



Moving the Policy Hackathon *Online*

When face-to-face meetings are not possible, online video conferencing is a popular alternative. With a combination of video conferencing and other web-based tools, policy hackathons can also be held entirely online. Below is our overview of an online policy hackathon and the tools and technology you could use, followed by a brief examination of the unique opportunities and considerations for hosting an online policy hackathon.

OVERVIEW

To help you visualize an online policy hackathon, we will take you through it step-by-step. We will reference what happens at an in-person hackathon and then describe the online equivalent.

- 1. In-person, facilitators and participants come together in one main room for the event.** Online, a video conference application (or app), such as those offered through Zoom, Google, WebEx or Skype, allow participants and facilitators using a computer, tablet or smartphone to see and hear everyone on their screen at the same time. They will need a webcam, speakers and microphone for it to work, but these days, laptops and tablets have them all built-in. A steady internet connection is also required for video conferencing. If there are participants without access to the necessary technology, some video conference apps will allow them to join for audio-only by calling into the meeting on their phone.
- 2. In-person, breakout groups take place at separate round tables or rooms.** Online, breakout groups split from the main video meeting into smaller video meetings. Some video conference apps allow the meeting host to create breakout rooms and move participants in or out (and back into the main meeting room) at any time. Breakout groups can even be taken offline, where participants connect by phone (conference call) and reconnect to the video conference at a specified time. An option for offline breakout groups is essential when participants have limits on internet usage.

- 3. In-person, there are note-takers in the break-out groups writing on chart-paper for everyone to see.** Online, most video conference apps have a screen-sharing feature that allows all participants to see a document open on the note-taker's computer. Alternatively, participants can use a shared document, such as Google Docs, allowing everyone in the group to see (and edit) the text typed by the note-taker in real-time. These tools can also be used when the breakout groups share their results with the other participants.
- 4. In-person, participants connect and build relationships during meals and activities during the event.** Online, ice-breaker activities are used to help participants get comfortable and learn more about each other. Hosts can create smaller breakout rooms for two or three randomly selected participants to spend a few minutes responding to questions about themselves or the policy topic. Guided movement breaks (stretching, dancing, etc.) also help foster a relaxed environment where people feel comfortable sharing their ideas. Plus, the break from sitting in front of a screen is great for the mind and body!



ABOUT VIDEO CONFERENCING

We like to reference Zoom as an example of a video conference app because it has features that we find useful in this context (including those mentioned above), but there are many other options available and new ones constantly being developed. While Zoom requires a paid account to host a meeting longer than 40 minutes, participants can join your meetings for free and they are not required to setup an account.

If you are interested in using Zoom, there are many video tutorials available here:

<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206618765-Zoom-Video-Tutorials>

Research the other video conference apps available to you, but before you decide on one, be sure to do a short test run with some volunteers. Use your test run to make sure the app has all the features you need and is simple for your participants to access. Regardless of your choice, we recommend having at least one “co-host” to help facilitate the technology side of things throughout the event, allowing the other facilitators to focus their support on the event content with the participants.

Video conferencing requires a lot of energy and focus from you and your participants. Try to include a break every 90 minutes.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSIDERATIONS

While meeting face-to-face has many benefits, an online policy hackathon creates many new opportunities. Being able to dedicate several full days to a policy hackathon is challenging for both an in-person or online event. Participants who are connecting from home may have other obligations and distractions during the event; however, an online policy hackathon can be flexible in timing and organization. If needed, divide the event into shorter segments and spread them out over a week. Consult with the facilitators and participants in advance and find a schedule that works best for everyone.

Ensuring all participants have access to the skills and technology needed for a video conference meeting is an important consideration, and the opportunity for capacity building is exciting. Early on, ask each participant about their access and comfort level for video conferencing – give yourself enough time (and budget) for responding to any needs you identify. If some participants are unable to connect over video, find a video conference app that allows them to call into the meeting from a phone. It is a good alternative and allows participants with limits on internet usage to switch over when needed.

Whether they are joining through video or audio, bringing the policy hackathon into this online space requires new considerations for building relationships between the participants. Using online ice-breaker questions or other activities in groups or pairs can help foster relationship-building. Online policy hackathons also create an opportunity to bring together participants from across large regions where meeting in-person would be restricted by the time and financial costs of travelling. Participants are connected to a wider network, and because these new relationships are being forged online, they are already primed for staying connected in a remote manner.

Help the participants prepare by sending them important materials at least one week before the event, including:

- A detailed schedule
- Instructions for connecting to the video conference and the note-taking tools
- Background information about the topic
- Any presentation slides you plan to show during the event
- A document with photos and bios of all facilitators (and of the participants, if possible)

