ABIS - The Academy of Business in Society Toolkit for Effective Virtual Communication

A guide with practical tips to improve your virtual communication, event organisation and teaching







The coronavirus outbreak and the ongoing restrictive measures in social distancing, smart and remote working and the disruption in professional and personal lives comes with a lot of challenges that every company, institution and individual must face.

Despite the negative impacts, at ABIS we are convinced that no crisis should go to waste and that it brings us all new opportunities as well. For instance, we are certainly pushed to rethink the old working models and incorporate more digital tools into internal and external communication.

This crisis taught us that changes can happen fast, even from one day to another, when the management and the employees are determined and supported to keep going, even if it means to go beyond what we know and to face uncertainties.

From this perspective, we can reframe the fight against the virus not to return to business as usual - because often business as usual did not work: the opportunity, instead, is to fight it and while fighting it, transform business to be more just and sustainable.

With this guide, we would like to facilitate the transition to a new normal by sharing with you our experience on digitalising our own activities. The aim of this toolkit is to provide an easy to use and experience-based resource to increase the effectiveness of virtual meetings. It offers practical support and tips to our community of business professionals, researchers, teachers, and students... and anyone who might use some help in adapting quickly to these new realms of working, communicating and connecting with others.

We hope that you will find it useful and that it will motivate and empower you to develop innovative ideas and to embrace new paradigms.

The aim of this toolkit is to provide an easy to use and experience-based resource to increase the effectiveness of virtual meetings.

If you would like to discuss any topic below, contact us at:

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Virtual Communication Skills

There are many ways in which communication is different in virtual settings: time flows faster than offline, a lot of body language is missing, distractions from others and the external environment have even more impact on the transmission of information. The experience of personal "presence" is very different and it is easy to get bored or distracted, lose connection with others, and to establish and develop trust. It is also increasingly common for people to experience very real "Zoom fatigue", which adds to the complexity. Whether you are organizing, leading or taking part to virtual meetings and events, it is important to take into account these factors and to hone a few skills that are key for a successful virtual communication. Here are a few steps you can take to develop your virtual communication skills:





Plan and set the stage

Virtual communication requires a great deal of preparation in advance. Agenda and meeting guidelines should be sent in advance to all participants.

You should also plan for a successful interaction throughout the meeting (do not leave it to chance), closing and follow up. Also, prepare your physical space adequately in order to minimize background noise and distractions for yourself and others.

Be clear

Define and state the purpose of the meeting/event: Why are we in this video call/event? Are we here to take a decision? Are we here to share progress on a project? What is the focus?), supported by a clear structure.

Even if in virtual team meetings, support your colleagues to be focused and engaged with the flow. Open with a key issue and why this is important/relevant for the attendees. Gently draw back the attention to the purpose of the meeting whenever you notice rambling discussions that go nowhere.

Keep it short

Time duration online is much faster and it is possible to communicate in a few hours what normally takes days to deliver offline! At the same time, it is much harder to keep the attention threshold high online.

Be conscious and respectful of people's time (and your own): keep your presentations concise, your one-time contributions short (<2 minutes) and avoid getting lost in details while people silently disengage. Similarly, aim to keep the length of the virtual meeting/session <1 hour.

Strive for value and simplicity

in spite of how comfortable technology can make organizing meeting and events, less is more. Focus on delivering value and making the best use of everybody's time.

Ask yourself: How can I add value? Is this information / feature valuable/useful for all attending? This will also help you shift from self-preoccupation about the means and the delivery to usefulness to attendees.

Engage participants

In order to keep the attention and energy levels high, aim to embed questions throughout. Remember to use questions to ask for participation, not to make people feel interviewed!

Fail forward

Do not try to make it perfect. There will be glitches and you need to be prepared and willing to accept them. Do not be too attached to the outcome - get it done and learn from what went wrong and be open to feedback.

Show up as a human being

Virtual meeting are an opportunity to connect with others. While we are all challenged with being physically distanced, we crave to be socially connected.

Bring openness, honesty and humanness to professional conversations: you will realize that people share similar struggles on the same journey of exploration and they are more interested in connection and exchange rather than criticism and judgement.



Internal Communication

We are sure you have all figured it out already, but if you are dissatisfied with your current communication and team management solutions, here is a summary of the best tools available for your internal meetings.

