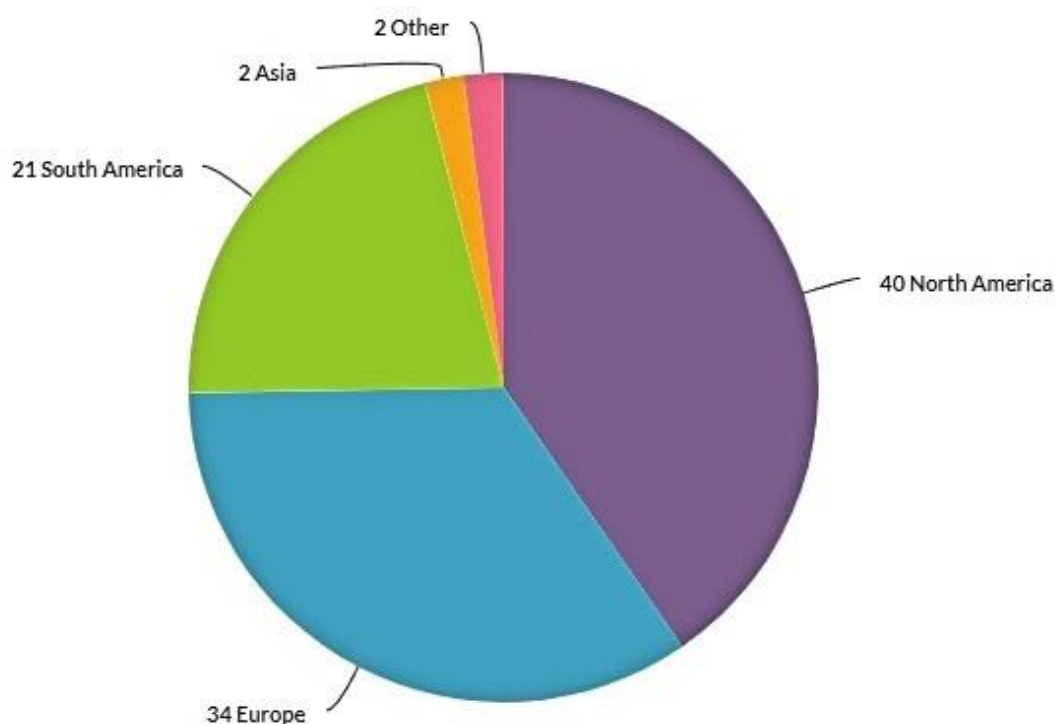
We asked professionals about all the roles they carry out in tango, and also about their primary role. Eighty-one percent teach and organize locally; this is the primary role for 55%. Sixty-one percent are traveling teachers and performers; this is the primary role for 28% of respondents. Additionally, 4% contribute primarily as musicians, and 4% as

tango product vendors. Six percent identified their primary role as social dancers. Others wrote in hybrid primary roles, such as “dance/choreographer/instructor.”

WHERE PROFESSIONALS RESPONDED FROM

We received the most responses from tango professionals in North America & Europe. We also had a good response rate from South America. You can find a [breakdown of professional respondents by country here](#).

Where do you live?



WHAT DOES TANGO MEAN FOR TANGO PROFESSIONALS?

When asked how tango contributes to their lives, 94% indicated that it was either their primary or partial income. Beyond income, the most common responses were that tango is an outlet for:

- Artistic and skill development (72%);
- Personal Expression (64%);
- Learning and Personal Growth (64%);

- Connecting with a Large and Diverse Community (63%); and
- Contributing to Help Others (56%)

View the [complete chart here](#).

Among both tango professionals, and the full pool of survey respondents, tango was identified as an outlet for “connecting with a large and diverse community” much more often than “connecting with a circle of my closest friends.” This fact gives us some clue as to the scope of the loss resulting from the lack of tango. If the role of tango were to provide a means to connect with a small, familial group of people, perhaps this could be replaced fairly easily — in zoom calls, or socially-distanced backyard gatherings, or WhatsApp groups. However, the opportunity to connect with a “large and diverse community” (and in so doing, to feel part of such a community) is not as easily replaced.

The opportunity to connect with individuals that one might not have otherwise, and the chance to feel part of something bigger than oneself — a global community, or as one survey respondent put it “la bella comunidad,” (“the beautiful community”) — probably get to the heart of what makes tango unique and irreplaceable.

