



# **Organising a hybrid or virtual conference**

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# Organising a hybrid or virtual conference

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## Hybrid conferences

We understand hybrid conferences as an in-person conference with a virtual component.

The simplest format is an in-person conference where the talks are streamed to registered virtual participants, or alternatively, the talks are recorded and made available to the virtual participants after the talk. The latter has the advantage of allowing participants in different time-zones to watch the talks at a convenient time.

With little extra effort, virtual participants can be included in the Q&A sessions via the chat options offered by most virtual streaming platforms (e.g. Zoom, Cisco Webex, Vimeo, YouTube Live and others).

Virtual participants could also give short talks based on the abstracts submitted. Sufficient time needs to be allocated in the programme to accommodate the switch between virtual and on-site speakers. Virtual speakers should be encouraged to present live but in case of technical issues, it is recommended that they provide pre-recordings of their presentations.

Social networking platforms, such as Wonder.me, Gather.Town, SpatialChat, Topia and others allow participants to meet in virtual space. According to our survey, respondents felt that, if attending the conference in person, they might not have time to join any virtual social networking event. On the other hand, virtual participants may find the opportunity to virtually meet with other (virtual) participants useful.

Some of our hybrid conference organisers have experimented with virtual poster sessions, i.e. in-person and virtual participants met in virtual space to discuss their posters. This can be done e.g. by using Gather.Town, Wonder.me, Remo or individual Zoom break out rooms for posters. In practice, this requires that the in-person participants find a quiet space (either in the venue or in their hotel rooms) to join the virtual poster sessions.

An alternative may be to hold separate poster sessions for in-person and virtual participants, and/or to hold a virtual poster session before or after the meeting for all participants.

Another option is to ask all poster presenters (virtual and in-person) to upload their posters on the meeting website (e.g. Whova, an all-in-one solution; figshare [for data sharing only]). Selected virtual poster presenters can also be invited to give flash talks as part of the programme.

Prepare all poster presenters on how to present their poster in the chosen platform.

See more suggestions below in the **HOW TO** section.

# Technical requirements

Taking an in-person conference into virtual space requires technology in addition to the usual AV equipment:

1. A virtual platform that allows access to the talks for virtual participants.

This could range from a simple webpage with links to the talks to a sophisticated platform with a chat, forum and other features.

EMBO can offer a simple conference webpage with links to the video stream. This is based on the webpage that EMBO provides to workshop/course organisers.

Otherwise, organisers of EMBO Courses and Workshops can choose a platform of their liking (including the virtual EMBO platform). Platforms that have been used by recent EMBO hybrid meeting organisers include Gather.Town and Whova (the latter also doubles as a meeting app for on-site participants).

2. A licence for streaming software (e.g. Zoom, Cisco Webex, YouTube Live, etc.)

Organisers of EMBO Courses and Workshops can use the EMBO Zoom licenses (for meetings and webinars).

Otherwise, organisers of EMBO Courses and Workshops can choose the software of their liking.

3. Cameras, microphones, audio mixer(s) and on-site technical equipment to provide sound and video to the virtual participants.

It is recommended to select a venue that provides these services or to arrange this with the venue and hire the necessary professional equipment and technicians. Organisers should have a clear idea of what they want and discuss the possibilities with the technicians. AV technicians may not be familiar with the specific requirements of scientific meetings, a thorough briefing may be necessary. Points to consider are:

- a. For optimal engagement, the video streamed to the virtual participants should switch views between presentation, speaker and the audience.
- b. During Q&A sessions, the audience needs to use microphones, so that questions are audible for the virtual participants. A camera filming the audience during Q&A sessions is helpful.
- c. When recording talks for later viewing by the virtual participants, make sure that you have software that supports the recording and that sufficient storage capacity is available. It is important to upload the talks as soon as possible after their live recordings, so that participants in other time zones have timely access to them.
- d. Conventional laser pointers used by speakers will not be visible to the virtual audience. Digital laser pointers are visible for both virtual and on-site audiences.

The EMBO grant can be used to pay for these services.

## Personnel requirements

In addition to the on-site arrangements, organisers need to consider the administration of the virtual side.

Apart from the technical and personnel requirements described above, an additional chairperson will be needed during the sessions to monitor the questions from the virtual audience.

## Speakers

A major reason why scientists attend conferences in-person is the opportunity to personally meet (prominent) speakers in their field. It was expected that speakers listed would also be present on-site to deliver their talks, even if some may not have stayed the full duration of the conference. In the future, this may change. Individual speakers may not be able to attend in person and may be invited to make their contributions virtually.

Another consideration is the carbon footprint resulting from long-distance travel, which may be reduced by asking a speaker from overseas to present remotely.

Organisers should agree on a clear policy on remote speakers and make it absolutely transparent to the participants prior to registration who of the invited speakers will be on-site and who will speak remotely.

Prior agreement from speakers for the streaming of their talks, and possibly recording for later viewing by the participants, has to be obtained. The virtual audience needs to be informed if a particular talk will not be available to them.

## Virtual participants

There are many reasons why participants may not be able to attend a meeting in person, these include: health reasons, care requirements, lack of funding, difficulty to obtain a visa, amongst other possible reasons.

Offering participation via virtual streaming of talks will allow these scientists to learn about the latest developments in their field despite these restrictions.

An upper limit to the number of virtual participants will be set by the streaming licence purchased, but organisers might want to take other aspects into consideration.

Please note that recorded talks may be important for virtual participants in other time zones, as they may not be able to participate in the live sessions.

# Registration fees for virtual participants

Registration fees charged to on-site participants cover part of the costs of the conference, such as venue rental, meals and speaker costs. Since the delivery of the virtual component requires significant finances, charging a reasonable fee to virtual participants is fully justified.

