

Transforming Scientific Conferences from In-person to Virtual – May, 27 2020

Original Listserv Post (5/19/2020 from Maryrose Franko):

Many HRA members are shifting their **scientific** conferences to virtual. Can you share tips, benefits or lessons learned for those planning to switch conferences or meetings to virtual in the future? The **consolidated responses will be posted to the [HRA COVID-19 resources website](#).**

Please include any helpful details such as:

- How many participants were (1) attendees, (2) presenters, and (3) staff running the program?
- What was the original length and format? (e.g. approximate # of attendees, program days, # scientific talks, length per talk, poster session, etc.)
- How did you organize the virtual meeting to avoid scientific overload and fatigue?
- Were there opportunities for virtual networking?
- What platform did you use? Any tips?

On a related note: HRA did host a webinar entitled [Running a Successful Virtual Peer Review](#). You will find not only the webinar recording at that link, but other very helpful documents such as checklists, guidelines, and other instructions.

EXAMPLE 1:

[AFP VIRTUAL MTG Case Study White paper](#) (listed in the 5/19/2020 original post)

This is from the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) annual conference. AFP's annual meeting transitioned to a virtual event in March. Nearly 1000 attendees heard from speakers, engaged with sponsors and exhibitors, and networked with fellow attendees over the same three days of the original in-person conference. After the event, staff wrote up what worked and what did not in the white paper.

EXAMPLE 2:

Tourette Association of America (5/19 response from Diana Shineman)

Thanks for consolidating this information. We transitioned our Research Symposium to a virtual format which was hosted this past Friday, 5/15.

- How many participants were (1) attendees, (2) presenters, and (3) staff running the program? **We were expecting about 75 people in person at the conference but got close to 300 in attendance for the virtual meeting, which we made free to register +small fee to access continuing education credits. I and 1 other staff member ran the program and we had 7 presenters in total, plus a virtual poster session which was separate.**
- What was the *original* length and format? (e.g. approximate # of attendees, program days, # scientific talks, length per talk, poster session, etc.) **Originally this was to be a full day meeting. In transitioning to virtual, we reduced the number of talks into 2 separate sessions which you could register for separately (3 talks in one, 4 in the other – each talk 20 minutes followed by 5-10 min Q and A). we also hosted a virtual poster session where posters were displayed on a dedicated site over a one-week period for people to visit.**
- How did you organize the virtual meeting to avoid scientific overload and fatigue? **Separated the two sessions by a 2-hour break. Made sure each session was not too long and that talks were broken up with Q and A in between each presentation.**
- Were there opportunities for virtual networking? **No, unfortunately**
- What platform did you use? Any tips? **Go-to- webinar. This worked really well for the size the meeting (close to 300 attendees). The Q and A feature worked really well for the discussion although attendees cannot see each other so not as interactive.**

EXAMPLE 3:

Alzheimer's Drug Discovery Foundation (5/20 response from Alessio Travaglia)

The Alzheimer's Drug Discovery Foundation (ADDF) has released a **series of pre-recorded webinars** instead of hosting a live, virtual meeting.

- The original, in person, format consists of 2.5 days, 9am-6pm.
- Because of Covid-19, we had a live virtual meeting "compressing" the program (2 days, 11am-5pm).
- However, some of our speakers mentioned that sitting in front of computers for hours over two days may be too taxing on speakers and attendees. With that in mind we have re-envisioned the structure of the virtual workshop as a webinar series.
- In average, we have ~120 attendees, ~20 speakers, 5 staff members running the meeting. The virtual workshop had over 600 attendees, ~20 speakers, 2 staff members overseeing the event.
- We didn't have networking opportunities. To stimulate scientific discussion, we collected questions in writing over a limited amount of time, sent to each speakers the questions relevant to their talk, and published Q&A on our website. Our poster presenters had the opportunity to present short talks (5 minutes).

Q: Did any of your speakers express concerns about talking of work that had not yet been published? Our scientific meetings are invitation only and the speakers often talk about unpublished work knowing it will not go beyond the community. I wondered if they might be less forthcoming on recorded webinars.

A1: No concerns or comments from our speakers, *though we recommended to do not disclose unpublished information.*

A2: From other posted responses. This is similar to the case with preprints. Will the scientific community recognize virtual presentations as "timestamped"? Will the thoughts, ideas, and intellectual property be recognized as the property of the presenter and "timestamped" with the date/time of the presentation?

