Applying Best Practices from Industry to Your Virtual Conference

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ABSTRACT

Continued restrictions on government travel and budgets for in-person conferences have prompted many agencies to turn to virtual conferences (vConferences or vEvents) as a supplement or replacement option. Drawing from literature reviews, observations, and interviews with industry organizations, this paper reviews the differences between virtual meetings and large-scale virtual events, how over-reliance and over-indulgence led to increased regulation and scrutiny of in-person events, and how vEvents are resulting in real return on investment. The authors detail the impact of social media innovations, how to apply best practice for analysis and planning, lessons learned for staffing vEvents, how to select the right platform without vendor influence, and explain where to gain access to a community of practice focused on virtual event engagements.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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INTRODUCTION

Budgetary restrictions on government spending, particularly on in-person conferences and meetings have resulted in changes to the way we do business. Government and industry are now presented with the challenge of enabling collaboration, mission critical activities, and training through means that equal formerly in-person events. To address these challenges, virtual engagement platforms and integrated services (e.g., registration, payment, tracking) are augmenting or replacing in-person events. These technology solutions, when strategically selected and appropriately implemented, can offset budgetary reductions and enable collaboration, while expanding access to geographically-dispersed audiences.

In-person conferences have been hard-hit, with participation waning over the past three years. Virtual conferences (v Conferences or vEvents), both large and small are becoming more commonplace. This paper will help you determine whether your existing infrastructure will meet your needs and assist with your planning, execution, and follow-up for your vEvent to result in similar success as a face-to-face event.

A VIRTUAL MEETING IS VASTLY DIFFERENT THAN A VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

Virtual meetings have become a common occurrence, whether participation is blended or entirely virtual. Prior to the introduction of relatively inexpensive virtual meeting technologies (e.g., WebEx, Adobe Connect, Defense Connect Online), virtual meetings were voice only. While there were select organizations that invested in expensive technology for video conferencing; most did not. In recent years, organizations have leveraged virtual meeting software to enable participants to share content (e.g., slides, screen sharing), post questions or comments in chat pods, and even whiteboard. Many webinars leverage the same or similar software capabilities – and often the communication flow is a speaker presenting material to an audience with some planned time for questions and answers.

In contrast, vEvents integrate a level of interplay among many groups of people, including the event organizers (the vEvent administration), the audio/visual production team, the presenters/facilitators, and the participants. vEvents often include a range of capabilities, including online learning, live chat, exhibit booths, on demand replay of events with ability to add to the chat, and much more. Think of a vEvent (or a vConference) like an in-person conference or on the demand video from your computer instead of having to travel to the event venue.

HOW OVER-RELIANCE AND OVER-INDULGENT IN-PERSON CONFERENCES LED US HERE

You have likely read about or viewed videos and photos of how funds for many in-person events were mishandled in recent years. Examples of extravagant spending and questionable entertainment range from a session on lobbying, a Latin Fiesta featuring a "sizzling fashion show," to a beach party that included a 15-foot-high sand sculpture of a sponsor's logo, and much more. To further add alarm, a U.S. Senator reported that the funds Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) spent on three international trips to discuss HIV could have be used instead to spared 150,000 infants from contracting HIV (Coburn, 2012).

In 2010, the federal government spent $2B on in-person conferences – a significant amount of money for any government. That, coupled with the misuse of funds, resulted in media attention and increased regulation and oversight of government spending for conferences and face-to-face events. For example, in September 2012, Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter released a memorandum on the Implementation of Conference Oversight

Requirements and Delegation of Conference Approval Authority outlining the new approach the Department of Defense (DoD) will be taking to conference budgets and attendance in the future. Of particular note is the following statement:

> When making conference approval decisions, approval authorities must confirm that physical colocation of DoD employees in a conference setting is necessary and cost-effective and consider alternative means of delivering the relevant information, including usage of remote collaboration tools (e.g., teleconferencing, videoconferencing, webinars, online sharing applications) and other real-time communication methods that would mitigate the need for physical colocation of DoD employees. (Carter 2012)

By 2011, the federal conference budget was drastically reduced with total spending on conferences reaching an all-time low of $650M (Pinto, 2013). Despite the change in funding or these events, government employees continue to understand the value that results from person-to-person interactions. The National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC) gathered data from federal government employees about the importance of conferencing, with 60% indicating conferences are crucial and 20% indicating they are important (Verrico, 2013). Of those polled, 87% said they rely on conferences for training and professional development.

