

TURKU AMK 

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Inspire and engage remotely!

– Handbook for organising remote events

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Preface

Remote events are part of the modern world and work. Especially during the coronavirus pandemic, the need for remote events grew significantly. Even now with the restrictions lifted, we have not fully returned to the times when events were mainly organised in person. Remote events have their benefits but also their inherent challenges, especially from the organiser’s perspective.

During the project period, DigiMESH worked with companies and organisations to organise remote events and experiment with different ways of making these events more interactive and conducive to networking. The aim has been to promote highly educated immigrants’ employment by developing digital networking, to bring experts and companies together and share more information about digital networking with the professionals who counsel immigrants.

The DigiMESH project includes Turku University of Applied Sciences, Tampere University of Applied Sciences and International Working Women of Finland. The DigiMESH project received REACT-EU funding from the European Social Fund between 3 January 2022 and 31 August 2023. The project is funded as part of the European Union’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The experiences of the DigiMESH project resulted in this handbook, offering guidance and support for organising and planning remote events, especially from the perspective of interaction and networking. This handbook is particularly aimed at people who organise events in their work but have not specialised in event organising. This handbook offers practical tips and experiences for organising a successful remote event.

We hope you get inspired!

*Turku, spring 2023,
the DigiMESH project*

Remote events vs. traditional events

Events are nowadays organised in a variety of formats, both in person and online. In early 2020, the number of remote events grew significantly with COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions preventing in-person events. Instead, events were organised online using different platforms. Having happened very abruptly, this change was challenging for many organisers and participants alike. Now that remote events are more commonplace, they have become part of our everyday lives and are probably here to stay.

In terms of content, remote events do not necessarily differ from traditional events. Depending on the event, it is equally easy to arrange talks, presentations or panels online as it is in person. The main difference is that participants join the event remotely over the internet.

If participants do not have a camera or have their cameras turned off, a remote event will not generate traditional face-to-face encounters.

Benefits and challenges of remote events

One of the main benefits of remote events is their ability to bring together people who would otherwise not be able to meet due to long distances. When an event is organised online, participants can join from anywhere in the world. The accessibility of remote events enables internationalisation and a global audience.

Make your event more international:

- Invite international speakers from Finland
- Invite speakers from outside Finland
- Hold the event in another language than Finnish, most commonly English
- Take time zones into account when deciding on the timetable of the event
- Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere at the event



Remote events are cheaper than traditional events for both the organisers and the participants. Participants do not have to travel or stay overnight, and organisers do not need to arrange catering for participants. You also do not need to reserve facilities for remote events or rent or buy tools and equipment. Usually you only need an internet connection and a computer or mobile device.

Networking is one aspect that can be challenging for remote events. Remote events usually do not allow for splitting up into smaller groups, and it may even be impossible to have a chat just between two people. Exchanging contact information usually has to happen by email during or after the event. Nowadays it is common for participants to add a link to their LinkedIn profile in the event chat.

Participation in remote events is also dependent on participants' devices and internet connection. Slow internet or a low-quality microphone will impact the quality of an event, especially if the issue concerns a featured guest. During remote events, it may take an unfortunate amount of time to resolve technical problems or give instructions on how to use hardware and software. We recommend testing the functionality of your equipment before participating in a remote event.

In remote events, the threshold for dropping out seems to be lower than in traditional, physical events. For remote events, joining and leaving is only a few clicks away. It is precisely this ease of joining that often leads, perhaps a little paradoxically, to people deciding not to participate for one reason or another. You should keep this in mind when organising a remote event.



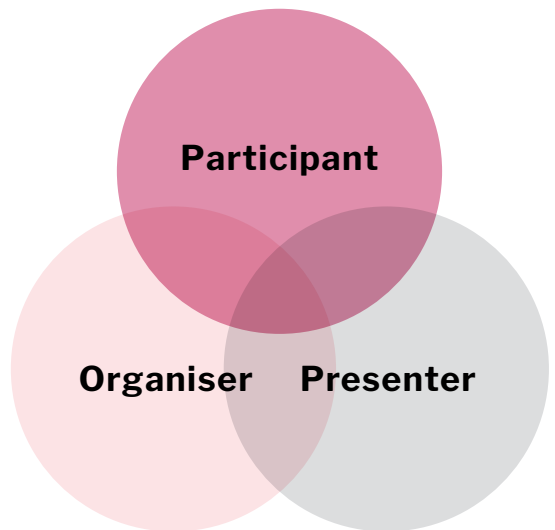
Interaction and inclusion

Remote events are often perceived as one-dimensional affairs where participants have a passive role. But it does not have to be that way. With just a little bit of effort, you can make events engaging, entertaining and interactive even if your participants are not physically in one space. Even when participants join an event remotely, their presence is important. The participants come together to engage in the content of the remote event. They create the spirit of the event. The organiser has the possibility to influence interaction between participants by making the content of the remote event engaging and conversational.

