



Best Practices for Interactive Webinars

Introduction

Webinars are a promising way to help nonprofits, public agencies, and volunteer programs develop quality training programs with a greater reach than traditional face-to-face sessions.

These online sessions allow the participants gather virtually, each at a personal computer and phone, offering almost anyone, anywhere, the ability to participate. In this way, webinars can transcend the boundaries of geography, bringing together individuals without the added costs of travel, time, or the cost of renting a space. For organization trainers, the benefits are clear. Not only do webinars provide meaningful educational opportunities to a broader audience than traditional in-person sessions, they usually cost far less.

Unfortunately, webinars often fall short of their potential because instructors fail to make the training interactive. Research has shown that adults learn best when they are encouraged to relate new material to preexisting knowledge. In comparison, studies show that individuals only recall 20% of information they hear and just 10% of what they read.

Since most speakers construct their webinars in a lecture format with slides, it is easy to see why webinars are not always optimal learning experiences. In comparison, participants remember 70% of information they discuss and 90% of the things they practice or apply. The primarily one-way nature of most webinars allows little space for this sort of activity and misses an opportunity to engage the wisdom of the group.

The possibility and reality can come together, however, with some basic changes in presentation and thoughtful planning.

Just like in-person, training, webinars need to be engaging and meaningful for their participants to be effective. Activities and discussion allow instructors to gauge participants' involvement in the absence of visual cues. Without this sort of interaction, attention invariably wanders and individuals use the time to catch up on their email or surf the internet. Making webinars interactive is not difficult; it simply requires planning.

This white paper will discuss a number of principles, ideas and concepts that instructors, trainers and facilitators can use to create more interactive and collaborative webinars. Online facilitation is a rapidly growing field with equally rapidly evolving technology. More work is being done every day. To access the most current research, articles, discussions, and advice, search online “online learning,” “best practices for webinars,” and “facilitation webinars.”

Great Webinars, Step-by-step

1) Set objectives for the session.

The first step in creating effective webinars is setting realistic goals. Webinars are usually limited to sixty to ninety minutes, and the best ones devote a large portion of that time to discussion and interactive activities.

Whatever the goal of the session, be sure that the objectives are in line with the experience level and size of the group, not to mention the time. How will you ensure individuals leave with increased knowledge, changed attitudes, or increased proficiency or skills?

Objectives must be practical for the webinar to be successful. Once realistic objectives have been set, it is time to think about the content, materials, and the resources needed.

2) Categorize material and content.

When gathering and developing materials, divide the content into three types:

- Materials and information that participants can read and review on their own.
- Knowledge and information that benefits from listening and questioning a subject matter expert.
- Shared knowledge and experiential learning that benefits from interaction between participants

With this knowledge, the webinar may be constructed in a series of segments that include pre-work and post-work, depending on the nature of the webinar.

3) Assign pre-work.

The easiest way to ensure that the group is actively involved in a webinar is to assign pre-work. Sending out relevant articles, podcast, video clips or interviews gets participants thinking about the material ahead of time and its applicability to their work. If the information is introduced in advance, individuals have time to consider questions and ideas before the webinar, leading to a more substantial and meaningful session.

One effective exercise is to pair up participants before the webinar and ask them to have a fifteen minute phone conversation about the webinar material. This can significantly boost the level of attention and participation during the real time session.

3) Plan the agenda carefully clearly.

Agendas for webinars should be planned in even more detail than in-person training. The session should be designed with tight content, lively speakers, and no more than 10 minutes of talking before an interactive exercise. Include the anticipated time-frames and the technological tools

needed for each segment. Leave roughly fifty percent of time for collecting and responding to ideas, questions and perspectives from the group.

During the actual webinar, post an electronic agenda or timeline that is highly visible to participants. Consider adding a check mark as you move on to each new section so that participants can track progress.

4) Keep it interactive

Many instructors rely on lecture-style presentations for webinars because they do not understand how easy it is to make their sessions interactive. With a little planning and creativity, many of the activities of an in-person training session are adaptable to a webinar.

The best advice is to take some time to participate in different webinars to see how other instructors are using the medium. Make notes as to what works and what does not. Adapt the most engaging ideas for your own webinars.

Webinar activities are limited only by the trainer’s imagination. A few ideas are listed below.

Interactive Webinar Activity Examples	Pre/Post Activity Examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderated panel with Q&A • Problem solving exercises with online brainstorming, categorizing, prioritizing • Idea generation prompted by statistics, images, graphics, video clips etc. • Storytelling and reflection • Quick polls • Discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-reading of materials, including slide presentations • Online introductions • Self-assessment survey • Partnering activities in twos or threes • Online brainstorming & prioritizing of ideas for later discussion • Session feedback surveys

5) Consider including presentations from an expert or a panel discussion.

An interview or panel discussion format with guest speakers will be more engaging than a lecture and will provide natural opportunities to collect questions or commentary. Ask participants to submit questions in advance or take live questions during the actual session. In larger groups, have participants type their ideas and comments through a chat feature or discussion board and act as a moderator, summarizing what you have “heard” from the group.

6) Use two presenters/facilitators whenever possible.

Having two presenters can be a huge asset in a webinar. It brings a mix of different perspectives while helping with the technical side of running a webinar. One person can handle the behind-

the-scenes questions or technological issues while the other presents. Presenters can take turns switching back and forth during the webinar. This takes preparation, planning, and practice to get right, but it can be much more engaging and likely to prompt input from participants.

7) Include individual, small and large group activities.

Varied delivery keeps participants engaged and active. Many webinar and conference-call systems allow for “break out rooms” of sorts, where instructors can break up the session into small groups for specific activities or discussions. Online chats and discussion forums can be used in a similar manner. The chart below lists a breakdown of individual, small group, and full group learning activities.