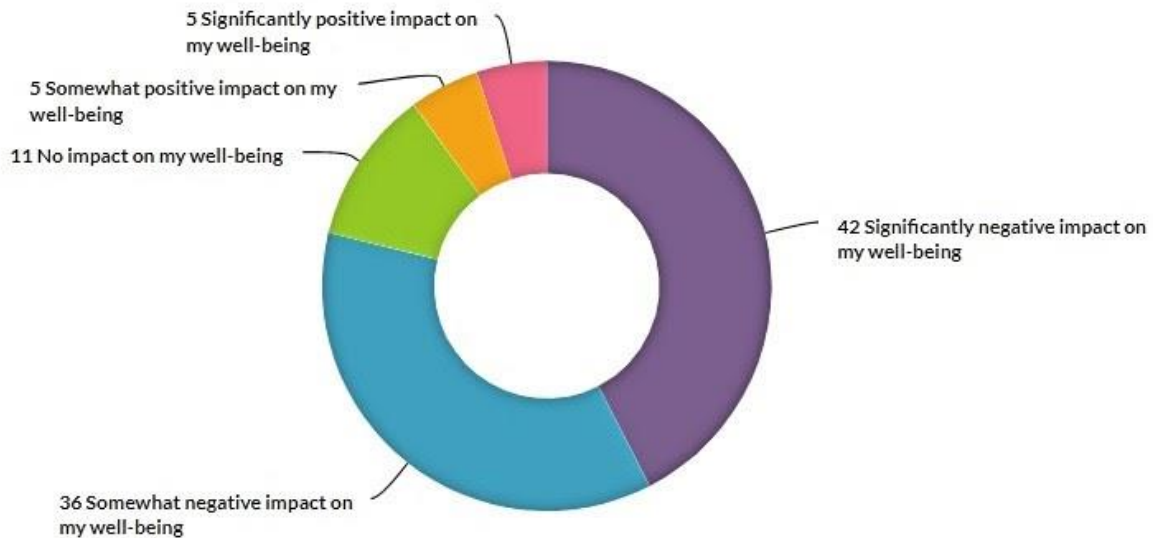
More than half of professional respondents chose “contributing to help others” as one of the main roles of tango in their lives, suggesting an altruistic motivation. It’s not just personal income, personal artistic fulfillment and personal access to community that create meaning for many tango professionals, it’s the sense of offering others access to a world in which they may find artistic fulfillment and access to community.

Many of the write-ins to this question, the “other” responses, indicated the extent to which the interweaving of tango’s multiple meanings in professionals’ lives added up to something greater: “Es mi Vida” (“It’s my Life”). Tango allows me to “feel like myself”. Tango is more than a profession/means of income, more than an artistic journey, more than a community to be part of, for professionals. It is the touchstone of personal identity, allowing professionals to know themselves, make their own unique qualities visible in the world, and contribute in their own deeply personal way. If this analysis is correct, if the lack of tango threatens professionals’ very sense of self, then the findings that follow about the suffering that has resulted from the COVID-forced tango pause will not be surprising.

HOW HAS REDUCED ACCESS TO TANGO IMPACTED TANGO PROFESSIONALS?

Seventy-nine percent of the tango professionals surveyed report a negative impact on their well-being from reduced access to tango; for forty-two percent the negative impact is “significant.” Eleven percent report “no impact” on their well-being; and 10% report a “somewhat” or “significant” positive impact.

How, if at all, has reduced access to tango affected your well-being? Having little or no access to tango has had...



Those who report a negative impact describe a double whammy of income loss and financial uncertainty, on the one hand, and lack of daily structure, community, sense of purpose, and artistic fulfillment, on the other hand.

We asked question 8 (“In what way(s) has reduced tango been bad for your well-being?”) in the same way to both non-professionals and professionals. The question therefore focused on emotions and behaviors. Looking back, I wish we had added a “loss of income” category for the tango professionals. Of the 16 write-in responses, 10 (or 63% of write-ins) mentioned loss of income and loss of work as reasons why their well-being has been adversely affected.

“No tengo ingreso ninguno.” (“I have no income of any kind.”)

“... I am living on charity, which feels odd, and is certainly untenable long-term...”

Because of reduced access to tango:

- 42% are working out less
- 40% are anxious
- 39% are stressed
- 36% feel sad
- 33% feel lonely
- 23% are depressed

We also solicited open-ended responses about the impact of reduced access to tango. I coded the responses in terms of impacts that were wholly negative/pessimistic (75%), that were wholly positive/optimistic (11%) and responses that mixed negative and positive impacts (14%).

Negative Aspects of Reduced Access to Tango

When we look at the negative impacts reported due to reduced access to tango, the themes that emerged in the wholly negative responses were reflected in the mixed responses as well. We will look at all of the negative impacts identified, organized by theme.

