Virtual conference platforms (March 2020)

Introduction

NomadIT has been interested in online conferencing for some time. Early adopters of Zoom (for both our internal and client meetings), we had already studied pioneering nearly-carbon neutral (NCN) models (including anthropology's pioneers, the SCA, with their #Displacements and #Distribute conferences) so as to encourage integration of NCN panels into the conferences we organise, to reduce their carbon footprint.

Our interest has redoubled in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, as we need to find solutions for our clients' threatened conferences this year. We spent two weeks in March researching available software options and their suitability as replacements for the sort of academic conferences we typically organise: 400-2000 delegates, a few keynotes but mostly 50-200 parallel panels over 3-4 days, delivered across 10 to 45 rooms. Unfortunately most available software has been designed for corporate, (largely) single-streamed events: controlling/deploying many simultaneous meetings within a single account is a rarity. We looked for solutions to plenaries, simultaneous panels, discussion, pre-recordings, registration/monetisation, on-demand (i.e. after streaming), etc.

In reviewing the range of platforms we considered both an asynchronous approach (where presentations are pre-recorded and posted in advance, with live discussions) and environments designed to be as close to In Real Life (IRL) as possible (with presentations and discussions live).

Possible platforms

Our fortnight of demos, tests, articles, conversations with other PCOs and conference convenors, and negotiations with providers narrowed the reasonable tech solutions down to three. While we are happy users of [Zoom](#) and can see ways of adapting this to serve both a workshop and a conference format, it wouldn't be our recommendation for large multi-stream events. Much-hyped newcomer, [Hopin](#), would be our choice for a one/two-day seminar/workshop around a theme. **But to recreate a large multi-stream conference online, we'd recommend [Shindig](#).** Details on all three follow. All platforms would require plenty of prior preparation and testing, later followed by rehearsals with the conference volunteers, keynotes, panelists and delegates.

Asynchronous vs live panels

Asynchronous (or 'flipped' panels) require a conference panel explorer capable of embedding recorded presentations (possibly with a commenting solution). While not a feature of the webinar/meeting platforms (but of the conference website), a platform is required for live discussion.

Flipped panels could allow for longer, slower, deeper consumption, digestion and discussion of a panel's content. They are less prone to technical failures and bandwidth issues. Delegates would be able to attend more panels in one day, if all they were attending were the discussions (having already watched the presentations.) However flipped panels require more commitment from panelists and delegates, and live discussions might be poorly attended or suffer from participants having not watched the presentations. Live panels require a similar commitment to IRL conferences while maintaining the sense of co-temporaneity. Prone to technical breakdown and bandwidth failure.

In allowing both formats within a conference, one can accommodate diversity and reduce somewhat the number of parallel sessions at one time - benefitting both delegates and admins.

Useful resources

While we will be putting together our own resources later this year, there is little point in reinventing the wheel. Here are some of the guides produced by other conferences either for specific platforms or for recording presentations for asynchronous panels.

- AHSIE's attendee and speaker guides
- AAG toolkit
- #Distribute guides
- Experience/guide to virtualising from mySociety (zoom-based single stream)
- An extensive PDF guide to virtualising from the Association for Computing Machinery

Enquiries

If you have queries about our research, the platforms or how to administer an online event our contact details are in the footer.

We gratefully acknowledge the contribution to this research of all those who've gone before, who are working on these things now, and with whom we spoke.
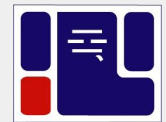
Rohan
March 2020

Platform details

Hopin

This is a great browser-based platform which is developing fast to meet the current surge in demand. It presents a familiar environment with good screen-sharing. Networking is currently randomised, although an intentional networking upgrade is being considered: neither networking space nor exhibitor booths really work for academic conferences without this. Presenters can screen-share files/websites while showing their camera. As with most webinar platforms, streaming video over screen-share is low-quality and should be limited to a few (choppy) seconds. There is no provision to upload files. Each session can have up to 10 presenters and 500 watching, and an admin can assign a moderator to a session. The platform offers an event reception page which allows for good branding and which can hold an agenda which highlights what is LIVE. Keynotes and sessions can be recorded. More info. (If you're wondering, the $10k license is per event.)

