KEEP IT GOING!

ONLINE TOOLS REVIEW FOR ERASMUS+ AND EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS NATIONAL AGENCIES

Introduction

National Agencies now need to work in extraordinary conditions and this review aims at giving some ideas on how to use the Internet and online tools to substitute live meetings, consultations, information and training events. It is not an exhaustive list and it does not claim to present "the best tools ever". Rather, take it as a collection of personal reflections of using these tools for a while or as a 'recommendations from a friend'. When choosing a tool, always consider what is the main objective - what do you reach with the tool and if it actually provides that function.

Author of the review: Laimonas Ragauskas, April 14, 2020

Table of Contents

Disclaimer

Tools are constantly updated with new functions, design and fixes. The pricing is changing quite often. Information provided here is based on the data found by mid-April 2020.

Meetings Online

Probably by now some you have tried several tools for online meetings. Each tool has its own pros and cons, but few tools got more used than others.

Zoom

Website: https://zoom.us/
Company headquarters: San Jose, USA

Suddenly almost everyone started using Zoom and then we got some news of safety issues with it, which made some organisations reconsider the tools they use. As [Mozilla experts pointed out](#), Zoom has done a solid job of responding to the questions, concerns, and interests that have come fast and furious in a short amount of time.

Whether you are new to Zoom or already hosted a meeting or two, take a few minutes to read some PRO [tips on how to make your Zoom gatherings more private](#) and safe.

It is for now the tool with the least bugs, quite a solid audio and video connection, very versatile screen sharing opportunities. You always have Plan B in case some of your participants get out of the internet zone. People can still participate by calling free phone numbers in their country. People will join without video, but they won't miss any important information.

You can also record your meetings either to your own computer or Zoom cloud. It can be useful to share the videos with people who have missed the meeting and you wish to promote some content for the wider audience.

If you opt-in for the [Webinar package](#) from ZOOM, you can have some cool extra features like pre and post-webinar emails, reminders to join, moderated Q&A sessions, Live polls.

[The prices for ZOOM](#) are quite competitive for the functions you get. PRO Plan usually is sufficient - it allows up to 100 participants with meetings limited to 24 hours (don't try hosting a meeting for longer, deal?).

If you wish to learn more tips on hosting and managing Zoom gatherings, check some [resources to learn](#) more, prepared by Zoom team.

We all know that tool is as good as the master using it. You can check [this great resource](#) focusing on ideas on how to facilitate meetings online.

Cisco Webex

Website: https://www.webex.com/
Company Headquarters: Milpitas, USA

Cisco is in the video conference business for ages and provides a number of IT solutions for organisations. Webex is quite a serious competitor for Zoom with similar pricing. Though for the same price you can 50% less people (50 instead of 100 on Zoom), rarely you will have a larger meeting than that. You can check their pricing [here](#). Most probably the Starter package will be sufficient for 12,85 Euro. Cisco Webex Meetings offers a limited free plan and a free trial of its paid

features. Similar to Zoom, all pricing plans include phone dial-in numbers from 45 countries. You can also record your meetings, have dedicated person meeting rooms online, etc.

ClickMeeting

Website: https://clickmeeting.com/
Company headquarters: Gdansk, Poland

Knowing some NAs willing to prioritise EU based IT solutions, ClickMeeting is another solution offering video conferencing solutions. Thought I would see CkickMeeting is focusing more on webinar functionality, but it can be used for meetings as well. Though it limits to 4 video feeds, meaning other people can be only with the audio connection.

Clickmeeting has a great design and quite an easy setup, plenty of video tutorials helping to host your first meeting. You can record, share the screen, enable Q&A session, launch live polls and surveys, draw on a whiteboard, share a Youtube video (with sound!) and few other cool functions. The nice thing about the tool is that you don't need to install any software, it functions totally as a web-based tool, you just need to give access to your microphone and webcam.

The pricing is higher than tools listed above. It starts at 25 Euros/month, but you get a possibility to have 3 hosts organising various meetings or webinars at the same time. In comparison, Zoom or Webex monthly price is per host. Meaning if you wish more people doing meetings at the same time, you would need to multiply the payment.

