VIRTUAL CONFERENCE CASE STUDIES

SCORAI International Conference 2020
Daniel Vare, Stockholm Hub Project Leader:

Event description:

Long before the pandemic, we decided to do a hybrid event because some participants were located in Europe and some in North America. Our aim was to lower CO2 emissions and be inclusive to those who had already committed to stop flying.

1. **What platform did you use? What were your deciding factors?**
   - **Whova.com** – a networking platform for bringing together the program
   - Pros:
     - Integrates well with zoom where the actual sessions were hosted (but the attendees only participated via Whova)
   - Cons:
     - Some functions are only available in the phone app and not in the browser version where we expect most of the participants will be joining our sessions.

2. **What additional technology did you use, and for what?**
   - All speakers/participants used a headset or echo-cancelling setup to lower the risk of sound issues.
   - We also ran a **slack workspace** in the background to provide quick contacts for participants.

3. **What obstacles did you encounter, and what were the solutions?**
   - Obstacle
     - Our main obstacle was allowing for the networking aspect of the conference, and keeping discussions going outside of the sessions. Without the social aspects of a conference such as after-work bar quizzes, it is difficult to enable the one-on-one connections.
   - Solutions

- - We put on coffee **breaks** between events with **forum style discussions** (both conference themed as well as more "relaxed" topics and ice-breakers).
    - We also encouraged and enabled the attendees to start their own zoom discussions during the breaks.
    - We had chats and Q/A both before and after the events, in order to maximise time for discussion.

4. **Top 3 tips?**
   - 1. Try to avoid parallel sessions that get expensive quickly and make everything much harder to handle
   - 2. It's better to spread out the conference on more days since people have an easier time attending events
   - 3. Do not fall into the trap of going with a standard solution – there are many alternatives out there, and it's worth trying out different tools.

5. **How does this conference differ from an in person event?**

   - We had much lower CO2 emissions
   - More efficient timings for attendees: Reduction in time spent travelling, sitting in a seminar hall, or waiting for events to begin.
   - The presentations were a mix of pre-recordings and live presentations. We encouraged all presenters to pre-record but did not require it.

16th EASA Biennial Conference: New anthropological horizons in and beyond Europe

Rohan, NomadIT:

Carbon Footprint of Travel
Earlier this year before the lockdown, we did an analysis of the carbon footprint of travel to/from our biennial conferences, aimed at both understanding the situation better, but also thinking to include offsetting within the budget/planning. You can see the results of that analysis here. It allowed us to estimate a ballpark figure per delegate for offsetting this aspect (the largest) of the conference. We recognise that not all those committed to reversing climate change are happy about offsetting, but we saw this as part of a two-pronged approach of offsetting and reducing.

1. **What platform did you use? What were your deciding factors?**
- We used **Shindig**. We surveyed quite a few platforms (see Nomad document, 'Virtual Conference Platforms' for a review):
- Pros:
  - Easier management of multiple parallel streams from one overall account, while providing better networking opportunities for delegates (freedom to essentially video call/chat with whoever they like)

- ○ Shindig were open to negotiation over the price of the license.
- Cons
  - ○ Designed for a corporate norm of single speaker events (mostly), so while it works well with multiple parallel single streams, there are limitations in terms of having parallel events each with multiple speakers and discussants (which is normal for most academic association conferences).
  - ○ The big **downside** is having to train delegates in a platform they don't already know. While it's pretty intuitive, delegates are a mixed bag in terms of IT literacy and experience.
  - ○ Shindig **didn't have significant online training resources available**, we had to create those, which was hugely labour intensive. See link:
    - https://nomadit.co.uk/resources
  - ○ Convenors need to have some practice time, and so for a large event, it means a lot of hours facilitating training and rehearsal opportunities.
- Other considerations
  - ○ AAG and #Displacements went with Zoom this year and had mentor-focussed coffee rooms, which is one way of allowing some sort of networking. Most academics probably now have a Zoom account and installed client, and so little time needs to be spent training there. But we wanted to give our delegates more networking freedom.

Hardware
Delegates need to have webcams and mics, or tablets/phones. While listening in on a mobile device is fine, we'd say the best conference experience with Shindig is on a larger screen computer. Again most folk now have webcams/mics either built in, or external, but some may not have. At the organising end, we did not need additional hardware, although it helps to be able to test platforms and do trainings when one has multiple devices/OS, etc.

Obstacles
- The need to devise training materials, online behaviour policies, recording policies, etc
- The need to offer extensive demo sessions (to get initial buy in from delegates who were somewhat anti-virtual)
- Training sessions (to panel convenors, exhibitors, keynotes, volunteers)
- We've also had to **upgrade our panel explorer** (the website that displays conference panels and papers from our abstract management system) to cope with video embeds, commenting, virtual location buttons, and other features - all of which can be **privilege based** (i.e. only delegates can see them, or only panelists, or public, etc) - so as to allow for both synchronous and asynchronous panel formats (refer to our resources here).

Comments/3 tips?
- *It's not something to be entered into lightly, if you don't have a **professional team** behind you.* Of course it can be done with **volunteers.** And some voluntary input is anyway essential. But depending on one's approach, this is a lot of work for events of **400-2000** delegates
- **Smaller events**, or a decision to just convert to a set of Zoom meetings (which we felt was rather didactic and had less of a conference feel) can be done with less input
- Many of the normal tasks need re-thinking

- ○ Ex. <u>timetabling an international virtual conference</u> is twice as complicated, as one tries to factor in time zones of participants; how one ensures content can be behind a paid delegate 'wall' is another; etc.
- We need to also be careful of the possibility for **furthering inequalities** that already exist in academia or new ones: access to stable electricity, fast internet, a quiet space, a modern computer, etc - all these are not enjoyed by all.
- The biggest challenge is likely to be, not this year's all virtual events, but working out how to budget, charge, organise, and deliver a **hybrid event** where delegates may be virtual or F2F. My team have not yet had time to give this deeper thought, but it is both necessary and complex.
  - ○ None of this is made easier by the tendency of academia to **render invisible labour which is done online** - think about what you're willing to pay to attend an online conference; or consider the pickle being made over Open Acess, where the assumption is that the work has already been paid for once (the academic research, writing, peer reviewing) and hence publication should have no further cost (yet who pays the layout, etc).
  - ○ Various associations we've advised this year since lockdown have wanted to make their online conferences free, despite the price of platforms, and the labour needed to drive them…

How does this conference differ from an in person event?
If you mean from an end-user perspective, that remains to be seen. Ask me in a couple of weeks once our delegates have given their feedback! There are so many ways in which an online conference can be arranged/digested that it opens up all sorts of possibilities that F2F events don't have. It can open up access if done right. It can lead to deeper engagement. The problem is actually that so many large association F2F conferences are designed around **a model that really does little for engagement** - papers stacked into sessions, delivered in 15 minutes, with some discussion, but not enough, and all that is driven by **habit** but mostly by **funding regimes** that insist that to get your registration fee paid, you must present. Virtualising might allow institutions to be a little more creative in rethinking those requirements - although this challenges the widely held metrics/output-based view of academic merit.