



Staying Connected: Supporting NHLKS remote workers during COVID-19

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Abstract

This article explores the delivery of virtual wellbeing events to staff working remotely during COVID-19. The changed working environment could have a negative impact on workers mental health. It is important now more than ever to develop team bonding and enhance communication.

Keywords: *Mental wellbeing, virtual events, team building, HSE Library staff*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented numbers of HSE Library employees working remotely from home or closed Libraries due to level 5 restrictions. Lack of social interaction and workplace engagement can lead to an increase in feelings of isolation, loneliness and poor mental health. It is important now more than ever to collaborate and interact virtually.

Aoife Lawton National HSE Librarian contacted us with a view to organising and facilitating virtual events which would allow staff to interact together virtually. Aoife's vision was to make the events informal so staff could relax and take a breather from work while catching up with each other and having some fun.

This was a new learning curve for the authors as we had never organised anything like this before. The professional challenge increased as we had never met each other and were working remotely in different parts of the country, Westmeath, Cork and Drogheda. We communicated initially via Slack¹ (a cloud-based team interaction tool used by staff of the HSE National Health Library & Knowledge Service (NHLKS) to communicate across the entire organisation) to make acquaintances and a brainstorming Zoom meeting was arranged.

Following extensive research and brainstorming it was decided to host

Virtual Coffee Mornings

Virtual Staff Wellness Day (to replace our annual staff engagement day where we would meet in person)

Virtual Staff Christmas Party.

We identified our individual strengths when deciding on the allocation of tasks, but primarily communication and team work played a major part in the success of the events.

Objectives

- Work as a team to successfully develop, organise and facilitate virtual online events for HSE Library staff via Zoom and Cisco WebEx² platforms within a designated time frame, while adhering to HSE ICT guidelines.
- Compile and distribute to all Library staff a virtual events etiquette document for virtual online events. Identify what activities staff would prefer by encouraging suggestions and inspire active staff participation in the events.

1 <https://slack.com/intl/en-ie/>

2 <https://www.webex.com/>



- Promote the virtual events to HSE Library staff via online platforms and e-mail to maximise attendance.

Methodology

Initially it was decided to hold the virtual coffee breaks over Zoom and a subscription to Zoom was organised by NHLKS. As our knowledge of Zoom was limited, training on its operations and functionality was arranged. The first virtual coffee break was scheduled for 3rd June 2020. A poster was created promoting the virtual coffee breaks and including the timetable and login details. This was circulated via Slack and Outlook together with a "Ground Rules and Virtual Coffee Break Etiquette" document, which had been compiled in advance.

In July 2020 we moved over to the Cisco Webex platform as Zoom was no longer supported by HSE ICT guidelines. Further training ensued on the functionality and operation of Cisco Webex enabling a smooth transition. Staff were notified of the move via Slack and new login details were issued.

The initial task in organising the **Staff Wellness Day** for the 30th June 2020 was to hold a brainstorming session to decide a format and Agenda. The central theme was wellness, but we also wanted a fun element and staff participation.

Our first Zoom brainstorming session took place on the 11th June 2020 allowing a timeframe of two and a half weeks to organise the event. A notification was posted on Slack to save the date and staff were encouraged to offer suggestions and volunteer to participate in the event. A number of staff with particular talents were identified and approached privately. They were enthusiastic to contribute to the event and share their expertise. After consultation with the volunteers it was decided a pre-recorded video would be more appropriate. This eliminated the risk that a staff member might not be available on the day of the event due to unforeseen circumstances. The videos consisted of a Yoga session, a gardening demonstration and a cooking demonstration.

For the **Christmas** Party a staff member wrote a Limerick titled "A Christmas Telearcarol". Using Canva the Limerick was converted to an MP4 video to permit sharing on the day. To add a twist another staff member recorded themselves singing the Limerick on WhatsApp to the tune of Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. We also had a pre-recorded meditation video, Korean cooking demonstration and Sing-a-Long to Christmas music.

A member of staff suggested we play an Irish Blessing video. The video was put together by over 300 Churches and Christian organisations from every county in Ireland who joined together virtually to sing an ancient Irish



Blessing to protect frontline workers. This was very appropriate as we were currently living under the cloud of COVID-19 and patients hospitalised, as a result of the virus, were receiving exceptional care from HSE staff. Following the Irish Blessing we had a Library Comedy Parody (which was compiled by Library staff in the United States.) They used one of Lady Gaga's songs to record a song about cataloguing. It was topical, light-hearted and brought the attendees back to the main event in an upbeat mood.

Numerous technical difficulties including low sound and low image resolution were experienced with the videos submitted by staff. This was due to the

fact that the videos were created using different formats i.e. WhatsApp, MP4 and YouTube. We identified YouTube as a universal platform which permitted video share in the chat function in Zoom. Attendees could watch the videos in chat then return to Zoom for the next event. On Cisco Webex we were able to play the videos without converting them to YouTube links. However, the sound caused a problem as the volume was very low. After various attempts we resolved the issue by playing the videos using VLC Media Player, which allows the volume to be increased to 200% whilst screen sharing.

To set the tone for the day we needed an event that would put everyone at ease and encourage relaxation. The icebreaker can create a positive atmosphere and drive engagement. When deciding on the icebreaker for the staff wellness day we had to accommodate staff both at work in the Library and at home. After some online research we agreed on a scavenger hunt. This enabled everyone to participate and join in the fun. A list of items was

compiled to which everyone would have access, both at home and in the library. Staff were encouraged by the hosts in a race to retrieve the items.

