



## COVID-19 How PANDEMIC ADVERSITY FAST-TRACKED INNOVATION

### UGM insights on virtual live workshops

1. Are virtual live workshops ready for prime time? Yes! Recent advances in technology, as well as user familiarity with the new format, make virtual live workshops a robust learning format.
2. How does 'online learning' compare with VLW? Online learning is established and is known for the ability to learn on demand. A drawback though is the lack of on-the-spot connection with real people.
3. What about 'webinars'? Webinars try to deliver 'online learning' in real-time. Basically, they're a broadcast ('lecture') with limited interactivity. They're great for a big crowd but that quality makes them an inferior substitute for an interactive and interpersonal workshop.
4. What makes a good virtual live workshop? Frankly, the recipe is similar to a traditional workshop that is successful. Usually there is a blend of facilitator input and participant dialogue. Spontaneity and interactivity are vital. Video, breakout rooms and screen sharing are powerful, engaging features.
5. What benefits do VLW offer? Reach. People can participate from anywhere. Travel time and accommodation costs are eliminated. It's possible to hold more short, focused workshops with valuable incubation time between sessions.

#### *Motivated by novelty, constrained by habit*

Few have been left unscathed by a pandemic that likely has still some way to run. For some, it has been catastrophic. For many more, severely constraining in a variety of ways. But, rather than conceding to this unseen, potentially deadly foe, humankind has chosen to fight back. That fight too has a way to run, but already some communities have discovered how they can gain a greater sense of control. Down for a while perhaps, but not out!

Two powerful drivers energise the human endeavour. First, there's the very basic instinct for survival. In short, people will endure a lot and expend an enormous amount of effort and energy to stay alive. This is closely coupled with the drive to optimise human experience. What use was survival if there was no opportunity to thrive and flourish?

To this end, brains are motivated by novelty. In fact, studies into brain health and longevity indicate that regularly experiencing novelty is vital to a long, happy life. But, oh that it were so simple! Brains are also faced with a challenge of being unable to process much more than a fraction of the data they're bombarded with each second.

To cope, the brain makes use of a range of techniques to achieve cognitive economy. One of these is the preference to reuse old patterns and associations (memories). It costs the brain a lot less energy to use habits than to create brand new memories and behaviours. That's why it's often quite a lot more difficult to learn a new behaviour than simply slipping into an old habit. "We've always done it this way" is an example of how the brain sometimes counters new ideas (that will require additional processing power to integrate).

#### *Stuck with what always worked, because it worked so well!*

It's these two primal forces that played against each another when UGM suggested to a few clients late last year, prior to the pandemic, that virtual live workshops might be viable for some programs. This shift in perspective challenged decades, if not centuries, of conventional wisdom that workshops were most effective when experienced in a physically-present format.

Even for UGM, there had been a reticence that the technology was good enough. Also, there was a sense that since the idea of virtual live workshops was such a new concept, people may simply prefer the old ways which worked. Fair enough.

In a most timely manner, Zoom seemed to emerge as a technology that offered a range of capabilities that a virtual live workshop would need. Although all of the technologies offered increasingly good platforms

for meetings, the one deal-breaker was the ability to readily disperse into breakout rooms and then as easily reconvene in plenary. As a participant, you would be reluctant to have to start a new video meeting for each breakout session and then have to re-join the main group each time. As a facilitator, organising such breakouts would be challenging and getting people back into plenary could become a nightmare! Zoom allows breakouts and reconvenes to happen pretty seamlessly. Also, since Zoom's mission from inception was to provide a quality video experience, it appeared to be a very reasonable substitute for face-to-face meetings (provided individuals each had a good connection).

The next challenge was getting people to give it a go! Why go virtual, with all the past misconceptions about poor video, if you can meet face-to-face? Other than those in regional areas (who saw obvious benefits), there was little motivation for change – which included learning how to use the new technology well. That might have been that.

Just a few months later though, enter COVID-19, global lockdowns, and a huge percentage of the workforce switching overnight to working from home! Sure there were challenges. But, the transition to a new mode of working, previously accessed by only relatively few 'tele-workers', has been astounding. All credit to the combination of a strong will to survive and a willingness to embrace innovation – new technology, that happened to be ready for prime time, as well as a different way of working. The rest, as they say, is history!

#### *Virtual Live Workshops are a great innovation*

UGM may not have been first to use the term Virtual Live Workshop, but we can confirm that it hadn't been used much until very recently. It was important to distinguish between face-to-face and virtual modes, just as it was vital to clarify it was not regular 'online training' or the more widely used, broadcast style 'webinars'. Neither of those provide a genuine workshop experience.

UGM had previously run hybrid virtual live workshops, for people in different remote locations. That experience, together with great new technology and people's growing comfort with it, made us confident that we could deliver high quality learning outcomes in a virtual live workshop format. Our clients have partnered with us in giving it a go and almost everyone has been extremely pleased with the outcomes. From those who've now attended several modules, it's become apparent that people have built the skills needed to work well virtually, including participation in virtual live workshops. Groups of up to 25 can now enjoy a workshop experience almost the same as the traditional face-to-face format.