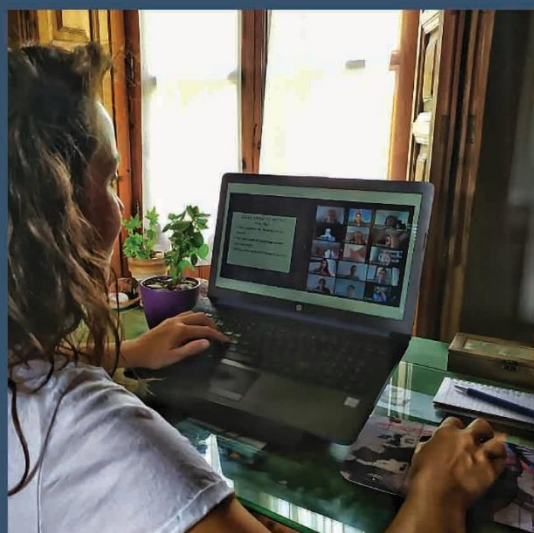
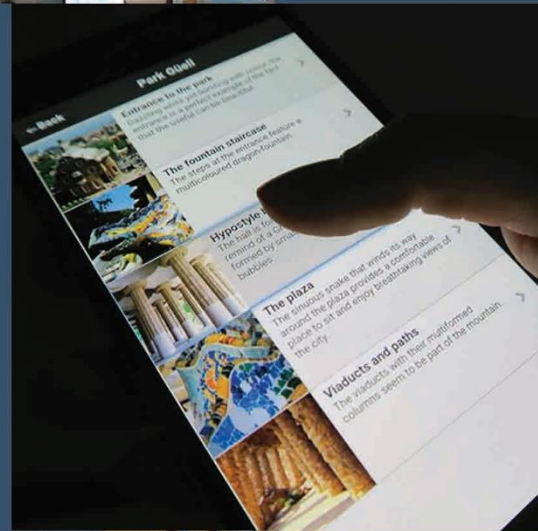




# Running a conference online

## Lessons learnt from the IE web conference 2020





**Interpret Europe**

## **Running a conference online**

**Lessons learnt from the  
IE web conference 2020**

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# Table of contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1 How likely was it that an online conference would succeed?</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2 Increasing the attractiveness of the event</b>	<b>9</b>
Following the needs of the attendees .....	9
Introducing special features .....	10
<b>3 Meeting technological challenges</b>	<b>12</b>
General requirements for joining an online event.....	12
Using recorded presentations.....	12
Wordpress as basis for networking and engagement tools.....	13
Google Calendar to organise the sessions.....	15
Crowdcast and Zoom: Searching for the right conferencing tool .....	15
Privacy and security issues .....	17
Further recommendations for assuring security.....	17
Recommendations for dealing with technical challenges.....	17
<b>4 Managing the budget</b>	<b>19</b>
Conference fees.....	19
Expenses.....	19
<b>5 Building and leading the team</b>	<b>20</b>
Preparation team .....	20
Support team .....	20
Managing the team as a whole.....	21
Recommendations on building the team.....	21
<b>6 Communication around the event</b>	<b>22</b>
Informing the public.....	22
Communicating with the presenters .....	23
Internal communication .....	23
<b>7 Feedback from attendees</b>	<b>24</b>
Satisfaction with the online format and the programme.....	24
Downsides and issues experienced by attendees .....	24
<b>8 Conclusions</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Programme schedule</b>	<b>26</b>



## Introduction

Interpret Europe (IE) conferences last four days. They usually take place once a year, have 150-200 attendees, and consist of 75-100 individual sessions. Keynote speeches, presentations, workshops, a varied Market of Ideas, and the General Assembly are included, but also work meetings, a large number of study visits to natural and cultural heritage sites, longer pre- and post-conference tours, and the obligatory informal gatherings during breaks, dinners and cultural side-events.

IE's theme for 2019/20 was 'Fostering heritage communities' and the conference was supposed to take place from 8-11 May 2020 in Haapsalu, Estonia. The organising partner was the Foundation of Haapsalu and Läänemaa Museums (SALM), an institutional member of IE.

Preparations started in spring 2019. In early 2020, the keynote addresses and study visits were confirmed, all paper abstracts were submitted, and 52 papers were selected for workshops and presentations. Two days before the early bird registration ended, it became clear that the conference could not take place due to the coronavirus pandemic.

On 13 March 2020, the conference in Estonia had to be cancelled, and three options were considered:

- To postpone the conference and General Assembly to autumn 2020;
- To postpone the conference and General Assembly to spring 2021;
- To postpone the General Assembly but turn the conference into a web conference.<sup>1</sup>

For SALM, running the conference in autumn 2020 was not an option and IE felt it needed to complete its focus on the theme 'Fostering heritage communities' this year rather than postpone it to 2021 in order to move focus onto a new theme for 2021 that better suited the crisis and its outcome.

On 6 April, IE, having assessed the options, informed that the conference would be turned into an online event.

So far, IE's experiences regarding online events were limited to its monthly webinars using Clickmeeting and regular Skype meetings with up to ten participants. Financial means were limited and IE's growth in membership, mainly linked to its on-site training courses, had basically stopped. External funding was not available, and if the original date was to be kept in order to turn towards the new annual theme for 2021, the time that was left to prepare for the web conference was just one month.

Trusting in its dedicated members (of which several were housebound due to the coronavirus crisis), IE decided to face the challenge.

### IE web conference in a nutshell

Time to turn the conference into an online event:		Four weeks
Duration:		Four full days
Number of attendees:		162
Number of contributions:		93
Number of staff:		34
Budget spent:		€8,578
Income generated:		€12,455

<sup>1</sup> IE's Constitution does not permit a General Assembly to be held online. Meanwhile, a temporary change in German Law, to which IE is subject, offers this opportunity, and an online General Assembly has been announced for September 2020.

# 1

## How likely was it that an online conference would succeed?

After IE decided to go for the web conference, it was not easy to estimate the outcome. Heritage interpretation is based upon first-hand experiences of original sites and objects. Many IE members are convinced that this is highly relevant for non-formal learning at heritage sites. Hence, there was some scepticism within the association what might be achievable through purely online exchange.

