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**faville**  
facilitators of virtual learning

# Module 3

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## 1. Introduction

As teams and organizations have begun their transition to working online, the need for well-designed, user friendly and effectively facilitated virtual courses, online learning, meetings and workshops rises rapidly. Unstructured or poorly run virtual meetings, boring non attractive courses, and not well facilitated workshops or discussions can lead to wasted time and frustrated teams.

Online group interactions do not always “happen” spontaneously. They require care and nurturing: facilitation. The core of facilitation is to serve the group and assist it in reaching its goals or purpose.

In this part of the course, we will explain what virtual facilitation is and why it is useful. We will also discuss what kind of events can be facilitated virtually and have a closer look at synchronous and asynchronous facilitation in a virtual learning environment.

## 2. What is virtual facilitation?

In simple terms, a facilitator is someone who makes a group process or task easier. They do this by guiding groups through a process, helping to develop understanding, and improve participation and collaboration. By employing facilitation techniques and methods, the best facilitators help teams move towards their desired outcomes in a structured manner.

If we have a look at the virtual learning facilitator role, we might use the following description: Anyone who facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and competences by establishing and proper using of a favourable virtual learning environment, including those exercising a teaching, training or guidance functions. The facilitator orientates the learner by giving guidelines, feedback and advice throughout the learning process, in addition to assisting the development of knowledge and competences.

Or if you like the shorter description: A virtual learning facilitator is an experienced person who supports learners during open online courses. A facilitator encourages conversation, ensuring that all learners are able to contribute and communicate in a positive and collaborative way.

Traditionally, facilitators work with groups in live settings, facilitating face to face workshops, team building or development days, training sessions and more. As more organizations and teams have become geographically scattered, having staff, students, teachers, colleagues, and trainers cooperating in virtual environment, the need for facilitators to help facilitate workshops, courses or meetings in a remote setting is significantly growing.

Experts from various sectors think virtual facilitation and the running of online course, workshops, and meetings is increasingly common and important in the future. Developing the skills and resources to be an effective virtual facilitator will future proof your team and business and enable you to work with virtual teams and remote workers in a virtual environment.

Whether you are a seasoned facilitator wanting to make the move to remote facilitation or the less experienced trainer, the chapters below can help you and your teams make the most of the time you spend together online.

### 3. What could I facilitate virtually?

Basically the whole world, companies, universities, public administration bodies and individuals are online: working, sharing, shopping, gathering information and learning in the virtual environment. Below we will have a closer look on just a few things you may have to facilitate online, virtually for your teams or trainees as they work and study from home, co-working spaces or elsewhere.

#### ▶ Virtual meetings

Virtual meetings for remote teams are incredibly common and remote workers will likely attend many virtual meetings every week. These might include daily-stand-ups, all-hands meetings, discussions and more. Like all meetings, virtual meetings should have a clear reason for being run and a specific goal to be reached. Keep in mind that any challenges of the virtual setting can be overcome with thoughtful facilitation, using of proper virtual environment, facilitation tools and well-designed sessions.

#### ▶ Online workshops

While online workshops employ many of the same techniques and methodologies as live workshops, online workshops have special considerations, challenges, and potential benefits. A well designed online workshop can help virtual teams align, generate ideas and solutions, build trust and relationships, and strengthen virtual team culture. In these scenarios, online sessions are not only a bonus, but they are a necessity for teams and groups that wish to be productive while also being distributed.

Remember that choosing the right workshop methodology, tools, techniques and process is as vital in a virtual online space as in a live setting. You might consider employing a remote design sprint or open space style format. Design your workshop with your purpose, team and the restraints and benefits of virtual working in mind for the best results. Asynchronous communication and collaboration tools are key factors of any virtual team.

#### ▶ Webinars

Simply put, a webinar is an event that is delivered online. In a webinar, one or more speakers often deliver instructional material to their attendees and conduct discussions, polls, and participation using online software. Webinars often differ in their approach to interactivity – some may be mainly presentational while others feature interactive elements where attendees may ask questions, respond to polls or engage with the speaker. Choosing the right webinar software for your needs begins with design. An unstructured webinar is likely to be unproductive and waste time. Carefully design your

webinar in line with your audience and purpose, choose the software that allows you to engage them in the right way and then use your facilitation skills to deliver the best possible session.

