A quick guide to webinars

A webinar is a form of online presentation, discussion or learning event with one or more primary speakers and an audience. To host a webinar you need a platform that can share live audio and video to the audience. A webinar can be a simple presentation or an interactive discussion depending on your aims with the session.

The Improvement Service uses webinars to share knowledge and reach large audiences on defined subjects. We often use them to share best practice or examples of work within defined networks, but the most popular ones are current and focuses on new knowledge and learning and open to anyone interested.

When should we do a webinar?

It difficult to give an exhaustive list of reasons for having a webinar. It can be used for training, presentations, meetings, reporting, showcasing, generating discussions, getting feedback and much more, but many online tools can do this.

The IS generally uses webinars for situations where there's a clear difference between an audience and presenters. Our presenters are normally subject experts and sharing their knowledge about a subject and answering comments and questions from the audience. It is especially useful when there's a large audience and you need to control the interaction.

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Getting the tech right

What equipment do you need?

To deliver a webinar, you'll need a reliable up-to-date computer, a stable and sufficiently fast internet connection and a platform to deliver the webinar on.

It can be useful to have access to a webcam if you want people to see you – the one in a laptop will do perfectly. If you have several presenters in different places, they will all need similar access and equipment.

Sound is important, maybe even more important than images, and you should attempt to get the best setup possible.

It is possible to host webinars by just using the inbuilt microphone in a laptop, but to avoid unpleasant echoes and feedback, you will get much better sound from a headset with a microphone. Even a simple one from a mobile phone will improve the sound significantly.

For a very stable and clear sound, it can be worth using a phone connection along with a headset for both the host and presenters. Almost all webinar systems offer a dial-in option, and this can also help free up your bandwidth a little bit. In case of an unstable internet connection, a phone is by far the best solution, as this will let your hear and be heard in the webinar, even if your internet connection breaks up.

This can also be good advice for any attendees, who are having trouble with accessing the webinar or getting good audio.

If you're in a room along with other presenters, you should consider investing in an external table microphone. They are much better for recording sound from a group of people. You may also need an external loudspeaker if you also have people presenting remotely at the same time or if you invite verbal comments from the audience.

What service should we use?

The IS uses a paid service called GoToWebinar, but there are many different options available. Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Cisco Webex and many others are all providing platforms that can be used for hosting webinars.

It can be tricky to find a platform that works for everyone, so consider finding out what other organisations in your field uses and make sure that it handles privacy and data safely.

For the IS it is important that the platform has a good registration system, can record webinars and is accessible for most of our key audience in local government (who are often behind firewalls). We have room for 500 attendees on our platform, but most providers offer the possibility to scale your subscription to your needs.

It's all in the preparation

How do we plan a webinar?

It is always good to plan in advance, but sometimes you just don't have the time – we can organise webinars with few days' notice, but prefer to be able to advertise them 2-3 weeks before the time.

Here a list of things you'd want to get in place as quickly as possible in any case. You might not be able to have all of them ready before you advertise your webinar, but keep them in mind:

Theme and audience: What do you want to talk to an audience about and who's the audience? How long do we need for advertising the webinar to them?

When and how long: Find a time where you think your speakers and audience would be able to attend. We usually set aside an hour and try to limit the presentations to about 30-40 minutes and leave at least 15-20 minutes for Q&A.

Book your system: Book your webinar system, so you get the time slot you prefer. Leave at least half an hour space before and after the webinar to make sure you and presenters can log in early, and it's always important to have a buffer in case your discussion unexpectedly runs over.

Speakers: Who is going to be presenting? How much time do they have each? Leave room for questions. Generally having two different expert speakers will give them enough time to go into a bit of detail without being a wall of talk.

Description: Write a concise description with information about the webinar (What is it about, who is speaking, who is the audience, and what can they expect to take away). It can be updated along the way as you have more info available.

Communications: Where to advertise, get registration link published, contact networks that can help you reach your audience, put it on websites, use social media.