Loss of Work & Income

As mentioned above, professionals reported grave concerns about their financial survival. Of the 62 respondents who reported wholly negative impacts, 33 mentioned the economic consequences: loss of work, impossibility of making plans for future work, and anxiety about how to pay the rent and other bills.

Here is a small sample of the dozens of write-ins about the catastrophic financial impacts of COVID for tango professionals.

"I have no income."

"Estoy desempleado." ("I am unemployed.")

"I don't know how to pay my rent!!!"

"My entire financial and social structures have come to a grinding halt."

Overwhelming Loss & Nostalgia for Pre-COVID Life

Reading the write-in responses was like reading the lyrics to one hundred tangos, given the ubiquity of themes of nostalgia and loss in tango lyrics. Respondents report missing dancing, social interactions with students and community members, hugs/touch, teaching, creative expression, being able to leave the house/having a reason to leave the house, contact with creative people, exercise, an active lifestyle, and more.

This lightly-edited quote sums up many of the losses described by many respondents:

"I feel lonely. I miss my friends. I miss being touched, held. I miss sharing mutual understanding with someone. I miss exercising. I miss practicing and challenging myself. I miss teaching. I miss seeing my students and being proud of them. I miss helping people to have joy in their lives."

Another response points to the existential implications:

“It’s made me think a lot about how all-encompassing tango is in my life... I’ve lost my primary way of contributing to society, being useful, making the world a better place.”

Concern for the Future of Tango

For many, the challenges of the current moment are compounded by a sense of hopelessness about the future of tango, a sense that the negative impacts will be permanent. This includes the worry that a significant number of current dancers will not return after the pause, and also that it will be much harder after COVID to attract new dancers to tango, because the public’s perceptions about touching and being in enclosed spaces with strangers may forever be altered.

Loss of Physical Fitness

For most people working in tango, exercise and movement were woven into their daily lives. The reduction in exercise and movement, along with the addition of more sedentary activities, has been very difficult for many of the respondents:

“The evenings are the worst. Usually we were teaching, practicing, going to practicas or milongas, always moving. Now we sit and watch TV. I’m sitting so much my hips are becoming a problem.... Physically I feel like I’m getting old rapidly..”

“Fisicamente me siento debilitada.” (“Physically, I feel incapacitated.”)

“Castastrofico al nivel profesional y artistico. Perdida significativa de estado físico y entrenamiento.” (“Professionally and artistically catastrophic. A significant loss of physical fitness and level of training.”)

Lack of Interactions with Others

Tango professionals are used to living very interactive lives — from teaching students, to attending/organizing milongas and other events, to rehearsing with colleagues, to performing for the public, and more. The variety of ways that they report missing interactions with others is significant.

Professionals report missing friends and acquaintances, but also “social emotional dancing, mostly with strangers.” For many, tango is not about creating or living in a closed community; it’s about the desire for interactions and experiences with those we don’t yet know, and those whom we may never know well.

Many report a deep love for teaching — “my primary source of joy in tango lies in teaching” — and miss interacting with students, experiencing fulfillment through their students’ successes.

Some relied on travel as a way of life, and are disoriented to suddenly be in one place without the stimulation of experiencing different communities and places regularly:

“It’s a complete change of life. I had not experienced being in one place for more than 3 months in 25 years! I also feel the need to dance and teach, to experience the knowledge of others through the touch.”

Lack of Structure and/or Untenable Daily Schedule

Respondents report a lack of structure in their daily lives, and the concurrent loss of a sense of purpose. Some respondents report herculean efforts to create continuity through online tango activities — “I spend a minimum of 12 hours per day in front of my computer” — but see all of this effort fall short in terms of making a living. Some note a sense of whiplash from how quickly life changed, and the difficulty of adapting to such a sudden change.

Tango = Life

Tango is woven into the lives of tango professionals at every level. Its lack impacts the totality of respondents’ lives in ways that do not necessarily fit neatly within a single category.

In the words of some respondents:

“[The lack of tango has] completely upended my career, lifestyle, community and medium of artistic and personal expression.”

*“Global, cuando el tango es tu vida, necesitas de el para sentirte bien.”
 (“Global. When tango is your life, you need it in order to feel good.”)*

“Un impacto que genera impotencia, algo de estrés y sobre todo, la angustia de no poder cubrir las obligaciones de antes.” (“The impact is a general feeling of impotence, as well as stress, and above all, the anguish of not being able to meet one’s obligations.”)

“My life changed completely. In a way, it feels like I have lost my personality.”

“Oh, tango es la actividad emocional mas importante de mi dinámica de vida... Antes de COVID, sabía que era importante, pero con el COVID, confirme que es el balanceador de mi vida, juntos a la bella comunidad.” (“Oh! Tango is the emotional activity that is most important in my way of life. Before COVID, I knew that it was important, but with COVID, I have confirmed that it is what brings equilibrium to my life, together with the beautiful community.”)