If you don't like any of the tools listed above, you can check other ones like GoToMeeting or Blue Jeans being quite a competitors to Zoom. Both tools have some good discounts now and meetings can host many users.

Keep The Communication Flow

When teams move online, they need more than just an email. They need a private working space to chat, quickly exchange ideas, share some links or just a cute cat picture during a virtual coffee break.
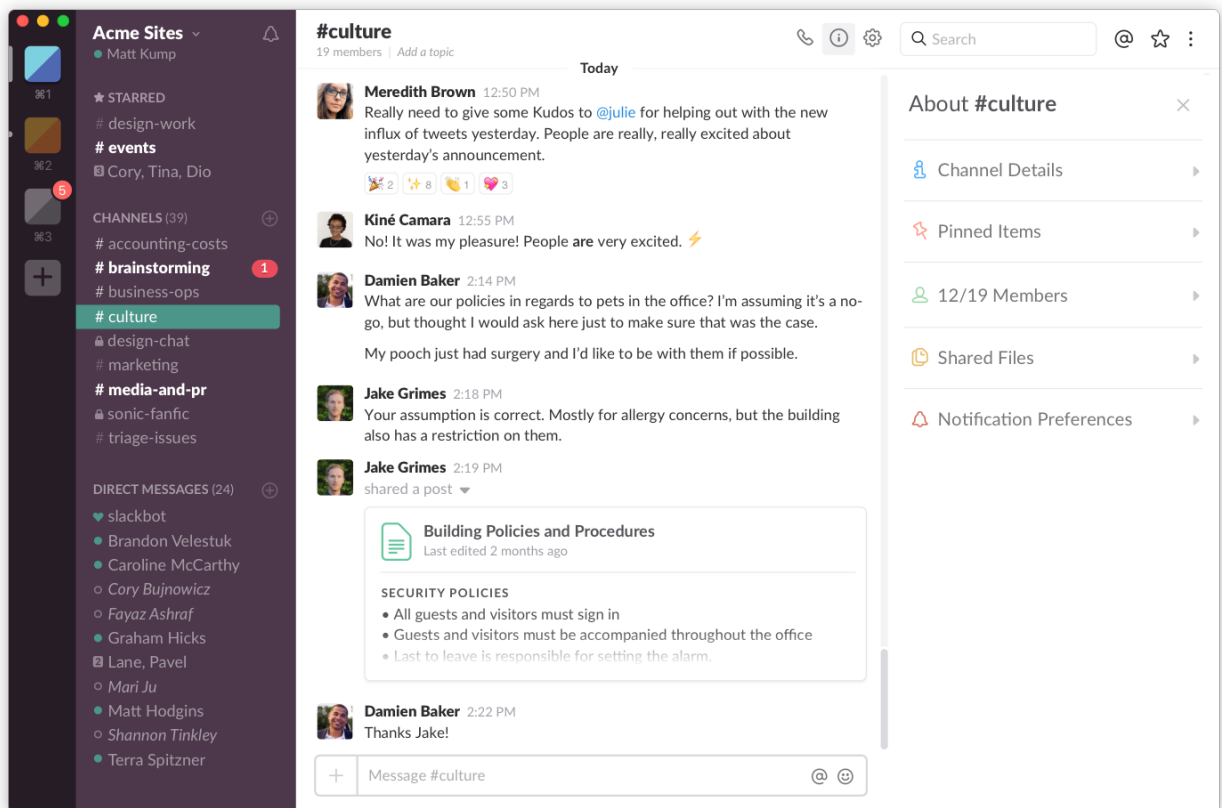
I will review here 3 platforms being on top of the game in team chatting and collaboration - **Slack**, **Microsoft Teams** and **Discord**.

Slack

Website: https://slack.com/
Company headquarters: San Francisco, USA

I have been using Slack for 5 years now and I feel it saved me a lot of time from writing emails or getting lost in email threads. Now we see many use cases for Slack. People organise some thematics communities and keep it as an ongoing discussion space or build an online course with resources structured in specific channels, etc.

Slack takes an old idea of IRC chat channels and gives opportunities to arrange workspaces based on teams or projects. Then inside the workspace, teams create topic-based communication channels. Team members can also chat via private one-to-one 'direct messages' or setup 'private channels' for some temporary project or an issue that does not need all the office to be involved. This article gives some great tips on how to use Slack in your organisations.

