

Reflections on the success of “The New Normal” webinar – facilitating community building and participant engagement

Nora A. Escherle¹

Schweizerische Vereinigung der Ingenieurinnen (SVIN)
8032 Zurich, Switzerland

Linda J. Seward²

ETH Zurich
8092 Zurich, Switzerland

Kaitlin E. McNally³

NCCR Digital Fabrication, ETH Zurich
8093 Zurich, Switzerland

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic will almost certainly prove to be a turning point in how people work and how they balance work and home life, the hope is for the better. However, early in 2020 there were reports of the disproportionate burden imposed on working women in Switzerland because of lockdown measures. The aim of the webinar series “The New Normal”, organised by the Swiss Society for Female Engineers (SVIN) and the National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) Digital Fabrication, was to provide women working in practice or academia in the architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) sectors with relevant information and concrete ideas about the nature of the new normal and its assumed or real effects on women. The organisers aimed to empower women to use the global upheaval to effect positive change towards a better, more gender-equal work-life. The webinar was also intended to give participants an occasion to connect and share their experiences of the “new normal”. To achieve this dual objective, both content and format were given much consideration in the organisation of the webinar. This was clearly perceived and highly appreciated by participants as indicated in the final feedback poll in the last webinar session. In this article, we will describe our methods of combining content (i.e., research on and personal experiences of various aspects of the “new normal”) and format (i.e., a setting engendering lively, meaningful, and open interaction) in the best possible way. The webinar was considered a success firstly because of the level of community building and exchange that was fostered between participants, as evidenced by recurring active participation, networking, and openness to share personal challenges and triumphs in the “Tales from the Home Office” session, and secondly, the quality of information and recommendations as documented in the final report.

Introduction

In early 2020 everything shifted online, and suddenly it seemed everyone was at the same time isolated but nonetheless more connected digitally than ever before. There were also concerns over how families could cope with lockdown, with stories and rumours about women reducing their work time to pick up the slack at home, the time of crisis causing a reversion to

¹ geschaeftsstelle@svin.ch

² sewardl@ethz.ch

³ mcnally@dfab.ch

classic breadwinner family models. The fear was that women would lose much of the quick progress made towards equality for women in the Swiss workplace.

The architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) sectors have a longstanding underrepresentation of women. Several associations and institutions are working toward increasing the number of women in these sectors and supporting them in their careers. The Swiss Society of Female Engineers (SVIN) is a nationwide association that brings together women in scientific and technical professions. The SVIN was founded in 1991 and is based in Zurich. The SVIN women's goal is to advocate for the concerns of the engineering profession and to motivate young women to pursue engineering and STEM professions (mathematics, information technology, natural sciences and technology). The National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) Digital Fabrication is a funding scheme of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) that develops digital fabrication technologies for use in construction and building processes. Regular partnered actions between SVIN and the NCCR Digital Fabrication include events with presentations on equality topics, role models, and networking opportunities for women in the AEC.

Building on their established partnership and mutual concern for women's careers in the AEC, the SVIN and the NCCR Digital Fabrication decided to develop a webinar identifying contemporary problems and solutions for AEC women in the "new normal". Ultimately, the aim was to help women to navigate or even steer the change in a positive direction for gender equality. The webinar was intended to provide empowering information on i) the current status quo of family structures in Switzerland and the historical context, ii) state-of-the-art research into the effects of the pandemic for employees in both the private sector as well as in the academic context, and iii) best practices for individuals and employers to maintain, or better, advance gender-equality in the current crisis.

In addition, the organizers wanted to provide a platform for exchange, support, and networking. By sharing their own stories or hearing from others, participants could view their individual situations from different perspectives, evaluate their options and act on their own behalf. Participants should also benefit from an inclusive and open environment where they feel recognized, valued, and encouraged to act. Finally, adding an element of networking was intended to boost participant's confidence, expand their current opportunities, and build a community of support.

Methods / Webinar design

Format

At the time of planning the webinar Switzerland was in its first lockdown and therefore all meetings, seminars and events were shifted online. It was not certain whether there would be a return to the office by the time the webinar should take place, October - December 2020, so the webinar was divided into 5 weekly online sessions, two hours each. The sessions were scheduled from 10-12:00 on Wednesdays, so that participants could plan to join with regularity. Each session was divided into two major parts, a "speed networking" event (see box: Speed networking) and presentations from invited speakers including discussion. Each session included a short break, usually after half of the time or after the first presentation if we had two speakers. We were aware that the internal diversity of each of the webinar's sessions posed a challenge in that attendees could easily choose to drop out during breaks, which is generally more likely with online events. In contrast to face-to-face meetings, participants feel less motivation to engage cognitively and behaviorally in remote meetings (Kuzminykh & Rintel 2020b). In order to bind together the different parts of each session and keep the attendees curious, invested and motivated to return after the break, we introduced polls as an additional program feature.