Despite the immense challenges facing tango professionals, and the negative impacts generated by COVID, the majority of respondents described their “attitude toward working in tango right now” as “patient.” Other attitudes identified were hopeful, optimistic, curious — all of which were chosen more than sad, afraid, confused or hopeless. You can view [the chart about attitudes toward working in tango here](#).

Positive Aspects of Reduced Access to Tango

The 11% of professionals who, in late May/June, described exclusively positive impacts from reduced access to tango, valued the following:

- A chance to take a break from the high stress and constant energy output that running a dance studio, or organizing classes and events, requires.
- The opportunity to focus on home life, relationships with family and friends outside of tango. Gardening was mentioned more than once.
- The chance to access geographically-distant master instructors through online classes, and keep learning.
- The chance to meditate on the gifts that tango had brought into each person’s life.

The following lightly-edited quote illustrates the last point beautifully:

“I practice my values of tango — grounding, balance, connection, listening, choosing my options, taking action, and expressing myself — in order to deal with the pandemic.”

Most positive responses seemed to indicate that the respondents were working very hard to make the best of a bad situation. In contrast, one respondent seemed to truly be living a better life without tango:

“Desde que no bailo tango me siento mucho mas feliz, porque me di cuenta que desde que no voy a la milonga con tantas reglas en los roles de genero, me siento mas tranquila y conectada conmigo.” (“Since I stopped dancing tango, I feel much happier, because I realized that when I am not going to milongas, which have so many rules regarding gender roles, I feel much calmer and more connected with myself.”)

The imposition of traditional gender roles in tango environments — and the harmful or off-putting effects which they may have on many individuals — is something that the tango community needs to keep trying to address.

Next, let’s look at the positive themes that emerged in the 14% of professional respondents who indicated both positive and negative impacts due to reduced access to tango. These include:

- Having time to reflect on life and career path, to wrestle with and clarify questions of identity. One respondent mentioned a “positive growth spurt [on] many levels.”
- The relief of having a break from interacting with “negative players in my community.”
- Time to rest, sleep, heal dance injuries that it was never possible to take time off to heal.
- Learning new skills and new technologies
- Organizing activities online: lectures, milongas, classes.
- Time spent practicing tango.
- The opportunity to collaborate with, and learn from, peers all over the world.

WHAT TANGO OFFERINGS HAVE BEEN REWARDING FOR PROS TO OFFER DURING COVID?

We asked tango professionals about the ways they had participated in tango during COVID and crunched the numbers to find out which offerings were most rewarding for professionals to offer.

Columns B and C show, respectively, how many producers found an activity most rewarding, and how many producers total offered that activity. Column D calculates the percentage, among those who offered an activity, who found it most rewarding. And Column E uses the percentage identified in Column D to rank the offerings by “rewardingness.”

Column A	Column B	Column C	Column D	Column E
Activity Name	Times Selected Most Rewarding	Total Times Produced	Percentage of Producers of this Activity who said it was MOST Rewarding	Reward Rank
I've written long-form content, such as books/papers.	2	5	40.00%	1
I've created artistic creations (music, dance, comedy) shared online.	11	31	35.48%	2
I've sold tango-related products (shoes, music, dresses).	5	15	33.33%	3
Online fitness classes (mobility, strengthening, stretching, etc.)	5	18	27.78%	4
I've offered live streams (facebook/instagram/youtube, etc.)	7	27	25.93%	5
Online tango technique - solo exercises	8	32	25.00%	6
Online courses (multi-session)	7	28	25.00%	6
I've written blogs.	2	11	18.18%	8
Organized/Djed virtual milongas	1	6	16.67%	9
I've run fundraisers.	4	25	16.00%	10
Online community-building initiatives, such as live interviews with community members	3	19	15.79%	11
Online discussions/panels/lectures	3	21	14.29%	12
Online festivals/conferences	2	15	13.33%	13
Online musicality or DJ content	1	9	11.11%	14
Live online 1:1 lessons	2	29	6.90%	15
I've received pre-payment for future milongas, classes, lessons.	1	22	4.55%	16
Online tango dance instruction for couples	1	27	3.70%	17
Online competitions	0	2	0.00%	18

Consumer / Producer Disconnect Regarding “Rewardingness”

There are notable differences between what consumers found most rewarding to take part in, and what professionals found most rewarding to offer.

