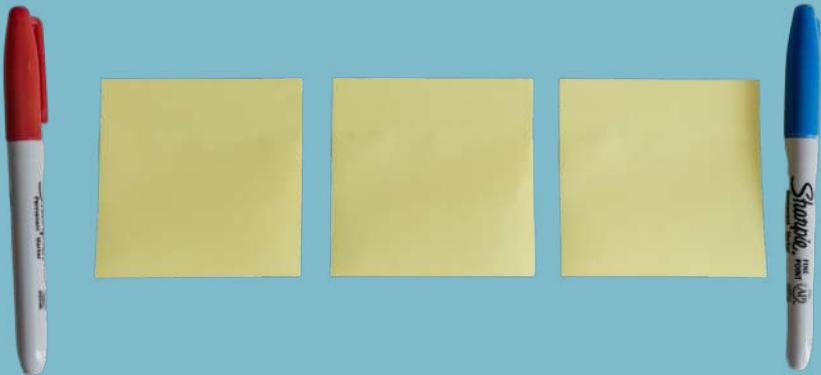


Online citizen workshops

How to facilitate online workshops for
your community



Get your citizens engaged on
local topics

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Introduction

A workshop is usually defined as **an interactive session in which a group of people simultaneously work together to reach a shared objective**. Workshops can take many shapes and forms, and it is up to the organisers to define three key elements:

- ◆ How **interactive** it is: allowing questions vs crowdsourcing ideas
- ◆ Who can **participate**: everyone vs a small group with a specific role or expertise
- ◆ What the shared **objective** is: exchange perspectives vs reaching consensus

Most participation methods, such as online ideation or surveys, are characterised by **asynchronous engagement**, which means that citizens participate individually whenever it is convenient for them. Workshops, on the other hand, are **synchronous**: citizens work together simultaneously towards a common goal. As a result of the direct interaction, discussions gain more depth, responding to each other becomes more natural, and personal contact can enhance empathy between participants.

While offline workshops undeniably have value and in-person discussions cannot - and should not - be substituted with online alternatives, we do believe that online workshops can be a **complimentary** solution:

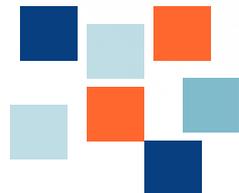
- ◆ When physical gatherings are difficult, e.g. during a global pandemic;
- ◆ For citizens with limited possibilities to visit or get to a physical venue, e.g. when there are vast distances;
- ◆ To increase your efficiency, e.g. by no longer needing to transcribe the hundreds of handwritten post-it notes of an offline workshop;
- ◆ To save the costs of renting a venue and providing catering.



How to **organize** an online workshop?

7 main tips and tricks

1. Plan well in advance.
2. Communicate details upfront.
3. Keep the session short and simple.
4. Keep the workshop personal.
5. Take ownership of the session.
6. Be flexible.
7. Practice, practice, practice.





Preparation

Proper preparation is, by far, **the most critical part** of your workshop. Online sessions require serious planning: the better you prepare, the better the workshop!

1. Define the scope and objectives:

What are you trying to achieve with this workshop? When will the workshop be a success? Make sure these objectives are clear and shared across your team. Also, take into account whether these objectives are obtainable in a workshop of 60-90 minutes? If not, better to split into several workshops or to make your scope more realistic.

2. Set a date and time:

Scheduling a workshop should be done far enough in advance, as you need time to prepare sufficiently and your citizens need to save the date. Keep your target audience in mind when selecting a timeslot. Are you talking about a new playground and curious to hear from young families with toddlers? Set your workshop after baby bedtime. Are you hoping to include participants from different timezones? Make sure your schedule falls within reasonable hours for all of them.

3. Set up the workshop:

Start the setup by defining the different steps in the process. To keep your workshop clear and focused, **each step should be limited to one goal or action only**. All your steps combined provide your workshop's timeline, which is visible to all participants.



Workshop tip: share both contextual information (e.g. what the topic is about) as well as practical information (what you expect from participants) to ensure all participants are well-informed.



4. Write your script

It's necessary to estimate beforehand how much time each step will take. Go through the timeline of your entire workshop and write down what you, as the facilitator, will say and do during each step. How you write this down will differ depending on your personal preferences: some prefer bullet points outlining key elements, while others prepare a literal transcription of their lines to feel confident.

When writing your script, keep the participant's perspective in mind. Does it make sense to them? What changes are needed to make things clearer for someone hearing it for the first time?



Workshop tip: Make a script that takes up slightly less time than the actual time you scheduled for the workshop. During your workshop, something unexpected can - and will - happen, which may cause you to 'lose' time.

5. Test it out!

You have set up your workshop and written your script, so now it's time for a try-out! Run through the different steps a couple of times while reading your script. Also invite your colleagues, friends or children to test-run the workshop with you. Is it clear to them? Is the timing accurate? If your test-participants found points for improvement, you still have time to make changes.



Communication

How do you get the right people to participate in your workshop?