In direct response to the memorandum noted above, reduced budgets, reduced travel funds, and increased oversight; vEvents are rapidly increasing—attempting to meet the need for continued employee development. In 2012, vEvents increased by 238%, averaging online attendance of 4,000 (Hughes & Salomon-Lee, 2012). Agencies like CDC have moved to the forefront of vEvent technology adoption, potentially due, in part, to criticism following a Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) report indicating that the CDC spent a total of $44.7 million on conferences from FY2000 through FY2005.

Additional intent to provide oversight was demonstrated when the House of Representatives passed the Government Spending Accountability Act unanimously by voice vote in July 2013. The bill caps the amount an agency can spend on a single conference at $500,000 unless the agency head determines a more pricey conference is justified.

REALIZING RETURN ON INVESTMENT FOR VIRTUAL EVENTS IS ALREADY A REALITY

The average cost for a government delegate to attend a face-to-face conference in 2011 was $173 per day (U.S. Travel Association, 2013). For a typical 2-day event for 1,250 delegates that equates to $432,500 for travel alone. In contrast, the average vEvent for the same number of virtual delegates costs approximately $16,000. Over a 3-year period, the resulting cost-savings of vEvents over in-person events would equate to $1,297,500 for one event for the federal government.

Saving $1.4M in a Single vEvent—The U.S. Navy Safety Professional Development Conference

The U.S. Navy Safety Center held its 21st annual U.S. Navy Safety Professional Development Conference (PDC) in March 2013 as a vEvent. The in-person conference was originally scheduled to take place in San Diego, CA but was adapted to a vEvent in response to the restrictions required by Ashton Carter's memorandum. The vEvent resulted in the largest attendance in the 20-year history with over 2,000 global participants, 80 speakers, and 52 seminars/events. The cumulative attendee satisfaction resulted in excess of 90% for Good and Excellent rating as highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1: U.S. Navy PDC vEvent Satisfaction Results

	Online Format	*Seminars/Events*	*Speakers*
Excellent	48%	54%	64%
Good	43%	40%	32%

The resulting savings was $1.4M for changing the in-person conference to a vEvent; as reported by Commanding Officer for the Navy Safety & Environmental Training Center CDR Gregory Cook, indicating that over $1.5 M in travel/per diem costs were reduced to less than $100K in operational expenses. (Murtha 2013; Konkel, 2013).

Showcasing the Art of the Possible and Making a Profit—The HIMSS vEvent and Expo

Beginning in 2007, the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS) has hosted multiple vEvents each year. While HIMSS charges a nominal fee for conference attendance, the key to their success lies in the benefits provided to exhibitors and sponsors. The "participation packages" offered by HIMSS provides promotion opportunities and a lead-tracking system that provides information on each of the approximately 300 visitors per virtual booth and opportunities to exchange business cards and chat in real time with participants. Because HIMSS has effectively managed to facilitate the interactions between decision makers and exhibitors who want to sell them healthcare information management systems, HIMSS' virtual conferences are among the most successful (Lang, 2010).

Hybrid Conference Reaches an Additional 900 Personnel—The CDC Public Health Informatics Conference

CDC added a virtual environment component to their annual in-person Public Health Informatics Conference held in Atlanta, GA in 2011, resulting in a hybrid event. The primary driver for adding the virtual element was to provide access to the content to those unable to attend in person. As a result, CDC increased their attendance rate by reaching an additional 900 field personnel through the virtual environment.

Adam Arthur, the Virtual Platform Initiative Lead at CDC said, "Adding the virtual engagement component saved the CDC over $780,000 in travel and per diem" (Arthur, 2013). Information like this can be an effective way to understand the Return on Investment (ROI) and build your case for using this technology.

