Remote workshops are here to stay: 3 tips to optimize your approach

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April 22, 2021

The rapid and mandatory transition to remote working in 2020 left a number of companies feeling uneasy about how their workforces would adapt. But to their surprise, many of these organizations saw significant increases in productivity among their employees, with 77% of remote employees saying they're more productive at home[1] than in an office setting. Big-name companies, such as Amazon, American Express, Facebook, and Microsoft, have even made the shift to permanent remote work for their employees.

Despite the benefit of increased productivity in remote working, there are challenges to overcome in planning and facilitating remote workshops:

1. Communication over videoconferencing can cause stress and fatigue

2. Participants working in remote environments experience varying levels of distraction

3. Remote participation complicates the process of creating and running a workshop

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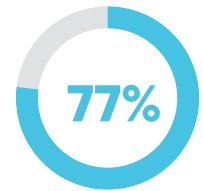
remote employees say they're more productive at home than in an office setting

Regardless of the obstacles, remote workshops are here to stay and, if approached logically, can be more efficient than in-person workshops in terms of work quality, results achieved, and time saved. For these reasons, the Evoke Customer Experience (CX) team has created new methods in adapting to these challenges and executing remote workshops.

1 THE SOLUTION:

Reinvigorate workshop time using the Pomodoro Technique.

The primary method of communication for remote workshops—namely videoconferencing tools, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Webex—has introduced the issue of "digital fatigue."

Studies note that our cognitive load is much higher in video chats[2]. Face-to-face interactions require minimal thought in making and interpreting gestures and nonverbal cues, while video chat requires us to work harder in sending and receiving signals. It has even been proven that constantly seeing oneself, in addition to the consistent eye contact with participants in video calls, is unnatural and can stress the nature of our subconscious.

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One way to mitigate the consequences of digital fatigue in remote workshopping is to structure your workshop agenda using the **Pomodoro Technique**. This time management system, created by Francesco Cirillo in the 1980s, encourages participants to work with the time they have, rather than against it. The method requires you to segment working time into 25-minute intervals separated by 5-minute breaks. After 4 pomodoros, you will take a longer break of about 15-20 minutes.

It may sound counterintuitive to include breaks throughout your workshop, but the Pomodoro Technique aligns with studies suggesting that brief diversions vastly improve focus[3]. Try implementing this technique to reduce digital fatigue and to motivate your workshop participants by combatting cognitive boredom and fueling decision-making.

2 THE SOLUTION:

Establish an engaging sensory environment to improve focus and understanding.

We have all experienced a remote workshop where participants are interrupted by their children, boisterously chirping birds, or the slamming of car horns during a traffic stop. A key driver of engagement during in-person workshops is the quiet, shared environment of its participants. In an effort to replicate this experience, it is advantageous to establish an engaging sensory environment among your remote participants in whatever ways possible.

It is best practice to ask that your participants prepare their remote workspaces prior to the scheduled workshop time. Ask that their environments are free of clutter, that they have access to drinks and snacks, that they are isolated from any distractions within their home (sorry: this includes pets and children), and that they place their computers on "Do Not Disturb" mode to eliminate distracting email and messaging notifications.

To create a positive auditory environment for your participants, consider playing instrumental music during a heads-down, ideation time. Research shows that relaxing, repetitive, low-information-load background music improves concentration, focus, and performance[4] even more than working in silence.

Additionally, when applicable, send physical copies of any significant, heavily detailed documents to your participants' homes prior to the workshop. Allowing participants to mark-up these documents on a hard copy, rather than just viewing them on their computer screens, will help strengthen their comprehension of the information during the workshop.

Creating a shared, engaging, sensory experience keeps participants productive and united.

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS:

1. Pick a task
2. Set a 25-minute timer
3. Work on your task until the time is up
4. Take a 5-minute break
5. After 4 pomodoros, take a 15-20-minute break

FUN FACT:

The intervals are called "pomodoros," named for the tomato-shaped kitchen timer used by Cirillo.

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3 THE SOLUTION:

Leverage digital collaboration platforms to create (or even enhance) the in-person workshop experience.

Remote workshops afford you with the opportunity to have more participants across more locations than you ever could with in-person sessions. But a larger volume of participants adds greater challenges to facilitating the workshop. One solution to this challenge is virtual white-boarding tools, such as Miro and Mural, which can be used to significantly strengthen the results of your remote workshop.

One feature within these platforms is the digital sticky note. This functionality can be used to recreate almost any workshop activity, including ice breakers, brainstorming exercises, and prioritization techniques. Moreover, it is a fairly simple component that can accommodate even the least tech-savvy of participants.

Easily add a blank workshop template, such as the prioritization matrix one seen to the right, to your virtual workshop board and instruct your participants to drag and drop their sticky notes in the appropriate areas. *(Tip: Be sure to "lock" the objects that are not meant to be moved.)*
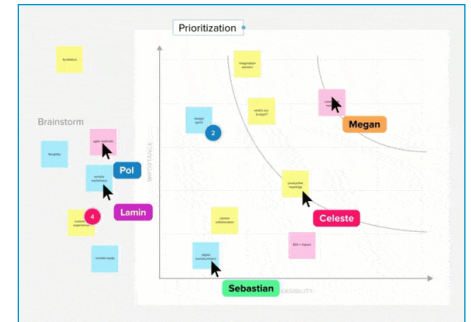
When you become more comfortable with these tools, you will learn to explore their other functionalities to suit your workshop needs, such as implementing color-coding of sticky notes, holding voting sessions, tagging elements of similar nature, and creating your own exercises using the templates and elements included.

One of the most valuable attributes of virtual whiteboards is that they can be used at any time and can be revisited at any point. For this reason, we foresee the use of these tools through the transition back to in-office collaboration.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Whether motivated by flexibility, productivity, safety, or cost-savings, remote work is here to stay. A study done by PwC states that over half of US employees (55%) would prefer to work remotely[5] at least three days a week once pandemic concerns recede. With this perspective in mind, it will continue to be imperative to improve collaboration in such a way to include remote participants. As Dave Malouf, designer and founder of the Interaction Design Association (IxDA), says: "If one person is not in the room, no one is in the room."

It takes time to create and run an effective workshop. At Evoke, the CX team does much more than build CX journeys for our clients. We integrate CX as a philosophy to not only improve the experiences of our client's customers, but to enhance the processes through which we create these experiences.

For more information, email us at: business@evokegroup.com

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