ON-LINE FACILITATION TOOL

/ Detailed description of the activity

The purpose of this activity is to guide organisations and facilitators in creating and leading online sessions for brainstorming, planning and agreeing on common decisions in international projects.

These kind of online sessions can be organized through variety of free and paid video conferencing applications, such as: Google Meet, Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Cisco Webex and others. Chose the one that you are most comfortable working in and that your participants are familiar with. You can make a test meeting, to make sure that everything works as it should and that your tech (camera, microphone etc.) is compatible with the platform you chose.

As any other activity that is based on non-formal education, you should first be aware of the backgrounds, profiles and needs of your group of participants. That can be achieved by introducing application forms before the online session that will ask about the personal and professional backgrounds of participants as well as about their motivation to participate in the activity/project. Based on the answers, you will be able to plan and adapt the working agenda as well as introduce elements that are important for the goal of the online session.

Once you know the backgrounds and needs of your participants and have defined your working agenda, then generate a connection link on one of the above-mentioned video conferencing apps and send it to participants via email. It is advisable to also send them information related to the online session structure, goals, expected outcomes, agenda with timing and practical information.

Before starting the online session, join earlier in the meeting to be able to greet the participants and give enough time to everyone to join and set things up on their end before the meeting officially starts. It is always nice to prepare a welcome screen and play relaxing music in the background before officially starting the session. When the participants join your online session, greet the participants by name to let everyone know they are there. To break the ice, you can ask participants to share their news, weekend stories or holiday plans. Encourage people to turn on their cameras since when people online join without video, it's easy to forget that they're there. Seeing people's faces and reactions helps the ones in the room be more aware of the online presence and leads them to interact with other participants more. You can also provide a set of rules for the meeting at the start.

When you start the session, introduce yourself and any other facilitators that will lead the online meeting. Introduce shortly the purpose of the session/project and what you are expecting to achieve. Also introduce the working agenda and the flow of the session, so everyone is aware in what to expect from the meeting. It's also good to use a background graphic or PowerPoint presentation that will show a summary of what you are saying. Continue by allowing participants to introduce themselves. You can do this by asking participants to share where they come from,

what is their academic and professional backgrounds, what is their interests and to present shortly their role in the organisations they represent. Once everyone has introduced themselves you can dive into the topic of the session.

In our case, we organised an online session to brainstorm, plan and decide upon creating a web platform for social inclusion of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and second generations of migrants. The platform is one of the results set to achieve through the Erasmus+ Strategic partnership project "Exodus" that is running from 2020 to 2023. The goal of our session was to decide about the structure, functionality, information and resources/materials that the platform will contain as well as about how the platform will be used during and after the partnership. Since our project has 6 partners from Italy, North Macedonia, Germany, Portugal, Spain and Turkey who were represented by 3 participants each, we decided to split the online session into 6 meetings with each partner organisation separately and one final meeting with everyone together. This was done to avoid too many people speaking and sharing their ideas at the same time and to avoid having a too long session that can easily get tiring and hard-to-focus for participants. This decision also allowed us to work with smaller groups that guarantees that everyone will share their thoughts and ideas.

After the introductions, each meeting started with short presentation of what is a standard platform, what it should contain, how it can be used and giving a first idea for its design. We also created the landing page and initial menu of the platform beforehand in order for participants to be able to see what we are talking about. The platform (www.exodusplatform.eu) was screened during this presentation and then the participants were asked to give their input and ideas for the structure of the website, its design, menu with sections, landing page, visuals, widgets and information that it should contain about the project and partners. After the first brainstorming, we started to discuss section by section which in our case was 1. Landing (front) page, 2. About the project, 3. Partners, 4. News, 5. Resources and 6. Contact. During each discussion about the different sections, the facilitator screened different websites and platforms that allowed the participants to visually see and get ideas on different ways of how the content can be presented on the platform. While the participants were giving comments, ideas and suggestions given, the facilitators took notes of what they are sharing. Once we finished with brainstorming for each section, we also discussed of what the partner organisations should provide the web designer in terms of logos, information for their organisations, contacts, articles on the project topics etc.

After the brainstorming process for the online platform, we continued with a brainstorming about the communication strategy that we will use during the project. This strategy includes deciding about the channels of communication, social media that we will use, the visual identity that we will use (logo and promotional materials), how often we will publish updates, what we will publish and who will be responsible for it. Participants shared their experience in this regard as well as the communication strategies that their organisations are using for other projects and activities. Facilitators again took notes of the input given by participants.

When we finished the meetings with each partner group, we organized a final meeting on which everyone was present. Since all the previous meetings followed the same agenda, everyone was aware of what was previously discussed. The final meeting started the same as previous meetings by providing time for participants to briefly introduce themselves to the others. Then we continued by presenting all the input and ideas given by participants for the structure, content, functionality, design, platform sections and communication strategy. For this, we used

the notes that we took during the separate meetings to create a presentation that summarized their input. For this purpose, you can also use a [Google Jamboard](#), [Miro](#) or other digital collaborative tool that can help you to give structure to your notes as well as make them visible to participants in online meetings. After we presented all the participants' input from previous meetings, we made a final decision about the things everyone agreed on. Since there were some things for which participants had opposing ideas (such as the 'About', 'Partners' and 'News' section) we needed to have voting. We used [Doodle](#) which is very easy to use to quickly make online surveys and collect answers. After this, we gave time for final comments, suggestions and ideas by participants as well as for discussing the next steps of the project.

The final meeting and with that the online session finished with a short evaluation from participants about it. Everyone had some time to express their feelings and experience with the meeting, its structure, quality, way of how it was organised, facilitators methods and the outcomes that it produced. We used [Google Forms](#) for this purpose which allows you to easily create an online questionnaire and collect answers that later on can be summarized into one document.

/ Modifications proposed by participants

/ Application area/group (how, where, with whom to use it)

You can use this tool for setting up online meetings on variety of topics with anyone who has a stable internet connection and device to connect to such meetings. It is preferable to use it with people who are comfortable working on a computer and who at least have basic IT skills. Online meetings can be especially useful for working on distance with international groups as they can save time, energy, resources and money.

/ Careful with/Pay attention to

- Turn off background applications and test your internet connection beforehand to check if its fast enough to provide smooth video and audio output.
- Chose a video conferencing application that you are most comfortable working in and that your participants are familiar with.
- Make sure that everything works as it should and that your tech (camera, microphone etc.) is compatible with the platform you chose. You can make a test meeting to check this.
- Be sure that you are aware of the backgrounds, profiles and needs of your group of participants before the online session. That can be achieved by introducing application forms.

- Send information related to the online session structure, goals, expected outcomes, agenda with timing and practical information.
- Join earlier in the online meeting to be able to greet the participants and give enough time to everyone to join and set things up on their end before the meeting officially starts.
- Encourage people to turn on their cameras since when people online join without video, it's easy to forget that they're there.
- Provide a set of rules for the meeting at the start in order to ensure that everyone is on the same page and behave professionally and respectfully.

/ Comments