Recent vEvents such as the SAP SapphireNow and TechEd conferences have attracted a large number of attendees—90 and 120 thousand, respectively. The scale of these events is simply unobtainable in the current environment for in-person events, and the benefits offered by the technology underlying these events have the potential to go far beyond those currently offered at in-person events.

CAREFUL SELECTION OF YOUR VIRTUAL EVENT PLATFORM CONTRIBUTES GREATLY TO SMOOTH AND SUCCESSFUL EVENTS

While technology does not create a successful vEvent, choosing a technology platform is an important component for enabling your ability to manage the event and for your participants to easily engage in your event. vEvent technologies offer a range of capabilities, including the presentation components that permit participant access/engagement and conference management components that permit administration features such as registration, invitations, payment, reminders, and report generation.

Figure 1: CDC 2011 Virtual Conference

While the presentation components are critical to a virtual conference keynotes and track sessions, the conference management components are critical to the many elements involved in planning and executing the vEvent, including promotion, marketing, registration, interests selection, pre- and post-event learning, and event organizer follow-up and marketing, as depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Components of Virtual Event Technology (adapted from Murtha 2013)

A vEvent platform should support both the asynchronous and synchronous functions of all groups. While manually-generated emails can be used for the management of a web meeting, administration functions are needed for a larger vEvent, along with the following six activities highlighted in the Table 2.

Table 2: Six Key Virtual Events Activities

1	Promotion and marketing activities should be easy to connect to registration and payment actions
2	Session catalogs/agenda should be available for participant review and crafted to support decisions on which sessions they want to attend (optimally, searchable based on date/time and topics)
3	Access to learning materials and social media-based discussions both pre- and post-vEvent should be integrated into the system to help develop and engaged the participants
4	Pre-loading of all presentation and interactive materials helps ensure that all items will work during the vEvent and can be used during presenter training and onboarding
5	Concurrent track sessions need to be easy to locate and the system should allow the participants to easily switch between multiple sessions (e.g., central hub or conference hall)
6	Live session feedback and post-event evaluations should be integrated in the platform and be used to solve technical issues

How Social Media is Changing How We Engage During and After Events

Over the past five years Social media has become a part of almost every in-person event. The use of hashtags (#) to unite event attendees is an excellent example of the power of Twitter. Taking this a step further the incorporation of pictures and video allows attendees to share at a much deeper level. It was no surprise that virtual attendees adopted the same use of social media. Virtual attendees can capture 30 seconds of a virtual session and send it to their followers on various social media sites. In addition, for virtual sessions using slide presentations virtual attendees can send specific slides to their followers. Technology like this is filling the personalization gap and the need for attendees to share their experience in their social circles. This can increase an event reach ten-fold over the life of the content. For example, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) held a small conference in 2012 for 200 people and decided to post the content online for on-demand viewing by personnel who were unable to attend. Six months after the conference ended the content had been viewed over 15,000 times. The conference manager discovered

personnel were emailing the conference link to others inside DHS. While vEvents 7 years ago were more like a slick web site they have evolved into a medium for effective content delivery. Combined with other technology, vEvents are becoming the standard and conference managers are increasing their reach to a new audience. For sensitive content virtual engagement platforms have internal chat features that are only visible to other attendees. While this is not as innovative as sending out a 30 second video clip it does provide an alternative for non-public facing content. These types of vEvents are secure and use encryption technology to ensure the content is password protected.

Differentiating Virtual Meeting and Virtual Event Platforms

One of the most important decisions you'll make entering this new paradigm is choosing a technology platform and system integrator. The first step is to internally discuss and agree upon your priorities and objectives. Understanding these essential items helps you and your team draft the correct language for Requests for Information and Requests for Proposals. Think about whether you need a single, repeatable platform for individual conferences or one that scales from small internal training sessions to large, government conferences, and is integrated on an enterprise level.

