Innovation in virtual settings

From embarrassment to new possibilities

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Key Takeaways of Article

» 9 specific learnings for virtual collaboration

» Advantages of virtual settings

» Examples of virtual workshop

The world is changing – and with it, our way of working

In March 2020, the world came crashing down for us consultants. The first lockdown meant that overnight we could no longer meet with our clients in person and could no longer hold workshops or seminars. A central element of our work, the personal contact with groups and the design of effective interventions of a unique collaboration, was taken away from us. After an initial moment of shock, we reframed the situation for ourselves. We had experimented with virtual meetings – both internal and external – on and off before Covid-19 but then always reverted back to the tried and true form of "face to face" meetings because we did not consequently address issues like inadequate IT equipment, insufficient bandwidth, poorly performing communication solutions, and unclear rules. But now, there was enough external pressure for us to seriously consider virtual options. Our customers were not so quick to throw in the towel either, simply because there was no alternative. It was impressive to see how quickly IT departments at our customers, with sufficient incentive, could increase bandwidth and quickly equip employees with equipment, including their own video cameras.

From video conferencing to virtual large group events

Very quickly, we were faced with the challenge of not only moderating virtual meetings well but also designing entire workshop events with 50 people and more in an interactive and dynamic way. We spent nights testing the functionalities of different videoconferencing solutions and thought about how we could transfer workshop interventions from the real world to the virtual one.

We think we were very successful in a short time. After only two weeks, we designed interactive, virtual large group events with very positive feedback from the clients. The team of consultants gathered ideas, experiences, and knowledge from different experiments quickly and thus developed a remarkable competence and a comprehensive repertoire.

Meanwhile, we design 4-day creativity workshops with 30 globally distributed managers of a large corporation and one-day strategy update workshops or accompany agile distributed innovation teams in weekly work sessions. Our training formats – transferred into virtual setting – are even more to the point, often packed into compact 1 to 3-hour nuggets and, at the same time, very interactive.

One of our large group highlights last year was definitely the TUA Innovation Marathon, where we spent 24 hours innovating for 5 Austrian companies with 50 students from all over the world. "Better results than in previous years" was one of the fantastic pieces of feedback from a client who had experienced this event in presence several times before. However, not only large group formats have been successful, but also the accompaniment of small agile innovation teams in different industries has proven to be particularly effective with the appropriate methods. We also offered our experience online in qualification packages for virtual facilitation.

Virtual companionship and other innovative formats

From these insights into the transfer of classic formats into virtual setting, we soon realized that the new possibilities can now also be used to design completely different, more effective interventions. Since the effort of traveling many people is reduced to practically zero, it suddenly becomes possible to create even short formats with potentially many participants. One example is our 2.5-hour in-house Town Hall meetings, which keep everyone at the same level of knowledge and keep morale high in difficult times.

But we can also now offer much more effective interventions to customers. A physical customer workshop had to last at least half a day to justify the effort. Typical workshops lasted two days to balance the trade-off between travel time – enough time for the content and the day-to-day waiting business. In the virtual setting, we are not bound by this. We can spread 2-day workshops over four half days and still have participants from all over the world involved – every day. We can now support virtual teams very efficiently in weekly 45min meetings as agile innovation consultants and trainers over months. We call it virtual companionship and are convinced that we are developing a future-oriented format.

On the one hand, we can introduce effective agile rituals such as stand-ups and retrospectives directly into project work. On the other hand, we can offer methodological support with pinpoint accuracy. Classical trainings, which are often temporally decoupled from the concrete work, are replaced by short video sequences, which are recommended situationally and explain exactly what is needed by a project team in the factual situation. In the weekly work with the teams, we then concentrate on the immediate transfer to the current project phase. Freely following the motto "rhythm beats one-time effort," we are thus much more effective in our support, and the investment for our customers is at the same time very attractive.

Disruption has just begun

We are only just discovering the disruptive potential of the global need triggered by COVID-19 to adapt to virtual communication for our innovation consulting. We transform our self-image more and more away from consulting towards virtual companionship and thus even more towards a partnership with our customers. We experiment with new formats every week and receive excellent feedback for many of them. We have decided to create our own environment for experimentation, where we share our latest ideas and virtual service offerings with all interested parties. We call it ICG-Beta and will officially launch it in the next few weeks. Against the valuable background of over 35 years of the entire ICG Group's systemic consulting experience, we are breaking new ground in innovation consulting. From the embarrassing solution of working virtually, exciting new fields of effective support are opening up.

Learnings for virtual collaboration

What are the most important experiences and learnings with virtual working from this year:

(Disclaimer: We refer to the following as 100% virtual settings, meaning that each participant attends individually. There are no small groups in front of a screen at any point.)

1. Conscientious preparation and the creation of a sophisticated meeting design are more important than ever. For the format to be effective, animating, and not tedious, it is essential to incorporate interactive sequences. It is crucial to keep impulses short, allow time for small group dialogues and sufficiently long break times.

2. The use of cameras for all participants can build a good basis of trust between people who have never seen each other before. Psychological safety is not a question of physical proximity but the team's mindset.

3. Impulses can be grasped equally well (on their own screen) by all participants. The need for a suitable room with a correspondingly large screen when there are many viewers is eliminated. Everyone can customize their interface according to their preferences and thus better focus on the content presented.

4. Small group settings (break-out sessions) are essential for interactive work and one of the most central interventions. When these are used consistently, they allow teams that are far apart in space to work together beautifully. A prerequisite for this is a smooth-running stable solution, such as that offered by Zoom in particular.

5. Small group results are more immediately usable. Since the writing of post-its is replaced by electronic forms of whiteboards, the results are, on the one hand, instantly readable and, on the other hand, as electronic writing, not assignable to a person as with handwritten notes. This means that existing text can be redesigned much more quickly and without inhibition and thus tends to be better. The quality of concepts thus increases.

6. For the first time, dislocated teams can work together effectively, and thus the potential of diversity can be used much better.

7. Participants are, on average, far more punctual than in the real world. This may be partly because you don't have to rush from one meeting room to another in the home office. In any case, a very positive signal of mutual appreciation immediately gets a meeting off to an even better start.

8. Discipline is exceptionally high. No wonder the usual "chatting in pairs" is practically impossible in the virtual plenum, and if it's done via chat, it doesn't bother the others.

9. The timing of workshops can be designed and adhered to much better. A punctual end is a certainty if designed well.

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