

CASE 1

Virtual Workshops – Real Surprises

Innotiimi

Many people believe that collaborative virtual (group work) methods are – in theory – just what their project or team would need; but many are hesitant because of their complexity. Katri Auvinen experienced virtual challenges but also the benefits.

von Katri Auvinen (Innotiimi)

Since starting to develop virtual versions of Innotiimi's group work methods more than eight years ago, I have been genuinely surprised by many things. Fortunately, the reasons have been primarily positive. Of course there have been other kinds of surprises too, often related to the complexity of the concept and technical issues.

Anyone experienced in virtual collaboration knows that computer technology can fail, and it often feels it does just that when you least expect it. Unfortunately, technical problems can occur with every virtual meeting tool, be it screen sharing, teleconferencing, video conferencing or VOIP, simple or sophisticated systems. These difficulties may be due to software, hardware or internet connections – and it continues to surprise me that we have not been able to create more reliable systems.

Nonetheless, after all the cancelled business trips due to worldwide flu epidemics and weeks of ash cloud problems, technical challenges have started to feel less and less important in comparison. Preparation is the key, even more so in virtual than in face-to-face collaboration.

The Unique Benefits of Virtual Workshops

The quality of virtual meetings can, beyond doubt, increase significantly with the introduction of collaborative group work methods. Still, I had expected that even complex virtual processes would, quality-wise, always fall short of »real«, face-to-face workshops. I have been most impressed to learn the opposite.

1. High quality contents – and results

Many participants have confirmed that virtual methods allow for a higher than usual level of concentration and focus on the topic, as well as improved listening to others. Yet, the biggest unforeseeable benefit has been that all group work results are typed right away into a digital document. This enables instant editing and makes the documentation much richer and more complete than any marker-to-flipchart notes. You can just imagine how easy it is to compile the minutes!

2. Some of us truly prefer virtual brainstorming

I had always assumed that virtual collaboration is by design less rich than being present in a group. There-



fore, I have been astonished to get the feedback from a large number of participants that they have actually felt more free and self-confident to contribute to a virtual discussion than when someone is looking at them.

3. Voice can largely replace body language

Voice conference and screen sharing are my favourite tools. The rest of the world keeps developing video conference tools, but I have noticed that I need a video connection less and less. In virtual collaboration, voice is able to carry far richer messages than I had previously thought. Perhaps because of this, also creating a nice atmosphere and a feeling of togetherness, even genuine team building, is much easier virtually than I had anticipated.

4. Increased flexibility, shorter lead times

My initial intent for organizing participatory workshops virtually was to help save costs and reduce travelling time. However, a much bigger benefit for many seems to be the possibility to organize workshops more flexibly and with less delay. It is often easier to find a common availability for a short virtual session than for an event that requires travel. Thus, lead times of processes and projects can be considerably shortened – and the overall number of collaborative opportunities is increased.

My experience shows that combining collaborative methodology with the virtual meeting environment can create a double benefit: not travelling but yet getting results that are almost as good as in face-to-face workshops – sometimes even better.



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Katri Auvinen works as consultant at Innotiimi in Belgium. Her main field of work is leadership development and team building, largely in the European institutions. The development of virtual group work methods and better practices for virtual teams is close to her heart, as she herself has been part of various virtual teams in the last 14+ years and has had her share of ineffective virtual meetings.

She has used virtual workshop methods in interactive virtual meetings, idea generation and planning sessions in dispersed organizations and project teams as well as in collaborative e-learning. Katri performs completely virtual training as well as virtual follow-up sessions for face-to-face training.

In 2007, Innotiimi won the International BestPractice-IT Award at CeBIT for the innovative way of using virtual meeting tools.