▶ Online courses and training sessions

Online courses or virtual training sessions benefit from the use of facilitation techniques and can help you add value to your offering. Running courses or training for your virtual teams likely includes lots of asynchronous learning and use of collaboration tools. Some online courses can be delivered entirely on demand, with pre-recorded materials and training software such as majority of MOOCs (massive open online courses). You know what is right for your audience and the training being delivered, but there is always value to unpacking concepts with a team in real-time or delivering follow-up sessions face-to-face.

### 3.1. Benefits of virtual events

Lately many organizations of various types are recognizing the benefits of online workshops and virtual meetings or training. Well designed and properly facilitated workshops and courses can be one of your best organizational tools to solve complex problems, create innovation or drive growth of your people. Simply asked: can you really afford to miss out on the benefits of workshops or online courses just because your team or organisation is remotely distributed? Here are some of the main benefits of running workshops, meetings or courses in virtual environment.

▶ Easy access and inclusivity

Remote working has revolutionized the work and learning for people in many roles and industries. Regardless of physical location, people can contribute to their team or organisation and have their voices heard or get trained. For people with young families, disabilities or who live in remote parts of the world, remote workshops or online courses enable access to things they might otherwise be excluded from. This is also great when it comes to diversity and inclusivity: an in-person meet-up in any small region will certainly not be as diverse as an online event that encourages participants from all over the world.

▶ Cost-effective

A virtual meeting or remote workshop is not only more accessible than in-person meetings, they are often cheaper for all involved too. by running an event online, you can significantly reduce overheads and eliminate many of costs for participants (travel, accommodation, workshop space, materials, etc.). However, there is value in bringing virtual teams together as personal meetings might be great for company culture building, but when it comes to a workshop series or training delivery, online might be the right choice.

▶ Reduced logistical effort

Creating and running a large scale workshop in-person can be challenging, particularly when it comes to logistics for distributed teams or large organizations. While there are many considerations for

running an online workshop and unique challenges to the format, a remote workshop or virtual meeting can generally be understood to be simpler to organize from a logistics perspective. Set-up might simply involve sharing a screen and asking participants to do tasks using their own materials at home and you most likely do not have to arrange a room or hire a space. Getting people to the virtual meeting usually involves a simple email invitation. Please, keep in mind that an online workshop requires considered planning to be effective and while some obstacles are removed, others also present themselves as we will discuss in the following chapter.

▶ Building culture in fully remote teams

In fully remote, virtual teams, or organizations with many geographically scattered teams and employees, real-time meetings and workshops might be the only possibility for teams to work directly together. Speaking with colleagues over video conferencing software and being able to see each other in real-time is essential for a success of virtual teams. Workshops held virtually where staff can collaborate and connect, regardless of physical location, helps build connections and a company culture that persists outside of the workshop or meeting.

### 3.2. Challenges of running a virtual event

Working in a virtual environment naturally comes with its own challenges. Virtual teams all have a set of best practices they employ to make their working days more effective, whether that includes the use of collaborative tools or well-developed working processes.

Workshops are, by design, highly collaborative and require the deployment of varied techniques and processes to make them effective. But how do these function in an online or remote space? In the following parts, we will explore the challenges of running virtual meetings or workshops you should consider when planning and delivering your online workshop.

▶ Technical issues

The reality of remote working and running an online workshop or virtual meeting is that sometimes, people will have connection issues or technical problems. Poor audio or video equipment, internet quality or loud speakers can lower the quality of your virtual workshop. This is a challenge that can barely be 100% mitigated, but you certainly can take steps to prevent or limit the impact of technical issues. Give people clear advice on what they need for the meeting. It's also worth communicating additional needs – software, meeting links or requirements – clearly and well in advance of the event. If people need to learn a tool to contribute to the meeting or create a log-in to a new video conferencing app, make sure this is done ahead of the workshop. Any minute spent at the start of a workshop to help everyone get connected might ruin your schedule or kill the momentum of your workshop.

▶ Alignment

One of the main purposes of any workshop is to align the participants around a common goal or purpose. Successful workshops help a team collect their thoughts and come to a consensus on how to move forward. The facilitator is the person in the room that makes alignment happen and depending on the purpose of the workshop, team alignment can be the major takeaway from the process. The alignment process is more difficult in remote or virtual environments Open communication is more difficult to facilitate, with cross-talking or an unwillingness to speak up in a remote meeting often cropping up. These constraints can sometimes mean that individuals or teams have less time to make their case or discuss concerns that would otherwise enable them to align. Effectively overcoming this challenge requires getting the workshop design right – ensuring that you have activities or exercises to facilitate alignment – and in thoughtfully facilitating the group. If you are conducting a problem-solving workshop in an online setting, alignment is extremely important and as a virtual facilitator, you should be attuned to helping the group achieve that.