Virtual meeting/presentation software is already in place in many organizations, although many groups use them just for PowerPoint and/or slide presentations or smaller meeting with under 80 participants. For example, according to a survey by Quantum Leap Marketing, of 71 percent of responding organizations project to host an online training session (with fewer than 100 participants) in 2013. Marketing webinars (with under 60 participants) will be utilized by roughly 68 percent of organizations, and internal all-hands webinars will be held by almost half of the organizations surveyed. More specialized online conference software options started out with more of a 3D look to mimic the feel of a conference with images of attendees and images of booths and presentation stages, but have since stream-lined into more of a platform for showing recorded videos. Sometimes the videos are recordings from in-person conferences, but many now are using pre-recorded video that is available on demand. Table 3 highlights examples of virtual meeting and virtual event platforms.

Table 3: Examples of vMeetings Versus vEvent Platforms

Virtual Meeting Platform Examples	Specialized Virtual Event Platform Examples
Adobe Connect	Inxpo
Cisco WebEx	On24
Citrix GoToMeeting	Social 27
Microsoft LiveMeeting	TurnoutNow

Example of Using Virtual Meeting Technology for vEvents—In order to achieve the knowledge sharing and training needs typically met by in-person conferences, some government agencies have turned to Defense Connect Online (DCO), which is the mandated and authorized enterprise collaboration solution for the DoD. DCO enables users on the Non-Classified Internet Protocol Router Network (NIPRNet) and the Secret Internet Protocol Router Network (SIPRNet) to participate in web conferences, virtual meetings, and chats at various levels of security. DCO comprises three primary components: a DCO portal site, Adobe Connect web conferencing software, and an Extensible Messaging and Presence Protocol (XMPP) client for in-session chat capability. In the most current version of Connect, Adobe has clearly added components to help meet the needs of organizations that need to hold large and more complex vEvents. These additions have made the previous "meeting only" focused software more like the more traditional vEvent software packages (e.g., ON24, INXPO, Vcopious).

Example of Using Specialized Virtual Conference Technology for vEvents—Streaming a virtual conference for 2500 people demands a specialized set of hardware and software skills, which is why Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA) chose to partner with a platform vendor for its online recruiting events in 2011. The platform had the ability to stream to as many as 50,000 simultaneous conference participants. It also had open architecture and application programming interface (API) capabilities ensuring seamless connections to existing applications and social media via a virtual conference environment created to reflect the NAVSEA image. All user actions and interactions were tracked with real-time metrics delivered immediately on request to leadership and hiring managers. NAVSEA had the flexibility to use it for single events, webcasts, and persistent virtual environments with live and on-demand content. Instances of the software could be added at will and multiple instances could run

simultaneously. The software allowed for content delivery through any visual medium and could be represented within a 2D/3D interface.

Table 4 provides a high-level comparison of capabilities, intended to assist in the selection of the right technology for the level of event desired.

Table 4: High-Level Comparison of Platform Capabilities

Capabilities	*Typical Virtual Meeting Platform*	*Typical Virtual Conference Platform*
Promotion and Marketing	No	Yes
Registration	Yes	Yes
Payment	No	Yes
Tracking	Yes	Yes
Entrance Portal	Basic Text Links	Yes
2.5D Look and Feel	No	Some
Persistent/Perpetual Environment	Some	Yes
Local Installs Required (e.g., plug-ins)	Some	No – Cloud Based
Login Access to Content	Yes	Yes
On-Demand Access to Content Recordings	Indirect Access	Direct Access
Volume of Participants	5,000	30,000+
Vendor Booth Support	No	Yes
Synchronous Access to Content	Yes	Yes
Asynchronous Access to Content	Indirect Access	Direct Access
Public/Private Chat	Most	Yes
Social Media	Some - during session	Yes

