

Online, asynchronous conferences are poised to disrupt the conference industry

Moyez Jiwa¹ and Alexandra McManus²

1. Melbourne Clinical School, University of Notre Dame, Werribee, VIC, Australia
2. School of Medicine, University of Notre Dame, Sydney, NSW, Australia

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INTRODUCTION

In 2019 and 2020 many if not most conferences were cancelled or postponed because of travel restrictions instituted by governments worldwide in response to advice from public health officials. For many, especially those who attend conferences as part of their professional development and to share their research and ideas, the global shutdown during the pandemic were lost opportunities to meet colleagues and friends, to network and build alliances for their teams, as well as to generate successful grant applications or to publish. Commentators on the value of conferences concluded, “A conference is not just an avenue for a scientist to present their research to the wider community, it can be an important venue for brainstorming, networking and making vital connections that can lead to new initiatives, papers, and funding, in a way that virtual, online meetings cannot. This is why conferences matter”.¹

For conference organisers the COVID-19 pandemic was the impetus to develop and deliver online events. Some of these events were formally evaluated, and in some cases the evaluations were published online. Benefits of online conferences include: affordability; engagement of a greater diversity of participants; time effective; chat and online polling enhanced participation; and reduced carbon footprint.^{2,3} Data also suggested some challenges associated with hosting an online conference: being aware of boundaries; effective inclusive facilitation; and managing expectations. Networking may not be as great an impetus to attend a conference in person. One review found that 80 per cent of attendees did not find that the online format limited opportunities to network.⁴ Most delegates paid close attention to presenters even if they did not

ask questions. These data suggest that those who have attended some virtual conferences considered them worthwhile.

Differences of opinion expressed in various forums about the value of in-person versus online conferences may have many roots. Face-to-face meetings may be preferred by those with a very specialist focus. Those who are familiar with their peers' work may prefer to attend in person. Publication of reports supporting conferences may be biased as some academics benefit from subsidised time away at conferences.

The financial cost of a conference includes registration fees, transportation, accommodation, hospitality, and the opportunity cost to the employer. In addition, there are the intangible costs to the delegates, including time away from the office, home, and family. On the other hand, one advantage to an employed academic is being able to go interstate or overseas heavily subsidised by their institution. For conference sponsors there is an opportunity to have their organisation or group drawn to the attention of those who might support their business through sales or service.

The challenge in recreating any value generated in face-to-face meetings relates to both the delegates and the organisers of online conferences. It is now documented that attending long or multiple Zoom lectures is not conducive to maintaining interest and concentration.⁵ The reason why online conferences may be problematic may be related to four factors: mirror anxiety, being physically trapped, hyper gaze from a grid of staring faces, and the cognitive load from producing and interpreting nonverbal cues.⁶

It is plausible that online conferences may be especially problematic when the conference requires attendance at a meeting scheduled at a specific time. People may find it is uncomfortable dedicating several hours paying attention to a computer screen.

There is, however, obvious value in organising a virtual conference:

1. Costs can be kept to a minimum so that there is no registration fee even if there is a cost to producing a video or attending a Zoom call. Mostly there is minimal need for sponsorship of delegates to virtual conferences.
2. The virtual environment is better able to facilitate a larger number of conference presentations.
3. The organisers can target the group who should be invited to present or attend with an eye to forging collaboration and networking among individuals with a recognised stake in the topic.
4. Significant time saving for both delegates and organisers. This could also lead to greater pool of keynote speakers.

An online conference needs to be organised with one or two clear goals: either to showcase innovative work and/or to forge collaboration and networking. It is unlikely that everyone will be satisfied in a conference whatever the format if there are multiple goals, each of which only

apply to some delegates. It is also incumbent on the organisers to select the audience for the online conference in the way that they might have selected the speakers in the past. Smaller conferences with a specific goal may deliver tangible outcomes.

In medicine conferences have been and will continue to be a key part of the academic and clinical year. For many, however, the past two years have demonstrated that we can thrive without having to travel to attend a once-a-year mega event. While the idea that conferences have very limited value may not be widely documented in the peer-reviewed literature, the view that face-to-face conferences may be a waste of time have been expressed in other forums. One commentator noted that⁷

- At networking events, you typically meet just a few people who are relevant to you and dozens who aren't.
- In sessions, you typically learn just a couple of important new things after hearing mostly what you already know or don't care about.
- On an exhibit floor, you typically wander the aisles avoiding eye contact with smiling, polo-shirt-wearing reps, and if you're lucky, you'll find one exhibitor who's both new to you and worthy of a follow-up conversation.

The solutions suggested include⁸

1. Having a clear reason for the conference
2. Understanding the audience's needs
3. Having clarity about the audience's understanding of the topics presented
4. Helping the audience to explore by giving them a few questions and then short-list the most relevant aspects of the conference for them.

For those who are interested in developing a broad network aimed at promoting collaboration, more needs to be done to ensure that delegates attending virtual conferences feel that the effort of listening to others present is worthwhile. Greater preparation of presentations is required as most people cannot sustain concentration for more than a few minutes even in the academic environment.⁹

One solution which has been tested and shown to be promising is the asynchronous virtual poster presentation.¹⁰ Many of the benefits of such a conference can be more broadly assimilated by conferences even when the focus is not on poster presentations. Asynchronous presentations are defined as follows: "Content and engagement opportunities are available over a broad period, such that attendees can access content and interact with presenters at a time that suits individual schedules, either within or outside scheduled conference time. Sometimes referred to as on-demand content in virtual conferences".¹⁰

Other key features of virtual poster presentations include¹⁰

1. Presentation materials (posters) displayed linearly alongside pre-recorded video introductions of poster presenters.
2. A brief poster summary included alongside each poster file to allow session attendees to search for posters by topic.
3. Clear goals for the poster session with alignment of content and guidelines for supplemental presenter videos to those goals.
4. A Zoom feature to allow participants to enter and exit breakout rooms freely, without additional facilitation from the meeting host. Delegates interacted with each other or the presenter during or after the session.
5. Virtual poster sessions had fewer posters per session.
6. All attendees that were interested, but not be able to attend the session, were encouraged to engage with the presenter asynchronously through commenting.

The JHD hosted its first asynchronous Global Mini-Conference (GMC) on a LinkedIn group in June 2022. The conference aimed to foster collaboration and networking and amplify the voice of healthcare advocates. Rather than uploading posters, we invited participants to upload videos no more than 3 minutes long, and which focused broadly around a theme. Participants were part of a global community, including those with direct and indirect connections to *The Journal of Health Design*. Comments and questions after each video were uploaded after the videos were uploaded. We look forward to evaluating the outcome of that conference, and we hope it will be supported as a monthly event.

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PEER REVIEW

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