

The Virtual Workshop: Designing for Digital Engagement

As part of the Salus Healthy Cities Design Conference 2020, Heta and CBRE partnered to design and facilitate a virtual workshop to explore, post-Covid, what a healthy, hybrid ecosystem of work looks like, including and beyond the office. The facilitators were Yvonne Pinniger and Namrata Krishna from Heta Architects' Design Advisory team, and Muriel Altunaga from CBRE's European Workplace team. We had originally planned to run the workshop face-to-face, but like many things in the last year, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the conference got moved into the virtual world. We've written in depth about the goals, findings, and insights that emerged from the workshop itself, and you can read more about that [here](#), but in this piece we wanted to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of running a workshop entirely through our screens, which demanded a creative approach and some rapid up-skilling on the part of everyone involved.

As human-centred design practitioners, the three of us were well-versed in designing and delivering interactive and engaging workshops, but moving to the digital world required a significant amount of time and resource investment which we hadn't quite prepared ourselves for. We knew we had to make the session interesting and dynamic not only for the audience, but equally for our group of knowledgeable participants, all of whom were experts in their respective fields and very familiar with good workshop techniques.

Building in Variety

When designing the workshop, we had to consider the capabilities and limitations of the online platforms we were using, the digital literacy of the participants, and delivering an experience where everyone involved felt like they had contributed to and learned something around our chosen subject. The workshop was also being broadcast a bit like a television show, with a small number of people who were directly involved in the workshop, and a larger, but unknown number of people who were watching the workshop as an event. Therefore, the session had to use tools that enabled everyone to collaborate effectively by generating ideas, raising questions and sharing opinions, while also allowing us as facilitators to shape and guide the conversation. It also needed to be entertaining, not just for those participating, but for those watching.

We decided to split the workshop into three parts - the first was scene-setting where we as design strategists, and hosts, shared our knowledge and thinking on the future of the workplace. This meant our experts could sit back and listen for the first 15 minutes as a way to ease into the subject matter. Like in any good workshop, however, we wanted to then hand over the microphone to the participants for the rest of the 'show', and kicked off the engagement activities with the exploration of two different knowledge-worker personas, Adele and Lee. Finally, we wrapped up by asking our participants to share their expertise and thoughts on what should be considered when designing this ideal ecosystem of work. At the transition points in the workshop we did some coordinated, and amusing, stretching exercises and launched short, interactive polls, where the participants and audience members could all take part.

A Dynamic and Considered Approach

Having participated in a number of virtual workshops over the past year, the three of us were aware of the elements that held our attention, as well as where we felt bored or disengaged. We realised that in order to make our workshop a success, we would need to incorporate additional digital tools beyond what the main platform allowed us to do. As in a face-to-face workshop, we wanted to be able to break the participants into groups, brainstorm ideas, and get them to play back their thoughts. So we also added the feature of moving to a breakout room through Accelevers, the main platform, two different brainstorming sessions with several activities in the collaboration tool Miro, and polling the audience via Mentimeter, an interactive presentation software.

We didn't expect quite how much we'd have to choreograph everything, however, especially the transitions between jumping from one platform or tool to the next, which had to be synchronised so that everyone arrived and left at the same time. Beyond us having to quickly learn how to harness each of the digital tools to meet our aims, this way of doing things also meant that we had to think about every move along the way for the audiences, give clear and precise written and verbal guidance, and make sure people knew how to ask for help before and during the workshop.

Although this involved more work for us, we were determined to tap into the benefits of running the workshop virtually, which in many ways translated to instant gratification. Miro has a google image search function which enabled participants to rapidly create moodboards, and one of Mentimeter's key features is its ability to visualise survey results right away, so everyone could see how their answers compared.

During the workshop, as facilitators, we were continually checking in with everyone - we needed evidence that they were both clear on the task and that they were engaged, and were able to communicate in the way that best suited them - writing, speaking, drawing or listening.



Visual summary of our virtual workshop process, highlighting the additional considerations and steps required when designing a virtual workshop compared to an in-person workshop. (Diagram courtesy of Heta Architects)

Virtual Makes It Harder

A virtual workshop as a model and method to think and work together has additional challenges to an in-person workshop, which also requires significant designing, planning, and preparation. In a physical context, 70% of our communication is non-verbal, and as facilitators we use non-verbal resources and cues to engage participants, to 'control' the floor and to make the interaction more dynamic. Successful sessions also feed off the energy of the people in the room and provide multiple points of stimulus for our brains.