Recommendation: we'd definitely use this to host a one- or two-day virtual workshop. At $99/month (plus 7% of any registration income) it's affordable for small events and gives a real sense of a gathering. The randomised networking space could be used effectively for such a workshop/seminar where all are working on similar research/topics, but wouldn't work for more general conferences. Despite being able to scale to ten thousand participants, the reception page and session page struggle to present well the choices facing a delegate in a multi-stream event. The company wasn't hugely responsive to our enquiries (albeit they are surely overwhelmed at present) so it's best used in contexts which don't require 'customisation' beyond the monthly package (where a conference can be 72hrs max). We wouldn't use this for a conference with more than 6 rooms in parallel.

Shindig

This stands out as **the** platform where one could deliver a consistently branded event that is multiple rooms wide, with capacity to support users, and options to build exhibitor and networking spaces that not only come close to IRL but can surpass it in various ways. With one account an organising team can surveille the whole event, and thus support the volunteers & convenors in panels if they cannot handle issues arising. Delegates would be able to participate in panels and/or keynotes, raising questions through text but also being able to come on stage and ask verbally; they could search out other delegates in the 'coffee break' or networking space, and have text/video-chat in pairs or larger groups. Audio and video files can be pre-loaded and delivered as part of a presentation. Browser-based there is also an app for phone/tablet. There appears to be good connectivity over multiple devices.

There are a couple of downsides currently. A presenter can exercise control of their slides, materials through screen-sharing, but when doing so, their camera is 'off' - which while fine for a quick tour of a website, is not ideal when using supporting slides in a talk. Alternatively, retaining the camera view, uploaded slides (as PDFs), audio (as mp3s) or video (as mp4s) can be displayed alongside. However only 'admins' can control these and move the slides along, and as 2 of the 4 possible admins in the room would be taken up by the panel convenor and our conference team volunteer (to monitor chat, problems, etc), presenters would need to say 'Next slide please' to the panel's admin (convenor/volunteer). However it is possible that Shindig may solve sharescreen camera and/or presentation control issues as we're not alone in raising these. We've also asked them to address the issue where the chat loads with its beginning not its end.

Despite the current surge in interest, the company has been very responsive in discussions on both features and price. We also had extremely positive/helpful conversations with the convenor and PCO of a 10-rooms-wide US academic association conference (AHSIE) which used it recently: they had overwhelmingly positive feedback from both delegates and exhibitors (where the latter's virtual experience surpassed IRL).

Recommendation: Shindig allows for as-close-to-IRL conferencing as possible with excellent networking potential. If asked to virtualise a conference that is seven rooms wide or more, we'd definitely suggest Shindig as the platform to use. A conference would still need a website which shows the timetable/content/panel explorer which gives links to the Shindig events.

Initial price quoted was $5k/day for events <250 delegates and $10k/day above that; but they have shown a concerned interest in the academic association sector with a pricing that befits it.

Further notes if you are interested

The best approach is to set up a Shindig event for each room being used and then update the admins and pre-populate the file uploads in the breaks between sessions, to prepare for each panel. Exhibitors would be each given a room in parallel with everything else and trained how to run their space. Have at least one trained volunteer admin monitoring each room. Offer prior training for presenters to get acquainted with the environment; likewise for panel convenors, some of whom will opt to run their panels themselves, while others will need volunteers to administer (bringing on stage, loading files, posting questions, monitoring chat, etc). Speakers can join the podium if the admin enables a space, or is directly invited up. The admin doesn't have to be on the podium and can mute podium speakers, but direct questions (as opposed to chat) can only be seen by admins, so the convenor would need that role. So you may need one volunteer admin in each room or two, while

having two floating super-admins as backup to troubleshoot, using WA or other channels for real-time comms. Super-admin can assign the admin role in the backend.

