

Virtual Workshops are Here to Stay

BY PETER STOPPELENBURG

MARCH 12, 2020

Nowadays, working virtually is becoming the norm -- especially if you work internationally. I can't imagine a world where you do not have at least a few calls per week via Skype, Zoom, or Google meets. With the COVID-19, now reaching pandemic levels, there is a strong shift to working virtually. This article explores the experiments and best practices for virtual multi-day workshops with complex content and topics with many attendees.

Recently, I have been facilitating workshops that were scheduled to run face-to-face but have now been converted, out of necessity, into virtual ones. The first thing we need to do is overcome some primary reactions: 'It can't be done virtually,' 'we will not have the same outcome,' 'it will be an energy drain,' and 'how do we build personal connection?'

In my experience, actually, the opposite is true. You can enhance remote collaboration and co-create solutions virtually, and that can be an energizing, high-quality, digital working experience. If you run it well, you can create better outcomes in a shorter time frame (it is often far more to the point) and at a lower cost (avoiding travel cost and time).

To have a successful virtual workshop, here are some best practices I have learned. Some of these things you also do in face-to-face meetings, but you need to be far more conscious about them in order to unlock them purposefully in a virtual setting.

1. It starts with technology: Every virtual workshop starts with selecting the appropriate tools to support collaboration. There are several tools available like Google Meet, Zoom, and others that I've found to work successfully. Make sure you test the tools 2-3 days in advance to resolve any technical issues. Set up all the functionality as you need for the workshop (e.g. a Whiteboard in Zoom, a Jamboard in Google, and virtual breakout rooms for breakout sessions). Communicate the selected tools to participants before the meeting. Depending on their level of capability, run a tutorial so everyone knows how to use the tools. On the day of the workshop let everyone dial in separately, not together in a room (otherwise side-chatter will happen). Technology that is not set up well or those who don't know how to operate in a virtual environment can be a major distraction.

2. Be well prepared: The devil is in the details. It is important to take time for good preparation, so spend time on a detailed design. Upfront, it is important to create a clear understanding with participants of what needs to be done during the virtual workshop. It is key to co-create the agenda and the design to have buy-in and ownership of participants. Make sure to share pre-read materials with participants. In my experience, the preparation is 2 to 3 times longer (including the technology set-up) than at a face-to-face workshop.

3. It needs more structure: Virtual meetings need more structure and there is less space for improvisation. Set some ground rules at the beginning to ensure participants are fully present (simple things like put your camera on) which can be used to flag when energy levels are waning. Make sure to be strict in time boxing the different sessions (in general use different formats). What works well is working in a plenary (not more than an hour) and having virtual breakout rooms (max 3 to 4 people per room). Individuals should have different devices (e.g. a computer for the main stream in the plenary room), an iPad to work simultaneously in a breakout room, and make a Whatsapp group (or another messaging tool) to have direct communication with the group.

It also helps to have longer breaks (at least half an hour) so that people can re-energize. One of the most dangerous things undermining a virtual workshop, especially in a plenary discussion, is when people go rabbit-holing. This will make the session drag. Individuals need to be succinct and to the point, this is actually one of the main advantages of why a virtual workshop can be even more efficient than a face-to-face meeting. To do so, it needs to be strictly facilitated (you can even appoint an observer) who will stop rabbit-holing when it occurs.

4. Continually monitor the energy level:

Remember that it's easier to get distracted in a virtual call. It takes a different kind of energy and a lot of focus. It also takes a high level of concentration to listen to everyone and, at times, refrain from speaking (which can be hard for some). The key here is to pay attention to the energy level – have long breaks, introduce ice breakers or energizers,

and bring some playfulness and fun into it as well. More frequent verbal check-ins will be needed. Also, encourage everyone to give some verbal cues as people can't read your body language.

Remind people they can move and do not need to sit behind the screen all the time. In fact, you can do sessions outdoors or do something to detach them from the screen. Try to make everyone responsible for both their own, and the group's, energy level. Last but not least, If things don't work – change it. There is more structure to a virtual workshop, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't change it when it doesn't work

5. Be creative and courageous: In my experience, you can use a lot of creative solutions and work formats such as the use of images, physical exercises, virtual drinks, mindfulness, music, avatars, gamification formats. So much is possible in the virtual world. Of course, it depends on the type of workshop what work format you choose.

Good teams are built on emotional connection and relationship. In the virtual world, you can strengthen relationships as long as you do not get distracted by technology. I often believe the biggest hurdle is the mindset.

I hear people say that after this Coronavirus is gone, everything will revert back to normal again and we go back to the physical workshops. I honestly do not think so. I think that this disruption will also disrupt the way we run workshops, and that virtual workshops will become far more established, now that people experience them and value the outcomes. They are here to stay.