Experts' e-discussions: Top-tips for stimulating engagement

Resource type: provisional guidance

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Here at IDS we have developed substantial experience of managing experts' discussions online. Here's our top-tips from lessons learned to-date.

1. Good preparation is expensive and time-consuming but reduces the risks of failure – build a project team with the right skills and reputation and give them at least a couple of months to prepare. Ideally, recruit a convenor with thematic expertise and reputation and a facilitator with specialist experience in managing online discussion events. Seek outside consultants if necessary but commit internal resources to ensure you retain 'ownership' of the project.

2. Research the participants you recruit and tailor the event to them – the facilitator should make the effort to understand the participants, their goals and their contexts in order to make the most of the opportunity the event provided (in terms of substantive outputs and the sponsor's own public reputation).

3. Choose an appropriate format / length for the discussion – opting for a 2 day discussion can help to maintain the interest levels of high-value experts who can't commit much time. Ask them to schedule in time in their diary to engage in the event (say 2 hours a day), around which they could plan their diary. This can also contribute to flow of contributions from participants in different time-zones.

4. Tailor invitations to the individual in question - check the tone of introductory emails, frame the event as an expert discussion (not just email / online), and sell the joint benefits (to participants and the sponsoring organisation) to each person individually taking into account their professional / organisational context.

5. Harness your boundary-partners (i.e. the influential people you can reach) and leverage them to motivate prospective participants – Personal suggestions / recommendations from high-profile figures help to motivate those you want to get involved. Highlighting confirmed participants helps to attract non-responders / late invitees.

6. Build and maintain the relationship with prospective participants during the lead up – this provides opportunities for individuals to get to know each other, help co-create the substantive agenda, and increases participant awareness of and commitment to the event. It helps facilitators to understand how to lead the discussion and which participants might play useful roles within the discussion.

For further information please visit http://community.eldis.org/.5c6e2d73/ or email eldiscommunities@ids.ac.uk

7. Ask participants to share a short biography and photo in advance – this can be circulated to participants beforehand to get 'introductions' out of the way and ensure individuals know who they are interacting with.

8. Invite a few well-placed and enthusiastic participants to play key roles in stimulating the discussion - Ensuring that there are at some least messages posted at the 'launch' of the e-discussion (by key discussants) not only signals that the debate has 'started', avoids ordinary participants 'having to be first' and provides something for others to think about and respond to.

9. Demonstrate the commitment of the sponsor to the event – highlight the investment allocated by introducing the convenor and facilitator and explain their roles. Encourage tactical contributions from the sponsor's staff base

10. Keep facilitation activities behind the scenes – backchannel 'match-making' and other activities (e.g. looking out for silent participants) are much more effective at guiding the discussion than attempting to 'be the chair' in an up-front fashion.

11. Trust the group to steer the discussion themselves! Once invested in a discussion, participants can take on most of the facilitation role (but the facilitator should reserve the role to nudge the debate if it becomes too distant from the substantive agenda.

12. Provide a 'technical support call-back by phone/Skype' offer to participants who experience difficulties – technical difficulties are an inevitable spectre in online events and need to be resolved as quickly as possible to enable participation and maintain interest among high-value individuals.

13. Produce and flag-up appropriate online help materials - FAQs should not only be there for ordinary users but for facilitators / convenors managing discussions who will have face different challenges (e.g. re-threading posts)

14. Many brains and distributed capacity lead to higher resilience - Try to resource specific individuals to take on the different roles required (host, convenor, facilitator, and power participants) and to avoid collapsing them into one or two people

15. Don't apply top-tips to every situation without question! – Not all online discussions are the same: success factors where objectives, structures, barriers to entry, timescales, participant contexts and technology are different could well vary considerably.