Format of the webinar: How do you engage the audience? Is it a talk to slides? A discussion using webcams? Is there a Q&A and does the audience get to talk or do you take comments and questions through a chat? There are many options and not a single correct way of doing it. Some presenters like a tight pre-planned format, others work better in a flexible structure, where the discussion steers the outcomes and discussions.

All of the above are dependent on what functionalities you have available, your aim with the webinar and your personal preferences. Talk with someone who has experience in webinars if you're unsure about what's best for you.
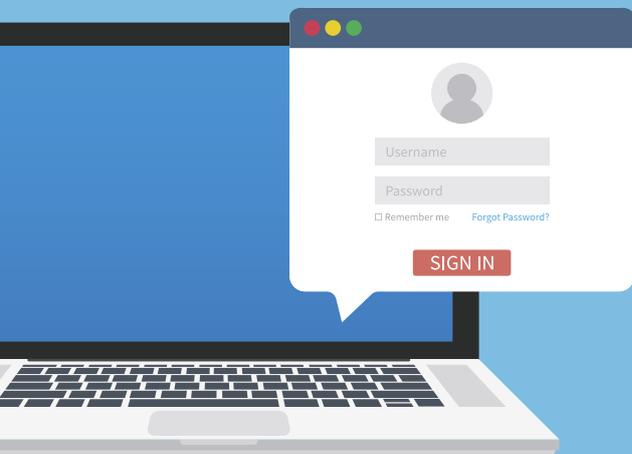
Other considerations:

Should you have two hosts? One for the technical support/written questions and one for talking and listening to presenters? The IS will usually have this on public and large webinars. Having two hosts is also a precaution for bad internet connection causing the host to be logged off.

Do you use webcams? Using webcams builds a trust in what is said as the audience can read your reactions, but it is a strain on a lot of internet connections and can also be a privacy issue. It can be very useful for webinars, where discussion between the speakers is the main content. Some webinars are just webcams and no presentations.

Recording: How and where can you record the webinar and what do you need to do with the recording to make it ready to share later? Do you have permission to record the presenters?

Q&A: Do you take "callers" or do you only take written questions? At the IS we rarely open up for microphones for attendees for public or large webinars. It's hard to control the time for questions, when you're not posing them. We also try not to mention names of the people asking questions for privacy reasons. This is a matter of preference, but consider it and inform your presenters (and later the audience) of the format you've chosen. Consider what you will do with any questions and comments you can't or don't have time to address during the webinar.

Pre-webinar testing and technical challenges

You'll probably have some small technical issues to deal with using webinar technology, but by testing with your speakers before the webinar, you can eliminate some of the more difficult ones. Try and do the testing as soon as possible, so you have time resolve any issues before the webinar.

At the Improvement Service we always run a test through the system we're using with any remote users. It is mainly to make sure that they can actually access the platform (using a home internet connection and private laptop will usually never cause any problems if the bandwidth is good enough).

We also try and make sure that the presenters feel comfortable with the technology, understand what they need to do during the webinar, know how to use their presentations, and know how they will be able to share content and address the audience. If all goes well, this can easily be done within 10 minutes.

Registration

Most platforms will have a form of registration service available to you, but the best services have a setup that can help you with keeping registrations, generating automated emails and support interaction with the audience. Make sure you are careful with the attendees' data and don't collect any unnecessary information. Remember that you might get questions and comments through the system, so it is important to have the emails sent to a place where you have access.

On the day

The actual webinar - some things to remember

As mentioned earlier, there's no single formula for hosting a webinar, but here are some of the things that we always keep in mind, when we're hosting a webinar for the IS:

Before you start

Make sure that you're in a **quiet space**.

As a host, you should **start logging in about 30 minutes before the start time of the webinar**. This will give you time to comfortably check that you have everything ready. Remember to check battery power, sound, headphones/microphone etc., internet connection (cable or Wi-Fi? Or both!), have a notepad and a glass of water ready.

Have polls, handouts or other things ready in the system, if you're using them. Have a couple of questions ready for the presenters if you need to fill out time before any questions from the audience comes in. You can give you presenters a heads up about them.

Have a copy of any presentations ready in case you need to run them on behalf of a presenter. Remember to ask if you can share them. Having slides with contact information and a Q&A slide can be helpful.