Microsoft Teams (Free basic version, then depends on your Office 365 plan)

Teams is great for big enterprises because it allows to create endless numbers of smaller teams where you can chat either all together or one-on-one, call, send documents and even schedule meetings in a calendar. The benefit of Teams is that it has all the Office 365 programs integrated, so that you can work with them natively.

Skype for Business

Microsoft® Teams replaces Skype for Business Online as Microsoft's professional online meeting solution.

Slack (Free basic version, advanced from 6,25€/month)

Slack gives the opportunity to organize messaging in different channels by topics. You can also use it to call and integrate the app with project management tools (Trello), Google Drive, Dropbox and more. Slack is good for more effective a communication where decisions are needed fast. There is a possibility to tag people to get their attention fast and the ability to share files.

Whatsapp

Used mainly as a mobile app, it is great for more non-professional chit chats among teams. As it is used mainly on the phone, the person can always get the latest updates even on the move.

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ZOOM (Free basic version with a 40 minute limit)

Became extremely popular since home office is a necessity and calls with colleagues were needed for work updates and having a feeling of personal connection by using a camera. It is very user friendly and doesn't need to be downloaded to use. Recently ZOOM had some PR issues due to violation of data privacy.

GoToMeeting (Basic plans starting at 10,75 €/month)

A competitor to ZOOM – it includes the same elements as ZOOM, except for the breakout rooms feature.

Miro (Free basic plan)

A collaborative virtual whiteboard great for brainstorming sessions, mind mapping and decision making enabling synchronous coworking. You can use this tool in internal calls, during workshops/ classes or even bigger virtual events. It is easy to use and all the outcomes can be saved in pdf format.

Trello (Free basic plan)

A project management tool great for keeping on track with project deadlines and tasks. It is an online To-Do-List for individuals or teams allowing to pinpoint the emergency, deadlines and assign tasks to people.

Asana (Free basic plan)

It is also a project management tool like Trello. Trello seems to be a better option for small businesses with straightforward processes, while Asana works well for medium and large businesses that need extra features to handle increased complexity. There are differences in features, so in the end it is up to personal preferences.



Based on the experience with our successful online "Creating Value Roundtable" co-organized with Antwerp Management School, with over 200 participants and speakers from all over the globe, as well as the digitalisation of our flagship Knowledge Into Action Forum "Towards a Circular Economy in Business Practice and Education", in this section, you will find our learnings and practical tips on how to organize an event/webinar/workshop/training online.

This is a non exhaustive list of digital tools that we at ABIS use or have tested in introducing virtual experiences to our members. These can be beneficial to you for your online event organisation, whether it is for your employees or external partners. All the tools described are mainstream and function on all web browsers, or can be downloaded easily on your desktop or phone from Google or iOS app stores.

Event Management Tools

When organizing an event, you want to make sure to adopt digital tools and practices that will make your life easier and your work more efficient. We are bringing you these tools that will save you a lot of time and will keep your work organized.

ZOOM (Free basic version with a 40 minute limit)

Works great for smaller sessions as well as big ones up to 10 000 participants in ZOOM webinars. Particularly useful is the ZOOM Meetings "breakout rooms" feature, which allows up to 200 participants to be divided into smaller groups to discuss a topic while using a "white board" to take notes or draw conclusions.

The host has the ability to create an unlimited number of breakout rooms, manage them and close them at the same time in order for all the participants to reunite in the main room.

ZOOM Meetings vs. ZOOM Webinar

The choice depends on the number of people and the level of interaction you would like to ensure. With **ZOOM Meetings** the sessions happen in a "roundtable" format where the speakers and hosts are able to see all participants and the participants can freely ask questions or discuss. Zoom meetings are ideal for hosting more interactive sessions where you will want to have lots of audience participation or break your session into smaller groups. Participants will be able to see the list of all other participants and, if enabled, even to see them on camera or hear them speak when asked to.

With **ZOOM Webinar** the sessions are more "presentation" like, with less interactions, giving the spotlight to the presenting speakers. However, it gives the possibility for many participants to join at the same time (up to 10 000). Think of webinars like a virtual lecture hall or auditorium. Webinars are ideal for large audiences or events that are open to the public. Typically, webinar attendees do not interact with one another. In ZOOM webinar the participants cannot see how many participants joined the webinar, nor can they see the full list of names.