In a survey on IE conferences that had recently been conducted, one respondent wrote: “Meeting people, sharing experiences personally is of far greater benefit than digital or other channels”.

This was fostered by earlier experiences. Technical glitches at online meetings and webinars were often encountered, and especially addressing complex and sensitive issues online was sometimes difficult.

For many members it was hard to imagine following an event for several days in front of a screen, and others felt it was inappropriate to launch any bigger gathering during the crisis, be it online or not.

When IE announced to turn the conference into a web conference, from 52 paper abstracts that had been accepted, 21 were withdrawn.

Towards those who were not hesitant to communicate through social media, one concern was that almost all such services are

free of charge while running the web conference required fees, and it was not clear how many attendees were ready to pay for this.

For IE, keeping those fees acceptable without losing money and letting the members feel that this was not just a low-level replacement, meant that the minimum number of attendees required would be 100.

Of course, an online event might also attract attendees that would not come to a regular IE conference. This is true for:

- IE members who cannot leave home or work for at least five days, or who cannot afford the significant fees of a regular conference plus the costs for travel and accommodation;
- Members from other associations with whom IE is cooperating or from umbrella organisations where IE is involved, who are interested but not to an extent that would justify travelling to an IE conference.

The latter include members of the Global Alliance for Heritage Interpretation, the European Commission’s Cultural Heritage Forum, the European Heritage Alliance, and the Climate Heritage Network.

Assuming that many sought an opportunity to get into an exchange about the crisis but also in order to announce the web conference more broadly, all organisations to which IE was related were especially invited to join the conference in order to share their ideas about how to overcome the crisis.



## 2

# Increasing the attractiveness of the event

### Following the needs of the attendees

To increase the self-confidence of attendees in the use of IT, specific guidelines were provided and test runs offered.

One challenge of the web conference was that most attendees would need to join from home. In some countries, they were not even allowed to leave their home. For many, the home office situation was new and while they needed to do some office work in parallel, there were also unusual distractions to be considered, especially because most schools and kindergartens had been closed and parents were expected to support their children through home schooling.

It was, therefore, expected that many attendees might like to follow all sessions but would not realistically be able to, and it was also recognised that the decision on which sessions they would skip might not be within their own control if they had other calls on their time.

Full attendance was especially difficult for attendees from overseas, some of whom were in significantly different time zones and could only attend part of the conference.

It had been decided to record all sessions and keep the replays available until three weeks after the conference.

The daily schedule ran from 09:00-20:30 Central European summer time (CEST) and since most attendees might need to skip sessions anyway, it didn't include fix breaks except for one lunch break (12:30-13:35) and one 'teatime' break (16:30-17:25).

For each day, one host was appointed (additional to the hosts for each session) to open and close the day and welcome the attendees back after each of the two breaks. Those regular plenary sessions were meant to keep the programme together.

In the end, just 17 attendees were based outside of Europe while it seemed that a considerable number of attendees actually joined the whole conference through all four days. Of course, those attendees were missing the more frequent breaks. However, only a few sessions were visited by more than half of the attendees.

For employees in public service who were using their office computers, one issue was that they were not supposed to communicate through software such as Skype or Zoom but only allowed to use software that had been authorised by their employer. This hindered some potential attendees to join.

Across Europe, IT policies are different and not always logical since especially public institutions are overstrained by the velocity of the development. Some tools seem to appear on green lists, not because they have less privacy or security flaws but because they became part of daily life to a degree that makes it almost impossible to exclude them. (For example, it is difficult to work on the internet bypassing any Google services.)

It seemed that the newer and less established a tool is, the more likely it is that it is not accepted by public institutions.

## Introducing special features

If technological issues could be avoided, all 'one-way sessions', including keynote addresses, presentations and spontaneous sessions within Speakers' Corner seemed to be easy to transfer into an online scheme. It was more challenging for the format of the panel discussions and interactive workshops. However, all those sessions formed the more serious part of the conference.

It was not clear how the immediate experience of sites and skills could be compensated, and how the event could generate the personal touch and the feeling of unitedness that is significant for IE conferences.

IE therefore decided to include a sample of new components and invited all attendees to contribute. Attendees were asked to follow the principles of good heritage interpretation but neither this nor professionalism in the recording were mandatory while authentic performances were key.

**Attendees were addressed in the following way to contribute to a number of special features:**

### Spring walks

Spring is coming! If you take a nature walk in your surroundings, what do you discover? Take pictures, add strong themes and maybe some background tunes, and share an inspiring presentation with all.

### My favourite site

Is there a heritage site close to your home where a partner could record you giving an interpretive talk? Take your smartphone or camera with you and share the recording with us.

### From my home

These days, some of us are spending a lot of time at home – time to enter the attic and re-discover objects that have some meaning for yourself. Place your camera on your kitchen table and take a few minutes to introduce them to us.

### Old skills

What skills did you learn from your grandparents? Maybe a workshop is a good place to demonstrate how they turned natural goods into something enjoyable – maybe on the kitchen stove with their culinary skills. Create a short film clip!

### Podcasts

If you would like to follow the conference but feel you also need to do some critical homework, then this is the best reason for listening to one of our podcasts.

**More interactive features to which attendees were invited were:**

### Fishbowl

Watch others arguing and if you like, jump in! The fishbowl is the place for doing so. There will be three chairs for panelists and if you want to get active, you could take one of them.

### In the glass case

Did you ever wonder what IE teams discuss in their meetings? The glass case is a transparent team meeting. Come, watch and listen. Nobody will notice.

**Besides this, IE appointed a 'Fun Director' who invited to three evening sessions:**

## Food for thought dinner

Take part in this virtual sphere to share your 'food for thought' while having a nice chat with presenters and other attendees. This unifying occasion will be our preferred way of networking by sharing the same tables.

## Scavenger Hunt

Bring out the best of our creativity with this witty, funny activity! All participants will have to collect a number of miscellaneous objects: common, outlandish or humorous ones, facing some challenges along the way.

