

Virtual hosting for meetings and workshops

Due to COVID-19 we have been working differently, avoiding face to face contact and non-essential travel. This has impacted in our normal working practices, and many of us have been working from home.

One of the significant ways our working practices have changed, is in the way we connect with colleagues, networks and partners. We are relying on technology to have meetings and workshops that connect people and bring them together, which is new and different for many of us.

However, in many respects good practice in hosting virtual meetings resembles good practice for physical hosting and facilitation:

- Instead of finding a physical space that suits your meeting, you need a suitable platform that can share live video and audio.
- Instead of setting up the room in cabaret, boardroom or classroom style, you use different products and functionality, and build in processes to suit the purpose of the event.
- Instead of sending instructions on how to get to the venue and where to park, you send instructions on how to test the software and join the meeting.

This guide contains hints, tips and good practice to get you started with virtual hosting and is relevant to whichever platform and functionality you are using.

Meeting, workshop or webinar?

To begin with, you need to think about the purpose of the session, and what you want to achieve. This will help you decide whether a meeting, workshop or webinar is the best option.

A webinar works well if you are giving a presentation or a training session and only need limited interaction with the participants. The audience can ask questions but only the host and the designated panellists can share their screen, camera and audio. This gives the presenters more control. For more information about webinars, [click here](#).

If you want to have some group discussion or you need participants to interact or collaborate with each other, then a meeting or workshop is a better choice.

People joining will need to be able to turn on their audio and sound so they can speak and hear each other. It is also helpful if they can turn on their camera so they can see each other, this makes it easier for people to connect and interact with other members of the group. Depending on the size of your group, it can be helpful if the platform has breakout rooms. This is not essential though, and you may find workarounds for breakouts with platforms that don't have this functionality.



Planning



Planning is key to successful hosting.

First, be clear on what you want the session to achieve. For example, is the purpose to check in and network with the participants, or collaborate and generate ideas on a piece of work? When you are clear on the purpose, you can start to plan your agenda or programme.

It is good to use interactive activities during a session to encourage engagement. Individual's attention spans will depend on what they themselves bring to the task, and as a facilitator, it is your role to provide interesting and meaningful tasks for participants. You need to know what functions you have available on your chosen platform and think about how you can use them. Examples include using the chat function to get people to answer a question, using the raise hand or ask people to turn their camera on or off on to vote etc.

If you are going to use breakout rooms to get people into smaller groups, you need to think about how you will split them into groups and whether you want them to take notes or capture some of the discussion. If you plan for the number of people that you invite to the session, there is no guarantee they will all turn up. Make sure you have a contingency plan or a 'plan B' so that if the numbers are not what you expect you know what you will do. Depending on how many participants there are, you may want to consider having a second host or facilitator to support you during the session.

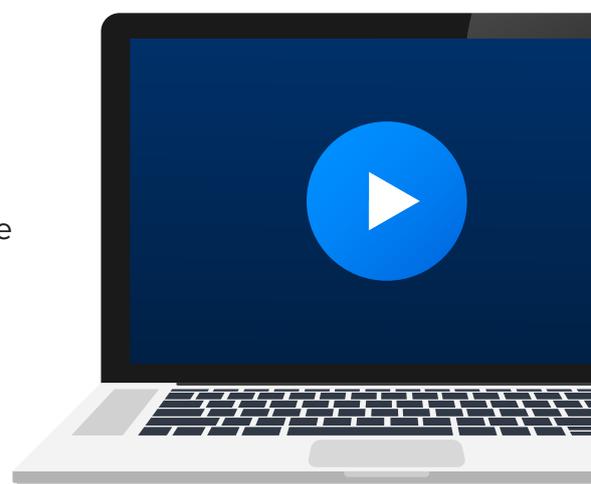
As a general guide, virtual meetings should last no longer than 2 hours. If you are unable to cover everything in that time, then consider whether you can split the session into a series of smaller ones. If you do decide your session will run for more than 2 hours, then you may need to include a comfort break into your programme.

Before the session

Just as you would for a face-to-face session, you should issue the agenda or programme in advance. This will help make sure everyone understands the purpose of the session and comes prepared.

If possible, you should have a trial run of the session if you are new to the software or new to the process. This will help you be more comfortable and confident at the session.

If participants from out with your organisation are involved, it is a good idea to offer a test before the session. This will make sure everyone can access the platform and can help eliminate technical issues on the day.



During the session

In the same way as you would do at a face-to-face session, you should ask the participants to introduce themselves. You may also want to include an icebreaker or check-in question as an opening activity. These can help to 'settle' people as well as build connections and social bonds that support participants to contribute. Generally speaking, icebreakers and check-ins should be related to the topic as this helps participants to be psychologically present.

Remember that some people may be nervous or uncomfortable with the technology, so it is important to cover 'virtual housekeeping' at the beginning of the session to ensure everyone knows how to use the functions available. This, along with a good check-in or icebreaker, will help them to participate fully in the session.



Have the microphone on mute when you are not talking, to avoid background noise.



Use the chat function on the tab at the bottom of the screen, to ask questions or highlight any technical issues you are facing.



If able to do so, have your camera on.



If you have a question for the speaker, use the raise hand function.

Finally, you should try to enjoy it. Don't worry about making mistakes or things not working, the more relaxed you are the better you will be at hosting the session.

After the session

It is good practice to ask the participants for feedback on the session. Find out what they think worked well, what was challenging or difficult, what would have made it better and what they like to see at the next session.

This will give you valuable information that you can use to plan any future sessions. It is all useful learning!



Virtual hosting checklist

The checklist below gives a brief summary of the steps described above. When you are planning your session, make sure you have thought about all of these areas. It can be useful to use during the session too.



Have an agenda or programme for the session.



Welcome everyone to the session and run through the 4 main Housekeeping items: Cameras, Microphones, Chat Function, Raise Hand



Use an icebreaker or a check-in



Stay relevant and on topic, paying attention to the agenda or programme



Encourage discussion and interaction, using breakout rooms if appropriate



Hold it lightly – some people may be nervous or uncomfortable, its ok to make mistakes



Ask participants for feedback after the session – what worked well, what was difficult or tricky