For consumers, online tango technique classes (for individuals) and online tango classes (for couples) were identified as most rewarding, among those who took part in them. These activities ranked 6th and 17th as most rewarding for professionals who offered them. Discussions/panels/lectures ranked third for consumers, but 12th for producers. Similarly, 1:1 private lessons ranked 4th most rewarding for consumers, but 15th for professionals.

One place of relative agreement was watching online artistic creations, which was the 5th most enjoyed activity by consumers, and the 2nd most rewarding activity for producers. Unfortunately, the most rewarding activity for producers — writing long-form content such as books and papers — was not well-received by consumers, ranking 16th.

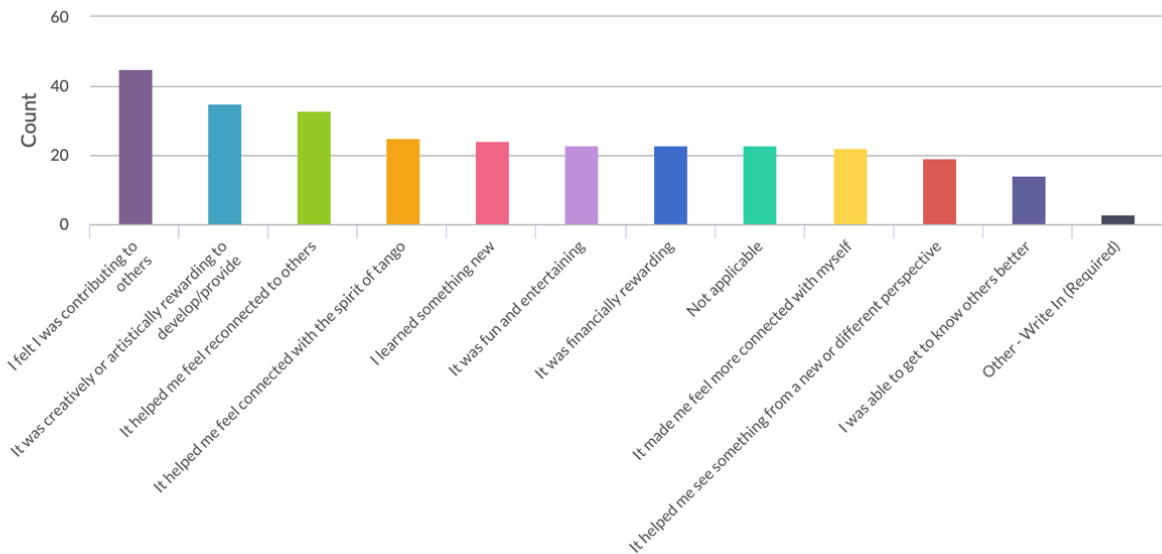
In any case, the proliferation of tango offerings online is recent, and there is still room for a lot of innovation and advancement.

When we asked those who received 75% or more of their primary income from tango why the offering they identified as most rewarding was so. The top responses were:

- I felt I was contributing to others (46%).
- It was creatively or artistically rewarding to develop/provide (35%).
- It helped me feel connected to others (33%).
- It helped me feel connected with the spirit of tango (25%).

Tango Professionals: Why Rewarding?