## Late-night live concert

Many of us play music but hardly anybody knows. Please share something with us – a poem, a song or a melody – to put the cherry on top of the day. The stage is yours!

During the two one-hour breaks (lunch and tea-time) music was played that was compiled by attendees in advance and, surprisingly, some attendees were having live exchange in the chatroom during breaks.

Besides the Speakers' corner, there was space provided for more activities to emerge during the conference, including ten facilitated thematic round tables, coffee tables to be booked for smaller groups, the conference whiteboard (internal social media platform) and the conference barometer where attendees could rate individual conference days.

As for all IE conferences, the web conference had its own hashtag (#iecon20) and was accompanied by numerous posts on social media.

### 3

## Meeting technological challenges

IE used a larger number of software services. Due to the time constraints, there was no debate about the corporate philosophy and marketing strategies of individual providers. Following an internet check on privacy and security issues, solutions were mainly judged on their usefulness and affordability.

All assessments in this chapter rely on the one-time experience with the IE web conference. They might not be representative. Against the background of the current demand for online communication tools, the situation might change rapidly, and it is recommended to compare these findings from May 2020 with more recent reports.

### General requirements for joining an online event

In online events, technical flaws are a regular companion. Organising a web conference requires reducing their likelihood as much as possible. Since many people only learn about online communication by using it, short and simple guidelines are key. Even if not all attendees will look at them, they should be sent some days in advance to enable attendees to care for their particular needs.

Attendees must have an appropriate device (desktop computer, laptop, tablet, smartphone) with audio and video capacity, and the necessary peripherals (at least earphones, better a headset, maybe an external video camera). In general, attendees should:

- Assure an internet connection with at least 5 mbps download and 2 mbps upload speed (an ethernet cable usually provides a more stable and faster connection than Wi-Fi);
- Close all other programmes that might use the internet;
- Wear a headset, preferably one connected with a cable (when opening their own microphone, a headset is a must in order to prevent acoustic feedback);
- Mute the microphone whenever not speaking.

Specific demands of the software for a particular device or operating system should be checked in advance, and attendees need to be informed about them. Not all browsers support all features, and if an attendee cannot connect, or the audio or video experience is impaired, changing the browser might help. Any browser should be updated before the event, the cache should be cleaned, and cookies should be deleted. The recommended browsers are:

- Windows: IE7+, Firefox, Chrome, Safari5+
- Mac: Safari5+, Firefox, Chrome
- Linux: Firefox, Chrome

### Using recorded presentations

#### **Presentation:**

One-way with 10 min live chat at the end;

#### **Workshop:**

Mix of introductory presentation with interactive working sessions for smaller groups and feedback to the wider group.

One early decision to reduce technical issues was that all that was presented one-way (speeches, presentations and special features) was recorded in advance and not presented live. This resulted from IE's experience with webinars

where about 10% of the live sessions cause at least some problem.

All presenters received presenting and recording guidelines (in terms of presentations tailored to the use of Microsoft PowerPoint), a declaration of consent referring to the use of the recordings after the conference, and an overview on critical dates for presenters during the preparation phase. To allow test runs, those should be delivered two weeks before the conference starts.

Disadvantages were that recordings were less authentic and during the presentation the speaker could not refer to earlier sessions which was expected to become more of an issue towards the end of the conference. For some presenters, talking without an audience was an obvious challenge. While it was noted that the quality of presentations overall was above average, the percentage of presenters who were speaking freely and inspiring was lower than at other conferences. One idea that came up after the conference was to fix a smiling face at the camera to simulate an audience during the pre-recording of the presentation.

The fact that, due to the use of recordings, the presenter could join the simultaneous chatroom, discussing their own presentation with the participants, was noted as a huge advantage. There were fewer side talks in the chatroom, questions could be immediately answered by the presenter, and additional links could be provided on the spot.

In the simultaneous chatroom it was also possible to refer to previous sessions. Points that were difficult to explain in writing could be collected by the host and discussed during the ten minutes live session after each presentation. While it was expected that an online exchange would be less personal, it was noted that, when the technology worked, the presenter could in

fact be better seen and understood than in an average lecture hall.

Different from the workshops, where participants were in an active exchange, even in sub-groups, the microphones of attendees were not opened in regular presentations with just ten minutes live exchange. However, many more attendees joined the exchange in the chatrooms than usually voice a question in an in-person discussion after a presentation.

Pre-recorded presentations also proved useful when the presenter couldn't enter the online room in time, either due to technical difficulties, time differences or just human error. Then the technician had time to help the person while the host was already introducing and starting the recording.

## Wordpress as basis for networking and engagement tools

The aim was to create a virtual lobby with registration area and 'coffee tables'; a space, where people could meet each other, access all information about the programme, leave information for other guests, apply for workshops and talk to staff. Networking and engagement of attendees were the main drivers for the creation of this custom-made space on the website.

The key quality of Wordpress is that its core can be modified to fit rather different needs. IE's conference website is set up in Wordpress and includes the registration forms and the possibility to transfer the conference fees through Paypal or credit card (via Strive). It also offers comprehensive information about the conference such as the programme, all paper abstracts, etc.

'Check-in' had its own tab on the conference website. This was the custom-made entry point for all attendees who registered for the conference. Registered attendees received a username and password with their names and location already added to their profile. From the 'Check-in', they could then access the following tabs:

## **Your profile**

For the purposes of networking, each attendee was asked to create a profile with basic information and a picture. From here, attendees could also send messages to each other, post content on the Whiteboard (see below) and receive notifications from the organiser.

## **Schedule**

An embedded Google Calendar feature, including the whole programme with clickable titles of sessions, abstracts, pictures and biographical notes of the speakers (see below).

## **Attendees**

A complete list of all attendees with pictures and links, and a classical pdf document download with the list of attendees, including name, surname, organisation, email address and country.

## **Hosts**

Contact details of the technical team, including the ability to send private messages to hosts in case of technical issues.

## **Whiteboard**

A custom social media style space for posting public messages or pictures with the ability to comment on posts or ask questions.