1. Define your audience

Who you want to involve ultimately depends on your scope and objectives:

- ◆ Are you looking for specific input, ideas, or expertise? Identify the suitable 'experts'.
- ◆ Do you want to get feedback on a new policy proposal? Reach out to citizens or community groups that will be directly impacted by it.
- ◆ Is your goal to inform citizens about running projects or a taken decision? Keep it open to all interested citizens.

2. Send out your invites

Reach out to the audience you have identified in the previous step. When approaching participants, clearly state what the workshop is about, why they are invited, what is expected from them and how their input will be used. Expectation management is vital in sending out a good invitation! Motivate your invitees by highlighting what is 'in it for them'. Why should they take the time to participate? Participating in your workshop means they are not spending that time with their family, or enjoying their favourite leisure activity, so you have to share a clear value proposition.

3. Follow-up on registrations

Keep an eye on the number of participants for your workshops. If there is considerable interest from your community and the amount of citizens interested becomes unmanageable, you can always decide to organize the same workshop a second and even a third time.



4. Send information in advance

Allow your participants to prepare for the workshop by providing the necessary information in time:

- ◆ **Practical information:**
 - The link to your workshop;
 - All steps participants need to take to enter your workshop (e.g. creating an account). Ensure this process is as clear as possible;
- ◆ Ask participants to log in at least **5 minutes before the start** of the workshop, so that they have time to test their microphone, webcam and can get comfortable.
- ◆ The **agenda** of the workshop, based on your established timeline.



Workshop tip: You can already ask participants' input upfront. How do they feel about the topic at stake? Which rooms are they most interested in to join? Not only does this offer your participants a way to co-create the workshop, but it also allows you to prepare the workshop even better!



Moderation

Moderation is critical to ensure a pleasant, memorable and impactful workshop. We have outlined a standard flow for moderating workshops below. However, even if your workshop deviates from this, the chapter will still hold valuable information for you to consider.

Ready: 30 minutes before the start

- ◆ Meet up with all other facilitators and moderators in your workshop environment 30 minutes in advance.
- ◆ Go over the script and roles one more time together.
- ◆ Check each other's technical setup and make sure the risk of being interrupted, e.g. by a noisy cellphone, is reduced to a minimum.
- ◆ Are you planning to share your screen or resources? Make sure all tabs are open and test sharing your screen.
- ◆ Do you plan to record your workshop? Start the recording already and make sure to mention it to participants at the start of the session.
- ◆ Get yourself something to drink, make sure you sit comfortably, and off you go!

Set: 5 minutes before the start

- ◆ When participants start dripping in, welcome them and make them feel at ease, for instance, by asking participants to answer an icebreaker question.
- ◆ Use this time to help out with potential technical questions.
- ◆ Don't hesitate to say explicitly "You can switch to fullscreen here" or "With that button in the left bottom corner you can raise your hand to speak." Many participants might not dare to ask if these things are unclear upon arrival.



Workshop tip: depending on the size of your group and time of the session, it can help to start the workshop with an energizer. [This article](#) shares suggestions for online-energizers.



Go: the start of your workshop

Start your workshop with a general welcome to all participants. Go over the agenda and the workshop flow once more and highlight the scope and objectives of the session. Ask participants for clarifying questions. Take the time to discuss your 'online workshop etiquette'. Ask people to:

- ◆ State their name (and role or reason to join) when they speak for the first time;
- ◆ Mute their microphone when they're not talking;
- ◆ Raise their virtual hand when they want to speak or ask a question.

Role of moderator

Lots can be said about this role, and we don't aim to be exhaustive. Even more so than for offline workshops, online discussions require an apparent moderator. But you can always fall back on your experience with offline workshops, or use the many resources written about this topic. Most of the principles that make sense in the offline world, make sense in the online world as well! Amongst other things, these are vital aspects of your moderator role:

- ◆ **Take ownership.** Bring clarity where needed, and get the discussion going where blocked.
- ◆ **Make everyone feel heard.** Invite people to speak or at least make sure they have the opportunity to do so.
- ◆ **Keep the focus.** Discussions tend to sidetrack easily. Keep the timing and desired outcomes in mind, and bring the focus back when needed.
- ◆ **Avoid hijackers.** When one person is taking up all the space, don't hesitate to stop him politely. If needed, offer that person other ways of sharing his opinion after the workshop.
- ◆ **Bring energy.** Try to "feel the - online - room". Positive energy is contagious, and it's crucial during (online) workshops to keep the momentum and engagement going.



Closing your workshop

Before ending the workshop, make sure to thank the participants for their engagement and indicate what's next. It's always a good idea to ask for feedback. You can do that, for example, by sharing a link to an online survey.



Want to engage your community online? We're here to help!

CitizenLab has worked with **+150 local governments** on online citizen engagement and launching a participation platform. **The platform offers a mix of participation methods**, including an online workshop feature. Get in touch with us today to see the tool in action and discuss your next project with our participation experts!

[Schedule a free demo of the platform](#)



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in your city or municipality!

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