1. Why was it rewarding?

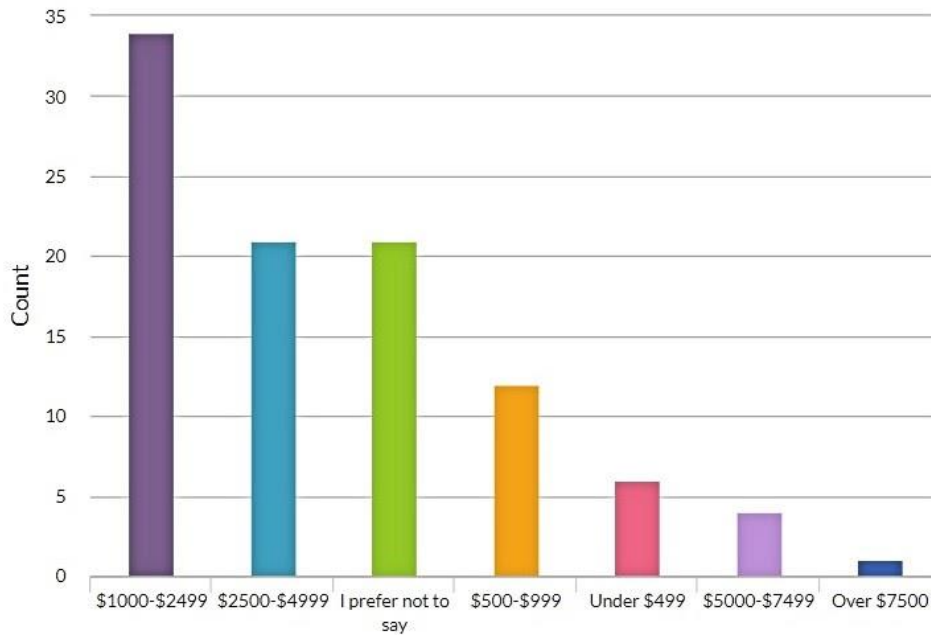


FINANCIAL REALITIES OF TANGO & COVID

Of the seventy-eight people who were willing to share their monthly take-home income with us, only five people (6%) were making more than \$5,000 US dollars per month before COVID. Thirty-four percent of respondents were making between \$1,000 and \$2,499 per month. Twenty-one percent were making between \$2,500 and \$4,999 per month.

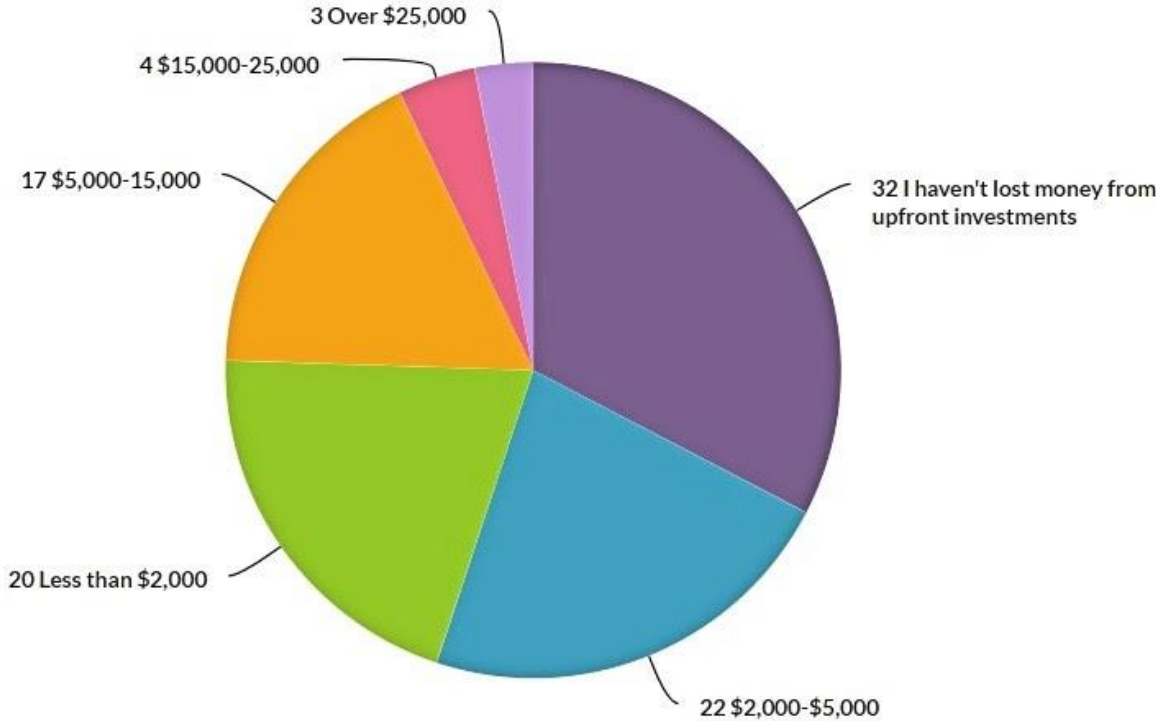
While respondents live all over the world, 75% live in the North America or Europe, where the cost of living is significant. In 2020, the median income in the U.S. is \$78,500 per year. The fact that the vast majority of tango professionals were making less than \$5,000 per month is notable.

24. Approximately how much money (in US dollars) did you take home on average each month from tango prior to COVID-19?



Combine relatively modest income with the risks that tango organizers routinely take to make big events possible, and you can see that tango is, for many, a pretty tenuous living, even in good times.

26. Approximately how much income have you lost due to upfront investments in large events (e.g., festivals, marathons, special milongas, tours) that had to be cancelled due to COVID-19?