As we highly appreciate the knowledge sharing from and to our members, we often go for ZOOM Meetings as it allows for a more personalized and "present" experience for all. It does require more technical assistance, so we recommend involving more staff to take care of muting/unmuting participants, technical assistance, chat management as well as hosting and facilitation of the sessions.



GoToMeeting & GoToWebinar

Works in a very similar way to ZOOM. GoToMeeting is used for less people (up to 250 participants) with higher interactions, while GoToWebinar is recommended for educational purposes (lectures, updates, presentations) for up to 1000 participants.

Eventbrite (Free paid per paid ticket)

A registration and ticketing tool with the possibility to send emails, notifications and gain data from registered participants. A practical tool comes in hand as Eventbrite offers to add a digital link for the online sessions which will directly inform attendees about on how to connect online.

Whova

Event management tool that is transforming itself to bring value even to online events by launching their webapp. Now you can add live streaming links to providers such as ZOOM and GoToMeeting directly to the app. It allows to create a hype several weeks before the event, engage participants in discussions on various topics and let them network by checking the whole attendees list and being able to privately message each other before, during and after the event. The participants can build their own personalized agenda. The agenda and speakers list can be integrated easily into the event website.

NetworkTables

An event management tool that offers registration, agenda building and easy emailing system. On top of Whova it provides one-on-one meetings (so called brokerage sessions) with their timeslot algorithm. However, their agenda cannot be integrated to your website. They are 100% able to provide all their features for online events.

B2Match

Another event management tool that combines ticketing, emailing, event agenda and B2B matchmaking (one-on-one scheduling) very similar to NetworkTables. They are 100% able to provide all their features to online events.

Slido (Free basic version)

Q&A and polling platform for meetings and events. You can simply insert a hashtag on the slido.com website from any device. This tool enables more engagement and makes it easier for hosts to gather important insights from participants.

Marketing and Communication Tools

As many of us struggle with the lack of connection with the community, in these times social media channels are even more important as a way to reconnect with others online simply and fast. Even if you do not have a graphic designer in house, you can produce stunning visuals by using the following tools:

Canva (Free basic version)

Offers thousands of layouts to create visuals – from presentations, reports, to various banners and marketing materials all without the need of a graphic designer. The platform is very user friendly and offers a whole database of pictures, schemes and objects to choose from.

Visme (Free basic version)

A very similar tool to Canva, offering thousands of free pictures and layouts to create visuals for any internal and external communication.

Virtual event organization: practical tips



At ABIS we connect our community of member institutions in order to be able to create long-lasting partnerships and develop innovative research and education projects to advance the role of business in society. We are proud to have many experts and knowledge in our network – we want this knowledge to be shared and disseminated further. That is why we are convinced that online events should be interactive, giving the possibility to the participants to have a say and take an active role in discussions.

Below, you can find **proven, practical tips** to ensure a great delivery of your next virtual event, ensuring a pleasant and interactive experience that will keep the participants level of attention and engagement high.

Technical issues

- Start on time to broadcast the event. Start the event few minutes before to gather the speakers and the whole production team. Enable participants to wait in the "waiting room" and once you are all ready, start exactly on time to not confuse the participants
- Strictly follow the timing as stated on the agenda
 don't leave speakers to have monologues for too long or wonder of the topic
- Keep the sessions short, but packed with content
 focus on a narrow topical issue. We encourage sessions no longer than one hour
- Do not forget to schedule short breaks so attendees can use it as a hygienic break and take refreshments. We found around 10 minutes to be enough
- To diminish technical issues, plan several test runs with the technology and speakers few days before and half an hour before the event. Practice makes perfect!
- To avoid problems with bad audio or slow connection, emphasize the importance of having headphones and if possible a connection to ethernet cable rather than Wi-Fi to the speakers
- Encourage speakers to put themselves on mute if they are not talking to eliminate background noise