## **Coffee Tables**

A private space for two or more people, made available upon request.

## **Speakers' corner**

A place to book 15-minute time slots for any idea/ talk/ presentation that emerged during the conference.

## **Workshops**

An overview on the workshops and ability to book one's place at any of them.

## **Conference barometer**

An opportunity to assess each day by selecting an emoticon for horrible, not satisfied, neutral, good, very good, awesome – and to monitor the general mood of other attendees.

## **Conference proceedings**

The conference proceedings as downloadable pdf document, including all paper abstracts and all full papers, speeches and interventions that had been received before the conference started.

## **Further downloads**

A selection of conference-related material that appeared during the conference suitable to be made accessible to all.

## **Replays**

All sessions from each day, published after they took place to be viewed by the attendees on demand.

## Guidelines

All guidelines, including guidelines how to use Crowdcast and Zoom, downloadable as pdf.

## Who's online

A section that displayed the pictures of all attendees that were online at that moment.

## Google Calendar to organise the sessions

In general, the timetable and all descriptions of the programme were publicly available, mainly in pdf format (see p.26). However, the recommended electronic way for approaching the schedule was through Google Calendar which attendees could also link to their own calendars. Entries at Google Calendar included for each session:

- the paper abstract or description of the session;
- the biographical notes and portrait pictures of speakers, presenters, workshop leaders, panelists;
- a direct link to join the particular session.

Different colour schemes for speeches, discussions, workshops, presentations, plenary and evening entertainment were applied, but the embedded version of Google Calendar on the conference website could not display the colour schemes. The reason was Google's application programming interface (API) which could not show all functions that were used in the actual Google Calendar.

However, in general, including the schedule in Google Calendar was comfortable and didn't cause any serious issues.

## Crowdcast and Zoom: Searching for the right conferencing tool

When starting to search for conferencing tools, there were basically two different formats of sessions considered: parallel one-way presentations and interactive workshops. At that point it wasn't yet clear how the complex schedule could be approached.

**Crowdcast** seemed to be the most suitable platform for organising presentations, mainly because it offered the possibility for implementing parallel sessions which were characteristic for all IE conferences.

It offers a personalised schedule through which all Crowdcast sessions can be accessed.

Recordings can be made available as soon as the sessions begin, and separate chat rooms remain open after the sessions end. This seemed to be critical for the experience of all who might watch recordings later and should still have a chance to engage in a chat or ask questions (which, of course, requires that presenters come back to their recorded sessions).

Additional advantages included a convenient questions-and-answers tool, an option to cast votes for favourite questions, and an overall pleasant interface.

On the other hand, interactive workshops are not possible on Crowdcast, and workshops run on another platform cannot be included in the Crowdcast schedule.

**Zoom**, in its Meeting version, seemed to be especially suitable for workshops. While Crowdcast only allows up to four people at once to join with microphone and/or video, Zoom allows all attendees to appear.



Hosts cannot just call a prearranged group into a room. All attendees decide individually when they want to join. However, at the IE web conference attendees needed to be confirmed by the host. The main advantage was that the host and the presenter could prepare for the session.

In general, Zoom is less structured but more 'liberal' which means a host needs to be more active. For example, all attendees can be unmuted by the host but the host needs to intervene by muting individual attendees if for example they open their microphone and their phone is ringing while they left their computer – otherwise, Zoom would just focus on that prominent sound. Besides taking care that their microphones stay muted when they don't need to talk, attendees also need to organise their screen on their own.

Zoom offers the opportunity to split groups and move them into breakout rooms, whereby all breakout rooms need to be recorded by attendees separately, and the recordings need to be compiled in the end, for otherwise the recording would only follow the host.

Different from Crowdcast, the chat rooms do not remain operational after the session has ended.

The Zoom application is installed directly on the attendee's computer which increases reliability and technical performance. Zoom does the set up automatically, and no configuration is required – if safety settings do not prevent the installation (which was a problem for some public service institutions).

IE first decided to combine Crowdcast and Zoom but, due to time constraints, the organising team had to determine programme features without being able to test the full capacities of each tool with all hosts. Crowdcast worked well in the test phase; but used by many

hosts operating with different systems, almost all Crowdcast sessions suffered from technical flaws – and Crowdcast didn't forgive less experienced hosts. Obviously, using recordings was also more of a challenge than live performances, and recordings were used for all presentations. In the end, many issues appeared and required a technician to be solved which was unacceptable.

Zoom required more active hosts and some practice; but it showed significantly fewer flaws than Crowdcast and most could be solved without special IT expertise.

During the second conference day, it was decided to abandon Crowdcast. Overnight the backstage programme was significantly modified in a way that the second half of the conference completely ran on Zoom.

The missing schedule was no big issue since the combination with Google Calendar worked well.

To be able to run parallel sessions, hosts needed to open private Zoom accounts and were assigned as alternative hosts as whom they received different passwords from the technicians to open different rooms. This was a bit more complicated but it was possible.

In general, there was no platform that was set up in a way that it would meet all requirements of an IE conference; but in combination with the customised 'lounge' on Wordpress and the schedule on Google Calendar, Zoom allowed the technicians to develop solutions and the hosts to work with them without facing issues that could not be overcome.

The latter was also due to the fact that Zoom became much more popular during recent months.



## Privacy and security issues

### Privacy issues in Zoom

The so called ‘Zoombombing’, which was the main criticism of Zoom users and the main concern during IE’s decision-making, was solved by Zoom before the conference started. Security was assured with a password and ID for each session. The password was embedded in the link on which the attendees clicked, so there was no need to enter passwords manually. It was ensured that only authenticated users joined the meetings as each attendee had to sign in to a Zoom account.

IE did not use the possibility of confirming email addresses from an approved list before attendees could join since this would have delayed the sessions as technicians or hosts would have needed to manually confirm each individual email attempting to join.

### Website hacking

After payments were enabled through the conference website, dozens of forced attacks were experienced. The responsible technician immediately blocked them and introduced extra security measurements for accessing the website administration.