▶ Lack of shared visual space

While using whiteboards and flipcharts to illustrate key concepts and conclusions, using post-it notes and helping a group create their own resources or prototypes on paper are all essential tools in live workshops it is different and at the first look quite complicated in the virtual environment. Asking virtual event participants to watch a shared screen, consult a document and contribute to a shared whiteboard is unlikely to be productive and might be boring. There are many online tools you can use to create shared visual spaces for your virtual workshop or remote meeting, but bear in mind the effects of visual overload or the distractions using all these tools can bring. For the tools check the Module 2 of this MOOC.

▶ Conversation flow is slower

In even the most well-constructed online meeting or virtual workshop, cross-talking or conversation flow can be a challenge. Online chats lack the nonverbal cues we all give off and receive in real life that allow us to more accurately know when/how to reply on an ongoing conversation. Furthermore, technical issues, large groups or sound quality can also slow down the communication process inside a workshop. This challenge is almost always with us in virtual workshops and online meetings. Restricting conversation during some segments, allowing everyone the chance to speak for limited periods or having people ask questions in text chat before the facilitator then selects which to address can be effective. The size of the group, format of the workshop and the technical stability of everyone involved can really dictate which approach is the best when it comes to solving this issue. At the design stage, try including methods which require less live chat and more individual brainstorming and small-group work, or use practical activities such as dot-voting to effectively time box and minimize unrelated discussions. To choose the right tool pls go to the FAVILLE project digital application available at <https://favilleapp.ht-apps.eu> where you can find the set of tools and techniques to be used in the particular situations and specific situations.

▶ Engagement



Successful workshops live or die on the level of participant engagement. This is where a facilitator shines – designing engaging processes and delivering workshops using tools and techniques that help engage everyone in the room. In virtual events, engagement can be a challenge. If your workshop is haphazardly put together and features several hours of presentations without any activities or a well-designed process, people will quickly become bored or distracted. Remote participants could be distracted by what's going on in their other screen or by their physical environment, so it is important to agree on ground rules to keep participants focused, just like in a live meeting scenario. The key to achieving engagement in a virtual workshop is to design a process that is interactive, varied and made to measure to your teams. Use tasks and techniques that exercise both creative and critical approaches, just as you would in a live workshop setting.

▶ Etiquette

Workshop or meeting etiquette can be vital to its success, and facilitators often ensure that the expectations for behavior and etiquette are outlined before or at the beginning of a session. Some basic tips for online etiquette include: learning to use the mute button when not speaking; locating to a quiet environment; ensure you are well lit so other attendees can see your face and that you are not backlit; paying attention to what's going on in the room and not continuing to do other work or answer emails. Just as all communication skills need to be developed and polished, so too does online or virtual communication.

▶ Co-facilitation

Co-facilitating is a great way of splitting workload and bringing multiple skill sets to the table in both live or virtual workshop. Of course, co-facilitating in an online setting gets more complicated without the non-verbal cues one can have in a live setting. Passing the torch or linking sections between facilitators can be clumsy and face technological complications that come from having multiple people sharing screens, resources or collaborating in real-time. If you are co-facilitating with another facilitator or with a client or manager, it can also be difficult to have a side conversation midway through the workshop. Being able to quickly chat and adjust the session in a live setting by stepping to one side becomes more difficult and will likely need to be done during breaks or in another chat room. Remove as much stress as possible by carefully and thoughtfully planning your workshop and liaising with your co-facilitator or client ahead of time alongside having a system for side-discussion that works for you. Some tools such as Zoom have the option for private chats in parallel with the main session. Using a Slack channel for facilitators to communicate while the meeting or workshop takes place in video conferencing software is also a viable solution.

