

TIPS FOR ORGANIZING ONLINE SEMINARS

Kindly note this document is a translation and adaptation of a document drafted by AGRIDEA. More information can be found on AGRIDEA's [website](#).

1. Introduction

If face-to-face teaching cannot be carried out physically, webinars offer great potential to convey the main contents at a distance or to provide targeted suggestions and ideas. A webinar is a seminar that is held online. The live transmission of the same is similar to a normal lesson, but the participants can participate online regardless of their location. The interaction usually takes place via chat. By recording a webinar, the same content can also be watched repeatedly and at different times.

- Farminars/Farm seminars are a special type of webinars, namely mobile webinars. They differ from webinars in that they are not transmitted from a classroom, but live from outside, directly on site, on a farm or in the field (virtual field inspection). This of course places special demands on technology and people (see 2.4).

Webinars and farm seminars offer many advantages - less time required due to no travel, only short absences from the office instead of whole days, therefore better accessibility; no costs/appointments for seminar rooms, no printed documents, simple recording available...

However, as is well known, all beginnings are difficult and it takes some effort to start webinars. Therefore, this document is a quick summary of the most important tips and tricks that contribute to successful webinars. With practice, the benefits of this type of knowledge transfer will become more and more obvious and its use will become as natural as face-to-face teaching is today.

GFRAS IS AVAILABLE TO OFFER SPECIFIC TIPS AND/OR FURTHER INFORMATION TO ITS REGIONAL NETWORKS

2. Recommendations for Organisers

In principle, the same or similar tools are used for webinars/farminars as for video conferencing. The technical preparations are therefore very similar, although the type and intensity of possible interaction naturally differs due to the larger number of participants and the clear distinction between speaker/organizer and listeners/participants. With a corresponding effect on the technical settings.

2.1. Before the Event – Technical aspects and infrastructure

- It is essential to **test the chosen tool before use**: facilitators need to know about the possibilities they have - screen sharing; commenting functions for participants and how they can be used; creating and using surveys - in the tool itself, or accessing them through other tools - ideal settings for audio/video; possibility of using group rooms (break-out rooms); chat function and participant authorisation; options for inviting and following up participants; registration options (for courses); possibilities/conditions for recording. For most of the tools there are already good guides and manuals available on YouTube or on the web.
- Work out a **detailed concept and program** for your webinar and think carefully about which functions (can) be used when and how. More information on this are available in the next chapter. Test these features in advance with some volunteers, with the exact equipment and in the environment where the webinar will take place. (WLAN, router, room...) Certain tools have different functions for use on iPad than on PC! A large screen offers much more overview for the webinar presenter.
- Make sure you have the **necessary infrastructure** - especially for farminars you should have a WLAN that can be used exclusively for you (it's best to bring it yourself).
- Choose a **quiet room/space** and make sure that you can work undisturbed ("please do not disturb"). Think about what should be in the background (neutral background) and make sure that no other activities take place behind you (no passage for people or similar).

The following considerations should be made:

- Define and communicate what kind of interaction with the moderator/speakers or with other participants should be made possible. Is the exchange between the participants desirable/important? If so, how should it happen - in the chat? By requesting to speak after the audio has been allocated? Live with audio in break-out rooms? In plenary by means of audio word messages (only possible with small groups) - Caution: Exchange needs sufficient time and can cut-up from the time needed to expose content, talk about the topic.
- Many webinars, especially those with many participants, limit the chat, allowing only messages from participants to the administrators/moderators, but no interaction of the participants; in order not to dissipate attention. It is possible to connect individual participants with audio and/or video. In smaller rounds, questions can be asked directly (with the same dangers as when you do this in a plenary session at a presence event where you do not know the people).
- Automatic basic setting of the participants' audio/video when they enter the room. (Usually on mute and without a camera for webinars, unless there are very small groups with the possibility of raising their hand to draw attention to themselves).
- What information do you want to have from the participants when they register? A mobile number is always a good idea so that you can make phone calls or send a message in case of an emergency. It can also be useful to ask about expectations or previous experience with the topic.
- Registration of participants: via an existing registration system (in some tools the registration function is integrated) for courses? Different? How?
- Where is the webinar saved/stored (space required!); Who can access it, where, afterwards, and under what conditions? (With some tools, the recording is only freely available afterwards with more expensive versions; attention with rights!). Attention: Speakers must be informed about recordings; in case of active participation also the participants!
- After registration a participation link will be sent (automatically or manually), preferably with minimal instructions and help on how to use the link. Do not forget the telephone number for a telephone dial-in if the network fails, and a telephone number for help with logging in. The participation link can usually be generated by the administrator/moderator once he/she has set up/defined the webinar (time, duration and other parameters- audio-settings on entry, chat possibilities of the participant etc.). Some tools automatically generate a mail with the participation link and all necessary instructions and information in it. Only the recipients e-mail addresses have to be used. Or a participation link is generated which can be copied into a (self-written) mail.
- It is very important to login and perform a connection test before the actual webinar! After successful login, the participants are shown the most important functions available to them (e.g. via an explanatory video in an endless loop) and are familiarized with the tool. During these tests, it