Additional Information (5/20 from Leticia Toledo-Sherman from the Rainwater Charitable Foundation)

As one of the ADDF session chairs and a speaker, I think the conference was effective. The biggest challenge was to do a prerecording without an audience, but the content was not the issue and I can echo Alessio that none of the speakers had issues with content. The issues were more mechanical with the format that is unfortunate given the lack of person to person communication or rapport between audience and speaker, but I would overall describe the meeting as successful.

EXAMPLE 4:

From eLife (posted by Susan Fitzpatrick, 5/20)

eLife publication: **Point of View: Improving on legacy conferences by moving online**

<https://elifesciences.org/articles/57892>

Publication's Conclusion: Neuromatch is an example of how an online conference can have a wide reach yet feel personal to those taking part. Indeed, many participants said that they preferred the online experience (including the social aspects) to a legacy conference. We hope that our experience will be helpful to anyone thinking of organizing an online conference, and that we are about to see the equivalent of a Cambrian explosion in the field of conferences. We are convinced that a shift from legacy to online conferences will make science better and be less harmful to the environment.

(Maryrose's opinion: This study has some great lessons learned.)

EXAMPLE 5:

From eLife (posted by Maryrose Franko, 5/20)

eLife publication: **Point of View: Mitigating the impact of conference and travel cancellations on researchers' futures.** <https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.57032>

Box 1: Recommendations to help mitigate the impacts of conference and travel cancellations on researchers.

- Conference organizers should promptly issue refunds and prioritize those experiencing financial hardship
- Funders should reimburse researchers for canceled travel, even if the cancellation is voluntary
- Institutions could help cover remaining expenses
- Organizers could make conferences virtual rather than canceling or postponing
- Conferences that are not canceled can be livestreamed to enable remote participation
- Organizers should facilitate online networking events
- The community should recognize canceled talks, papers and abstracts as 'accepted for presentation' on CVs

Table 1 (pasted in below) has very **helpful links** to a variety of successful virtual conferences.

Option	Example(s)
Organize virtual poster sessions with live video and chat options.	Cognitive Neuroscience Society (2020)
Make abstracts, posters, and other conference materials freely available online for anyone to read and share.	SOT 2020 (Hines, 2020)
Allow speakers to offer a pre-recorded talk for any online session. Provide instructions for recording a talk. Invite pre-recorded speakers for a live Q and A session after their virtual talk, at a time that accommodates the speaker's time zone.	Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections (CROI Foundation/IAS–USA, 2020)
Organize a virtual conference, followed by a virtual 'unconference' where scientists interact with others in small groups that are automatically matched based on similar interests.	Neuromatch 2020 (<i>see paper above for an excellent study of this conference</i>)
Organize a free virtual conference using social media and videoconferencing.	Librarians Building Momentum for Reproducibility (2020) with draft guidance following their organizing experience available from Sayre et al. (2020) 1st International Twitter Conference of Herpetology (Associação Portuguesa de Herpetologia, 2018)

EXAMPLE 6:

The Simons Foundation (5/27 response from Allegra Thomas)

Our virtual Spring 2020 SFARI Science meeting took place every Friday at 1PM EDT, for 6 weeks.

[Here](#) are instructions for panelists. These include zoom screen shots plus recommendations such as:

- Close all non-essential applications on your laptop/computer (slack, email, etc.)
- Pause things running in the background of your computer (backups, etc.)
- Phone audio is generally clearer than computer audio. If you will be doing a long presentation, you may want to connect your audio via phone.
- If possible, use a pair of headphones or earbuds with a microphone
- Make sure no one else is using bandwidth on the same router during your meeting
- ...and many more (*see the [instructions for all the recommendations](#)*)
- How many participants were (1) attendees, (2) presenters, and (3) staff running the program?
 - Attendee count ranged from 100 - 177, with an average of 145 per webinar. Of those attendees, an average of 25 were internal staff.
 - Each webinar had 2-3 presenters.
 - Each webinar had 4 staff running the program (AV technician, moderator, backup moderator, and administrative support).
- What was the *original* length and format? (e.g. approximate # of attendees, program days, # scientific talks, length per talk, poster session, etc.)

Original

- Original # of Attendees: 148 external attendees, and 40 internal staff in total (~20 staff attended all sessions)
- Original Program Days: 2 Days. Sunday 4PM - Tuesday 12PM
- Original # of Scientific Talks: 18
- Original Length per Talk: 20 Minutes, with an additional 10 Minutes for Q&A
- Poster Sessions: Two sessions, with 10-15 posters each.