In a remote event, you can create an experience of participation simply by making it possible to comment and react, for example with a thumbs up feature and small polls. Although remote and live meetings use different methods of networking, the goal is the same: you want to enable encounters between people. An exception to this is video broadcasts and webinars where viewers are not able to participate actively even by commenting or “liking”.

Interactions may for example occur:

- between the organiser and the participant
- between featured guests and participants
- among participants.



Bigger events may also include virtual exhibitors and other types of participants. This guide however focuses on smaller-scale events that smaller organisations and associations can organise on their own.

Main elements of engagement

So how can you engage the participants of a remote event? Remote events do not stimulate all the senses like live events. For this reason, the opportunities for inclusion and engagement are also more limited.

Engagement can be divided into three main elements: **voice**, **text** and **video**.

You should still be aware that not every participant will engage actively in your event despite all the ways of encouraging engagement. It is important to respect this so that every participant can have a comfortable experience of the event. Do not force participants to turn on their cameras or unmute their microphones.



Voice

participants are given space and time to speak up.



Text

participants can comment, ask or share their contact information in a chat or comment field.

Video

participants can see the organisers, featured guests and other participants. The content of a remote event, such as a talk, can be supported by an engaging slideshow.



Encounters in remote events

Why would anyone attend a remote event and not just watch the video recording afterwards? Because of interaction. Taking part in a remote event gives participants a real-time opportunity to meet and network with other people. For this reason, it is important to be mindful of the audience and create opportunities for interaction during a remote event.

The ways you can enable interaction depend on the content and nature of the remote event and the number of participants. At its simplest, participants can have encounters in a chat by sharing their contact information, asking questions or commenting on the content of the event. But this might not be enough to generate a significant feeling of participation and engagement. As the organiser of a remote event, you can consider whether your event could include discussions in groups or pairs to enable networking and active engagement. You can even go further than simple group or pair discussions. One option is to include problem-solving, brainstorming or case assignments that participants get to work on. Many methods used in traditional events can also be implemented online with modifications.



How to engage participants?

Even if your planned remote event is more of a webinar, you can still include methods and tools that get participants engaged. This way you can make the event feel more purposeful and interesting. In remote events, participants will easily start multitasking on their computers, losing their focus on the event, and in the worst-case scenario, the event gets left to the background.

Activities should be spread out over the course of an event, especially when it comes to longer events. Engagement is however not an intrinsic value and it should always serve a purpose. You should not forcibly include small assignments, votes, word clouds or other activities. Also consider how many activities it is sensible to have compared to the length of your event.

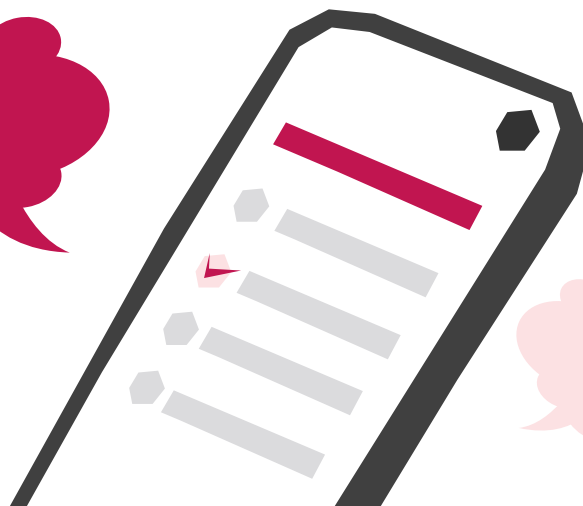
Engaging assignments can include:

- word clouds
- polls
- surveys
- small questions (share one thing, send one question)
- note applications (writing down thoughts on a platform).

Experiences!

The Mentimeter app works for initial warm-up. Do a couple of polls on your topic and orientate your participants for the event!

Note! The free version of the app only allows a limited number of features.