- To eliminate distraction by background elements, encourage speakers to set themselves in a **neutral** setting (next to a white wall) or use a virtual background
- Take into consideration different time zones for your online event. Think about your main and additional target groups – you cannot accommodate to all
- If you have more tracks or breakout sessions at the same time, you will need one host per track to open the session in ZOOM or GoToMeeting. Be aware that these platforms charge more for multiple hosts
- Use icebreakers to introduce a new technology in a light and fun manner. While sharing housekeeping rules, ask people to respond to an easy question in a poll, or ask them to "raise a hand", try out giving reactions in ZOOM or introduce an external tool: Slido, Miro or Mural to showcase how you will use it throughout the event
- Have 10 minutes of **buffer time** in the beginning to properly start the event you might need to wait few minutes until all the participants arrive or deal with any technical issues. This will give you the opportunity to stick to the agenda and feel relaxed at the same time

Virtual event organization: practical tips

Participants' engagement

- Make sure you encourage the participants to chat and ask questions
- You can allow participants to "raise their hand" (a special feature in many platforms) and give them the floor to ask or comment in under one minute. Make sure they keep it short and straightforward!
- There is a possibility to launch **polls** to increase the engagement of the participants. You can use this data later in your event report or for internal decision-making processes. Make sure you don't overwhelm the participants with polls we do not encourage the hosts to use more than 2 polls per session
- We recommend leaving the chat function public for all the participants to be able to see everyone's comments. This way they will be motivated to participate themselves
- Encourage speakers to answer some questions on the chat while they are not speaking
- If you need participants to work on a specific issue or discuss a topic, divide them into **breakout** rooms for the time needed and then bring them back to the main meeting once they have finished (breakout rooms feature in ZOOM)
- Provide at least 20 minutes for Q&A session or discussions to let participants speak or address their questions by your chat facilitators. Participants need to feel heard during the event
- Use fun and innovative digital tools and that gather participants' inputs and ideas (e.g. Slido or Miro, described in the "Digital Tools" section)

Division of team roles

- Let each team member focus on one specific task!
 One moderator does not have the attention span to share presentations from speakers, facilitate the discussion, launch polls and manage the chat.
- We encourage the allocation of the following roles:
 - Host responsible to run the session, present practical details and housekeeping rules, share slides, run polls
 - Facilitator moderator of session
 - Technical assistant deals with technical issues arising for speakers and participants
 - Chat manager encourages comments, keeps chat alive by responding, picking questions, summarizing the discussion as an input to Q&A
 - Communication coordinator responsible for live tweeting (or using different social media channel) to increase awareness of the event
- A facilitator has to moderate more strictly than in an offline setting. It is better to ask a question to a specific panelist rather than asking generic questions to the whole panel. This makes sure that the panelists will not start talking at the same time
- Housekeeping rules are of utmost importance: share practical details with participants at the start of the event e.g. agenda, breaks, muting/unmuting, camera on/off, ways of interacting (e.g. chat, raising hands), where they can find the list of participants, any documents and slides to be shared in the follow up, is the session recorded (where can it be found later on) etc.
- Let the technical assistants register their name as Technical assistance (or something similar) so that the participants can find them more easily among the other participants

Virtual event organization: practical tips

Visuals

- Enable turned-on cameras for speakers and facilitators for a more personal feeling
- Put yourself in the participants' shoes for the best screen views. If it is a panel, set a gallery viewing (to be able to see all the panelists at once). If you would prefer to give the spotlight to the person talking, set a" speaker spotlight" setting
- In order to **share screen and/or slides**, we encourage to do so from the host and not the speaker. This eliminates extra stress element from the speaker's side and ensures smooth presentation
- If you are aiming for dialogue and discussions, shorten the length of presentations. A virtual event does not need many slides and visuals. However, if we talk about teaching, you will need more slides (one idea per slide) to catch students' attention. Remember, people remember 20 % of what they hear, but 50 % of what they hear and see at the same time
- Set a limit to number of slides for speakers in order to avoid lengthy monologues. Keep it short, reduce text and use more images, which are more captivating. If text is needed, recommend using big and clear fonts
- To increase connection and the feeling that a speaker is talking to participants, we encourage speakers to look straight to the camera when speaking, not to the screen
- To increase interaction, know that you can also introduce virtual clapping (using ZOOM special emotions – clap, like) or encourage comments in the chat (virtual thank yous at the end of each session)