The following measurements were taken:

- Authentication code sent to the technician’s smartphone.
- Automatically banned internet protocol (IP) addresses of persons trying to use common usernames and to guess the password (e.g. anyone who would try to log-in as ‘admin’ would immediately be banned).
- Automatically banned IP addresses of persons who guessed usernames and failed five times (which caused problems, because

some attendees did not use their given usernames, yet tried to enter their personal email addresses, first names, last names, etc.; attendees should be informed about this to avoid that they try to guess a password several times and are banned).

### Further recommendations for assuring security

Check platforms for ISO27001 standard, which assures that the provider follows the information security standard.

### Recommendations for dealing with technical challenges

- For dealing with any issue, technicians, hosts and presenters should have each other’s telephone numbers to hand. Interventions were needed more often than anticipated.
- If sessions overlap, even if only with a preparation waiting room, it needs to be assured that the activity in one room doesn’t compromise what happens in another room on the same platform. In Zoom, technicians interfered with each other as long as they all shared the same log in credentials.
- Enough time should be allowed for the preparation in the waiting room to test camera and microphone settings with every speaker. Speakers might experience log in issues, or have other reasons for delay. Thus, the preparation should be scheduled at least 20 minutes before the session.
- Technicians and hosts should know how to deal with delays. Must the session end on time or could it be prolonged? Shall the Q&A session be shortened or completely cancelled if the time would be exceeded?
- Background noise might originate from the open microphone of the technician just sharing their screen. Applicable settings need to be checked in advance.

- The guidelines for the use of platforms were mainly focused on Realtek audio chips but some attendees had Conexant chips which resulted in sound issues. (This was solved by installing the Voice Meeter app on the technician's computer.)
- In Crowdcast it was challenging for a technician to cast a video while not being able to listen to the session. (This was overcome by being logged in on a second device (computer or smartphone) as an attendee which helped the technician to get ready before the video ended.)
- No matter how easy it seems for one capable person to host a session and to deal with technical matters at the same time, it is strongly recommended to have two people for each session for sharing tasks: a host and a technician. Especially if attendees must be permitted into the room manually, a technician should not be actively involved in the presentation or discussion.
- Within each day, one time slot could be left empty as spare time into which any failed session or cut off discussion could be moved. If this is not needed, the slot could be used for the conference team's meeting.

## 4

# Managing the budget

IE events never depend on external funding. The IE conference 2020 was one of the first conferences turned into a web conference. So, there was just no external funding available, and it was supposed to be covered 100% from fees.

IE's usual practice is to deliver a lot for a rather low budget, based on considerable volunteer engagement. IE conferences are organised by local partners, who benefit from all financial gains but also cover any losses. This was different with the web conference, where IE took all the risk.

After a rough calculation, the estimated costs for the web conference were €4,045. Including a sufficient buffer, the minimal income required was €4,850, and the estimated break-even point was at 100 paying attendees.

When the early-bird period ended, the basic expenses had already been covered. The final income was €12,445 (from 132 full paying attendees plus ten post-conference registrations), while the real costs were at €4,711.

## Conference fees

According to IE's fee policy, all fees follow a scaled system based on the GDP of the country in which people are based. The system includes countries split into one of four groups (A-D) for which a sliding scale of fees are charged.

### Fees in euros

	A	B	C	D
Early-bird member	25	50	75	100
Early-bird non-member	65	95	125	155
Regular member	50	75	100	125
Regular non-member	95	125	155	185

### Post-conference registration:

Member	10	20	30	40
Non-member	25	50	75	100

152 attendees registered before the conference, ten attendees chose post-conference registration.

## Expenses

Category	Services	Cost
Staff	Payment for three key team members	€6,786
Programme	Speakers' fees	€929
IT	Three platforms SSL certificate Credit card system	€539
Other	Banking fees	€322

## Staff payment

Based on the break-even calculation, three members of the core team agreed to receive a modest financial reward in compensation for their full-time commitment for more than one month. This minimum payment summed up to €2,920 for all three persons.

The agreement foresaw a certain percentage as an add-on, after the break-even point was passed and all basic expenses were covered. This resulted in a final payment of €6,786 for all three key persons.

## Unpaid contributions

IE Management postponed other duties during the one-month preparation phase and dedicated its working time mainly to the web conference without additional payment. About 30 IE members contributed voluntarily to the web conference. Their commitment included administrative and organisational services, translating and proofreading, communication, technical support and facilitating all sessions during the conference.

A rough estimation is that the event required about 1,000 hours of unpaid work at different levels of qualification. (This does not include the contributions to the conference programme.)

## 5

# Building and leading the team

As mentioned above, the web conference was largely based on volunteer engagement. Apart from the preparation team of six members that turned the conference into a web conference, 28 members joined the extended team as technicians and hosts, shortly before the event started. So, in total 34 people were actively involved in preparing and/or running the conference.

## Preparation team

The preparation team consisted of:

- Conference Manager, full-time
- Conference Manager Assistant, part-time
- Technical Manager, full-time
- Office Manager (admin support), part-time
- Two IE representatives (content), full-time
- Accountant, part-time

The two key roles were:

## Conference Manager

- Was acquainted with all details;
- Had contacts from all involved and was able to instantly reach any presenter or host;
- Monitored the execution and foresaw possible issues in advance;
- Fed session hosts with useful information as needed;
- Found replacements for hosts and other staff members;
- Fed the chat area with useful information, technical announcements, links, etc.;
- Made organisational live announcements.

## Technical Manager

- Prepared the whole event in IT terms;
- Trained and monitored all technicians;
- Managed the conference website;
- Created the registration and 'lobby' area;
- Implemented changes swiftly and flexibly;
- Took care that all technical issues were solved;
- Took care that questions regarding technical issues (including log in) were answered.

During the event, the Technical Manager should take a supervising role. They should be available for instant trouble shooting, able to log in to any platform and intervene when other technicians experience issues. They should be accessible at any time over the phone or any other instant channel, which does not interfere with the platforms running in session.