Image source

Slack offers unlimited public and private channels for members of the workspace, file sharing, 5GB of storage, and 10 app integrations. The free plan also locks your viewable and searchable message history to 10,000 entries. There's no indication, however, that Slack's free plan limits the number of users accessing your workspace.

Slack's free plan offers unlimited 1-to-1 audio or video calls. However, if you need additional callers in a single conference, you'll need a paid plan, which supports up to 15 simultaneous callers.

Pros:

- It is a secure way to host discussions, people can create channels themselves.
- Easy to signup/ easy to handle the sign-in process if a person forgot the password (quite important as people are forgetting their passwords way too often)
- It displays web links or video links very well, people can add pictures or emojis' - whatever way of adding their argument or sharing some examples on the chosen topic
- It can be used both as desktop-based (web-based or a dedicated desktop app) or mobile (both on phone internet browser and as a stand-alone App)
- Possibility to set up notifications either through a web version or as an App.

Cons:

- Slack free plan does not have it's own group audio/video chat function and it requires using other tools.
- Some security concerns that the free plan limits to 10 000 messages and these messages can not be accessed by organisations until they start paying the 'Starter' plan. Though Slack is storing messages in their servers.
- People might not enable push notifications and then forget that they are part of any discussion.

Microsoft Teams

Website: *Microsoft Teams*

Company Headquarters: Washington, USA

Microsoft Teams is following a very similar approach as Slack. You will find most of the functions mentioned above. Slack is in the team chatting field for longer, but Teams caught up quickly. Both tools look somewhat similar, though Slack gives more options to set up your favourite look of each Slack workspace.
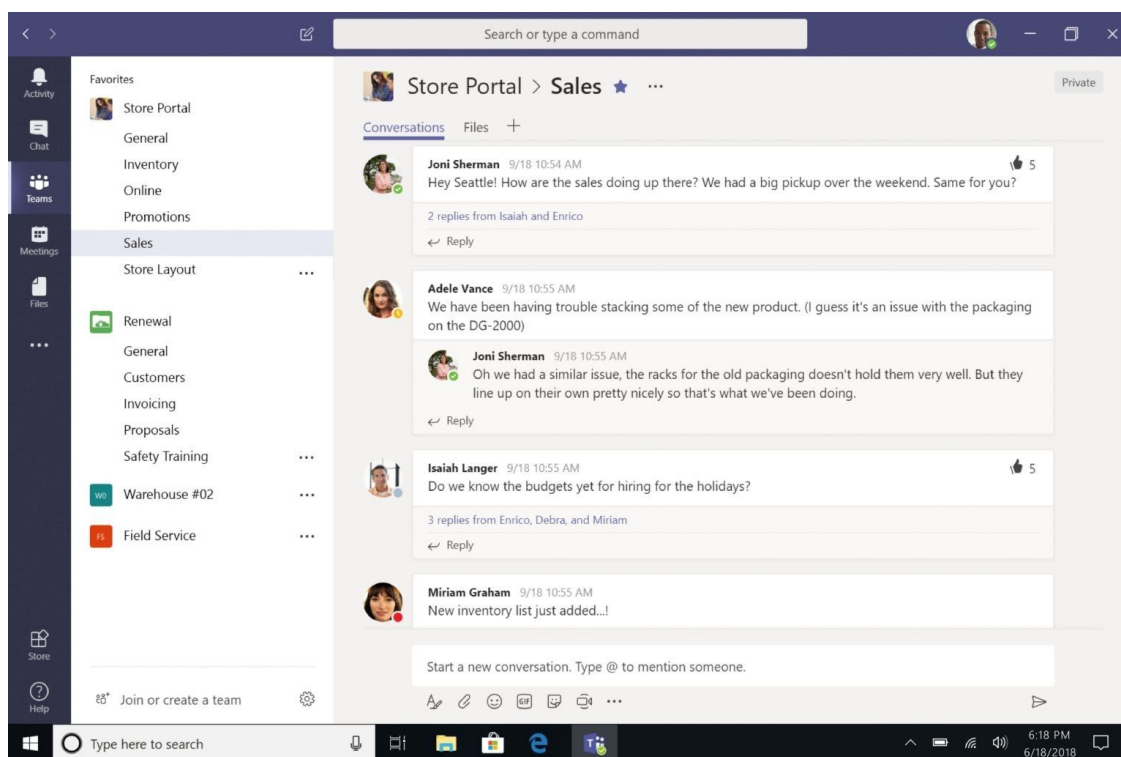
Image source