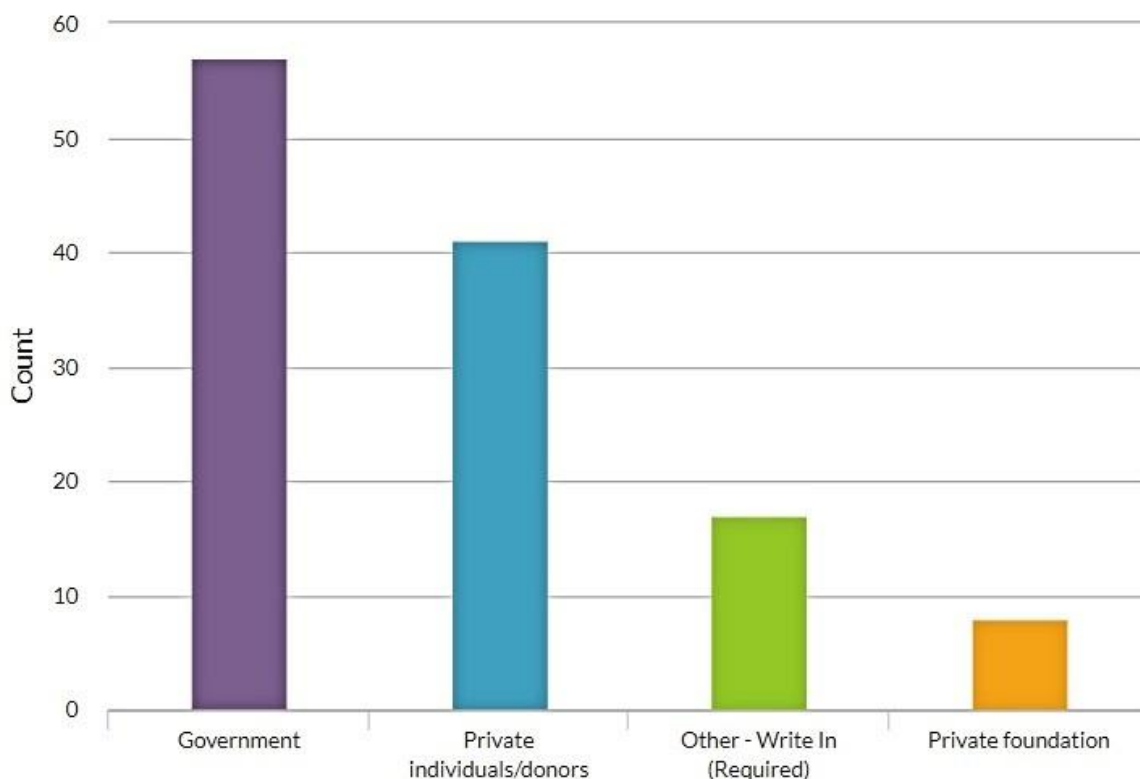
Sixty-seven percent of respondents (66 individuals) lost money due to upfront investments they had made in tango events that had to be cancelled or postponed due to COVID. While forty-two of these individuals lost less than \$5,000, twenty-four organizers lost more. In fact, four respondents lost between \$15,000 and \$25,000. Three respondents lost over \$25,000.

Imagine the combination of taking a significant loss due to an event cancellation (a festival or marathon, for example) and additionally losing monthly income for an extended period of time. COVID has truly created a brutal situation for many tango professionals.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE DURING COVID

By the time we closed the survey on June 7, a number of tango professional respondents had received some kind of financial assistance. Sixty-two percent of respondents had received government aid. Forty-five percent had received help from individual donors. Nine percent had received funding from a private foundation.

Have you received any kinds of aid?



The availability of aid differed enormously by location.

High percentages of tango professionals reported receiving government aid in Asia (100%), Europe (71%), and North America (70%). But only 23% of tango workers in South America reported receiving help from the government.

Private foundation support was very limited in general. In Asia, no tango professionals received foundation support. In South America, 5% received foundation funding, and in Europe just 3%. In North America, there was a bit more foundation support available, with 15% of respondents reporting receiving such aid.

Individuals in tango communities worldwide have been very generous with their efforts to help tango workers. 65% of respondents in Europe reported receiving donations from individuals; 38% in North America; and 23% in South America. It must be said that the needs that tango workers are experiencing during COVID — money to pay for housing (plus studio rent or mortgage, which 21% of respondents are also paying), food, health care and other necessities — are very great and unlikely to be covered by what individual donors can provide. Systemic help from governments and aid organizations is absolutely needed.

In a beginner's mistake, we neglected to include an "I have received no financial assistance" answer to the aid question. Nonetheless, 36% of respondents from South

America wrote in some version of “I have received no financial assistance,” in the “other” response. An additional 14% of South American respondents did not respond to the question, leading me to conclude that they received no aid. **Our conclusion is that one-half of South American respondents had received no financial assistance of any kind by the time we closed the survey, though they had not been able to work for nearly three months.**

Our results indicate that, while tango workers all over the world are facing enormous financial struggles as a result of COVID, the situation is most desperate for tango professionals in South America.