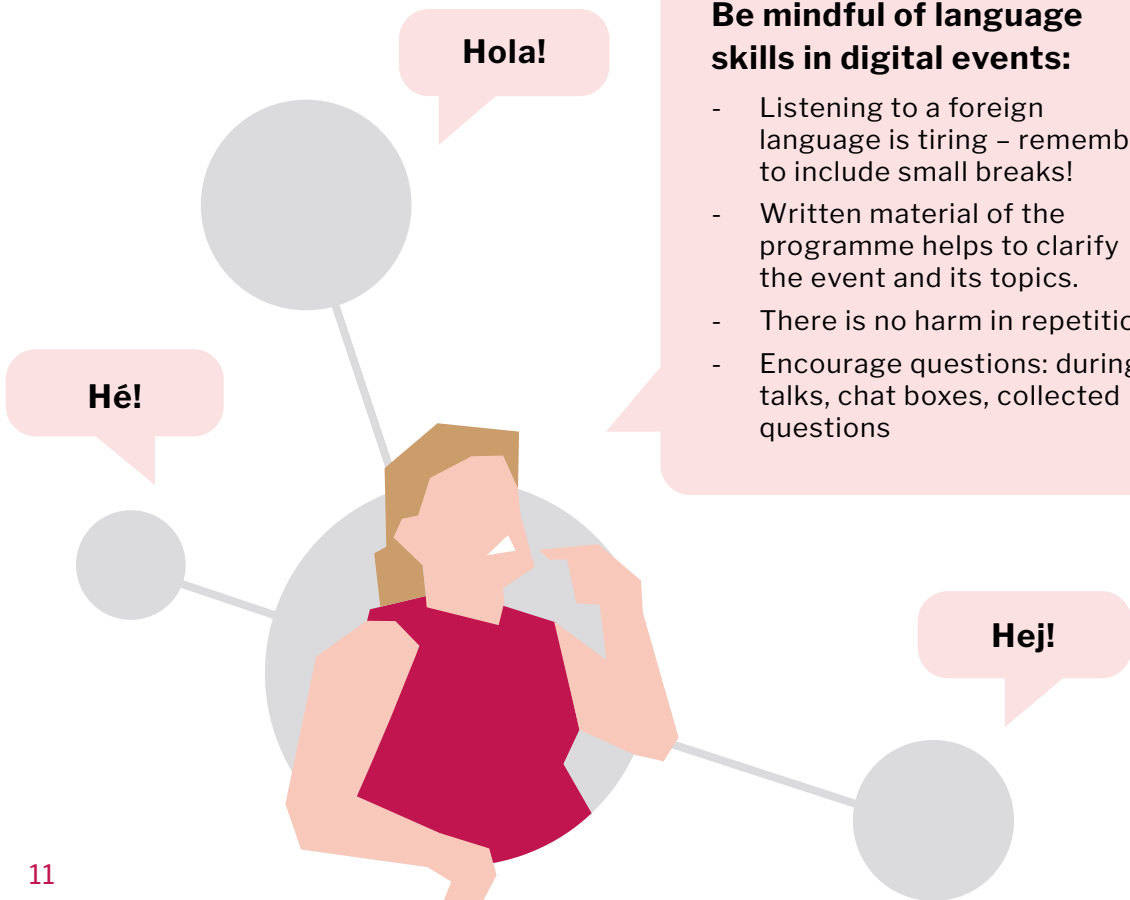
Successful engagement and interaction requires slightly more resources. Typically, you should have at least two people running a remote event. One person is responsible for the technical aspects, such as chat, setting up breakout rooms and doing polls and word clouds. The other makes sure the event is running smoothly, for example initial greetings, transitions between activities or speakers and any other possible discussions. Having two organisers also ensures that your event does not have to be cancelled if one of you gets sick.

Taking language learners into account

Listening to a foreign language and focusing on understanding it can be exhausting for a person participating in a remote event. People's ability to concentrate also depends on how much energy they have. If an event is organised in participants' non-native language, we recommend providing explanations of the contents and having transitions from one topic to another. Clear written materials help participants understand the event programme.

Be mindful of language skills in digital events:

- Listening to a foreign language is tiring – remember to include small breaks!
- Written material of the programme helps to clarify the event and its topics.
- There is no harm in repetition!
- Encourage questions: during talks, chat boxes, collected questions



Steps of organising a remote event

Organising remote events involves much to remember and learn. Luckily most of the learning happens during the planning and implementation process, and the more you participate in or organise events, the better you become as an event organiser. Next, we will look at good practices and tips at the different stages of a remote event, from planning to implementation and wrap-up.