By far, the biggest difference between the two apps is that Slack is easier to set up and administrate. On the other hand, Microsoft Teams is designed for larger organisations and its setup is more complex. In return, it offers excellent integrations with Office 365 applications, One Drive and other Microsoft solutions.

However, if integrations are your primary concern for your team chat app, Slack is the clear winner since it integrates tones of other online tools into the workflow.

Teams, meanwhile, has quite good web conferencing capabilities by integrating Skype . On all pricing levels, including the free version, you can conference with voice or video with up to 250 people. Teams also offer the ability to record meetings (which Slack does not) and provide screen sharing (which Slack only has in higher pricing levels).

The good thing about the free version of Teams is that there's no limit for messages, unlike Slack. You can check [this article](#) for more detailed comparison of the two.

In a nutshell, Slack looks better, maybe easier to use and manage, but if you opt for paid versions Teams will give you more functionality and also you get Microsoft Office 365 included.

Discord

Website: https://discordapp.com/
Company Headquarters: Campbell, USA

This is an alternative to Slack or Microsoft Teams, but using the same logic of chatting in channels. Even visually it looks similar (Slack on the left and Discord on the right)
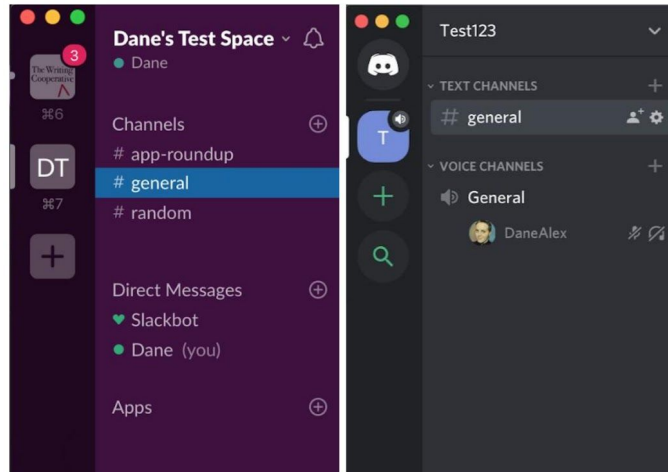
The free Discord plan provides virtually all the core functionality of the platform with very few limitations. Free users get unlimited message history, screen sharing, unlimited server storage, up to eight users in a video call.

Pros:

- It has integrated live voice chat and screen sharing in the free version.
- It clearly shows both channels for text and voice - if there are few people online they can simply join with a voice chat for a discussion.
- It is light and quick
- it also has desktop and mobile web versions and app versions
- It is becoming super popular among young people (250 million users last summer) and youth workers in some counties are already using Discord actively.

Cons:

- It is very much focused on gamers and sometimes people might not feel that it is for them
- Calling function works separately from text chat and some people find it difficult to manage it.

Collaboration tools

National Agencies not only provide funding for projects, but also manage them and sometimes pretty large-scale and/or complex ones, such as Europe Goes Local or Youth@Work, among many others.

Such projects require local and international teams to collaborate remotely: create, share, assign, monitor and report on the project tasks.

Basecamp
Website: http://basecamp.com/
Company headquarter: Chicago, USA

Basecamp is an online collaboration app that lets people work together on projects, events, or other assignments. You can upload files to discuss, assign and track tasks that need to get done, and have ongoing conversations with colleagues.

It gives you places to chat, make announcements, and view upcoming assignments and events on a calendar.

Sometimes people mistakenly gravitate toward Basecamp when what they really need is proper project management software. So when making the decision whether to opt for Basecamp, one should ask if you need to have a rather open sand-box for collaboration remotely or focus on managing particular projects, resources, timelines.

