

# Moving to Online Training for Volunteers

The COVID-19 pandemic presents many challenges for Volunteer Involving Organisations. You may be exploring alternative forms of volunteering such as virtual volunteering, now is also the time to explore delivering your volunteer training online.

Organisations are now looking at alternative ways to “on board” their volunteers, moving away from group face-to-face settings. There are many good reasons to make this switch: it saves time and travel costs, reduces limitations due to learner availability or classroom capacity, and can be recorded for future reference.

Online training brings its own challenges, most notably the risk of reduced participant focus and engagement. But don't worry, we've got you covered with a series of tips and tricks that will help you maximise the engagement and effectiveness of your training.



## The Right Software

There are many online tools that allow you to do a variety of tasks, ranging in cost from zero to €1,000s per annum. The features vary greatly and you've got to decide what is best for you. Consider your volunteers in terms of ease of access and use, and consider your accountant in terms of cost.

We could not recommend one package as everyone's needs are different. Talk to others about what they use and the features they find useful. A flexible and cost-effective measure would be webinar software that allows you to display a slide set, do a voiceover and have interactive elements for participants to engage in.

### Training Needs Analysis

Designing training can be a challenge, making sure you get all your messages across in a comprehensive coherent manner within your set timeframe. It's an even bigger challenge trying to do this online. Designing a storyboard for your training will help your plan. What are the messages you need to get across and what's the best way to do that? You may need a number of drafts before you master your message.

### Participants Not Attendees

It might sound silly, but you want "participants" not "attendees". Make sure the participants can interact with you and others and ensure the language you use encourages people to be more than passive attendees. Factor this into your training design.

### Training Design

Know what you're training for - to be effective, you must fully understand the volunteer roles in order to create training that is relevant. Ensure the training includes intermittent pop quizzes on key information to make sure their brains are straining for the right information. Allow space for recap and review. Depending on the software you use, review e-learning reports to see what information is being retained correctly or what needs to be optimised.

### Consider Timing

When scheduling online training, remember that learners might be home schooling or have additional things going on at home that may be a barrier to participation. Try and pick a time

that is convenient for all. If possible run the training twice, one mid-morning and one early evening to ensure you get the maximum attendance possible. Make sure you keep your blocks of online training to no more than 45 minutes and if you need a second block, ensure you take a break of 15 minutes.

### Provide Login Information

Make sure that your calendar invitation contains everything that participants will need to attend, e.g.; the meeting link, access code, dial-in number, access instructions, agenda, and any pre-training materials.

### Testing One, Two, Three ...

There's nothing more frustrating than launching into your presentation only to find out that half the participants can't hear you. It'll also be the moment that your internet starts to act up. Always be online at least 30 - 45 minutes before the start time to allow ample time to test access, taking into account multiple devices, browsers, pop-up settings, etc.

Use a wired connection to your router as opposed to using wi-fi. Ensure others you live with aren't downloading movies at the same time you are trying to broadcast. If you know which browsers work or don't work with your platform in advance let participants know.

If you have the option to have a second device nearby it can be useful to have this set up as a participant screen, so you can see that what they see and hear, however make sure you turn down the sound to avoid feedback.

### Request That Attendees Join Early

Advise your participants to get online early to ensure everything is working well. A good way to achieve this is to play a video on loop with visual and music playing, a bit like a moving testcard. Have a message on the screen to ask participants to check that they can see and hear everything. This will allow time to troubleshoot individual issues, install necessary software, etc. It can really disrupt your flow if, just as you start your presentation, you are trying to answer several online messages at the same time from participants with connection issues. Remember that even if the tech problem is at their end they will still expect you to fix or resolve it, which can put extra pressure on you as a presenter.

Set your online housekeeping rules out in advance of the session and this should also feature in one of your first slides. You may want to send out a handout in advance that participants should have open on their desktop for an online exercise during the training.

### Send Out A Reminder

People have a lot on their minds right now with COVID-19 and challenges in terms of their work life balance. They are more likely to forget to join an online training than if they were

planning to attend in person, so it's a good idea to send out a reminder email in advance. Most meeting tools and webinar software offer automatic notification tools which will do the hard work for you.

### Practice Makes Perfect

You can't "wing it" with training, all eyes and ears are on you so as always you will need to prepare properly. A TV presenter doesn't just turn up to do their show without rehearsal and preparation. For online training, you are the TV presenter. Firstly do a few tests online, get a family member or friend to login so you and they can check sound levels etc. Record yourself presenting the slides and listen back. No one likes the sound of their own voice, but listen out for things that you say or repeat that may be irritating for participants. For example you may say a word to fill space, you don't want people counting how many times you say that word!

### Death by PowerPoint

If your content is clear and concise it will engage your participants, so take some time to carefully design your slides. There are lots of presentation tools; PowerPoint, Keynote or Prezi to name just three. There are lots of features that you can use, but use them sparingly. There's nothing worse than an over-zealous presentation with loads of different transitions, tacky clipart and animated lightbulbs that leave participants feeling like they have stepped off a rollercoaster. If this is not your forte, you could engage a virtual volunteer such as a graphic designer to help re-design your slides.



### Switch Off Distractions

Ask your participants to put their mobiles phones on silent, and to close other applications on their devices so notifications are not pinging throughout your presentation. There's always the distraction of the email you need to reply to. Even worse is when someone is speaking and there's a ping in the background and everyone goes to check their email. Encourage them to focus on the online training alone.

