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Making the Most of Webinars

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If you're anything like I am, you listen to webinars with one ear, occasionally checking your computer screen if a graph or image is referenced, perhaps catching up on email or articles while the webinar is running in the background. Despite the challenges for viewers, everyone from for-profit companies like LinkedIn (http://help.linkedin.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/530) and Procter and Gamble (<http://www.pgpro.com/Default.aspx?tabid=252>) to non-profits like the Red Cross (<http://www.citizencorps.gov/resources/webinars/redcross.shtm>) and City Year (http://alumni.cityyear.org/events/event_details.asp?id=297480) to professional associations like the American Medical Association (<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/education-careers/webcasts-webinars.page>) and the American Bar Association (http://www.americanbar.org/publications_cle/cle_courses_by_format/webinars.html) to publishers like HBR (<http://hbr.org/multimedia/webinars>) run webinars. These sessions are designed to do everything from teach particular skills or tools to discuss trends in different sectors. And they are aimed at all sorts of audiences, from clients to colleagues.

But while they're ubiquitous, webinars aren't generally especially effective teachers. Why? Content isn't tailored to the viewer, the virtual experience offers few opportunities to engage with speakers, there are no consequence if you don't attend, and no rewards if you do. Of course, there are exceptions. But here's the bottom line: there is little oversight or quality control even with webinars that count toward professional development requirements, or ones for which the participant or his organization have paid a fee. How can webinar developers engage viewers? And how can viewers learn more from webinars?

Research on which methods are most effective for sharing knowledge related to innovation provide some clues. In the California Civic Innovation Project' (<http://ccip.newamerica.net/>) s (CCIP) recent survey of city managers and county administrators in California, we found that webinars attempting to provide information about innovation in local government are not as effective as many other techniques. When we asked officials to evaluate the value of sources of information used in researching and implementing important new approaches, webinars ranked very low on the list. The most valuable sources: those that allowed direct, informal contact with human beings — personal contacts, other city/county staffers in California, and community groups. Webinars ranked between list-servs from professional associations and magazines and newsletters from professional associations.

Webinars can be valuable when they are offered and consumed under the right circumstances, or when they address areas unrelated to approaches to innovation — training to use a technology, or information about the details of a new legislative requirement, for example. Indeed, in certain cases, webinars have advantages over other types of learning. Webinars don't require the time or expense of travel. And participation in webinars doesn't generally require an extensive network.

But in order to make webinars work, both those offering the webinars and those participating need to do more to make the experience worthwhile. Follow-up interviews with survey respondents, and survey findings related to the importance of personal relationships and employee engagement suggest some practical approaches to how webinars can be made more effective. Professional associations and others promoting webinars should keep these rules of thumbs in mind when developing webinar content:

- Choose topics carefully. Consult members in the process of selecting topics. Many organizations have their communities vote on topics for possible webinars. In developing this list of possibilities, concentrate on subjects that can be taught through short presentations, not subjects that require long explanations or substantial exchange.
- Focus on training, not analysis. As evidenced by CCIP's research, webinars seem to work less well when they deal with topics around which there is no consensus, or that require enormous customization to be relevant to all audience members. On the other hand, webinars can be valuable when they focus on training or diffusing objective information on a discrete topic of shared concern and consequence.
- Create opportunities for dialogue. Technology now allows for webinar viewers to submit questions in real time, and skilled moderators can integrate these questions or themes into the discussion. In addition, professional associations can organize smaller regional or interest-based discussion groups to continue discussion after the webinar presenters sign off.
- Allow participants to grow their networks. If presenters and participants circulate their contact information ahead of time or during the course of the webinar, everyone can get more out of the webinar. They can continue the discussion afterward, and presenters and participants can make connections that will be useful in the future, especially on topics that do not lend themselves to webinars.
- Provide incentives for participants to demonstrate their mastery. In cases in which a webinar counts toward professional development requirements, there may be some measure of mastery offered at the end — a short quiz, for example. But this system can be useful in other cases, too. If participants can accumulate points or professional development dollars or achieve recognition based on their performance, they will listen more closely.

And those watching webinars need to hold up their end of the bargain, too. Here are some things participants can do to maximize their webinar experiences:

- Choose webinars carefully. Time is limited and not all webinars are created equal. When selecting which webinars to attend, consider how much value each will provide for particular projects with which you're involved. Think about your other commitments for the period. Also, consider which professional associations and other groups offer the most compelling content. Consult colleagues about which experiences have been most valuable to them.
- Watch the webinar with a group. A town manager that CCIP interviewed described how she convenes groups of employees to watch webinars. Not only does this practice make employees more likely to attend and pay attention during webinars, but it also signals the importance of the topic and the value that the organization's leadership places on professional development. Plus, it allows for a more comprehensive discussion of how to customize the content for the organization.
- Take and distribute notes. Taking notes helps participants pay attention. Distributing them to relevant colleagues is not only helpful for those who weren't able to attend the session, but it also gives the note-taker recognition as someone who has learned and synthesized the material presented during the webinar.
- Use the webinar to network. When presenters and other registrants distribute their contact information, don't be shy about

following up with questions or ideas. It's perfectly acceptable to use the shared experience of the webinar to present queries on other topics, too. Personal networks are incredibly important for researching and developing innovative new approaches to problems. Webinars can be a means for expanding yours.

- Ask questions. Take advantage of technologies that allow you to ask questions of presenters, following up in an email if your question doesn't get asked or answered. In addition, talking to colleagues about questions or themes that emerged from the webinar can be an important piece of understanding the information and making it work for your organization.

Of course there is no way completely to avoid the occasional pitfall. Even the most conscientious webinar-attendee will miss one occasionally, failing to make good on his promise to watch the session at a later date. Even professional associations that spend a great deal of time and thought selecting topics and designing curricula will choose a dud of a speaker. Every once in a while the technology simply won't work. But webinars can be made into much more valuable resources if both sponsors and attendees do more to make the experiences worthwhile ones.