## Support team

The support team (during the conference) consisted of 28 members:

- 12 **technicians** (including five technicians that were only trained for Zoom);
- 16 **session hosts** (four of whom were also hosts for one whole conference day).

During sessions, session hosts welcomed participants, introduced the presenter and the topic, facilitated the live exchange and closed the session at the end.

Hosts for the day were hosts who were guiding through the day by opening the day in the plenary and introducing the focus, welcoming attendees back after the two breaks, and closed the day before the evening programme.

Involving volunteers from all over Europe contributes to the lively and colourful appearance of any IE conference and leaves a strong impression of the inclusive and mutually supportive IE community. Having more than 30 teams of volunteers, active involvement is key for IE.

Considerable volunteer involvement requires flexibility and constant availability which can be demanding for organisations that are not used to it.

Of course, an organiser could also decide to engage fewer people for this with more expertise and full-time engagement, especially if particular means are available.

## Managing the team as a whole

A backstage schedule was developed with technicians, hosts and presenters assigned to each session that was also described in a scenario. The more people are involved in the delivery, the more frequently the backstage schedule needs to be adapted, including last minute changes. It is critical to keep everyone updated.

The following guidelines were developed to support the members of team:

1. For Crowdcast technicians;
2. For Zoom technicians;
3. For presenters and hosts (both platforms);
4. For workshop leaders on Zoom;
5. For attendees (check-in, Crowdcast, Zoom).

Crowdcast hosts and Zoom hosts were trained on both platforms during two test runs and individual trials in pairs/groups.

Presenters and workshop leaders were not part of the team, but they also needed a test run and guidelines how to set up and get

ready for their presentation or workshop and be put in touch with the technician and/or host assigned to them. Ideally, each of them should have had a test run, but due to the lack of time, only self-tests of the microphone and camera could be encouraged.

## Recommendations on building the team

- Clear roles should be assigned to each member of the core team as one of the first steps.
- Task management and control is key. (IE generally uses monday.com as a task management system.)
- Technicians should be trained early in advance, also supporting them in setting up their own devices. A demo with the whole technical team is useful, followed by training in smaller groups or pairs, including trouble shooting scenarios. A dry run is highly recommended.
- Guidelines should also be sent early in advance. However, since guidelines are usually not (thoroughly) read, practical test runs are of greater importance.
- All pre-recorded sessions, the programme, backstage schedule and related material, the list of participants and contact data should be made available to the whole team behind the event, ahead of time through a shared drive or app like Dropbox or Google Drive. Ideally, the team should go through the material together before the event and make sure that everyone is able to find the right file/ information at any time.
- Internal immediate communication channels need to be set up before the event starts. For example, WhatsApp can be used as an 'emergency channel' to communicate with each other.
- During the event, activities of the Conference Manager and Technical

Manager should be limited to decision-making and SOS interventions and support. Neither of them should run sessions.

- No person should be assigned for both moderating and technical assistance during the same session, no matter how easy it appears in advance. Many unforeseen issues can occur on the technical and the organisational part.
- Attendees should be able to easily contact one designated person (usually the Conference Manager) at any time who can then take care that any issue related to their attendance can be solved.

## 6 Communication around the event

### Informing the public

All announcements regarding IE conferences are published on [www.interpret-europe.net](http://www.interpret-europe.net) and on [www.interpreteuropeconference.net](http://www.interpreteuropeconference.net). They are sent by direct email to about 2,500 addressees of which about half are IE members. The others belong to organisations with whom IE is in direct exchange and to individuals who asked IE to be informed.

In spring 2019, IE sent a save-the-date notice for the conference and in autumn 2019 the call for papers. In early 2020, the public was informed that registration had opened, and in March that the early bird period would soon end. All this information was also published on the IE websites and on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter (#iecon).

In early April 2020, the conference was turned into an online event. Information about the web conference was sent by email on:

- 6 April: 'Join our web conference';
- 17 April: 'Early bird registration ends';
- 4 May: 'Registration closes'.

IE did not buy any social media promotion. From 6 April until 6 May (when the registration closed), 21 posts were placed on Facebook, 14 on Twitter and 13 on LinkedIn. During that time, IE received 166 new followers on its main Facebook page, 20 on Twitter and 18 on LinkedIn.

All technical information, including the delivery of username and password for accessing the

web conference platform, was delivered 24-48 hours prior to the start of the event. This information was not sent earlier to avoid later corrections but for some attendees this time was too short to complete the profile section and acquaint themselves with the features in the check-in area (lobby).

In the end, 162 attendees joined the conference. Registration was possible before and after the event, numbers in brackets refer to post-conference registration. 152 (plus ten) attendees from 36 (plus one) countries registered, 17 attendees came from outside Europe. 106 (plus nine) were IE members. 91 attendees registered during the early bird period (of which 81 were IE members). In general, the numbers were not much different from previous IE conferences.

## Communicating with the presenters

When the event was turned into a web conference, the call for papers had already been closed for about two months. However, while 21 out of 52 paper abstracts were withdrawn, IE explicitly requested four more (adding up to 35) and also invited attendees to contribute with special features. Like all speeches and presentations, the special features had to be recorded in advance. IE received 31 contributions in this category.

In the end, 73 attendees (including co-presenters) contributed to the conference by sharing content through one of the formats, or by hosting sessions. (Attracting about 50% of the attendees to actively contribute is not unusual for IE conferences.) The exchange with those attendees was quite intense since they received guidelines for presenting and recording their sessions as well as for using the platforms and the details for logging in while

they needed to send abstracts, biographical notes, portrait pictures, their declaration of consent and their recording. They also joined their own test runs to make sure their microphone and camera would work.

## Internal communication

Being in touch with all team members was of high importance during the conference. All actively involved should have contact details from everybody else. An email contact list of hosts and technicians was also distributed among the presenters and workshop leaders and vice versa.

A Whatsapp group was created among the core team to have immediate contact in case of emergency. During the event, team members created from day to day different Whatsapp groups in various constellations, depending on the work packages they shared. One challenge in doing so was to keep all team members on board.

Every conference day, the core team met for about one hour to evaluate the progress and determine further interventions. Meetings in the evenings were held with the hosts for the present and following day to ensure smooth transitions.