### Tone

Talking for an hour can be tiring as a presenter, but it can be a killer for participants if you speak in the same monotone for an hour. Make sure to change your pitch and delivery throughout the online training. Have a glass of water beside you. Delivering the training standing up might seem unusual but it will help you project your voice, feelings and emotions to participants. Do not sit slouched in an armchair to deliver a training, you'll just come across sounding tired and not very engaging. A lot of breakfast radio shows are presented standing up to project energy and positivity in the morning to their listeners.

### Be Engaging

Don't try and be a comedian, and on the other hand don't try to be a scientist, unless you are one of the two. Be yourself, this can be challenging when online as it is an environment some of us are not used to. You can find yourself talking to a computer screen and wondering are you alone. Be clear, be concise. Be even more careful with humour as people won't be able to see your face to gauge when you are being funny.

### Tell Them What You Are Going To Tell Them

Start with your session objectives, (tell them what you are going to tell them), deliver the training, recap the session objectives (telling them what you have told them). That way you'll be sure that everyone is clear about what was covered in the session.

### Get Your Participants Talking

One challenge with presenting online is not being able to easily gauge participant confusion or attention levels, as you can't see their faces or gauge body language. When you start your online training ask volunteers to introduce themselves and where they are from. You could decide to do this by the chat feature too, it just adds a little engagement for participants. Pause frequently to ask for questions and if possible, ask participants to expand or provide examples of new topics as you introduce them.

### Mute Is The Holy Grail

Noise in the background can distract from your training so firstly make sure your own room is free from noise. Try to use a room with carpet and soft furnishing for a natural sound and avoid large cavernous rooms as you'll get an echo. Don't use the inbuilt microphone on your computer / laptop as it will amplify background noise. There are lots of inexpensive webinar microphones you could purchase, but take a little time to look at online reviews first. A combined microphone / headphone such as one you get with a mobile phone will suffice. When participants are not speaking, ask them to mute their microphones. Your webinar software will allow you mute others to avoid background noise.

### Utilise Your Chat Window

This is a convenient alternative to pausing for questions. If possible, dedicate a resource member from your team to monitor and respond to those questions so that you can focus on your slides. Remind people at the start of your online training as to where and how they can type their questions

### Remember That Less [Text] is More

This is generally true with any presentation, but it is particularly relevant for online training when it's easier for the audience to tune out. Try to keep your bullets succinct and catchy, with visual representations and images whenever possible, fill the whole screen with an image and then tell the story to that picture. Remember, a picture paints a thousand words. Don't fall into the habit of reading the slides, people are sitting there and need to hear and see something different to what they can already see in front of them.

### Thank You For The Music

In any setting music can be used to set the tone, this equally applies to online training. Remember this is not about what you like in music, it's about setting the tone. Think carefully about which music you will use. For example, you might start with some upbeat music to set the tone for your training and then use some background music for a time when participants might be doing a reflective exercise.

### Take Advantage Of Interactive Virtual Tools

Polls, pop quizzes, breakout rooms, and white

boarding are all great ways to engage your audience and gauge their understanding. It also give you a breather from speaking while participants are using these tools.



### Put In Some Face Time

Using your camera brings your training alive, it brings humanity to what is otherwise a set of slides.

Make sure your room is well lit and don't sit in front of a window with the light behind you. You may also need to use an additional desk lamp to provide warm lighting for your face. Make sure your web camera is at eye level not below this level. You can use a shoebox to bring the level of the camera up to eye level.

You should enable your web cam to show yourself and bring a bit of human connection to your presentation. It's also a good idea to ask participants to do the same. While not everyone loves to show their face on camera, it will keep everyone engaged and accountable. At minimum, have a photograph of yourself on your first and last slide.



### Schedule Breaks Into The Agenda

Participants will be less likely to stray into email or other browsers if they know they will have a 15 minute break to do so during the session.

Keep to your timings too. At maximum, do a 45 minute session followed by a break before a final 45 minute session. Don't forget at the start of each break, be sure to mute your own microphone and pause the recording and then remember to switch both back when you resume.

### What's The Password?

One way to ensure that volunteers stay focused is to include a password on a slide that they have to write down to prove that they were paying attention.

For some fun you might include a photograph of yourself as a young person and ask them to let you know when they see you on screen, randomly drop the picture into your slide deck and offer a prize to the person who first types in the password when they see your picture. This keeps people engaged and waiting to see what you look like and again shows you are a real person who can have a bit of fun!

### That's A Wrap

Email out the link to the recording of the online training, the slide deck, chat transcript, and any other associated materials. You can do this by publishing a link to the recording online or distributing it via email.

Decide whether you want volunteers to watch the recording or to attend the online training session live. Recordings are great for people to reflect and refer back to, but your decision to allow them to listen later or only participate live will depend on the type of information you are delivering. Depending on the setup and credits associated with your online training, you may need to mark attendance (including no-shows, walk-ins, etc.) and update the class status.

### Finally

It's important to collect feedback from attendees. Include questions about the length of the meeting, the technology used and the topics addressed.

This feedback can also prove useful to encourage other volunteers to engage with the training if their previous experiences of online training hasn't been very positive.

Visit the [Volunteer Ireland website](https://www.volunteer.ie) for further support and advice on how to adapt and improve your volunteer programme.