BOX 1: Speed networking

One practice known to increase meeting effectiveness is encouraging everyone to participate (Mroz et al. 2018). The speed networking activity was designed to get participants to engage each other one-on-one, to break the ice and have the opportunity to connect personally or professionally with other participants. The activity took advantage of the functionality of Zoom breakout rooms by providing a prompt as an icebreaker, then randomly pairing participants for a short period of time (3-4 minutes) to introduce themselves and answer the prompt. Participants were then brought back to the main room, given the next prompt, and then again randomly paired in breakout rooms. In total the activity lasted around 15 – 20 minutes, with a total of 3 or 4 pairings. This format was limited by the random pairing function of Zoom, which would occasionally re-pair participants who were paired previously. Additional time and effort were required if individuals indicated they wished to not participate in the activity, however in our experience most participants joined in.

At the beginning, middle and end of each session the Zoom “poll” function was used to ask questions that help set the tone of the different parts of the program. For example, the opening poll and the break poll (between the networking and presentation parts or between two presentations) would ask a personal question about participants’ experiences during the pandemic with humorous answer choices (How would you describe your home office? Chaotic, covered in cats... What is your preferred handshake replacement? Fist bump, foot tap...). The break poll had the additional function of motivating participants to return after the break, so the question was posed at the start of the break and the results only revealed once participants had returned. The wrap-up poll included logistical questions about participants’ intention of participating in subsequent sessions and feedback questions.

Finally, depending on the speaker preferences participants could directly ask questions during the presentations or use the Zoom “chat” function. Participants were free to comment or ask questions in German in the chat, which would then be translated by one of the organizers into English. This lowered the language barrier of the event.

Content

The organizers intended that the program content form a story arch of historic context - recent impacts - current actions - prospective future - synthesis - next steps (see box: Program overview). Speakers were sent “speaker guidelines” to clarify deadlines for biography, title and abstract submissions to the organizers, as well as to clarify roles and responsibilities of the speakers and the organizers. They were also warmly invited to participate in the speed networking activity with participants.

While the basic structure described above was the same in most sessions, two of the sessions stood out from the others: the first session and the fifth session. With the intention of allowing participants to warm up before the first iteration of speed networking, the first session began with the keynote presentation followed by a speed networking trial. Afterwards, participants were invited to give feedback on their experience and the activity format (Was there sufficient time given for introductions? Were the prompts appropriate and engaging?). The organizers adjusted the activity based on the feedback and the remaining webinar sessions began with the speed networking activity, followed by the presentations. This webinar architecture with differently structured sessions enabled participants to ease into a new networking activity, and allowed those who did not want to participate in the speed networking activity in subsequent sessions to easily join solely for the presentation.

BOX 2: Program Overview

- Keynote session
 - Dr. Christina Seyler (UZH) “Reconciling career and family in Switzerland: What do STEM women experience?”
- Research into “New” Work Processes
 - Prof. Dr. Gudela Grote (ETHZ), “No new normal in sight: Opportunities for experimenting with new work practice”
 - Dr. Patricia Widmer (HSG), “Corona: different effects on men and women”
- Corporate Policy Changes? The Employer’s Perspective
 - Prof. Dr. Heike Bruch (HSG), “Leading in the New Normal – Dos & Don’ts for a real new work transition”
 - Dr. Nora Keller (HSG), “Covid-19 Policy Changes: Unintended Adverse Consequences for Women?”
- Tales From the Home Office
 - Participants sharing struggles, successes, surprises, funny anecdotes, bizarre moments, surreal experiences, and lessons for the future.
- New Work Culture?!? – Wish vs. Reality
 - Prof. Dr. Alexandra Cloots (OST), Presentation of survey from Projekt Neue Arbeitskultur des HR-Panels New Work
- Panel Discussion, “Lessons Learned: Making Lemonade in a Lockdown”
 - Moderator: Prof. Dr. Sarah Springman (ETHZ)
 - Panellists: Christina Seyler, Gudela Grote, Patricia Widmer, Nora Keller, Alexandra Cloots

The fourth session comprised the Tales from the Home Office, which invited written submissions of up to 500 words from participants to “share struggles, successes, surprises, funny anecdotes, bizarre moments, surreal experiences and lessons for the future”. Participants could read aloud their own stories or have one of the organizers read for them, either anonymously or with credits. This session was intended to bring the real-life circumstances, challenges and achievements into the webinar and to demonstrate the breadth of experiences during the pandemic.