becomes clear very quickly whether or not the participants have access to the necessary equipment. Certain tools, e.g. Skype, are blocked by some companies for security reasons. If this is the case, it may be necessary to either request activation from the IT department or, if necessary, to participate with a private device. Requesting IT authorization can take many days, and should be requested well-ahead of time. Therefore, for longer interactions such as courses with several modules etc., it is essential to test early enough. Important: Do not forget the to perform the same tests with instructors;

2.2. Before the Implementation – Planning Structure, Procedure and Moderation

Create a programme for the participants - as detailed as necessary (setting up orientation/expectations) but allow room for flexibility and changes. In this case, the planning is similar as to the one for classroom courses, according to didactic principles - red thread - e.g. preliminary information - starting phase - entry content / knowledge transfer (interrupt with interactive moments) - summary/conclusion. Think through carefully, with goals for each step and adapted methods.

Special features of online courses compared to classroom courses:

- The risk of "digressing" among participants is much higher, especially when working without video (one is invisible - can quickly do something else etc.). Therefore, plan a short interaction/active involvement of the participants every 8-10 minutes on average! E.g. ask a question, have your hand raised, answer a survey, connect a participant... etc. This keeps the participants engaged and allows you as moderators to draw conclusions about the mental presence of the participants and their mood (despite the lack of non-verbal communication).
- Attention: Online sequences are "strict", the concentration of the participants is much more strained than in physical sessions. Do a maximum of 60 to 90 minutes webinars! Possibly second sequence after a 30' break. Interpose sequences with individual work or group work (where video can be used).
- Important: Also prepare the presenter(s) well regarding the points mentioned above. Especially with longer presentations, allow questions in between or add an interactive part after about 8 minutes. Otherwise the participants will not dare to ask questions or will disengage relatively quickly.

If required: send documents in advance by e-mail or make them available online before the webinar or afterwards.

As soon as participant interaction is allowed, e.g. questions, two people should moderate the session, i.e. one person for the actual moderation and one for observing the chat during question rounds, sorting and prioritizing questions, etc. This second person can also take care of technical problems (especially at the beginning) and provide telephone support for individual "problem cases". Make sure that the co-moderator has the appropriate rights on the tool or still has the rights to assign them.

It makes sense to record the webinar so that interested parties can watch it afterwards. The most common tools usually have the possibility to make recordings.

2.3. During the Execution/Moderation of the Webinar

Open the virtual webinar room at least 30 minutes before the webinar and ask the participants to arrive at least 15 minutes earlier so that everyone is technically (audio/video etc.) ready for the webinar. During this lead time, also make sure that all participants enter a "display name" that is clear (no abbreviations or nicknames).

Before the start of the lead time, prepare all the necessary materials yourself (schedule, with displays showing when which picture, survey, etc. is to be shown), open everything you need on your PC so that you can quickly show by sharing the screen, it is important that you don't have to do anything more in this "lead time" and that you are there for participants, perhaps you already speak a little and say what is to come, etc. - offer a "warm" room when the participants come in.

Turn off noise sources, close doors and windows. Possibly put a sign on the door so that no disturbances occur during the webinar. Have a clock that is clearly visible at all times for easy time management.

At the beginning of the webinars (if the participants can actively participate via audio/video (only for very small groups of up to 10 people) you should announce the specific rules:

- Switch off the microphone when not talking
- Raise your hand to report (virtual hand!)
- Repeat and visualize important points or decisions so that they are clear to everyone. If necessary switch off the microphones of the participants as moderator (function - switch off audio for all)
- Announce break(s) and specify "return time" with time (not "in 10 minutes" but at 13:40). If necessary, inform participants at the beginning of the break that they should switch off the microphone and camera during the break; this can be particularly helpful for home offices.