Get presenters to log in about 15 minutes early. Good webinar systems allow presenters and organisers to talk to each other before any broadcasting to the audience.

Ask presenters to completely mute mobile phones (and mute your own), and remember to close any app that creates popups on your desktops (Outlook and Teams are the main culprits).

Run through the agenda with presenters.

If you're using webcams **do a quick check of each other's physical backgrounds** – you'd be surprised what other people see.

Have names, titles, organisations, and other important details and info about your presenters written down, it's easy to suddenly forget something halfway through a presentation.

Press record when you're ready to start the actual webinar. Most dedicated systems lets you have auto-start recording enabled, but this might make editing necessary afterwards.

During the webinar

Start on time – or maybe about 2 minutes later, so people have time to sign in from the email links they have.

Use chat functions and possibly your microphone to let people know when you're planning to start and when you have started (when people should be able to see and hear the presentations).

Introduce your presenters and the agenda. Tell people what they can expect and how they can communicate with you for technical issues, questions and comments. Explain how questions and comments are used and when they should be sent/asked.

Hand over to your presenters – just as you practised in the pre-testing.

Try and **act on behalf of the audience**, so explain jargon or ask exploratory questions of the presenters when necessary.

If you're doing a Q&A, then remember you might not have any audience questions, so **have some standard questions ready** to fill the "dead air" before you can ask on behalf of the audience.

Be careful with sharing people's names and other info if you pose questions for them. They might not want that shared.

Try to end on time. Most people have busy calendars and might feel unhappy if they have to choose between leaving your great webinar or being late for an important meeting.

End with thanking presenters and audience and talk about the next steps and any interaction the audience can expect.

End recording.

End the webinar.
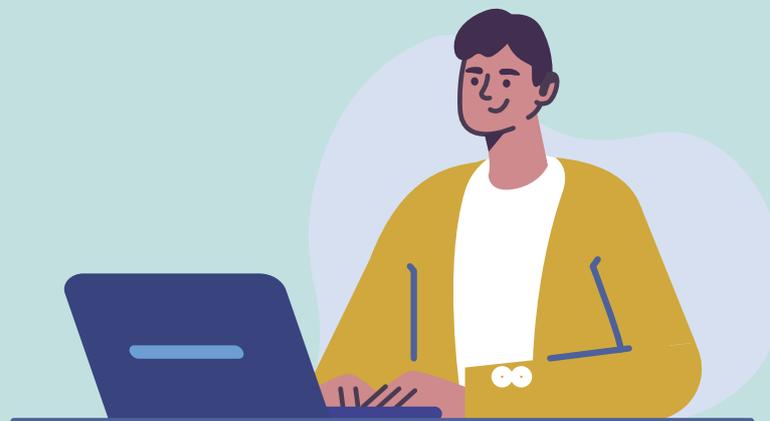
Post – webinar

Give your presenters a quick call or an email to make sure that they're happy and check if they are still ok with sharing the recording.

Check that your recording is working and make a backup if you only have it locally.

Check that you have **noted down anything you have promised** the audience and presenters.

In the hours/days following you might want to **contact your audience** with a link to the recording, link to answers to questions or a maybe a survey.

Share your content again and build networks

A great way to get more value from your webinar is recording the live webinar and sharing it to your networks afterwards. Sometimes you may have to edit the webinar a bit, but we generally try to get the webinar out in its full version as soon as possible. Remember that you should as a minimum provide a transcript for accessibility reasons when you share it. A lot of video services can help you get an automated transcript if you need to publish quickly, but beware, they are not without faults.

Many webinar platforms have a channel for sharing your videos, but you can also upload them to your own website, Knowledge Hub or for example YouTube or Vimeo for more control of the content. This makes it easy to share on social media as well. Include your presenters and their networks in any social media to give them credit for their participation.

After the webinar you can engage further with your webinar audience (if you have their permission under GDPR to do this) about other content, surveys, feedback and more. If your signup was open to the public, you might have found new audiences that you can interact with on other subjects.

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