Before the event

First you have to select an appropriate platform for your event. The majority of the most popular platforms are suitable for remote events of almost all sizes. However, some platforms require a licence or limit the features in their free versions. It is important to pick a platform that is easy to use, can accommodate the planned amount of participants and offers tools that help you manage your event. The most important tools include dividing participants to virtual breakout rooms and the ability to screen share. These features will take you far and allow you to organise almost any kind of remote event.

Once you have found a suitable platform for your event and created an event space, it is time to draw up a registration form and event description and share it in the channels appropriate for the target audience. Social media

is nowadays an important channel for promoting events. Depending on the nature of your event, you should promote it several weeks before the event. You can also send direct invites to suitable participants. Online registration form and promotion is the most convenient, making it easier to manage participants and communicate with them. If you use a physical invitation (e.g., a paper invitation, brochure, poster), you should use a QR code or short URL to link to the registration form. If your event does not have pre-registration, you can share the join link directly in your promotion, but this way you cannot send instructions or reminders to the participants before the event.

Our suggestions for remote event platforms:

- Zoom
- Microsoft Teams
- Google Meet



You should send a reminder a day or two before your remote event. You should include the join link in the reminder message so that participants can find it easily. Also keep the link at hand on the day of the event so that you can easily send it to people who have lost the link and ask for it just before the event starts.

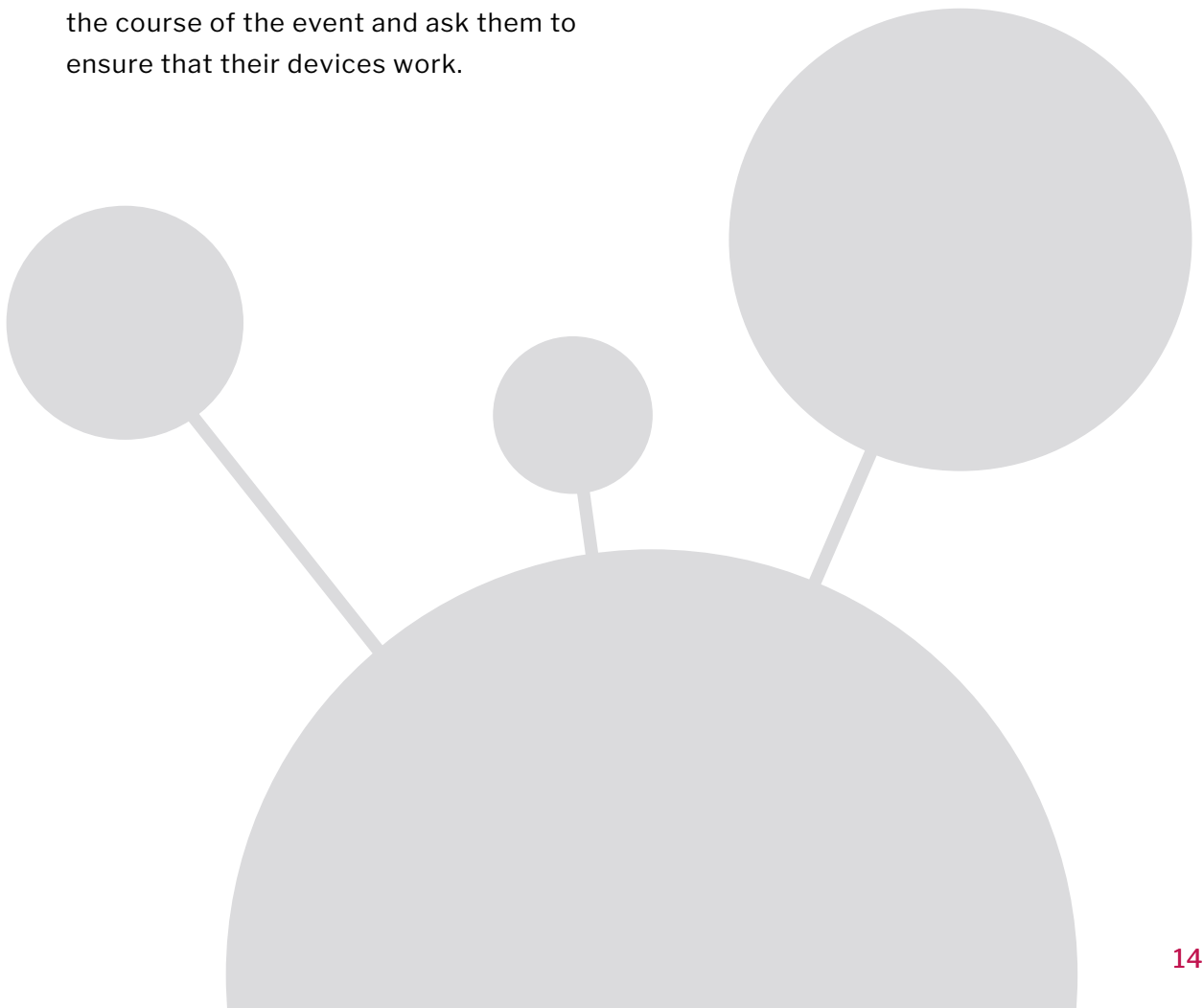
How to encourage people to join:

- Promote your event and invite participants well in advance
- Give clear instructions for joining the event
- Depending on the type of event, ask people to report if they are coming / confirm their participation in advance
- Remind participants about the event a few days before the event



You should start preparing for your remote event well in advance. Before the event starts, make sure your equipment works and that you have a calm environment. Depending on the nature of the event and your role, dress appropriately. Remember to take out all necessary materials and check that any presentations and speeches are finished. If your event has other speakers or featured guests, you can send them a message beforehand to make sure they are ready to participate and that they are clear on the course of the event and ask them to ensure that their devices work.

You should join the actual remote event a little before it starts so that you can help participants with technical issues if necessary and ensure that the meeting software is working. If the event includes materials that are available to participants, for example in a Teams folder, prepare to send them separately to people who cannot access them or otherwise find them.



Cooperation with others

Cooperating with other parties is often recommended when organising events, whether in person or remotely. Cooperation creates visibility, makes an event more versatile and brings different kinds of people together. An event organised remotely also requires much less resources from each organiser.

Networking plays a key role in work-related events, which is why bringing different people together promotes contacts and expanding networks.

With regard to cooperation, it is important to clearly agree on the division of labour and roles in a remote event, for example whether a company is only bringing their expertise to the event or whether they will also promote the event internally and/or externally. Cooperation with other organisations can also be very rewarding. Different parties have different skillsets, and they can promote a remote event to a wider audience and add more expertise and content value to it.

Experiences!

The easier it is for companies and organisations to participate and collaborate as an organiser or featured guest, the more likely they are willing to join. This is particularly true for companies.

This is why you should prepare the following aspects carefully when organising a remote event in cooperation with others:

- finalised event concept and facilitation (participating does not take a lot of company resources)
- ease of remote participation
- compact timewise (does not take up the entire workday, fits in with other work tasks)
- target group and topic are usually predefined (e.g., recruitment events).



During the event

Targeting content

In a remote event, maintaining participants' interest is important because if the content is not convincing, the participant can leave the event much more easily than from a physical space. They can log off discreetly with the press of a single button. For this reason, it is important to consider how you can attract your target audience but also how to keep them engaged throughout the event.

Experiences!

The number of people not showing up is particularly high in remote events. Prepare for a loss of 50% of participants at minimum!

This means that you can invite a generous amount of people, as you are not restricted by physical space in the same way as in-person events.

Content choices are determined by target group and theme in both live and remote events. Interaction with participants gives an event a sense of purpose and a reason to participate in real time.

Presentations

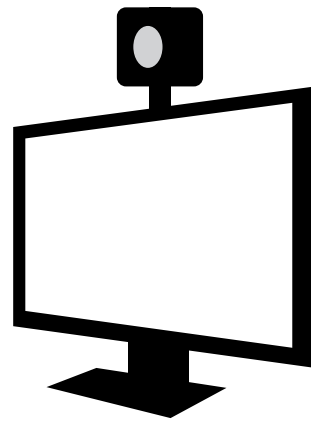
The performance quality of featured guests and other presenters is highlighted in a remote event. As non-verbal interaction is scarce or completely non-existent in remote events, people pay more attention to what people are saying and any visual materials they present. An event can be spoiled by nervousness, an incoherent presentation or slideshows that are difficult to read.

Being succinct is important for a remote event, as people are less able to concentrate when following a programme online. Speakers should engage and communicate with their audience and keep their talks short.

Presentations are better if you have a clear plan for your remote event and its featured talks. Featured guests should come prepared and be mindful of technical aspects – point their camera to their face and look into the camera.

‘Instead of shouting out your message into the void, talk to your audience.’

– Kati Sorjanen, Tapahtumantekijät



Presentation materials

Interesting materials maintain the focus of the audience, so putting effort into materials pays off. Presentation materials make it easier to follow the content, but the speaker should not hide behind their slides.