## 7

### Feedback from attendees

An online questionnaire (SurveyMonkey) was sent to the 152 participants who registered before the conference. 22 of them responded by the time this brochure was released.

The questionnaire included mostly open-ended questions in order to get deeper insights to the attendees' experience.

#### Satisfaction with the online format and the programme

Most of the respondents did not feel the web conference was a barrier to connecting with each other. Compared to other online events, attendees found that the conference was:

- Surprisingly effective;
- More fulfilling and lively than expected;
- Fostering a sense of community;
- Also encouraging newcomers to interact;
- Less connecting in one way but more in another;
- Offering a good mixture of different kinds of sessions.

Special features as a creative part of the programme were found to be "highly personal", "a way to enjoy without thinking", a "contribution to the atmosphere and informality to the conference", "creative, inspiring and intimate, truly heart-warming and beautiful", "real refreshments in between", a means of "unitedness".

#### Downsides and issues experienced by attendees

Concerns mainly referred to managing home and work duties and technical issues. Some

respondents found the conference to be challenging:

- In terms of the need to attend family or work commitments during the programme;
- Regarding the intensity of the programme and the lack of breaks;
- In terms of listening to speakers and reading chat room comments at the same time;
- If the presenter was not seen during a presentation or the English was not good;
- In order to make new connections at the conference;
- In terms of remembering the time zone;
- Considering their own device limitations that were not sufficient;
- If their own internet connection was weak or unreliable;
- If it was not clear whether technical glitches resulted from the attendee or from the organiser.



## 8

# Conclusions

For Interpret Europe, networking is key. When attendees of the web conference were asked: In relation to existing colleagues and new connections at the conference, how did the online format make you feel compared to a regular conference?, 36% answered they felt less connected, 36% considered there was no difference – but 28% felt even more connected. One respondent answered that this conference was “surprisingly effective”.<sup>2</sup>

It was stated that in Q&A live sessions, speakers and moderators could be better seen and understood than is often the case in big lecture halls. The involvement of new attendees was seen to be less limited since old friends didn’t assemble at their own tables as they often do when they meet in person after a long time. Using recordings for presentations and inviting the presenters to the chat room to discuss their presentation with participants in parallel offered significant advantages over average in-person presentations at conferences. IE has since changed to this system for its monthly webinars which was the first significant impact of the web conference.

Often, it is more convenient and cheaper to allow new technologies to set the ‘quality standards’ instead of adapting them in a way that fosters organisational goals. The conference showed that taking the effort to adapt them in a way that fosters the organisational goals might help to overcome some of the limitations that often come with online events and, in some cases, even turn them into advantages.

Some findings might also feedback on IE’s in-person conferences and extend their outreach, including to offer replays and chatrooms to all

attendees after the conference. This allows attendees to follow sessions again at their own pace, which is a significant advantage for non-native English speakers. If there is a ‘post-conference registration’, this also enables exchange with those who could not travel to a conference. In many cases, either time or money are constraints, and there could be a smaller fee for such involvement from which all benefit.

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that, at the web conference, attendees did not experience any heritage site or get into an informal exchange with local people. Special features such as ‘My favourite site’, ‘Old skills’ or ‘From my home’ (and even the music selected by attendees for the breaks) helped to work around that gap but they mainly brought the attendees closer together. The relevance of first-hand experience remains a subject against the background of increasing digitisation. The debate about the effects of online communication in the social context, and especially in the context of learning, has been deliberately postponed to after the web conference.

Although IE conferences are a tried-and-tested mix of onsite and offsite exchange, it is now worth considering whether especially speeches and presentations can easily be delivered online and should this have an impact on their number at in-person conferences. Especially in terms of the European Green Deal, IE is also considering whether it should continue to run annual in-person conferences or replace them with web conferences, at least every second year; and whether other formats should be tested instead that rely more on first-hand experience (international study visits, summer schools,...).

In many concerns, the web conference triggered new thinking, and for sure this will happen in all organisations that decide to give it a try. This brochure intends to inspire them to do so.

<sup>2</sup> At the time when this publication was released, only 22 attendees had returned a questionnaire.