In a virtual context, we have less control over the workshop environment, having to rely on the size of the screen to grab people's attention, and the quality of participants' individual tech setup. Participants must actively seek help; we can't easily see if they are struggling. And when they are, as we found in our workshop, it can be difficult to help them resolve the issue if it is a technical one because we can't see or experience what they are.

Finally, attention spans are shorter when online, and attendees will tire more quickly - this has actually been documented by neuroscience - so meetings which last more than 90 minutes can be difficult to sustain. We found ourselves packing a lot into an hour and a half, which helped with keeping things interesting, but might not have given participants enough time for each activity.

New Behaviours, New Capabilities

In many ways, and much to our delight, our workshop was a success, which validated the extra time and effort we spent in preparation. Most participants were able to easily access and use the different tools to contribute their thoughts and raise questions. Our varied activities ensured that everyone got a chance to speak, one way or another, and crucially, kept everyone engaged. We heard from participants that they felt like the 'time flew by' and that they genuinely enjoyed being a part of the session.

While it certainly has its challenges, and its limitations, we know the future of hybrid working will increasingly require more forms of digital engagement and interaction. This opens up a whole range of opportunities to engage a broader audience, work more seamlessly and effectively globally, save time and money, and in general, support more flexible ways of working.

But working in this way requires an investment of more time and planning on the part of everyone involved, from those designing and running workshops, to people participating or watching. It also requires a fundamental understanding of what is happening in our brains when we engage through a screen, and a shift in behaviours based on this.

We've distilled our learnings into these five recommendations that we'll continue to tap into as we explore how to bring the best elements of physical and virtual together:

“Translating the familiar rituals of a live workshop into a virtual environment during a conference is a daunting task. But this workshop was well constructed and took participants through a clear process with just enough talking-head set-up to set the context. It was a stimulating experience.”

- Jeremy Myerson, Helen Hamlyn Professor of Design, Royal College of Art; Director, WORKTECH Academy

5 Recommendations for a Successful Virtual Workshop

- 1. Allow a lot more time than you think you'll need, then double it.** Doing things virtually is far more time intensive, when designing and preparing the workshop, as well as on the day. Build in time for testing digital platforms and tools, creating and sharing pre-read material and training participants based on their digital literacy.
- 2. Build in variety and keep things moving.** Create activities that ask participants to engage in different ways (write, collage, chat) to make the session dynamic, and capitalise on digital tools that enable us to do things we can't do easily in person (like instantly visualise information or take a quick anonymous poll). Our virtual attention spans are short and diversifying tasks help attendants to focus.

- 3. Have a human side to the interaction.** Though it can feel awkward or uncomfortable at first, incorporating ice breakers, breathing and stretching exercises, and a bit of humour brings the audience together as a group of people sharing an experience.
- 4. Triple-check the tech.** Explore and understand the capability of digital platforms beforehand and verify their functionality before you start planning. Whether a participant or facilitator, before the session play around with your camera and audio setup to make sure you can be clearly seen and heard, with as few distractions around as possible. And of course make sure you have good wifi! Ask participants to dial-in 30 minutes before the start of the workshop to make sure everyone's kit works.
- 5. Enjoy the journey!** Because virtual workshops have more unknowns and variables, there is greater potential for things to not go according to plan, especially if you have technical difficulties or lose people's engagement, but new discoveries may arise. The element of novelty and exploration around the virtual space means that we're all still learning, and being adaptable is a key asset.

About the authors

Namrata Krishna is a Design Strategy Lead at Heta Architects. As part of Heta's Design Advisory team, she works with clients through strategic design and behaviour change, with a strong focus on narrative to create spaces and experiences that are unique, immersive and meaningful.

Yvonne Pinniger is an independent consultant working with clients in the UK and Australia. Her background is a blend of research, design, strategy and engagement to help clients and communities generate collective prosperity within the built environment. Yvonne formerly led Design Advisory at Heta Architects.

Muriel Altunaga is a Director at CBRE's EMEA Design Hub. Muriel is a senior architect with 20+ years of experience in workplace strategy, change management, interior design and build. A skilled strategist, she has an extended track record in the implementation of new ways of working, enhancing the workplace concept through a holistic, user-centred approach.