Since we closed the survey, three more months have passed, and still little to no government assistance has flowed to tango professionals in Argentina. Efforts to provide assistance to tango workers in Argentina, and throughout South America, are greatly needed at this time.

WHAT DO TANGO PROFESSIONALS NEED TO GET THROUGH THIS TIME?

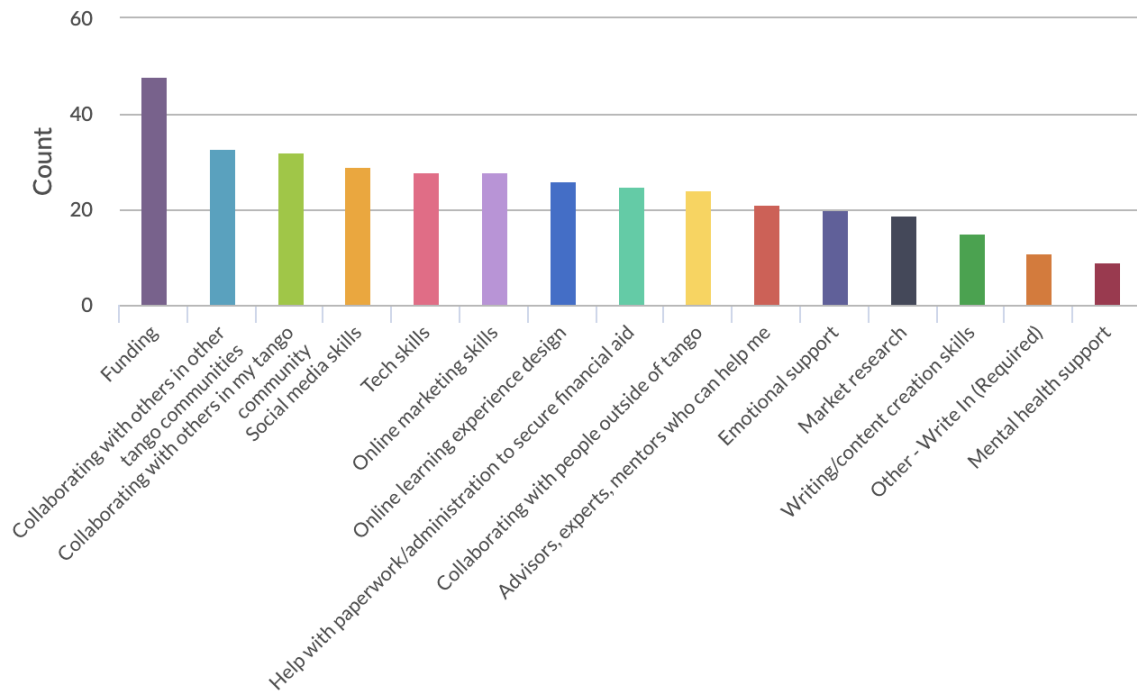
Forty-nine percent of tango professionals identified funding as the resource they most needed at this time. This was the top response by far.

The next most common responses were:

- Collaboration with others in other tango communities (33%)
- Collaboration with those in my tango community (32%)
- Social media skills (29%)
- Tech skills (28%)
- Online marketing skills (28%)
- Online learning experience design (26%)
- Help with paperwork/admin to secure financial aid (25%)
- Collaborating with people outside of tango (24%)
- Advisors, experts, mentors who can help me (21%)
- Emotional support (20%).

Nine percent of professionals identified mental health support as a resource that they need right now.

1. What are the top FIVE (5) resources that would help you most at this time?



CONCLUSION

In the short term, tango professionals need funding to cover basic needs during this time of reduced or no work. Many seek help learning skills that can make virtual activities more profitable: marketing, social media, and video production, among others. While reviewing both the professionals' and general survey responses, we were struck again and again by the desire for increased collaboration, both within and among tango communities. The overwhelming response to the Tango Gamechanger Summit seems to corroborate the desire to work together more, and the sense that we can find better solutions by putting our heads together with tango dancers outside of our immediate environs.

In the long term, this pause has given us the chance to rethink aspects of tango that we have inherited from the past – the strictly-delineated gender roles, the valuing of the leader's role more than the follower's, the division and cliquishness that tango communities can easily fall prey too, and the factors that make it difficult to attract and keep a more diverse membership (in terms of age, gender identity, race/ethnicity and other factors). Systemic change is a long-term and messy process. But if we can make progress on these problems, we may find that it is easier to attract and keep new dancers going forward. That rising tide may well lift all boats.

Please stay safe, everyone. Until we embrace again.

You can find more reporting on the *Awaken Tango COVID-19 World Tango Community Survey* at <https://www.awakentango.com/ideas>.