If you do feature presentation materials, you should have them as visual and brief as possible. No one wants to read a slide-show with a wall of text. You should also avoid small font sizes.

You are only human!

Despite preparations, it is important to remember that you are all only human. This will bring the organisers, speakers and moderators closer to the audience.

Don't worry about potential mistakes or setbacks. Events are first and foremost about interaction.

Although hybrid events have recently become more popular, they also have their challenges. Hybrid events require that organisers and moderators take many different audiences into account during an event. It is possible that remote participants get left behind as passive observers, which makes their experience worse. To engage remote participants, you should appoint one person to be responsible for remote participation, such as moderating the chat and highlighting any questions that come up. Consider in advance what form of implementation will serve the objectives and target group of your message and event. Remember to take the participants' experience into account as well.

Experiences!

In a hybrid event, some participants are remote while others are present in person. In the DigiMESH project, we organised company events where international jobseekers were present in person and corporate representatives participated remotely (Zoom).

Safety and security at remote events

The organisers and moderators are responsible for the safety of a remote event. They maintain order and are responsible for keeping conversations appropriate and safe for all participants.

A remote event can also be recorded and distributed to the participants only or made openly available to everyone online. It is important that participants know about the recording so that they can choose not to participate, use their camera or comment on the discussions. It is appropriate to let participants know well in advance that the event will be recorded, for example in reminder messages.

Not everyone wants to participate actively with their own name or face, especially when the topic is more personal. The organiser should consider in advance whether to let people chat or send questions anonymously. There are a variety of programs and applications that enable this, including free ones.

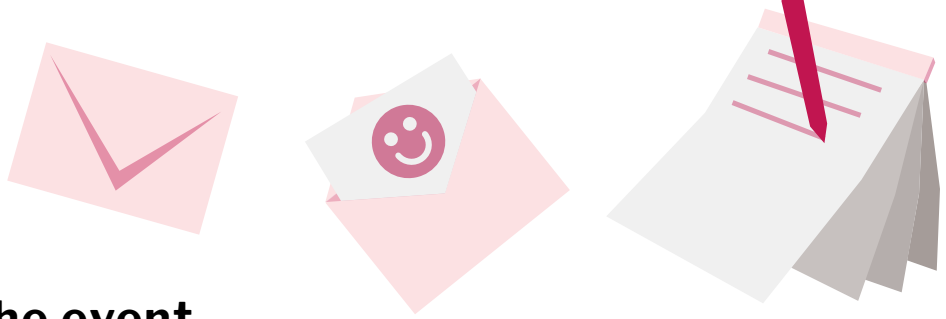
In today's world, data protection concerns us all. Event organisers are responsible for ensuring the privacy of people who sign up and participate. This is why you need to be familiar with the General Data Protection Regulation, GDPR. You have to prepare a privacy statement for an event where you collect and process personal data.

Make sure that you have prepared a privacy statement for the processing of personal data for the participants of your event!

Experiences!

Using another application alongside the actual event software may be difficult for participants and make it more difficult to pay attention to the event. DigiMESH has tried tools like Flinga and AnswerGarden to collect anonymous questions and comments, but the participants used them very little during the event.





After the event

Once your event is over, we recommend sending a thank you message to the participants. You should also thank the featured guests and give them positive feedback. You can easily send a feedback survey in connection with the thank you message. Getting feedback on remote events can be difficult, so it is important to collect it during or after the event. An anonymous form is one of the best ways to collect feedback, as it also enables giving criticism anonymously. The feedback you receive and any other lessons learned will be useful when you are organising your next event.

Remember to document any information you collect during a remote event, such as a participant report (e.g., Teams automatically generates a report after an event ends) or assignments done by the participants. You can make notes for yourself, especially if you know that you will continue to organise remote events. Learning from past events is the best way to improve as an event organiser, so you should keep previous events' successes, challenges and points of improvement in mind.

After your remote event, you should remember to pat yourself and any other organisers on the back. Organising remote events is not always easy, so you should be proud of what you have achieved!



Conclusion

Organising and running remote events is a skill that you can only develop by experience. Although this handbook is full of ideas and our experiences from the DigiMESH project, you will learn best by doing it yourself. Don't be afraid of making mistakes. There is an intrinsic human element to life and remote events. People are impressed by and enjoy genuine interaction – so be yourself when organising events!

The people of the DigiMESH project wish you good luck and unforgettable moments of success in remote events!



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