

Virtual Conference Cannot Replace Physical Meeting: Lessons from COVID-19 Pandemic Online Transformation

Sir,

We read "Virtual Meetings during COVID-19 Pandemic: Is it time to say Goodbye to Physical Meetings?"¹ by Zaman and Fatima with interest. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions, initially, all scientific meetings and conferences shifted from in-person gatherings to virtual online meetings. Virtual meetings are beneficial in terms of reduced costs and logistics and allowing people to join from any part of the world without any need of travel or time off from work. However, they have their own set of challenges. We present counter arguments that these virtual conferences cannot replace the real world experience of in-person meetings and learning associated with physical conferences.

While planning for a physical conference, participants take time off from work and dedicate hours to days for that specific conference. However, in virtual conferences, different time zones present a major challenge in scheduling a meeting. Besides, attending a conference in the middle of the night after a hectic day or very early in the morning might not be a good educational experience.²

Another drawback of virtual meetings is the sporadic attendance and lack of focus. Many participants attend these virtual events from their home settings. They have to attend to their families while focusing on the computer screen at the same time. This is particularly problematic for women with children and undivided attention to computer settings becomes difficult.³ Multi-tasking with reduced behavioural and cognitive engagements, which can occur in virtual meetings, may lead to negative outcomes in terms of knowledge gained.⁴

Although online sessions offer access to a wider audience, it mostly results in one-way communication only, particularly when there are many attendees. The number of participants who can simultaneously interact with each other is limited which is required for healthy two-way communication. The chat between participants during virtual event can lead to lateral communication and is like a virtual chatter which reduces the attention to the main speaker.

Evidence supports the role the body language plays in interpersonal interactions, but its role as an effective tool for imparting knowledge has been underestimated. Movement within the lecture hall, gestures made with hands and

arms to stress upon points that deserve attention coupled with an open stance not only motivates listeners to listen but also engages them in an effective discussion. Eye contact between the speaker and the audience initiates development of connection, trust, and rapport that is required for the effective delivery of knowledge.⁵ This is impossible when people are viewed as pictures in small boxes on the screen. In many cases, participants keep their cameras turned off, thus removing any possibility of eye contact, and getting live feedback from their expressions.

Individual and group discussions with peers and subject experts across the world during a physical conference allow sharing of insights and experiences. It enables building of effective partnerships and collaborations that form the basis of scientific publications and shared learning. Focus groups and meetings of small groups at conferences can have immense advantages. Gathering people with varied expertise, experiences, and from different parts of the world has led to new initiatives, publications, and enhanced multidisciplinary learning. On site workshops that are offered in physical conference offer hands-on training of new devices, surgical techniques on mannequins as well as practical application and usage of various instruments which is not possible in a virtual meeting.⁵

Conferences are not just resources for presenting or listening to research papers and posters. They are avenues for continuous professional development of both young as well as experienced members of the scientific community who interact with each other, brainstorm, and build long-term human-to-human connections. We conclude that while virtual conferences are useful, they at best can be considered complementary to in-person conferences and cannot replace them in near future.

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The authors declared no competing interest.

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AM: Initial draft writing, literature search, and final approval.

FAR: Study concept and design, literature search, critical revision of the manuscript, and final approval.

FF: Literature search, critical revision of the manuscript, and final approval.

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AUTHORS' REPLY

Sir,

We totally agree with the time zone issue and post-virtual conference hangover. But this remains an issue too of almost the same magnitude like jet-lag after attending a physical conference.

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We also agree with the issue of sporadic attendance and lack of focus by virtual participants. But it is not uncommon thin audience in a physical session which is disappointing for a presenter who witnesses huge participation in conference-related social events. We also totally agree with sentinel issues of internet connectivity and laptop malfunctioning during virtual events. However, most of the sessions are made available on website archive for interested e-learners for their convenience.

Lack of physical contact among participants and non-viable option of hands-on-training in virtual meetings are major drawbacks of the virtual conferences. But we disagree with eye contact issue as how could you expect eye contact by a participant in a physical meeting who switches off camera in a virtual session.

We agree that conferences and symposia are established tools for knowledge dissemination for decades. But virtual meetings have provided a sustainable substitute by minimizing the cost and huge time saving. It is important to understand that vendors and companies pay to conference organisers and also sponsor large number of participants but it is actually patients who pay this humongous cost. We feel that virtual conferences would transform into a hybrid model (virtual and physical) to satisfy participants for whom travelling and physical presence are also important while attending the conference

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