Here are some pros and cons on Basecamp:

Pros
- Flexible, sandbox-style software.
- Flat monthly price (99 USD/month)
- Supports integration with a wide variety of apps and services.
- Combines a number of functions, which are often scattered through different tools (task management, calendars, chats, file storage, etc.)

Cons
- Interface can be confusing
- Somewhat dull design
- Limited reporting capabilities

In the recent decade, we've seen a huge increase in the so-called **Kanban** way of visualising tasks. Kanban is a visual way to manage tasks and workflows, which utilizes a kanban board with columns and cards. The cards represent tasks, and the columns organize those tasks by their progress or current stage in development. Kanban board apps are ideal for managing work and the movement of work through different stages, or workflow. Tools like *MeisterTask*, *Trello* or *Asana* are based on this card-based approach. While Basecamp is a lot about communication, task sharing, checking-in with colleagues, these tools focus on increasing productivity, having a clear, visual overview of tasks.

Let's look closer at a couple of tools: **MeisterTask** and **Trello**.

Meistertask
Website: https://www.mindmeister.com/

Company headquarters: Vaterstetten, Germany (part of MeisterLabs Gmbh)

This Germany based tool comes from the creators of the famous MindMeister mind mapping software. This tool is getting very high review ratings, offers a loads of functionality already with the free version and paid version just adds some cherries on the cake.

Meistertask like other Kanban-style tools is based on boards/lists and task cards with various functions that a user can do with the card:
- To create checklist - smaller steps in completing the task
- Add links (e.g. some online meeting notes, or task description)
- Add attachments
- Comment on tasks
- Add due date (though notification is part of the paid plan)
- Assign a team member as a responsible person
- To add other members as "watching" (or they can add themselves)
- Tag the task by relating it to some project, process, team, etc.
- Pin the task and see it first at your personal dashboard

You can find similar functions in other tools like Trello, Basecamp, Asana and many more. This tool combines collaboration and project management functions, though essentially focusing on task management.

Pros:
- Lots of functions in Free plan
- Time tracking feature
- Clear overview of personal tasks
- Easy to review own tasks in each project
- Modern look and easy interface

- Support multiple European languages
- Supports a lot of integrations with other apps

Cons
- Issues with reminders, one needs to check the app often to check the tasks
- Automatic text fading on non-active card has poor visibility
- Paid option can become expensive for larger teams
- Lacks resource management functions
- Not easy to see all comments made for certain tasks

Trello

Website: www.trello.com
Company headquarters: New York, USA (Atlassian inc.)

Trello is in the game for longer than MeisterTask, though not as long as Bascamp, which started its first online collaboration platforms 17 years ago. Trello is a very widely used Kanban-style task management tool. Though sometimes we use Trello for presenting training programme or Open agenda sessions and adapted use of the tool. Essential Trello does most of the things that other tools like Asana or Meistertask can do. Users can create tasks, assign people, sort out tasks into lists, attach files, add comments, etc. Commenting allows people to have asynchronous communication in the team, however the communication flow is not very quick and engaging.

Pros
- Many options of "Power-up" by adding extra features
- Easy drag&drop card function

- Cheaper than Meistertask paid level

Cons

- Lack of project resource management functions
- Lack of more diverse views of tasks
- Exporting to CSV is only possible as paid function
- No time tracking function

Online Whiteboards

If our team is international or suddenly we can not work together with colleagues in one room, we still prefer writing on post-it note, doodle, group ideas, add comments, or create a visual flow. By using online whiteboard tools, we can do most (and even more!) of the things we can do on a physical whiteboard or pin-board. Let's take a look at some of the most popular ones. These could be used as a stand alone tool or during a webinar or an online course.

Google Jamboard

Website: https://jamboard.google.com/
Company headquarters: Mountain View, USA

Jamboard used to be known and a software for physical electronic whiteboards as a competitor to Microsoft Surface. Now Jamboard can be used simply as an online whiteboard without a need to have a physical one. However, by using it, you understand that it's really a basic whiteboard except of function of adding an image from Google search.

Sometimes it's enough to have such a simple tool without much rigmarole in setting it up and choosing layouts, etc. Here are some key pros and cons for the tool.