CEST	Friday, 8 May		Saturday, 9 May		Sunday, 10 May		Monday, 11 May	
	Host for this day	Keynote speaker	Host for this day	Keynote speaker	Host for this day	Keynote speaker	Host for this day	Keynote speaker
09:00	Thorsten Ludwig (Germany): Opening the conference Jelena Močević (Serbia): Opening the day	Keynote speaker	Peter Seccombe (UK): Opening the day Dirk Gotzmann (Germany): The European Landscape Convention (Florence Convention)	Keynote speaker	Sandy Colvine (France): Opening the day Agnes Aljas (Estonia): Involving people at museums	Keynote speaker	Valva Stergioti (Greece): Opening the day Lisa Brochu (USA): Never lose HEART	Keynote speaker
09:30	Kathrin Merkle (France): The Faro Convention		Friederike Hansell (Germany): Case study Erzgebirge/Krušnohoří Mining Region: Together we are World Heritage!		Nigel Mills (UK): Heimat museums and the 21st century		Tim Merriman and Lisa Brochu (USA): Post-pandemic opportunities for putting the HEART back into heritage communities	Janja Sivec (Slovenia): Our heritage – Capacity building workshops for heritage communities
10:00	Panel discussion on the Faro Convention – Panelists: Francesc Pla (France), Jovana Poznan (France), Matteo Rosati (Italy)		My favourite site with contributions from Italy, Portugal, Slovenia and UK		Old skills with contributions from Croatia, Ireland and Slovenia		Ave Paulus and Riin Alatalu (Estonia): Empowering heritage communities: Rights-based approaches	
10:30	Dragana Lucija Ratković Aydemir (Croatia): Intangible cultural heritage and community empowerment		Angus Forbes (Germany): Architecture and heritage interpretation		Nicole Deufel (Germany): Creating agonistic (third) spaces through heritage interpretation for diverse heritage communities		Manuela Hrvatin (Croatia): Fostering active citizenship through heritage interpretation: The Istra Inspirit project	
11:00	Spring walks with contributions from Bulgaria, Estonia and Sweden		Philip Songhurst (UK): The Master's House: How community interpretation helped to bring a historic building back to life					
11:30	Argyri Platza (Greece): Why fostering heritage communities is not a priority for the Greek state							
12:00	Dimitra Sidiropoulou (Greece): Heritage approaches have their own past							
12:30								
13:00								
13:30	Jelena Močević (Serbia): Welcome back at 13:25 Lesley Hatipone Machiridza (Zimbabwe): Minus us, it's your white elephant		Peter Seccombe (UK): Welcome back at 13:25 Michael Jungmeier (Germany) with Anneliese Fuchs (Austria): Engaging heritage communities by citizen science		Sandy Colvine (France): Welcome back at 13:25 Yael Bamberger with Eyal Mitrani (Israel): Behind the scenes' visits to foster heritage interpretation community peer learning		Valva Stergioti (Greece): Welcome back at 13:25 Steven Timoney (UK): Heritage identities; heritage values; heritage futures	
14:00	Thorsten Ludwig (Germany): Dubravko Fijacko (Croatia) and learning concepts for the development of interpretation		Mirela Tase (Albania): The challenges of ecotourism and perception among residents in Albania		Sarah De Nardi (Australia): The project of inclusive communities		Thematic table rounds You can select from and move between: Architecture (Angus Forbes), Culture (Jelena Močević), Geology (Carla Silva), Nature (Eva Sandberg) and Tourism (Elizabeta Milanović)	
14:30			Pedro Morais (Portugal): Are environmental interpretation centres in Portugal prepared for fostering active citizenship?		From my home with contributions from Slovenia, UK and USA			
15:00	Michael Glen (UK) and Elena Weber (Russia): Translations must be meaningful, not just faithful		Spring walks with contributions from Croatia, Estonia and Slovenia		Helena Tolić (Croatia): IE's Western Balkan project		From my home with contributions from Albania, Croatia, Estonia and France	
15:30	Kristian Bjørnstad (Norway) and Sandy Colvine (France): Interpretation for the tourism business community		Florin Nechita (Romania) with Simona Ciuraru (Romania): Historic personal live interpretation in an urban outdoor setting				Thematic table rounds You can select from and move between: Children's interpretation (Janja Sivec), Freelancers (Simona Markovska), Interpretive planning (Michal Masdek), Live interpretation (Mark Wallis), and Research (Carmen Granito)	
16:00	Podcasts with contributions from Poland, Romania and UK		Orsolya Szilágyi (Romania): The past and the future of the Roman military site from Călugăreni/Mikháza		Aida Vezir (Bosnia and Herzegovina): The Western Balkan region against the background of heritage interpretation development			
16:30								
17:00								
17:30	Jelena Močević (Serbia): Welcome back at 17:25 Mark Wallis (UK) and Valva Stergioti (Greece): The new you - How to become an historical character for museums and heritage sites		Peter Seccombe (UK): Welcome back at 17:25 Stuart Frost (UK): Developing volunteer-led LGBTQ+ tours at the British Museum		Sandy Colvine (France): Welcome back at 17:25 My favourite site with contributions from Croatia, Estonia and Israel		Valva Stergioti (Greece): Welcome back at 17:25 Karin Magi (Estonia): SALM - The Foundation of Haapsalu and Länema Museums	
18:00			Nina Simon (USA): Participatory approaches		Song Stott and Paul Caputo (USA): Dealing with COVID-19 and keeping members engaged		Speakers' corner You can book a 15-minute time slot for a short talk that will be announced to all attendees	Glass cases You can watch Interpret Europe teams holding their meetings
18:30	Zsuzsa Tothay (Hungary) and Janja Sivec (Slovenia): IE's Nine years of a Certified Interpretive crowdsourcing (CIP) course				Panel discussion on the impact of the coronavirus crisis Panelists: Yael Bamberger (Israel), Tajana Cvjetičanin (Serbia), Vanessa Vaio (Italy)		Fish bowl Sharing your personal conference experiences with all attendees	
19:00			Panel discussion on participation – Panelists: Nina Simon (USA), Jon Kohl (Costa Rica), Dragana Lucija Ratković Aydemir (Croatia)					
19:30	Jelena Močević (Serbia): Closing the day		Peter Seccombe (UK): Closing the day		Sandy Colvine (France): Closing the day			
20:00	Evening event: Food for thought (will start at 20:15) Take part in this virtual sphere to share your 'food for thought' while having a nice chat with presenters and other attendees.		Evening event: Late night concert Please share something with us – a poem, a song or a melody – to put the cherry on top of the day. The stage is yours!		Evening event: Scavenger hunt All participants collect a number of miscellaneous objects: common, outlandish or humorous ones facing some challenges...		Peter Seccombe (UK): Conference Wrap-up Nuria Mohedano (Spain): Revealing the destination of iacon21 Helena Vižić (Slovenia): Closing the conference	

\* All times refer to Central European summer time (CEST).

Speeches Discussions Workshops Presentations Plenary Fun





Interpret Europe's conference 2020 was meant to take place this year in Estonia, from 8-11 May. In mid-March it became clear that, due to the coronavirus crisis, a gathering of attendees would not be possible. For that reason, on 6 April 2020, the conference was turned into an online event.

Interpret Europe conferences are quite complex, and they generally last four days. Apart from work meetings and monthly webinars, Interpret Europe had no experience in running online events and had no additional budget to do so. Turning its planned conference into a virtual event within four weeks was a significant challenge.

The conference attracted more than 160 participants from 37 countries representing six continents. It included more than 90 sessions. One attendee wrote: "Thank you so much to everyone who made it happen. What an amazingly inspiring four days! I don't think I'll ever forget them".

This brochure intends to offer support to all organisations that find themselves in a similar situation. It does not claim to be a comprehensive recommendation on how to organise online conferences but it offers a quick résumé to share the lessons Interpret Europe learnt during the preparation and running of its web conference 2020.

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