Individual learning activity	Small group or partner learning activity	Full group activity
Reading, listening to a podcast, or watching a video. Thinking about personal relevance of the topic. Researching, practicing, and journaling.	Reflection on reading materials, identifying issues and concerns, debriefing on exercises or activities, and brainstorming ideas and solutions to bring to the whole group.	Input to be shared through discussion, polls, or collaboration spaces like chatrooms both before and during the live webinar.

8) Match the interaction to the size of the group.

Though all webinars should be interactive, sessions with eight participants should not be structured the same as a group of fifty. In general, discussion-based activities become difficult with groups over 25, but interactive activities like polling or discussion boards can keep participants engaged. Consider using “break out sessions” where small groups get off the main call, call each other, interact and call back into the main call. Another option is to divide larger groups into separate sessions.

The following list gives some ideas on how to facilitate communication for groups of different sizes.

Mini Webinars 5-10 people: It is relatively easy to keep the tone conversational and relatively free flowing with groups this size. Asking provocative questions or engaging in group brainstorming can be highly productive.

Small Webinars 10-25 people: Trainers will run into issues with limited air time during discussion. Online collaboration tools that mimic traditional flip-charts allow everyone to get their ideas down quickly to focus the discussion. Voting tools can make collection and prioritization easier.

Medium webinars 25-50 people: Facilitation is essential to keep question and answer sessions focused and productive. Collaboration tools like flipcharts and discussion

boards are critical to maintain a high level of interaction. A guest speaker may help focus discussion.

Large webinars 50-150 people: Within a group this size, open discussion is apt to be limited to phone break-out sessions. A good alternative is to run a live discussion forum or chat for participants' comments and questions. Using a panel point-counter point format will keep audio conversation lively while inspiring online discussion among the group. Polling focuses attention on key issues and illustrates changes in ideas over the course of a webinar. Keep a copy of online group comments for a handout to distribute after the event.

Very large webinars > 150: By necessity, webinars of this size tend to be structured as a lecture by an expert or a panel. Live online discussion and frequent polls are important to keep participants attentive and engaged. This online interaction may continue through chat boards after the webinar.

9) Contact participants before the webinar.

Corresponding with individuals prior to the webinar is important to confirm their participation in the webinar and assess the group's interests. Polls can uncover the topics that they would most like to discuss. The webinar can be focused on the content the group finds the most difficult or compelling; other information can be provided for self-study after the session.

In the initial email, ask participants to submit a photo and a brief biography. Post these introductions on an online forum or create a handout to distribute to the group prior to the webinar. Being able to put faces to names will help build a sense of group rapport and combat the feelings of disconnection and isolations that can arise from webinars. For widely distributed groups, create a map with pictures of the participants near their location on the map. Distribute this map to the group or publish it on a web page.

10) Set ground rules

It is important to lay out ground rules or etiquette prior to a webinar review them again at the start of the session.

- 1) *Use the Mute Button.* Using mute prevents disruptive audio feedback, particularly on speaker phones.
- 2.) *Introduce yourself each and every time you start speaking.* There is little chance that everyone in webinar will recognize each others' voices. Using names makes it easier to follow a discussion, refer to past ideas, and build group rapport.
- 3.) *Minimize distraction and background noise.* It's best to go to a closed room to join a conference call to eliminate background noise. Try to ensure that there will be few interruptions that might disrupt the webinar.
- 4.) *Don't use a mobile phone if you can help it.* The sound quality is much worse than with a landline. If cell phones are the only option, make sure it has three or four bars and there is little background noise.

11) Encourage participation.

With a couple of strategies and plenty of practice, encouraging participation and discussion in webinars can become second nature. One approach that is particularly effective is informing participants at the beginning of the webinar that you are tracking participation by placing a check mark on a roster. Though this approach feels childish, it works.

Be sure to check-in verbally more often than you would in a face-to-face training. Ask things like “Elizabeth, are you with us? Do you agree with the items just discussed?” These process checks provide opportunity for individuals to stay engaged and offer feedback. At every chance, use names when verbally interacting with virtual participants.

To keep the conversation going, create an ongoing forum for additional ideas and reflections. Especially for individuals who take a longer time to process information, having a way to share after the webinar creates a more meaningful dialog.

10) Limit the slides.

Research and experience suggests that lecturing or reading from slides will provide significantly less learning than a discussion-based session. If there must be a lecture-style component in the webinar, provide a workbook in advance to encourage participants to take notes or engage with the materials as you go along.

It is best not to go more than five slides without giving an opportunity for sharing or interaction. One possibility is to integrate the information with a brainstorming or prioritizing exercise to allow the participants to engage more.

Better yet, keep the slides to a minimum or adapt them to a pre-webinar handout. By giving out slides in advance, the webinar can begin with a brief review and then move on to provocative questions. The means of doing this will vary depending on the size of your group. Consider an actual discussion with smaller groups; for larger groups, use chat, email, or other virtual tools that allow participants to “raise” their hands with comments or questions.

13) Technology will fail eventually. Be prepared with a backup plan.

Webinar technologies vary as do participants’ comfort levels. Stopping the webinar each time a participant has a glitch interferes with the flow for everyone. Set up a method for participants to get in touch with you if they have a technological failure that will not disturb the entire webinar. This can take the form of direct email or a chat feature. Consider having a co-facilitator to handle these behind the scene issues while you carry on with the agenda.

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Webinar Planning Template

Use this template to plan the activities for your webinars. Be sure to include all the necessary materials and technology needed for each as well as instructions for the trainer.

Activity	Time and materials	Trainer instructions