Pros
- Simple to access

- Usual way of setting up sharing access (like other Google products)
- Easy way of moving and resizing notes
- Very few functions allow to easily manage the tool
- It's free (but it's Google, so it's a trade-in)

Cons

- Very limited in terms of adding data to the notes
- Exporting only as an image or PDF
- Not possible to restore if someone deleted some content
- No way to limit the frame or add a structure - it can get messy easily

Padlet

Website: https://padlet.com/

Company headquarters: San Francisco, USA

Padlet can be used for many purposes. You can have a collaborative brainstorm online. Everyone can add their ideas and then the admin can sort them out.

You can have a statement and ask people to express why they agree or disagree with it. You can build a timeline and add more detailed descriptions of each step. You can use a map-based Padlet and make pins and posts based on the specific location.

Padlet is like your super boosted whiteboard - you can add a direct clickable web link, image (you can search images right from the Padlet), link to a video, add a file and much more.

Upload
Pick file from your computer.

Link
Enter any URL.

Google
Search images, videos, audio, GIFs, web.

Snap
Take photo from your camera.

Film
Capture video from your camera.

Voice
Record audio from your microphone.

Screen
Record your screen.

Draw
Doodle on an onscreen canvas.

Place
Add a location.

Padlet
Link to one of your other padlets.

Furthermore, you can enable reactions from others - they can comment or like or add a star, etc.

When your team finishes collaborating, you can share it online, embed to your website or online course page, export as an Image, PDF (in a really cool layout),, Excel and even CSV. It means someone can do a serious research by using CSV files analysis tools.

Pros:
- Easy to set-up and you get 3 padlet boards for free
- Simple to use - add posts with one click, copy-paste, or drag and drop
- Reactions on posts from others
- Changes are autosaved
- Simple link sharing allows for quick collaboration
- Lots of export formats
- Option to create your own unique web link to the Padlet
- Available in 29 languages, with more being added

Cons:
- Choosing the right layout requires few trial & error cycles
- Not good of longer text notes
- Boards with lots of contributions get hard to read
- Sometimes people don't see if they can scroll the board down or to the sides

Miro

Website: https://miro.com/
Company headquarter: San Francisco, USA

Miro is the new name for the old online whiteboard tool "Real Time Board". If Jamboard is a super basic online whiteboard, Padlet is somewhere in the middle, then Miro is on the Pro level with loads of functions. Company recently changed branding, user interface and upgraded the tool though it keeps all the good essentials from the past.

You can start by choosing the template of your whiteboard. It all depends on your objective - are your preparing for the brainstorm session? Or are you building a mindmap? Or a Kanban style cards to discuss your team workflow? All these and many more are available for your start.

Flowchart	Brainwriting	Wireframing
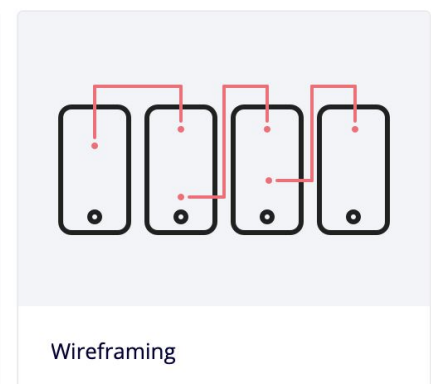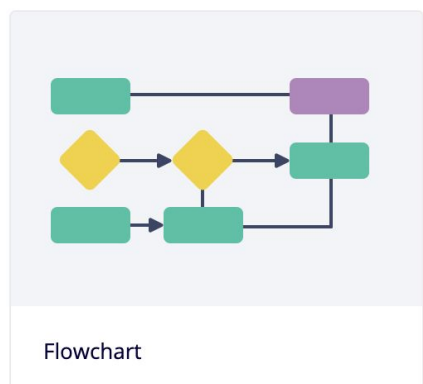
Then you can add virtual 'sticky notes' or shapes with text, you can connect different ideas. Then you can put all the big picture into smaller frames and switch to the presentation mode so you can present your virtual teamwork in a smooth and visual way. It looks like a whiteboard was merged with Prezi - really cool result!

With everyone logged in, you can carry on a chat conversation, select and drag a portion of the board to create "frames" so you can pan through the board in a more organized manner during presentations, or just turn on the screen sharing mode so that all participants can see your screen and hear your voice over the audio system.

