Virtuality: the Final Frontier?

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Telling anyone that COVID19 has changed the way we work is like knocking on an open door. It is less obvious how much it has changed our lives and how much of that change will stick after this crisis has passed.

However, crisis is opportunity. Working at home is now common. Like everything, this comes with upsides and downsides. No time lost due to commuting or traffic jams, being master of your working hours, uninterrupted time for completing tasks… but it comes also with a grey zone between work and home, less informal contacts, every meeting has to be planned, decreasing creativity due to diminished interactions, the loss of social awareness during meetings… I do not know how long we, homo socialis, can survive with social distancing. Unless your EQ nears freezing point, you need an active social network to stay happy. However, this is not an article to contemplate on our current situation.

A few months ago, virtual meetings took a high flight. Not only did the number of meetings and specialized applications increase, we, the attendees, are getting better at it. Microphone, camera, lighting, and chat discipline has improved with quantum leaps. Unless you have awakened from summer hibernation, you know perfectly how to behave during a virtual meeting. If you do not, please check the internet for some tips and videos.

With the many conferences and courses the members of our HQ organize, some were confronted with the travel ban turning in-person conferences into pipe dreams overnight. For those who were hit by the slamming door, cancelling was the only option, but others had to change their approach and come up with a virtual version. These pioneers tried to accommodate the brick-and-mortar expectations of their audience with simple, virtual meeting platforms. Just-in-time delivery was often combined with discovering the limited possibilities of these platforms. The result may now look a bit amateurish, but they were leading the way and their audience, being in the same boat, was forgiving.

After the first wave – I do not refer to the epidemical waves – of rudimentary meetings, the second wave came in the form of webinars. These were better organized and better looking. Although the interaction with the audience did increase, it is still, in essence, a one-way communication event. The whole flow is directed from or to the 'expert' on the main screen. It is a serial happening focused on delivering the intended content.

There is a third wave coming. I have no complete idea of how this one will look, but the result will be webinars on steroids. The possibilities of the virtuality will be explored further and exploited better. I compare the evolution of the last months to the space race with the initial virtual meetings the first rocket test, small attempts to jump into space. With webinars, we started circling mother earth. With the third wave, it is time we go for the moon!

Not much unlike in-person conferences, webinars organizers are herding the attendees like sheep through a series of live briefs. Attendees do not have much choice but to sit in the dedicated conference room and listen to the speaker scheduled for that slot. Only at that moment, they can decide to listen or do something else. One advantage is that escaping a virtual room is much easier than trying to leave a crowded hall through the screeching backdoor.

A conference should aim at maximizing the outcomes for the attendees packaged in an overall theme. People should only invest time in what they assess as important or interesting for them, however, current technology does not allow for full individual control yet. As organizers, we still have to do some guiding. However, it will be more like herding cats. We must make every activity appealing to the audience and make these events available at a time convenient to them.

This means maximizing the use of pre-recorded talks and limiting the sequential screen time to the interactive moments that add value to the live moment. Only the moments when the audience can interact in real-time, like questions and answers sessions, panel discussion, and networking must be sequentially programmed, the rest is up to the individual discretion.

This change in approach has a far-reaching effect. Selling your conference is no longer the focus of your media campaign. Every single activity must now be 'sold' to the attendees. The question of how many attendees at the conference becomes a superfluous one. Even the length of the conference is uncertain. And there will certainly be effects that we did not foresee, yet.

As HQ SACT's Concept Development and the Operational Experimentation branches, we are organizing our Concept Development & Experimentation (CD&E) conference (26-29 October) by exploiting and exploring the possibilities of the virtuality. I should underline 'trying' as we consider this as a kind of experimentation. We will try out things that will be successful and others that will not. Not failures as we will, without doubt, learn from all. Our audience will voluntarily accept being part of such an undertaking.

With the risk of our experiments not delivering what we want, you may wonder why I tell you this. Well, surfing on the third wave means we are exploring the unknown. Understanding the previous waves and the lessons learned might help us to see better

what lays ahead. We want to reach to all who want to share their experience. There are challenges out there that we do not know how to overcome. Of some, we are not even aware. We can use any help and input you offer us.

We have excellent speakers as astronauts ready to bridge the distance. However, to land on the moon, you need an organization inspired for space exploration. For virtual events, we need an HQ inspired to work together and take the next step. To boldly organize a conference that no one has done before.