BEST PRACTICES FOR VIRTUAL EVENTS

Interviews with Karl Kapp and Karen Hyder on vEvents highlighted some of best practices of a good vEvent that are support by the technical components noted previously. Karl Kapp is a professor of instructional technology in Bloomsburg University's Department of Instructional Technology and the assistant director of the university's Institute for Interactive Technologies. He has co-authored five books on the convergence of learning and technology and is a frequent keynote speaker, workshop leader, and panelist at national and international conferences. Karen hosts, produces, and moderates online forums for The eLearning Guild. In 2007, Karen co-authored The eLearning Guild's Handbook on Synchronous eLearning, and has presented a variety of training-effectiveness topics at national and international conference events. Karl's and Karen's summarized comments on vEvents include:

- **Partial Event Participation:** vEvent organizers can't expect to have the same person available for the entire conference. Many participants will pre-select the unique sessions they want to join and will log in at those specific times. The importance of setting the agenda/schedule and adhering to it is crucial. Don't start a session late or run long, allowing participants to benefit from the entire session without impact to others.
- **Technical Producer:** There should be a technical producer for every session. The producer(s) handle the technology behind the scenes (e.g., polls, screen shares, videos, interactions, games) and filter the inputs from the participants (e.g., chats, questions).
- **Presenter Training:** Providing technical training to the presenters is a must to ensure understanding of the layout, functions, and protocols of the producers.
- **Presenter Meet & Greet:** Support the speakers in the sharing of basic slides and general topic information prior to the event, a recent American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) vEvent had all of the presenters get together for a virtual content/topic meet & greet. This allowed the speakers to avoid unnecessary content repetition/duplication and provided speakers with advance context to build on key themes discussed by other presenters.
- **Programming Conference Themes:** Having conference themes clearly defined with an individual or group responsible for tracking the development of the themes across the sessions allows for a moderator to summarize the day and correlate how the themes/topics were interrelated. A summary session is a good

way to close the day and reinforce key concepts and can serve as a reference for participants to determine which materials and recordings they want to access later.

- **Backup Speakers**: vEvent organizers should be prepared with a number of backup sessions or backup speakers for key topics. Some presenters will have to cancel – be prepared.
- **Downloads**: The number one participant request is for a copy of the slides - the number two request is for the link to the recording of the session. Make all materials available from one place for downloading/viewing.
- **Twitter Lead**: The Twitter/backchannel lead should recruit a few Twitter champions to help capture the in-session discussions as posts that can help guide others on themes and trends.
- **Sustainment**: Ensure that participants have a clear set of concrete next steps so they can continue to engage with the content, the presenters, and each other. The Social Media Channel Lead should guide and support both pre and post-event discussions.

Nomenclature is Significant Element for Branding and Participation—Real World Lessons from ADL's Multiple-Day Webinar Series

Specific lessons learned on hosting virtual events were also shared by [Jason Haag](#) of the Advanced Distributed Learning ([ADL](#)). Jason is ADL's Mobile Learning Lead and a member of the ADL Technical Team. Jason provided insights from the "interagency mobile learning webinar series" which was a follow-on event to the mobile learning summit ADL co-hosted with Combating Terrorism Technical Support Office - Technical Support Working Group (CTTSO-TSWG) in May 2012 (an example of cross-event sustainment). Jason noted that title of the event was selected due to government restrictions on attending "conferences." What we call an event is now a significant determinant of whether some can participate. Some of the co-hosts had very strict guidelines regarding the types events they can participate in, specifically not permitting involvement with anything that contained the words "summit", "conference", or "expo" whether it was "virtual" or "physical."

Due to the resources and time constraints for procuring, testing, and configuring virtual conference software (e.g., InterCall, Second Life), ADL made the intentional decision to use a webinar format of a "conference-like" format. Their approach included:

- Technologies: For this multiple-day webinar series, ADL used in-place technologies, including GoTo Webinar, Defense Connect Online (DCO), Camtasia, and Google+ Hangouts. The event was produced using mainly GoTo Webinar. Using multiple technologies requires significant pre-planning and a strong coordinated team during the sessions.
- Plugins: To accommodate Government and DoD attendees that could not install plug-ins, ADL also broadcasted sessions in DCO by sharing the GoTo Webinar screen inside of DCO. Having a Plan B for those unable to install plugins is crucial. A technical producer standing by to troubleshoot unanticipated challenges is also important.
- Q&A Chats: The second day included a panel discussion with three experts/authors on mobile learning which used a combination of the chat features in GoTo Webinar and DCO with postings in Google Hangouts. Ensuring engagement of the audience in a non-verbal manner is often easier to manage once the audience size is over 50 participants.
- Session Scheduling: ADL worked during the session to preserve the important 15-minute buffer allocated between sessions. Permitting time for both participants and producers to take a quick break and prepare for the next session is just as important for a vEvent as an in-person event.
- Intermission: Intermission slides (or lobby slides) worked well between sessions, providing content, event information (e.g., links to the slides and recordings, schedules), and other relevant information.

PLANNING YOUR VIRTUAL EVENT: FIVE KEY ANALYSIS AND PRE-PLANNING ELEMENTS

While there are credentialed professionals who specialize in large-scale event planning, a few helpful tips are provided, compliments of the Government Virtual Engagements Community of Practice (GVECoP), industry subject matter experts, systems integrators, and platform vendors who have identified the following analysis and pre-planning element as being critical to success when integrating a virtual engagement technology platform. The analysis planning is not intended to replace the expertise offered by degreed or certified professionals in the

discipline of conference planning, rather is intended to help you understand key elements of the lifecycle as you determine your organizations readiness for vEvents.

1. Strategy/vision
2. Target audience
3. Staffing plan and budgeting
4. Select the right platform
5. Executive support

1. Begin With A Strategy

Successful vEvent planning begins with clear objectives and a strategy. It is important to hold interdepartmental meetings to discuss your resources and objectives. A virtual conferencing platform can be a powerful addition to existing in-person conference and training program. While a virtual conference can educate, engage, and create new space for government personnel or constituents, they will never replace a handshake or direct look in the eye. Integrating both strategies via a hybrid conference should be considered and can be very effective.

2. Target Your Audience

It is critical that your strategy focuses on the audience you are trying to reach. During the development process, identify and segment your target audience. You need to understand your audiences' pain points, needs, and values. Also consider whether or not that audience is ready to engage in and is equipped for, a virtual engagement technology experience. If your target audience isn't ready, look at what you can do to make them ready (e.g., provide educational information via e-mail or instructional videos).

3. Proper Staffing

A virtual conference requires just as much thought, planning, and effort as a physical conference or training session. Managers still need to develop relevant content, book subject matter experts, and session speakers. So the question to ask yourself before you start is: Do you have the right personnel for content development and conference management? We recommend having personnel assigned specifically to the virtual conference or training sessions much like you would a physical one. This ensures that everything goes smoothly, that the audience is pleased with the experience, and that they will return in the future.

4. Choose the Right Virtual Conference Platform

Ask yourself these questions:
- Is the platform flexible enough to grow with your requirements, including audience size, reliability, and integration with third-party technologies and other applications?
- Is it simple enough to use so that anyone can easily select, create, and design their content without a lot of effort and customer service intervention?
- Does it feature rich back-end reporting and integration capabilities with detailed reports and APIs to integrate outside applications?

5. Executive Support

Lastly, senior executives within your agency must buy into the value and effectiveness of virtual conferences and training in order to be successful. Remember that ultimately the senior management will likely have to sign off on budgets and technology requests. Have you convinced them of the need to incorporate virtual conferences into your mix or do they remain skeptical?

Comprehensive data analysis and careful tracking of ROI is paramount to secure senior executive buy-in. If you've begun the RFP process, ask prospective partners up front for the potential cost savings their platforms can help your organization realize. Compare them to your existing budget results from previous years. Tangible results are what counts here – especially during this time of increased budget tightening.