Registration fees charged to virtual participants should be lower than on-site fees and may be waived for participants under certain conditions (e.g. for participants from low income countries). Group fees for multiple participants from individual labs or institutions should be considered.

# Transparency

Organisers should clearly specify how the conference will be run and what virtual and on-site participants can expect. This should be detailed on the website of the meeting and should include information on the following:

What is available for virtual participants, e.g.

1. Access to talks (specify which talks are not streamed), and which talks will be recorded and available on demand. Specify when the talks will be available and for how long (if applicable)
2. Participation in a Q&A session, via virtual platform or other means (e.g. via chat, meeting forum, email, Twitter) (if applicable)
3. Participation in discussion sessions or other on-site sessions and activities (if applicable)
4. Abstract submission (if applicable)
5. Selection for short talk/flash talk (if applicable)
6. Participation in (virtual) poster sessions (if applicable)
7. Means of communicating with other participants, either virtual or on-site, via chat, a meeting forum or other (if applicable)

Potential in-person participants should be able to see from the website which speakers will not be present in person prior to registration.

# Venue

Chose a venue that has experience in hosting hybrid meetings.

# Code of conduct

Organisers should have a code of conduct for virtual and on-site participants, a policy regarding data protection (both participants' personal data as well as the scientific data presented) as well as specifying the use of social media during the meeting.

Participants should agree to these upon payment of registration.

## Virtual conferences

Purely virtual conferences require careful preparation. The “conventional” in-person meeting programme that we are used to, frequently lasting more than 12h per day, cannot be transferred one-to-one to virtual space. A virtual meeting should not be as long and intense per day as an in-person meeting. This may mean that the meeting may stretch over more days, has shorter presentations or fewer speakers. This may also result in fewer topics to be covered. The length of the scheduled breaks can be seen as a compromise between allowing people to have bathroom, coffee or meal breaks versus losing them to other activities.

See the sections above and below for more specific information.

# HOW TO

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Here are some suggestions on how to deal with more specific issues that you may be faced with when organising a virtual/hybrid meeting.

## **How to address the lack of rapport between speaker and the audience during the talk in a virtual meeting**

Use a platform that allows the speaker to see, for e.g., the chair, or a panel of session organisers.

Have all session speakers (and chairs/organisers) meet in a session before going live to make them feel comfortable and get to know at least some of the audience. This is particularly important for short talk speakers and flash talk speakers who may be less used to speaking in an online format.

Play artificial applause audio clips at the end of the talk.

Have a poll running visibly during the talk (of course not to be addressed by the speaker during the talk, but visible evidence for reactions to the talk).

Encourage participants to show virtual reactions (clapping hands, thumbs up etc.)

Q&A sessions can also help improve the rapport with the audience (see suggestions below).

If the speaker wants to see the participants or the chair while presenting, they should be advised to use two screens for a more comfortable experience.

## **How to run Q&A following a talk or a session in a virtual or hybrid meeting**

Sessions should be moderated by a chair who selects the questions.

Questions could be upvoted by participants.

Live questions where the moderator preselects the questions and opens a channel for the question to be asked live can make the talk more interactive.

Collect all incoming questions in the poll/chat/Q&A of the platform or directly in e.g., a Slack or Jitsi channel, and ask the speaker to answer them in writing during the course of the meeting. The collected questions could be downloaded and posted on for e.g., a dedicated Slack/Jitsi channel so that the answers are visible to all participants.

Place speakers in breakout rooms and have live discussions with the participants after the talk. You may consider grouping the speakers to prevent that less popular speakers are alone in their breakout room.



## How to facilitate networking at a virtual or hybrid meeting

Organise speed networking events in breakout rooms. These could also be arranged using keyword matches of participants.

Meet-the-speaker sessions in breakout rooms with all participants visible. These could be organised to meet different requirements, for e.g., restricted to junior participants to allow for juniors to ask questions, or one for speakers and group leaders only, etc.

Organise thematic breakout rooms (select a discussion leader or host to kick off the discussion). The themes could e.g. be scientific, technical, political, or career advice related.

Organise mentoring sessions for junior scientists with an appropriate host.

Facilitate/encourage one-on-one virtual meetings via your platform or ask participants to indicate their means of virtual communication.

## How to deal with time-zone differences

- Record talks for re-viewing at convenience
- Restrict virtual meetings to half days, possibly repeat sessions at different times
- Indicate local times on the virtual platform

## How to run virtual poster sessions

Posters, possibly including a short presentation, can be uploaded on free or commercial platforms.

Reserve specific timeslots for poster sessions, like in live poster sessions. Poster sessions can be organised in breakout rooms, where each poster presenter has their own breakout room during the poster session. Encourage (require) presenters to be “at” their poster at the specified times.

Hold at different times of the day to accommodate different time zones.

Organise flash talk sessions to allow poster presenters to introduce their poster during regular meeting times. These could be pre-recorded to minimise technical problems.

If the platform does not provide one-on-one live meeting function, encourage poster presenters to publicise their own channel (e.g. Zoom [free for 40 minutes], Skype, etc.), so that those interested in talking to them can do so.

# How to address screen fatigue during virtual meetings

- restrict meeting duration per day to 0.5 days
- maximum meeting length of 3–4 days
- add adequate breaks, for e.g. 10-15 min between sessions or talks; 45 min to an hour for lunch

Disclaimer: This document is intended to assist organisers set-up virtual or hybrid meetings and offers merely suggestions and advice. EMBO does not endorse any software or services and does not take any responsibility for third-party services that the organiser may choose to use.