Virtual Training for Virtual Success: Michigan State University Extension's Virtual Conference

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Abstract: Michigan State University Extension conducted its first virtual conference, attended by more than 600 staff, with a weeklong menu of over 100 online meetings and learning sessions. Providing multiple types of pre-conference hands-on training to small groups using Adobe Connect Pro was an important key to success. Other success factors were pre and post training homework, well-trained "hosts" for each session, guidelines and checklists, pre-conference equipment check, virtual office hours, and immediate and friendly help. Embedding these factors into online training can help ensure successful adoption and positive impact of this new way of meeting and sharing knowledge.

Michigan State University Extension conducted its weeklong annual conference entirely online in October 2010. The decision to 'go virtual' was based on both the reality of budget constraints and the recognition that competence in online learning and teaching is necessary for relevance and survival into the 21st century (Milburn, Mulley, & Kline, 2010). Breaking past attendance records, an estimated 600 Extension educators, specialists, program associates, administrators, and faculty attended over 100 plenary, breakout, and poster sessions during the course of the week. Adobe Connect Pro (ACP) was used for plenaries and breakout sessions. Presenters and attendees were located in their offices throughout 83 counties across the state. Staff travelled to 13 locations only on opening day, which featured organizational updates and a statewide award ceremony distributed to the locations via ACP. Known as "District Day," the face-to-face meeting provided personal contact and organizational time for staff in their new districts, formed as part of a recently implemented statewide reorganization.

Evaluation feedback informed us that one key to success was preconference training. Because many potential participants had little or no experience with Adobe Connect Pro, early in the planning stages a detailed plan and instructional design for organizational learning was developed similar to Coppernoll, Jahedkar, & Murphrey (2006) and Murphrey & Coppernoll (2006). August and September were devoted to training approximately 275 hosts, presenters, and participants in both technical competence and participatory and interactive methods. Of the 236 respondents reporting they had attended at least one type of training, 80%

said the training was useful, and training was the most frequent answer to the open-ended question "What most facilitated your participation in the conference?"

This article describes the training processes and support documents that contributed to successful participation in the conference. The processes described can be applied to any type of online meeting platform and used for professional development of Extension personnel, or as a way to orient external audiences to effective participation in online meetings or webinars.

Basic Adobe Connect Pro Classes

Our Adobe Connect Pro introductory class consisted of a 3-hour online workshop. Pre-session homework focused on microphone set up for using VOIP audio. Session topics included meeting roles and rights, pod types, pod options, layouts, audio selection, meeting planning, sharing PowerPoint and pdf files, linking Q&A, using the presenter only area, recording a meeting, and managing the meeting information. Each participant uploaded a short PowerPoint introduction to share with the class. Class size was limited to six to ensure everyone had a chance to practice skills.

Post-session each participant was given his or her own meeting room and a homework assignment to change layouts, record an introduction, and share the recording with the instructors. Learners were offered a 1-hour follow-up class to review, practice skills, and gain confidence in such operations as sharing an application from their computers. We offered these classes several times per month in early 2010. By June we had a small cadre of people comfortable with using ACP for meetings; this became our "experienced host" pool.

Host Training

We recruited 20 people to serve as "experienced coordinating hosts" for our conference breakout sessions. Each host was assigned four to six sessions and invited to participate in a 1-hour refresher workshop limited to six per class. A session template was created with pre-populated content to provide a consistent look and feel and to simplify host/presenter setup. The agenda <http://www.msue.msu.edu/objects/content_revision/download.cfm/revision_id.596776/workspace_id.-30/Host%20Agenda.pdf/> for host training focused on practicing tasks hosts would be responsible for such as loading documents, screen-sharing, trouble-shooting audio, linking and managing the chat Q&A, and adding, deleting, or rearranging pods and layouts. We provided a checklist <http://www.msue.msu.edu/objects/content_revision/download.cfm/revision_id.596777/workspace_id.-30/Host%20Checklist.pdf/> and detailed written instructions <http://www.msue.msu.edu/objects/content_revision/download.cfm/revision_id.596778/workspace_id.-30/Host%20Instructions.pdf/>, including: 1) a screen capture of all ACP layouts in the template as a helpful visual reminder and 2) a contact list of experienced ACP troubleshooters plus an 800 number to the Library Computer/Technology 24-hour HelpDesk.

Presenter Training

Most of the 120 presenters participated in 1-hour online workshops, also limited to six participants each. Our goals were to help presenters with little ACP experience know how to operate their computer microphone, understand the role of their coordinating host, and make their sessions interactive and participatory. Some conference sessions consisted of a presentation followed by Q&A. Many incorporated poll pods for quick opinions and chat pods for brainstorming and audience interactions, while others had lively discussions. Our ultimate goal was to make the technology a tool to deliver a quality and interactive presentation. The presenter training agenda <http://www.msue.msu.edu/objects/content_revision/download.cfm/item_id.596347/workspace_id.-30/Presenter%20Agenda.pdf/> had four sections: setting up

the meeting room, making the session participatory, working with hosts, and ensuring audio quality. We also provided presenters with a checklist <http://www.msue.msu.edu/objects/content_revision/ download.cfm/revision_id.596780/workspace_id.-30/Presenter%20Checklist.pdf/> of preparations and timelines before, during, and after their sessions.

Participant Training

Our approach to participant training consisted of having online "office hours." A total of 37 hours were scheduled for participants to visit our virtual office room in ACP at their convenience. There they listened to a short recording on participating in an ACP meeting. Then they were instructed to ring our virtual doorbell so we could test their microphones and have them practice using status options and chat pods. This gave us a chance to connect personally with many, ease them into the use of an online meeting space, and identify connectivity or microphone issues. An estimated 150 attendees visited during these virtual office hours.

Keys to Success

Conference evaluation data show that on the whole, participants rated the conference a resounding success. This was in part attributable to the pre-conference virtual trainings using ACP to teach ACP. Convenient help options were immediately available, and most equipment had been tested for compatibility pre-conference. Keys to training success included: small classes (six or fewer), pre and post homework, lots of hands-on practice opportunities, clear written guidelines and checklists, immediate and friendly help, pre-conference equipment checks, and non-threatening virtual office hours for participants. Embedding these factors into online training related to online meetings, regardless of the platform, can help ensure successful adoption and positive impact of this new way of meeting and sharing knowledge.

References

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