HOSTING A VIRTUAL CONFERENCE
PROS AND CONS

The COVID-19 pandemic fast-tracked the academic world into a more digital one, including academic conferences, which were converted into virtual alternatives. A study of virtual conferences hosted by AAU researchers in 2020 has identified a number of opportunities and challenges of virtual formats. These insights may assist decisions on how to organize academic conferences in the years to come.

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BENEFITS OF HOSTING A VIRTUAL CONFERENCE:

- Virtual conferences can be **accessed from anywhere** in the world and you can, therefore, address a wider audience without thinking about travel fares or environmental harm due to travels.

- **Less practical planning** in regards to venue, accommodation, food, security, transportation, visa-applications etc. is involved.

- Virtual formats make it **easier to attract key-note speakers**, who are high in demand, due to time saved on not travelling. No physical mobility again means zero airfares and environmental impact.

- Your event becomes **more flexible** because it is not confined in time and space . It can be hosted live or have pre-recorded presentations for the attendees to watch on a closed platform.

- It is possible **to record sessions and make them available** to the greater public afterwards. Thereby high-profile key-notes and plenary sessions may be used on subsequent research webinars and for teaching purposes.

CHALLENGES IN HOSTING A VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

- The successful execution of a virtual conference is dependent upon the **technical skills and internet connection** of both the organizers, the keynotes and the individual participants.

- The online setting can cause **"Zoom fatigue"**, which hinders audience engagement and productivity.

- **Data protection and other security concerns** are important challenges that need to be dealt with. Participant information, videos and other sensitive data must be guarded against hackers and other unauthorized access.

- Hosting an international virtual conference also means **different time zones**, which makes the planning process more difficult.

- **Expanding your professional network** is more difficult online, as 'the accidental meeting' has to be pre-arranged and, therefore, can be more awkward for participants.

MATCHING CONFERENCE DESIGN WITH DESIRED OUTCOME

There are therefore several designs to draw inspiration from depending on desired outcome. The most commonly used online conference designs at AAU in 2020, were:

Design 1 – virtual, inhouse supported: This design is favorable if the focus is on academic knowledge dissemination more so than on interaction and networking.

- It is flexible as it can be hosted both synchronously and asynchronously, and it allows for fragmented participation with potentially no limitations in regards to participants.

- There is a potential lack of engagement from participants as it is primarily characterized by one-way communication. Less opportunities for dialogue and informal networking is offered, which inflicts upon the engagement of the participantst.

- Inhouse supported events are often cheaper but may seem less professional than conferences that are hosted by an external provider. It however provides the opportunity to keep skills in-house and build on knowledge.

Design 2 – hybrid, inhouse supported: This design makes networking in smaller groups easier, which facilitates knowledge sharing and participant engagement ("sense of community")

- Hybrid conferences may be a challenge to those who participate from a distance, as physically present participants are often favored.

- They are less suited for large international conferences as they need to be held synchronously, and a great difference in time zones complicates this.

- They are more difficult to plan and facilitate, as both the challenging elements and expenses of the virtual and physical format need to be handled. For these reasons external expertise is recommended.

Design 3 – virtual, externally supported: This design creates more spare time for the organizers to concentrate on the academic side of the conference.

- Support can be in relation to platform, technical support, equipment or facilitation during the conference, which frees up time for the organizers.

- External support makes the conference more expensive, however, the user interface, technical functionality and networking possibilities will typically be enhanced, which will strengthen participant engagement and outcome.

Design 4 – hybrid, externally supported: This design can create a more professional setting for those both physically and virtually present, which in return increases the commitment from participants.

- External support minimizes some of the cons of hybrid conferences, as formats for including the virtual participants may be provided

- By having a platform that supports academic knowledge dissemination, sharing and networking, the participants are more likely to stay active during the conference, especially those who participate from a distance.

FOR MORE DETAILS ON VIRTUAL CONFERCENCES:
WWW.KONFERENCEGUIDE.AAU.DK

CONTACT:
YOUR DEPARTMENT'S CONFERENCE ADMINSTRATOR