Results / Outcomes, Report

The webinar had 91 registrants in total, with a range of approximately 15 - 40 participants per session and 5-10 “regular” participants attending every session. Registrants were not only employed in AEC sectors or academia, but were from other sectors and even located abroad. There were a mix of women with families and without, and most were early in their careers. Participant numbers were steady through the first five sessions and increased significantly for the final panel discussion. Participants were engaged and active throughout, responding to poll questions, asking questions to the speakers and sharing personal anecdotes and insights. The organizers noted the environment was markedly light, energetic and enthusiastic throughout.

The content of the sessions was partly the result of the original intention of the organizers in designing the webinar (Research into “New” Work Processes: perspectives from academia and industry), and partly the result of the organizer’s growing awareness of the topic, including

the invitation to Prof. Dr. Alexandra Cloots to present the results of their recent survey from the Projekt Neue Arbeitskultur des HR-Panels New Work.

The Tales from the Home Office session stood out from the other sessions for its intimacy, moments of intensity and feeling of connectedness. There were 13 submitted Tales, approximately half of which were read by the authors in the session. Participants showed astonishing candor, empathy and insightfulness in listening and sharing Tales. Several Tales described significant challenges faced during lockdown, including the loneliness, boredom and uncertainty of home office, the experience of having COVID-19, fleeing persecution over closed borders, navigating new online territories for work, balancing work and family when childcare centers closed, reflecting on coping mechanisms, adjusting to change and navigating life during a pandemic. Many stories were also positive: funny anecdotes of Zoom blunders, increased feeling of connectedness across distances, small joyful moments, improvised celebrations and the freedom and flexibility of home office. Several participants followed up with one another after this session, asking about improvements or successes, and offering advice and support.

The feedback poll at the conclusion of the final session asked participants about their satisfaction with the content, format and impact of the webinar. In the poll, all participants were either “very” or “moderately” satisfied with the format and content of the webinar, with 78% indicating they were “very satisfied” with the format and 91% “very satisfied” with the content. Additionally, 70% of participants responded that they were “more optimistic” regarding the outlook for gender equality in the workplace as a result of the webinar, and 91% were “likely” to “extremely likely” to follow up on some of the actions suggested in the webinar.

A few participants were shy regarding the speed networking activity, and occasionally asked to be left out (remain in the “main room”), however participants were often observed to be smiling, laughing or attempting to continue cut off conversations upon returning from the breakout rooms. This set a great tone for the rest of the program. Participants who wished to be left out of the activity did at times present a logistical problem for the organizers as they had to manually exclude these participants from the breakout room assignment feature. With more than 20 participants there was a need to build time into the program to exclude those who wished not to participate. This was less of a problem for sessions which began with the speed networking activity, as participants could simply leave and rejoin the event when the presentations were scheduled to begin.

The polls were also effective at engaging participants, personalizing the webinar, and setting the tone during different moments of the program by getting participants to smile or laugh with the opening poll, then peaking their interest before breaks. Consistently over 90% of participants chose to answer each of the 3 polls per session. Early participant departure from a session was surprisingly rare, and usually accompanied by a public or private message to the organizers where the participants expressed gratitude for the event, regret that they had to depart the session early and questions about how to access recordings at a later time.

Following the conclusion of the webinar a final report providing an overview of the webinar content and recommendations for action for those who missed all or some of the sessions, or for those who prefer a more condensed information format, was published on the SVIN website⁴. The New Normal Report has been accessed over 150 times at the time of writing. The recordings of the webinar available on the NCCR Digital Fabrication YouTube Channel⁵ have been viewed over 600 views at the time of writing.

⁴ <https://svin.ch/wordpress/events/webinare/>

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/plavlist?list=PLx4_UehA-vHdmvnsPM3hhM7_3aPvYDa79

BOX 3: Main Takeaways

- Relative to physical meetings, virtual meetings present unique opportunities and challenges that must be accounted for by leaders, who must make adjustments to the program and format accordingly.
- Increasing participant engagement is a crucial element for effective and impactful webinars.
- Planning for and investing in program elements that activate participants is key to participant engagement.
- Two program elements that were effective at engaging participants and setting the tone of The New Normal webinar were Speed Networking (see BOX 1) and periodic Zoom polls.

Discussion / Feedback and reflection

The purpose of The New Normal webinar was to optimize format and content to provide an engaging and interactive online environment where participants could not only inform themselves but also share their experiences, connect and bridge the virtual distance. The organizers consider the webinar a success because of recurring participation, participant engagement and spirit, active contributions to the Tales session, and positive feedback on the format and content.