2.4. Special Tips for Farminars/Virtual Field Inspections

The following (and earlier) instructions specifically for the organisation of farm seminars are based on a conversation with Ms. DI Lisa Piller and Mr. Ing Gerald Pfabigan of the Chamber of Agriculture in Austria, to whom we would like to express our thanks.

Securing and testing the necessary infrastructure:

- At the place where the moderator sits and also where the farminar takes place - make sure that you are not in the local WLAN but are independent.
- For moderator: Capacity: upload and download 10-15 Mbit is ideal.
- At the location of the farminar (on the farm): Check in advance whether a YouTube video can be played smoothly with the existing network and whether the telephone has reception everywhere (where you want to go during the event). (For reception, see the bar on the telephone). Caution Interference factors: e.g. power lines, dead spots. Tip: Switch off all other services/services on the phone.
- Equipment: Camera (Smartphone -newer), Gimbal, Bluetooth Headset; own mobile internet router with data SIM card (for independent WLAN); good microphone, which gives good quality even in wind (with protection/"cat")
- With TN - a conventional ADSL access is sufficient, PC or Tablet
- Allow sufficient time on site for tests for connection and presentation setup (content, location, contributions) plus a short review with the speaker, running the routes, defining the locations.

3. Recommendations for Participants

3.1. General Preparation

- A quiet room is the basis for a good learning success;
- If you (can) connect via video camera - remember that you can see the background (sometimes it can be hidden, e.g. in Microsoft teams, but it changes the face of the participant);
- Use a headset to reduce feedback, communicate more clearly and hear what others are saying, especially when other people are in the room. The headset also works as a headset with the microphone of a mobile phone (e.g. iPhone);
- Dial in early as recommended by the organizer and test the connection. Most tools have the possibility to test the microphone and speakers. Attention, the participation links only work after the moderator has opened the virtual room, not at any time. If login/connection testing is offered, use these times or log in early enough before the actual webinar.

3.2. Ensuring a Good Connection

- Ensure that you have a good connection to the Internet and that it is not overloaded: if possible, use a cable connection, not WLAN. If WLAN is used, keep the distance to the WLAN router small;
- Close all applications that need connection resources, such as Skype, Netflix, Facebook, etc;

- If the connection is bad during the webinar, switch off your own camera, so that at least the sound quality is good, or dial in by phone. You can usually find the corresponding telephone number in the invitation mail;
- It is recommended that at least 2 MBit upload and download are available. For security reasons this can be checked at www.speedtest.net;

3.3. During the Webinar – For More Efficiency

Contribute during the webinar to make it efficient:

- Follow the rules set by the moderators;
- Only ask important questions that are of benefit to all;
- Switch off the microphone when not speaking.

4. Tools – Some Considerations

There are various tools with which webinars can be conducted. Some are more focused on one-way communication, others offer more options for interaction. All of those tools have advantages and disadvantages. The offers and functions of the individual tools are constantly changing. When choosing a tool, it is therefore first important to define exactly what needs you have, what features are important for the planned/type of webinars (and/or other activities). After that you should inform yourself concretely and promptly which tools are the most suitable for this.

In general, however, some tips are important:

- Ideal are tools that are widely used and successful (have good ratings). On the one hand, this has the advantage that (in case of licensing) the support is guaranteed in the long run. On the other hand, it is relatively easy to find (video) instructions for such tools on the web in different languages. There is also a chance that some participants have already used the tool or have had some experience with it;
- The tool of choice should be suitable for all (or most) uses within an organisation. This avoids the need to use different tools in parallel (and to be supported by IT);
- It is recommended to use the same tool for internal and external use, so that joint learning is as efficient as possible.
- Attention: Some tools (WhatsApp, Skype, etc.) are o.k. bilaterally or privately, but do not meet certain business requirements (privacy, security). Therefore, some of them are not even permitted for (potential) users (government offices, official educational institutions).
- Tools that work without (or with minimal downloads and installation of software) are certainly best. Participants from companies with strict IT security requirements often cannot participate otherwise (or have to switch to private devices/private WLAN).