Increasing reach and awareness

- A series of webinars is a poor virtual event. If you are planning an event with multiple sessions, make sure to create and connect them with a red thread, having a nice flow, including short breaks and engaging participants pre-, during and after the event. Make your event as engaging as your offline events by enabling virtual networking, collecting questions and opening discussion topics beforehand and following up with participants post-event
- To increase reach and awareness of your event, share a hashtag with the participants at the beginning of the event and encourage them to post related insights online
- Make sure to find and tag speakers and their organizations in order for communication staff can tweet and post on LinkedIn fast and efficiently
- Use print screen to take "photos" of the speakers and panels during the event
- If possible, record the sessions to be able to publish it and disseminate it to those who could not attend (or for those who would like to re-watch it)
- Many platforms (such as ZOOM) offer live broadcasting across social media channels such as Facebook Live and Youtube Live

Post-event tips

- After your event, have a plan to follow up and take advantage of the momentum and connections created
- If you recorded your sessions, send it to the participants with a link to a **feedback survey** to learn for next events. Keep improving!
- If the discussions raised questions and topics, create a virtual space online – LinkedIn groups, use twitter hashtag, Slack or other platform to keep conversations going
- If you use Whova, this platform can be used even after the event to keep sending announcements, ask for feedback or encourage participants to get in touch and network
- Summarize your event in a short but condensed report and disseminate it
- Take the time with the team to debrief and reflect on your internal experiences and learn from each other – what worked, what did not work as expected.
 Learn from your own mistakes
- Follow up with speakers and participants to continue collaboration or explore possibilities for joint projects

Teaching online: practical tips

Online teaching is very different from offline teaching. It is not simply talking to a camera and sharing slides. As a teacher in an virtual environment, you miss a big part of non-verbal communication and you have "only" your ears to listen. The same for students: they miss many interventions, also from their peers, that helps to clarify the subjects. Offline interventions are key for understanding and to transform teaching into learning. This transformation has to take place online now with different interventions. Everything has to be prepared more precisely in order to manage the online class and to make it enjoyable and interesting for students and for lecturers. This is the key message: more precise, shorter classes, focused and perfectly prepared in terms of content and learning interventions.

Schedule

Screen time is more intensive than looking in an open space. It means that the required energy level of students and lectures is shorter and therefore it is good to plan shorter blocks and sufficient short breaks. Also, it makes sense to plan a higher frequency of short classes - it is much better than a low frequency of attention-intensive, longer classes. Taking an example from Executive Education, it is better to have two half- day seminars than one full day seminar.

Preparations

Since there is only the verbal dimension of communication, we have to be more precise, because as a teacher you will not get enough non-verbal cues to adjust or to change the teaching or explanations. It is important not only to prepare the teaching, but also the expected perceptions - now this is a matter of effective teaching (more than ever). Lecturers should focus on the interpretation of the lecture more than on "what to tell". What do you want the students to "hear"? It is a kind of customer-oriented communication. This transformation from telling to hearing and understanding is the effectiveness of the online class and the level of knowledge productivity. If during the session some tasks should be done by the students, these tasks should be very clear, specific and precise. And, one by one! Not only the lecture, also the tasks should be prepared in smaller "building blocks" and prepared from the perspective of the listener.

Assignments

We also recommend sending the students **assignments beforehand** to prepare themselves for the lecture. As mentioned before, better three specific focused assignments than one broad described assignment with multiple dimensions. It is also important to advise the student how to prepare, for example a format for a one or two slides presentation. During the online class a few students could present their results of the assignment. If you ask someone to present, ask a specific person by name and not invite someone in general.

Online class discussions and interactive sessions

There are many online platforms. Sometimes you can see the individual group members, sometimes you cannot. In the option where you can share your screen, you cannot see the students anymore. If the group is not too big it is possible to start discussions. Rules are needed for this. We would recommend you asking all students to mute themselves. If they have a question, they can raise their hand and they can unmute themselves. The lecturer allows the student to do this. This is just to control the class and the Q&A. If the group is too big (more than 15 pp), it is better to use the chat function for questions.