For the virtual staff Christmas party we wanted an original fun icebreaker. We decided to do our own version of Dictionary and called the event Festive Fictionary. Eight unusual Christmas related words were chosen with four possible definitions listed under each word in a festive themed PowerPoint presentation. Staff were challenged to choose the right definition. This icebreaker involved creative thinking as all the definitions had to sound feasible. It proved to be a great success on the day.

To retain interest the Agenda was structured with an equal mix of videos and staff activities. Each video was followed by an activity that involved staff participation, for example bingo and a quiz. A coffee break was also incorporated where participants were allocated separate break out rooms where they could chat and get to know each other. Each room was allocated a topic which staff could use as an icebreaker to get the conversation going if they so wished. A timer alerted staff when to return to the main event.

The staff quiz comprised of two parts. In the first part the participants would answer four rounds of multiple choice questions and the second part consisted of a picture round. Research was undertaken to see if it was possible to hold a quiz on Zoom and we discovered this could be achieved by using the Zoom polling function. A poll was created into which the questions and answers were manually inputted. Participants would answer the questions on screen and save their answers. At the end of each round the answers were given and the participants could see a percentage poll of how many people picked 1, 2 or 3 for their answer. A report was compiled from the saved answers to ascertain the total correct answers for each participant.

For the picture round we secured a PowerPoint presentation of a quiz, which was previously used at another online event and adapted it. The PowerPoint presentation was shared on screen and each participant privately messaged their answer to the host in chat. This ensured that everybody's answers remained private. Careful consideration was given to the content of the quiz questions to

ensure they included a variety of themes, including Library and Christmas themed questions at varying degrees of difficulty. This involved extensive research online.

The answers for both rounds were totalled and the person with the most correct answers declared the winner. Totalling the scores took an inordinate amount of time as the answers in the picture round had to be manually separated out in chat, counted and crosschecked. When holding the quiz on Cisco WebEx for the virtual Staff Christmas Party further research was carried out to see if the quiz could be conducted by poll. We ascertained it could not. We needed to download WebEx Poll Questionnaire Editor to enable us to launch the quiz through the WebEx poll function. As a back-up measure we created a PowerPoint presentation of the poll quiz questions and answers in anticipation of technical problems. We had a similar back-up of the quiz for the virtual Staff Wellness Day. Thankfully it was not needed on either occasion. Library Babble Bingo was created for our Wellness Day and a Christmas themed Bingo for the Christmas Party. A series of preparations were carried out to ensure a successful event. Each Library staff member was sent an individual bingo card with instructions via Slack prior to the virtual event. The individual bingo cards were created using Microsoft Excel and a random number generator. During the live event a PowerPoint presentation was shared on screen with a slideshow of words, which had to be ticked off the bingo sheet. Prizes were given for one line, two lines and a full house.

Prizes for the quiz and bingo winners were organised through Aoife Lawton. For the Christmas party we also had a prize for the best Christmas outfit. This encouraged staff to dress up and created a festive atmosphere.

Given the potential unreliability of broadband strength all PowerPoint presentations were shared allowing each host access to all of the presentations. This proved fortuitous on the day of the virtual Staff Christmas party when Marguerite lost her connection just as she was ready to present Festive Fictionary. Natasha was able to smoothly take over in her stead.

A number of trial runs were scheduled in advance of each live event to ensure that everything would run smoothly on the day. Live events were recorded,

“ Thank you Natasha, Caroline, Marguerite & Aoife, it was a great fun morning, I enjoyed it all. It was brill and it was good to see our colleagues even if at a distance. ”

“ Huge thanks to all involved in making our virtual Christmas party with lots of fun and frolics, it was so good to see everyone again. ”

“ Very many thanks and well done. My connection was giving me trouble this morning but I was there. ”

“ Thanks everyone, the wellness day was so much fun and it was great to get to meet everyone. ”

“ Thanks to all for arranging this morning. I got disconnected just as the Bingo was starting and couldn't get back in so missed the opportunity to say thank you. Great fun and well done to all involved. ”

edited on PowerDirector and the video posted in Slack. This facilitated staff who were redeployed due to COVID-19 or were unable to join us on the day.

Results

All virtual events were well received and well attended by Library staff. Over thirty staff attended the staff wellness day and the attendance increased to forty one for the Christmas party. Interaction and engagement was positive. The events enabled staff to connect while working remotely. When hosting an online event for staff working remotely it is inevitable that some technical/broadband difficulties will be encountered which is outside our control. Some of the more common technical difficulties experienced during the live events included cameras freezing and staff getting logged out of the event. The problems occurred more frequently in the Christmas event when a larger volume of staff attended. We advised anyone that encountered problems to re-join the event. Overall this did not appear to impede the enjoyment for staff as illustrated in some of the feedback received. The most common theme in the feedback received was that Library staff enjoyed interacting with colleagues again.

Counting the quiz results was laborious and time consuming. An automated system that calculated the results would have been preferable. This would involve using a cloud based quiz solution integrated into your web conferencing platform.

Conclusion

Teamwork and communication played a key part in the planning and preparation of the virtual events. Anticipating problems in advance and having back-up solutions in place are absolutely essential. Enabling staff to participate on the day also proved successful. As virtual events and working remotely are new concepts for Library staff it was encouraging to see the increase in numbers attending the second event. There were a number of staff new to the Library service and the events enabled them to meet and interact with their colleagues. All attendees expressed delight at seeing and interacting with their colleagues again. A number of staff requested the

Festive Fictionary, quiz and bingo presentations to share with their families during the Christmas holidays. Three enjoyable virtual staff events were planned, organised and orchestrated in a specific time frame through positive thinking, good communication and fantastic teamwork. New skills were developed and challenges overcome. We are now identified as “The Events Team”. As remote working becomes more common due to COVID-19 virtual staff events are vital to keep the channels of communication open, prevent staff burn out and combat feelings of isolation and loneliness.

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