Fact Sheet No. 5: Webinars

Overview

Webinars, put simply, are real-time interactive Web-based seminars or online meetings. They differ from Web*casts* (which are characterized by a one-way transmission of information) because they involve interactivity between the presenter and the audience. In most cases, participants view a presentation while listening to the presenter. The presenter is able to point to objects or text displayed on the screen, and can offer the participants an opportunity to comment and ask questions via a chatroom, Voice Over Internet (VoIP), or a telephone line. When webcams are available, it is possible for participants to see the speaker and/or one another.

Key Considerations

- Webinars closely mirror in-person meetings, since most providers offer capabilities for slide presentations, interactive whiteboards, and document collaborations.
- Saves on travel-related costs and time.
- Provides the ability to quickly organize and host a meeting when participants are in various locations and time zones.
- The degree of interactivity and collaboration helps to foster relationships amongst participants even though they are in different locations.
- Usually synchronous, but can be asynchronous for the delivery of training programs.
- Most providers offer the option to record Webinars for archiving purposes and future reference.

Design Considerations

When designing a Webinar, it is important to know what uses participants may have for the various tools and options offered, and it is preferable to have the capacity to customize the Webinar accordingly. For example, chatting may be very useful for solving technical problems on the fly, but it can be distracting to participants and presenter alike during a presentation.

Some challenges

As this system involves online interactivity, the participants would need to be comfortable with the online environment, and technologically literate enough to be able to share documents online and participate in the exercises such as online voting and white-boarding. The degree of sophistication of the system would be dependant upon the level of comfort of its users, and should be able to grow with them.

Firewalls installed by some GoC Departments may prevent the use of Webinars unless a special permission is granted to a specific user. In this case, planning for the Webinar needs to be done in advance to allow for the time to obtain permission and set up the firewall requirements. This can potentially impede participation in last-minute Webinars. A solution to this situation, if recurrent, might be for the Department to host the Webinar on its own server and use it as an Intranet or Extranet application instead of a Web product.

When planning a Webinar, it is important to review the help file supplied by the service provider, and ensure that it is readily available for each user. Providing participants with clear and concise guidelines will help circumvent some technical difficulties associated with the learning curve, such as the microphone and sound set-up and the purpose of each button and function.

Application

Webinars can be used at any time during the policy development process for meetings with team members and stakeholders working or residing in various locations.

Webinars are valuable education tools and as such can be used at the Agenda-setting and Implementation stages of policy development, when there is a need to educate stakeholders and/or the general public about the needs, requirements or application of a new policy. In a way, this medium could be used as an online town hall meeting.

They can also be used to provide remote training to employees who will need to directly apply or monitor the policy.

Example of Use

Various federal departments are currently exploring Webinars as an online collaboration tool to conduct live, synchronous online meetings.

In the business and academic sectors, Webinars are frequently used to provide up-to-date training to staff and stakeholders.

In early 2005, the Online Consultation Technologies Centre of Expertise (CoE) helped Health Canada's Health Products and Food Branch, Office of Consumer and Public Involvement (OCAPI), to conduct a pilot project in online education and consultation.

Participants at the Webinar's originating site in the National Capital Region, met online with groups in Moncton, Toronto and Winnipeg. Additional individuals participated from their home or offices in other places across the country. The Honourable Ujjal Dosanjh, Minister of Health, participated in the Webinar, saying the Department will continue to develop a new approach to involve stakeholders and various participants.

OCAPI is pleased with the outcomes of the project to date, and wants to make use of Web-based tools in future.

Complementary Tools

Web-Based Discussions, Forums and Document Sharing tools
Process allowing participants to submit postings or documents on a given topic. The posts, organized in threads, can be viewed and responded to by all, thus developing an asynchronous discussion.

Online Surveys
Surveys administered over the Internet, as a Web form. Answers are stored and compiled electronically.

For more fact sheets, and further information, on Online Consultation technologies, please consult:

Online Consultation Technologies Centre of Expertise

www.onlineconsultation.gc.ca

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