▶ Breakout groups or small group discussions

A winning mind set for designing and running a virtual workshop is to develop the live workshop experience as much as possible. Think of the last full-day workshop or conference you attended. How much productive conversation happened in the breaks, between activities or while just getting a coffee? Were full group discussions as effective as more focused breakout groups? All of these

opportunities to communicate in groups of varying sizes is conducive to a successful workshop, particularly if it is long and the group will benefit from variation. This is challenging to achieve in a virtual workshop setting, and should be considered early in the workshop design process. Remember that virtual workshops do not allow for the same level of non-verbal communication as live meetings: reading body language, for example, is difficult to impossible to achieve online. Informal chats during break time or the ability to break off into smaller groups is also difficult to implement well.

The challenge here is how to create space in the agenda for those kinds of breakout sessions or small group discussions and how to implement them in practice. Zoom, for example, supports breakout sessions, or an alternative would be to told multiple small meeting rooms on your video conferencing software. Remember that good facilitation is always conducted in the service of the group and the underlying purpose. Use breakout sessions only if you are absolutely sure they are the right fit.

## 4. Synchronous and asynchronous facilitation in VLE

Depending on the learning objective, learners can benefit from both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Each offers its bright sides, and of course, its drawbacks. So what are the definitions and differences?

Synchronous virtual learning involves geographically dispersed students accessing the same web site at the same time as an instructor. This type of learning is commonly supported by internet communications media such as videoconferencing and chat. The instructor typically "drives" a slideshow presentation, which the students watch while connected to a conference web site. Students can ask questions or provide comments through the phone line, or through a chat window.

To sum up, participants communicate at the same time, from different locations using the same communication tool. Engaging with learners and addressing their questions, comments, and feedback is a never-ending but critical endeavour for effective learning. This is what synchronous learning can help you deal with. But who said you must stick to purely synchronous learning?

Asynchronous virtual learning, is a just-in-time, on-demand student learning experience. It is commonly facilitated by internet communications media such as e-mail and discussion boards. Students do not need to schedule their time around the predetermined plan of the instructor. There is complete flexibility with asynchronous training, which comes in two forms, facilitated and self-paced. Asynchronous e-learning makes it possible for learners to log on to an e-learning environment at any time and download documents or send messages to tutors, facilitators, or peers. In other words, participants communicate at different times from different places using the same communication tool.

Asynchronous learning involves self-paced training activities that learners take when it's convenient for them from anywhere in the world. It doesn't involve getting immediate feedback, nor does it require attendance at a scheduled time.

Asynchronous learning benefits both learners and teachers by eliminating limits created by schedules and the human factor. It's often more affordable, especially if your team is large. It's also a great opportunity to make learning inclusive. These are feasible arguments to give such a training delivery method a try.

#### 4.1. Asynchronous facilitators

Asynchronous learning implies online or distance courses that learners can take on their own schedule. Asynchronous facilitators must have skills such as organization, attention to detail, quick response times, and ability to read between the lines in their learners' comments, posts, and assignments.

Asynchronous learning has many benefits for learners, such as:

- materials, lectures, tests, and so forth are available and accessible 24/7 so that learners can access it at any time from any place
- students are free to contribute and communicate when they choose.

#### 4.2. Synchronous facilitators

Synchronous online classes are those that require students and instructors to be online at the same time. Synchronous facilitators offer lectures, discussions, and presentations at a specific chosen or agreed time. All students must be online at that specific hour in order to participate.

Synchronous facilitators must be technology-savvy because their connection to learners will be mainly through technology. In addition, they must be able to respond quickly to learner questions and be able to handle limits in technology.

#### 4.3. Synchronous versus asynchronous facilitation skills: basic overview

The table below provides the basic overview and comparison of the skills which virtual learning facilitators should possess in order to be able to provide a real support to their learners' groups. As you can see there some differences as the two modes of virtual learning delivery bring some different features to the scene. Nevertheless, both options have a few things in common.

<b>SYNCHRONOUS</b>	<b>ASYNCHRONOUS</b>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Time Management</li><li>▶ Student Engagement</li><li>▶ Manage Real Time Environment</li><li>▶ Provide feedback</li><li>▶ Knowledgeable on Course</li><li>▶ Effective Communication Skills</li><li>▶ Flexible/Present</li><li>▶ Knowledge on Technology Mechanics</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Time Management</li><li>▶ Student Engagement</li><li>▶ Encourage Self-Learning</li><li>▶ Provide feedback</li><li>▶ Encourage Self- Motivation</li><li>▶ Effective Communication Skills</li><li>▶ Be Available</li><li>▶ Knowledge on Technology Mechanics</li></ul>
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## 5. Resources

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