Motivation to adapt the format

When the organizers began the webinar planning, most work meetings, lectures, presentations and seminars had necessarily been transferred to the virtual setting. Oftentimes, this transfer was barely successful because the specific properties of the virtual space with its many challenges and opportunities were disregarded. Many participants of online events reported that it was difficult to concentrate during long online presentations. Not being physically present with others created a sensation of augmented passivity and isolatedness. A similar impression was reported anecdotally by many presenters who had no chance to develop a sense of their passive audience, which made it difficult for them to be responsive and deliver an engaging talk. The feeling of connectedness was lacking on both sides. In so many ways it had become obvious that the transfer of meetings, lectures and courses from physical to virtual space required far more than simply delivering the same content in the same format in a new virtual setting. In order to design and implement interesting and engaging online sessions, the organizers believed the shift from physical to virtual setting required a significant adaptation of format.

Prioritizing participant engagement

A few of the reported positive benefits of remote meetings and webinars include the use of polling, the chat function, and the ability to enhance relationships by the intimacy of attendance from home (Karl et al. 2021). Both the polls and the speed networking in small groups were designed with the foremost aim of warming up participants, making them give up their passive role as listeners and get actively involved - both in terms of content and in terms of networking with the other participants. It was also intended to facilitate the feeling of connectedness and interaction between participants and with presenters. These elements and the expected effects of their implementation were considered essential for a successful webinar by its organizers. In addition, the webinar was designed in two parts, speed networking and presentations, with programmed breaks in between.

It has been reported that meeting participants feel strongly that cameras should be kept on during video conferences and that not doing so can impede communication and signal disengagement or disrespect (Kuzminykh & Rintel 2020b, Karl et al. 2021). To avoid these

negative consequences the organizers asked participants to mute their microphones when not speaking and during presentations, keep their camera turned on, and to properly introduce themselves when joining a discussion. The organizers noted the high level of compliance with these rules and interpreted it as a consequence of effective community-building and engagement. In the future the organizers will advocate even more strongly for participants to keep their cameras on, citing the collective advantages.

Reflections for the future

Even though the format of The New Normal webinar was a success, the organizers would like to make a few suggestions for improvements. First, the 2 hour sessions were difficult for participants to fit regularly into their schedules and at times felt a little too long. The time was often filled, however, by speakers who went over their allotted time frame. Existing research shows that meetings that are poorly led or that go over time can increase participant stress, fatigue and perceived workload (Luong & Rogelberg 2005, Rogelberg et al. 2006). For future webinars the organizers will limit sessions to 1.5 hours, will lead the sessions with more clarity, confidence and efficiency and will increase their efforts to coach speakers about engaging with the audience and keeping within the program time. The organizers feel that increased coordination with speakers always pays off, however it does represent a significant increase in workload. For example, although the Speaker Guidelines precisely defined speaker responsibilities like deadlines for sending biographies, abstract and slides for review, very few of the speakers adhered to them. Weighing the pros and cons, the organizers would still advocate for the use of the Speaker Guidelines, but with added email reminders and follow-ups.

Another strategy that represents a significant increase in the upfront workload of organizing a webinar is to integrate program features like breakout rooms, poll and chat functions in creative ways to engage participants and personalize the content. In the future the organizers will use these tools even more to progressively increase and maintain active participation during sessions. An additional activity that was not used in The New Normal webinar but that the organizers plan to use in subsequent webinars are questions posed by the moderator, for which participants are given time to answer in the chat, but that are submitted simultaneously by participants. This encourages all participants to answer, and not just passively read the answers of others, and can also give an impression of the spread of ideas within the group. The organizers felt that more than anything else these activities, when carefully prepared and efficiently executed, were more than worth the extra time spent designing them because of the atmosphere and engagement they created.

One area of difficulty for the organizers of The New Normal webinar was promotion and registrant attendance rate. It has been suggested that the average no-show percentage of virtual events can go up to 35%, which is slightly higher than in-person events, however some of the webinar sessions saw only approximately half of registrants show up. Solutions proposed by the organizers include last-minute reminders, sending “goodies” such as an apero pack by mail for a first or last webinar session to lighten the atmosphere and provide added motivation to commit to joining, and increasing anticipation of and link between subsequent sessions by delivering a “teaser” at the end of a preceding session. The final panel discussion session of The New Normal webinar saw the most participants, likely due to increased advertising efforts and the summarizing and concluding aspect of the content. In the organizers’ experience, the more time and effort invested in developing a network and strategy for promotion, the more successful any event will be in terms of participation. The experience of hosting The New Normal webinar greatly expanded the organizers’ network in the topic, which will facilitate the promotion of future events on related topics.

To make an entire webinar series more attractive it could also be possible to integrate one physical event into the program. The role of such an event in the overall program should be

carefully considered, however, as the audience might be too geographically distributed to give equal opportunity of attendance.

A final and important change the organizers will make for future webinar series is to develop a more robust feedback poll using a survey software (and not the Zoom poll function) and to send it out after the final session to all webinar registrants, not only participants. The Zoom poll function is limited to suggested answers, with no open answer options. The organizers consider feedback to be an essential part of organizing any event and will continue to optimize the feedback process for future webinars.

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