WHERE TO TURN WHEN YOU NEED ACCESS TO VIRTUAL EVENT PRACTIONERS

The Government Virtual Engagements Community of Practice (GVECoP) is a non-profit organization comprised of government and industry professionals focused on a more accessible, flexible, and sustainable government. The purpose of the GVECoP is to support the incorporation of 21st century virtual business practices and engagement technologies into federal, state, and local sectors. By developing training and resources, the GVECoP will facilitate the transfer of knowledge, and the learning of technical skills and abilities, among individuals who perform mission critical activities requiring collaboration and engagement between government entities and partners. The GVECoP will convene online workgroups around these areas of focus to fulfill its stated purpose. To further the reach of the organization, GVECoP has partnered with the American Council for Technology, National Association of Government Communicators, and The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy to educate and exchange best practices.

An enterprise solution for government virtual engagements is being reviewed within federal government agencies and divisions that oversee conference and event budgets, making this Community of Practice (CoP) both timely and relevant. However, a lack of knowledge, skills, and abilities among staff resources pertaining to the planning and execution of virtual engagements is a limiting factor that must be addressed. Equally important is the need for virtual engagement systems integrators to have insight into government standards for privacy and security of applications that interface with secure systems. Additionally, Software as a Service (SaaS) applications vary widely in Application Programming Interface (API) integration code and methods. There are currently no set standards among SaaS applications, making it difficult and often expensive to integrate needed third-party services.

- **Standardization**. As use of virtual engagement technologies become more widely utilized by government entities, compatibility among software applications and integrated services will become a topic of ever-increasing importance, as these technologies will need to interface smoothly. Collective knowledge on integration needs and standardization for government will inform and direct a more simplified solution.
- **Professional Development**. Equally important is the need for government staff, systems integrators, and platform vendors to effectively plan, manage, and facilitate virtual engagements using unilateral standards and practices that are viable cross-agency. As a remotely hosted knowledge network community, educational materials will be gleaned and sourced through the open collaborations of virtual engagement practitioners (VEP), culminating in the development of standards and evolving best practices that will produce a professional VEP designation.
- **Solutions Strategies**. A simplified and streamlined process for identifying technological needs and best practices for virtual engagements is vital to effectively plan and execute these initiatives successfully. Resources such as directories, comparison tools, and analytic tools will be developed by the CoP.
- **Scope**. The GVE CoP is made up of three representative factions, coming together to develop standards, share knowledge and find the best solutions for implementing virtual business practices and engagement technologies at all levels of government:
  - Communicators and collaborators, both government employees and contractors, within federal, state, territorial and local governments, who are practitioners of virtual engagement use-cases and technology solutions.
  - Partners of these government entities – such as non-profit and for-profit organizations and associations.
  - Virtual engagement technology systems integrators/consulting firms that service government entities.
  - Certification authority for Virtual Engagement Practitioner (VEP) professional development and designation.

CONCLUSION

> "The technology is there to do it. We can bring the conference to individuals with existing technology even with some constraints. The key to being successful is you've got to connect participants to make them feel like they are really part of a conference."

- Gregory Cook,
Commanding Officer for the Naval Safety & Environmental Training Center, (Konkel 2013)

Virtual conferences are growing in popularity, due in large part to the declining budget for in-person events. Key takeaways include:

1. Apply the same rigor to a vEvent as an in-person event; carefully plan your themes and select speakers with relevant topics.
2. Plan your vEvent with the five key analysis and pre-planning elements.
3. The complexity of the technology platform must be seamless to the participant; the technology production team must be well-trained and practiced in administering features and troubleshooting issues.
4. Practice sessions and meetings with the speakers help them engage with the technology and the participants.
5. Establish a connection with your audience by designing engaging sessions; not all sessions need to be live but weaving in interaction into key sessions, varying presenters, using great visuals are just a few examples.
6. An intuitive user interface that allows registrants to quickly find and select the sessions they want to attend is imperative.
7. Measure, measure, measure; conducting post-session and post-event evaluations and follow-up will provide you with insights to determine ROI and adjust plans for future vEvents.
8. Provide summaries of major trends/themes in easy to share/reuse formats – especially for social media channels.
9. Consider hybrid conferences by blending physical in-person events with virtual components.
10. When selecting a technology platform, consider both the participant, presenter and conference management components (synchronous and asynchronous).

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