2 Planning and managing a virtual event

Burcin Kalabay Hatipoglu and Karin Elgin-Nijhuis

Introduction

We have seen an exceptional acceleration in the adoption, innovation, and acceptance of digital technologies during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. What was imagined as "*widespread adoption may be years away*" (Pearlman & Gates, 2010: 247) became real almost overnight – the transformational power of technology-enabled organizers to hold events through Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet. To survive, those organizing events had to transform face-to-face meetings into a virtual environment.

Even though events moved to hybrid mode as the pandemic lost pace, many agree that virtual events cannot replicate face-to-face event experiences (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022; Wreford et al., 2019); they are here to stay since we have all discovered the benefits of connecting digitally. As a relatively new and growing trend in the events field, research and exploration are needed to understand the management and effectiveness of the delivery of virtual events.

In a review of the events literature, based on their commonalities and frequencies, Dolasinski et al. (2021) categorize events into 20 types under four categories organized for professional, entertainment, social, and common cause. According to the review, professional meetings aim to educate, motivate, sell, and provide opportunities for networking with the participants (e.g., employees, customers, or association members) (Dolasinski et al., 2021: 559). The first part of the chapter focuses on the planning and management of professional meetings in virtual environments. The chapter uses the case of the HTHIC (Heritage, Tourism and Hospitality, International Conference) Heritage & Slow Tourism LAB (slowtourismlab.org) to illustrate a virtual meeting's planning and management processes.

Event planning stages for a virtual event

The planning of an event involves developing an operational roadmap to guide the policies and decision-making in the event management cycle (Figure 2.1). Quick (2020), in her book on event management, recommends starting the planning process by setting and defining the objectives and continuing with planning for the

budget, venue, audience, content, teams, stakeholders and partners, and ending with follow-up and evaluation of the event. Virtual event planning involves many of the same elements as planning an in-person event but with a focus on delivering an engaging and interactive experience through digital platforms. Despite similarities, virtual events bring specific challenges to the event organizers and the participants (Döring et al., 2022; Standaert et al., 2022), which underlines the role of the planning and project management functions in executing successful events. For effective management of virtual events, it will be essential to note these challenges and differences between the two modes.

A virtual event involves the participants' attendance and interaction with virtual environments and takes place over the internet rather than in physical space (Godovykh et al., 2022). Therefore, the functions of researching and choosing an event venue before an in-person event will be replaced by finding the right physical environment for the organizer to host the event (e.g., studio or office space), and reliable and cost-effective technology and digital medium to deliver the event. Consequently, ensuring the connectivity of the internet will gain importance. The organizer must ensure that the host and presenters have the necessary hardware and software to access the virtual platform, such as a stable internet connection, a camera, a microphone, and speakers or headphones of a certain quality to deliver a satisfactory experience (Karl et al., 2022).

In a virtual event, the type of suppliers will differ from an in-person event, not only for the venue and technology components but also for other services like food and beverages, transportation, and accommodation, as they will not be needed (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022). Second, the management of the virtual event will differ from in-person events. To manage time efficiently and minimize risks during a virtual event, it will be critical to draft and share protocols and scenarios with team members and presenters. The following sections will review the essential elements of planning and managing a virtual event while highlighting the challenges.

Developing the event content

While Figure 2.1 shows the critical elements of planning and managing a virtual event in the form of a circle with one stage following the next, in reality, planning and managing is, of course, a more integrated and iterative process in which objectives and aspects of managing a (series of) virtual event(s) may be influenced by the choices made and the results.

The objectives, the format, and the audience will guide the organizer in determining the content of the virtual event (Figure 2.1). The content can be developed according to the event's objectives to help achieve them (Quick, 2020). For example, is the goal of the event to educate, entertain, inspire, or connect people? Depending on the answer, the format should align with the objectives. A business meeting, conference, or congress that aims for information exchange, education, or training can include keynote presentations, panel discussions, symposiums, and workshops (Dolasinski et al., 2021). Applying one of these formats or a combination during online meetings will be possible.