Pros

- Many templates
- Unlimited whiteboard space
- Smooth zoom-in and zoom-out, visual support to understand where the user is at the moment
- Many shapes and functions to doodle, connect ideas
- Many ways to share your whiteboard (Image, PDF, CSV, etc.)
- Collaboration extends beyond adding notes together - you can share your share, write messages, audio chat, etc.

Cons

- Can be confusing for new user
- To collaborate fully everyone should sing-in
- Many functions require time for learning
- Editing on mobile can be difficult

Training events: from residential to online

We now have a situation with many residential training events being cancelled. What are the solutions to transform the residential course to the online course?

There are a number of platforms out there in the world hosting online courses. I will review two of the platforms, which I'm using. If you are interested to explore other platforms, you might want to check this quite extensive [review](#). I chose to present **HOP** platform and **Canvas Free for Teachers.** These platforms already host courses supported by National Agencies.

HOP

Website: https://hop.salto-youth.net/
Coordinated by SALTO-YOUTH Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Centre, HOP is one of the tools in youth work and it focuses on providing space for the online course linked to the field of youth work and especially linked to the Erasmus+ programme or the European Solidarity Corps.

WELCOME ABOARD

Community of online learners in Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps.

User friendly and intuitive for learners from different fields of European youth work.

Diversity of possibilities how to deliver content for online courses' authors and facilitators.

Native tool ensuring prominent recognition and visibility of the youth programmes.

HOP is based on Moodle, being the most widely used open source platform for online courses. Moodle courses are hosted by various organisations and educational institutions worldwide. There are gazillions of design templates and Moodle courses may look different, but usually it would have some common functions for hosting your course. HOP is using 3.8 version of Moodle, which is the newest one at this moment. HOP allows course creators to add various content: text, videos, photos, podcasts, quizzes, tests, surveys and much more into a clear educational sequence. Host of the course can make it closed - only people with an invitation can access it. The other way - to transform your residential course into a completely open course without any restrictions. Though Moodle has some restrictions and managing a course with a few hundred people might become a hasle.

Not sure, how to start your course? Check out the online course to get to know HOP and experience some of its features.

Pros

- It is a "home platform", managed by SALTO-YOUTH and used by NAs
- Free to use
- No big requirements for launching the course online
- Easy to start if you're used to Moodle
- Has online resources and online community of HOP learners
- Integrated open badges

Cons

- Moodle environment can be confusing for some learners
- The design and readability is not good at some sections of the course (might improve in the future)
- The enrollment and signup process is a bit too long

Canvas Free for Teachers

Website: https://www.instructure.com/canvas/login/free-for-teacher
Company headquarters: Salt Lake City, USA

This platform is developed by Instructure, providing learning management systems (LMS) for organisations and also hosting their MOOC platform www.canvas.net. Last year they were leading platform with more than 30 million users. Last year Canvas changed their direction and focusing mainly on open online courses for teachers, but they provide a free to use platform "Free for Teachers". At the moment this platform is hosting MOOC on Erasmus+ (already since 2015), YOCOMO online course for youth workers, MOOC on Europe and Young People and used to host MOOC on Youth policy by the EU-CoE Youth Partnership.

The platform is easy to use for uploading variety of course content: text, images, videos, adding surveys. It has tools to manage big groups of learners easily. It has a good design and hassle-free course management environment. Courses on the platform are open source and accessible. Canvas follows strictly accessibility guidelines for people with special needs.

Pros

- Simple environment to manage course content
- Huge resources for [facilitators](#) and [learners](#)
- Possibility to integrate many LTI tools for webinars, surveys, open badges, etc.
- Easy to import and export the content
- Platform has many supported languages

Cons

- Slight uncertainty how long "Free for teachers" will remain available

Outro

I reviewed 14 different tools that I am using or I know that number of National Agencies using some. Many of these tools can be combined to create a workflow based on your needs. I often combine a few tools if one tool does not have functionality I need. Most important is to set up the tools in the way that it would be easy for people to start and learn on the go. Do not overestimate the skills of your colleagues. Allow some time for people to try it out, to ask questions, and wander around. Good luck!

Sources

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