Teaching online: practical tips

Breakout sessions and work groups

It is very helpful to use the breakout session for smaller peer groups to keep the students active. In Microsoft Teams and in Zoom, this is possible. This needs also very precise preparations. The groups should not be too big (3-4 persons) and the lecturer needs to **form and inform the groups beforehand**. Give all the groups a number (not a name) and communicate this to the group. A breakout session takes time: 20 minutes will work. You can also use the assignments for the breakout session. The students can share their homework and one of them presents during the online plenary session.

Using different media simultaneously: teaching and chatting

As mentioned before, it is possible to make a session interactive with chats. If the group is too big it is very difficult to manage direct discussions and the lecturer will lose control. In this case, the chat function is really helpful. If you have 15-30 students, it is possible to multitask and answer the questions on the chat during the lecture. It may be wise to communicate before that you will answer the questions using them as input for teaching during the session. It keeps the flow and the students do have influence on the lecture. Communicate explicitly when you use this input, because this is also a reward for the student. If you literally answer the question you also have to repeat this; this is like moving forward and moving backward and it can disrupt the flow. The students will be disconnected from the "red line".

Slides and screen sharing

During offline classes, it is recommend not to use that many slides, because the students will not absorb the real teachings and messages. But **in an online class you need more slides**. It is Important to realize that the slides should support your teaching: the slides are not the lecturer: you are the lecture yourself.

More specific slides are better than slides with broad statements. If you share your screen to present your slides, you may also show webpages to make it more "open" and creative. If you teach strategy and you want to share Unilever's strategy, it is better to share their webpage (with strategy, mission, business model etc.), than to repeat it on your own slide.

The continuation of the learning process

Shorter classes and/or less classes may reduce the "digital contact hours", but that does not mean that the workload will be reduced for the students. The same is for the academic workload for lecturers, because the preparations will take more time. For the students we recommend giving them some assignments what they can do in the digital peer groups themselves and they can also plan these in between break outs sessions themselves. The lecturer does not have to be present in these sessions. Most students have already some experience with more "traditional" elearning systems. Keeping the learning flow going from a scheduled session to the next one will support effectiveness and productivity.



As we have seen, virtual communication implies some changes to face-to-face communication in a variety of settings. Our aim was to provide you with practical tips and learnings from our experiences and many hours of desk research to organize our own events and improve our team management, communication to our members as well as with external stakeholders and audiences

In this guide you can find information that has been applied, tested and/or researched. It is not provided by platform owners and tools providers, but rather has proved to be useful when organizing our virtual events or teaching lessons. The whole ABIS team contributed with their knowledge and insights to this toolkit, that is why we were able to give you lots of practical tips and information ranging from communication tools to teaching insights.

We hope that this toolkit will help you in adapting more easily and more efficiently in your daily professional and personal life at at time where we are physically distanced, but can be more even more socially connected. And hopefully engaged to rebuild a better world post-Covid 19.

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You can contact us if you would like to discuss any topic below further on:

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Who we are

ABIS - The Academy of Business in Society is a business-academic network working together to advance the role of business in society through research and education. Our ambition is to make a significant contribution to the debate and the practice involved in equipping current and future business leaders with the knowledge, skills and capabilities for the long-term success of business in society.

Our story

ABIS was founded in 2001 and launched at INSEAD in 2002 with the support of the leading Business Schools in Europe (INSEAD, IMD, London, ESADE, IESE, Copenhagen, Warwick, Vlerick, Ashridge, Cranfield,

Bocconi) in partnership with IBM, Microsoft, Johnson & Johnson, Unilever and Shell. This initiative was driven by a shared belief that challenges linked to globalization and sustainable development required new management skills, mindsets & capabilities. ABIS developed a strong role in responding to this need and it focused on integrating sustainability at the heart of business curricula, corporate policies and business strategies by providing knowledge and capacity building.

ABIS is a business-academic network working together to advance the role of business in society through research and education.

Our network

Our network is unique as it is big enough to have always new insights and ideas flowing, but small enough to create intimate atmosphere and build long lasting and strong connections with each other. We are one of very few business-academic networks, fostering this relationship as we are convinced that research and business is inseparable, and that academia and business need to work together to create a sustainable world. We are proud to claim that our members are willing to share openly their challenges and dilemmas to learn and further progress. This creates an inclusive community and environment where individuals feel safe to share and value each other insights and experiences in order to scale up the efforts in research, education and promoting sustainable ways of doing business.