Zoom

By now, most people looking at platforms will be familiar with Zoom. It is the best meeting software currently available. Meetings can have up to 100 participants, presenters can screen share, there's chat discussion, polls, breakout rooms, hosts can control mics and shares, and the meeting can be livestreamed. It shares most webinar platforms limitations in that one cannot really play video files (for more than a choppy few seconds). Pro accounts (£12/mth) can go beyond the 40-minute meeting limit, while other participants can attend with free Zoom accounts. While it can be used in a browser, it is best used within a desktop client or phone/tablet app.
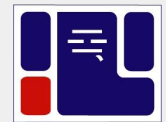
However this doesn't make it the best conferencing software available. While Zoom has the upside of familiarity, it can't do simultaneity - one needs an account for each simultaneous panel. Imagine having 40+ accounts to schedule that many simultaneous 'meetings' and you can quickly envisage how hard it would be for a PCO to have a super-admin capacity across the conference. If delegating responsibility for each panel to convenors, this would be the low-cost, low-input approach, but the event would lose cohesion in terms of brand and support, and organisers would be unable to ensure panels end on time! It doesn't offer great networking or exhibitor opportunities. While one can envisage how one might approach exhibitor spaces, (one account and all-day meeting per exhibitor), it's hard to see how one would create an effective coffee/hallway/networking space.

For keynotes, one could use the monthly subscription add-on of Zoom webinar. (The lowest rate is £32/mth/host for up to 100 participants - however one can livestream to Youtube for others to watch. In such a scenario you'd be paying for the webinar style features over the meeting features. Webinars allow for registration and on-demand/subsequent registration (via PayPal). It allows for discussion - but clearly if you want to allow those on YouTube livestream to discuss, you would either need to shift discussion to that platform, or have a further discussion feature available. Alternatively for 1000 participants, £272/mth/host.

To achieve a conference where one small PCO/admin team can administer the event, and to keep costs down, one would need to reduce the sessions going on in parallel at any one time, so as to reduce the number of Zoom accounts to set up and monitor. (A business account with 40 meeting (not webinar) hosts, would cost £640/mth, or £160/mth for ten hosts, etc.) This could be achieved by adopting the asynchronous panel approach, posting videos of presentations online in advance and only live-webinaring the discussion. By effectively reducing panels to <30 minutes, and scheduling with 15 mins in-between from 8am-8pm, one Zoom account could host 14 sessions in a day. However this would make it hard to charge for participation in the panels, unless the pre-recorded content was behind a paywall on the conference website.

Recommendation: if running a single stream event where a networking space (between individuals) isn't critical, Zoom would be a good fit. Where you have more than 100 attendees, you could either live-stream or make use of the webinar add-on. (Bear in mind in any situation that the webinar add-on allows for monetisation.) We wouldn't suggest this for a large multi-stream event, unless everyone accepts they have to self-support and panel convenors are happy to take on tech responsibility for their sessions. This might make it harder to justify a registration fee - despite the admin work done.

If using Zoom then this is quite a good overview/guide to how to go about it.

There have been some articles recently highlighting anti-social behaviour within Zoom, so care needs taking to ensure the settings behind a meeting allow hosts to protect all users.

GoToMeetings/Webinars

We also looked at this industry-staple which is essentially competent webinar software, where again one needs a license per parallel session. Their licenses have to be taken for a full year, and after some haggling we were offered 3 licenses for £4293. Scaling that up to 10-40 rooms wide shows it is unaffordable (for academic events). Nor does it offer networking/exhibitor possibilities. It's unclear what it offers over Zoom webinar which can be bought monthly.

Recommendation: use Zoom webinar!

NomadIT

NomadIT are a professional conference organising (PCO) company based in Europe who've been organising global conferences for academic associations in social science (especially anthropology) for almost 20 years. We also administer academic associations and their membership, design and maintain their websites and provide advice on all logistical, administrative, financial and related matters.