New

- New # of Attendees: Average of 120 external attendees, and 25 internal staff, for a total of 145. However, the number of total attendees ranged from 100 - 177. We expanded our inclusion criteria, and encouraged lab members of our investigators to attend the online webinars.
- New # of Scientific Talks: 15
- New Length per Talk: 15 minutes, with an additional 10 minutes for Q&A
- New Poster Sessions: N/A - We removed the poster sessions.
- How did you organize the virtual meeting to avoid scientific overload and fatigue?
 - We decided that the virtual sessions should be 1 hr - 1.5 hours, which meant scheduling 2-3 speakers a session. Based on the number of speakers who agreed to speak virtually, and the topic of their talk, we organized the series into 6 weeks of webinars, which took place every Friday at 1PM.
- Were there opportunities for virtual networking?
 - No, although we would like to look into this in the future.
- What platform did you use? Any tips?
 - Zoom Webinar. Please find detailed tips below:

Practice Sessions: We scheduled a practice session with the presenters, instructing them on how to share their screen, testing powerpoint audio, and providing tips in case there were bandwidth issues (join with phone audio, or turn off video). We asked for a backup copy of their slides, in case they had bandwidth issues with screen sharing. We had a backup moderator, in case the moderator had internet issues. Our AV technician went through a run of show during the practice session. Instructions to presenters attached for reference.

EXAMPLE 6: The Simons Foundation (cont)

Zoom Webinar Settings (Context: Closed Scientific Meeting): We required registration, set custom registration questions, set a password for security, incorporated our logo, scheduled a reminder email 1 hour prior, scheduled a practice session with panelists and our AV technician the week of, customized the Q&A settings (toggle off anonymous questions; only showed answered questions), customized the chat feature (only allowed attendees to chat with the webinar host and panelists), and set the webinar to record automatically in the cloud. These settings worked for us - we may adjust the Q&A and chat settings in the future, but we took a more conservative approach the first time around. We also ran attendee reports after the webinar.

During the Webinar

- Each week, we had a housekeeping reminder: "All attendees are muted. To submit a technical question, please type it into the chat. To submit a scientific question, please type it into the Q&A. Questions are encouraged."
- From experience, it is helpful for the moderator to have a few questions prepared, and for internal staff to submit questions in order to jumpstart the Q&A.

After the Webinar

- Video Platform: After the webinar, we used a private, password protected Vimeo Showcase in order to share the recordings with our closed scientific community.

EXAMPLE 7:

Also from Simons Foundation but focused on RFA Review (5/20 response from Alexandra Geldmacher) The Simons Foundation Autism Research Initiative recently hosted an **RFA review meeting** virtually.

- There was a total of 26 attendees across three time zones. Of these, 14 were external scientific reviewers, 9 were internal scientific staff, and 3 were grant administrators.
- The grant administrators managed the meeting logistics, including the meeting slide show (displaying the application being discussed at all times), managing COI, and facilitating application scoring.
- Each application was assigned to one primary external reviewer to present the application, with one or two additional external scientific reviewers assigned as secondary presenters.
- Further, an internal scientific staff member was assigned as a general moderator for each application discussed.
- The meeting was originally scheduled to be a full day long, in-person event with extra time built in for breakfast, lunch, and an optional evening dinner. To best accommodate the varying time zones, we changed the meeting start and end times to 10am to 4pm, with 2 half-hour breaks built in. We estimated 15 minutes of discussion time for each application, and the breaks took place approximately after 1.5-2 hour intervals.
- In advance of the meeting, we circulated the order of discussion, presenter assignments, and approximate timing of the breaks, so that all participants could plan accordingly. We also aimed to be mindful of time zones when scheduling presenter assignments.
- We used Zoom for the meeting and did not have any issues. We had an AV technician in the meeting for the first half hour or so to troubleshoot any potential issues. We also began our meeting with a quick Zoom tutorial, establishing 'ground rules' for the meeting such as the hand raising feature, chat function, etc.

ADDENDUM FROM OTHER SOURCES:

There are significant benefits to virtual conferences. Funders and scientific societies might want to consider these benefits when the need for virtual conferences passes and we can go back to business as usual. But should we?

- Virtual conferences are more inclusive.
Remote participation increases participation from diverse groups including:
 - Those needing VISAs to attend
 - Scientists from countries that are banned from entering other countries
 - Early career researchers
 - Persons with disabilities
 - Parents and caregivers

- Virtual Conferences decrease the carbon footprint.
For example, the carbon footprint from a single meeting of the Society for Neuroscience Annual Meeting hosting 31,000 attendees is equivalent to the annual carbon footprint of 1000 medium-sized labs. Remote meetings can decrease unsustainable practices such as:
 - Air travel (generally the major contributor to a meeting's carbon footprint)
 - Conference program, badges, and other conference waste
 - Disposable food and other packaging
 - Unsustainable food options