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Considerations before Hosting a Meetup Online 💻 🗣️🙋 🤫 due to Covid 😷

#meetup   #usergroups   #community   #zoom

In February 2020, I attended and [organized some web development meetups](), not knowing we would not be able to do so anymore for a very long time. When deciding to host our upcoming meetups as online conferences, we did not yet know about the challenges we had to face.

I first shared my experience with online meetups in a talk called [Meetups in Times of Covid]() in June 2020. This article includes updated information to help you prepare for successful online events in 2021.

In this Article

What are Meetups anyway?

[Meetup]() is a service used to organize online groups that host in-person events for people with similar interests. In web and software development, at least in Germany, the term "meetup" has replaced the once-popular "user group".

Before the pandemic, tech meetups were a nice opportunity to share some knowledge, talk about the latest trending technologies, socialize, and have some food and drink. As a sponsor, you can promote your product and present your company as an employer.

Social Distancing

At online meetups, you can ...
✅ share knowledge,
✅ talk about trending technologies,
✅ promote your product,
✅ promote your company,

... but you can't ...
🚫 have some food and drink together,
🚫 make nice photos to put on social media

... and it is hard to
🚫 socialize!

Often I heard people underestimate socializing, small talk, body language, and relationships for developers. Some think developers are shy and lazy and only care about the food and drink.

However, due to social distancing in the pandemic, we were advised not to host any meetups in person anymore. No more food, no more drink, but we can socialize online. Really?

Challenges

Talking Loud to Everybody?

In video conferencing, you are either muted 🔇 or you are talking loud 🗣 to everybody, while in real life, you can join a small group in a corner of a room for a quiet chat that no other people will overhear. You can come up to the speaker after the official event and ask a seemingly silly question without exposing yourself. A possible solution might be short sessions for only small groups of people, also known as breakout rooms.

Getting to Know People 👋🤚

Another benefit of actual rooms is a group perspective. While following a presentation or taking part in a conversation, you can watch what is going on around you. Maybe someone enters the room wearing the cool trainers you never knew where to buy. Maybe your coworker will introduce you to his old friend who came to your country for the first time. Getting to know people can be easy in real life. It can be hard online, especially when you are the host trying to handle login problems or trying to silence your dog in the background.

Actually Attending and Following the Meetup

In real life, you go to a place, meet people, and sit down in the audience, facing the speaker in front of you. Either you show up in the first place, or you don't, which has already been a challenge for smaller meetups in the past.

If you want to leave early, you probably wait for a break between two sessions or wait until the talk has ended.

Online, it seems to be easier to forget your meetup or to do something different like washing your dishes or finishing your day's work. If you want to leave early, you can just drop out of the meeting. Sometimes you do due to a technical problem and don't bother to rejoin.

Technological Challenges

Is everybody still online? Can they see the video, will they understand the sound? Does it lag, does it get distorted? Is someone trying to say something but forget to unmute themselves? Is someone desperately trying to log in?

Does your software limit the number of participants or the duration?

Solutions

Test and Practice

I found it useful to have an additional meeting maybe a week before, just a short session with every host and every guest, to make sure the technology is working and to agree on a schedule, how to handle questions during the talk etc.

Communication 🗣️🙋🤫

As a host, be very clear in your communication!

Make sure to communicate when the meetup will happen, and how users will be able to join. Maybe some guests from other time zones read your announcement and want

to join, so it does not hurt to specify your time zone. Include a schedule: when will the

actual talk start, will there be time for discussions, will there be interactive sessions, are members expected to present themselves? Will the meeting be recorded?

On meetup.com, you can send mailings to all of your group members, so you can share a conferencing link in advance. You can send messages to all members who have subscribed to the upcoming event, but this will exclude those who only subscribe after the message has been sent.

During the meetup, have an eye on the chat, on your member list and on the videos. Look for "raised hand"
🙋 icons, mute or unmute 🤵 people if they fail to do themselves. Read important chat messages aloud, because not everyone might see them. Do you have guests that misbehave and disturb ("zoom bomb") your meeting?

Have another eye on external communication (meetup group messages, e-mails, social media). Are people having login problems? Are there new pending members waiting to be allowed to join your group?

Another Pair of Eyes 👀

It is much easier and more fun to do this together! Ask a co-host or a friend for help. This might be the person who would otherwise walk around and take photos of the event.

Don't let them Fall Asleep 😴

If nobody is talking anymore, you should! I find that one minute of silence in a video or phone call feels much longer and more awkward than a minute of silence being together with other people and having a drink in your hand.

Don't wait too long before ending your event! Otherwise, I observed many online meetings slowly fading away, people leaving empty chairs, who forgot that their video is still on, and even a cat before the camera!

Benefits

Worldwide communication

- everyone can take part in any meetup, worldwide
- join other meetups and see how they do it
- get to know people from other places

- invite speakers from far away!
- invite new guests to your meetup on social media

- stand out from other meetups that pause do to the pandemic

Choosing the right conferencing software for your meetup

Does the Software meet your requirements?

- Assess your requirements!
- Check restrictions (duration, number of participants, etc.)
- Do you need to buy a licence to use it?
- Are you allowed to use it? Does it violate privacy laws?
- Is it easy to use? do your group members like it?
- Is it popular? do people already know how to use it?
- Is it easy to use at all?

Useful Online Conferencing Software in 2021

Zoom

[Zoom](#) was one of the most popular conferencing apps for personal use, despite criticism of security risks and privacy issues.

Most of these problems have been addressed by software updates, and so have feature requests, so at least as a host, you should always use the latest version.

Breakout Rooms

Zoom was the first popular video conferencing app to introduce a feature called "breakout rooms", which allows hosts to split the audience into smaller groups for a given time.

Some meetups are regular users either to offer discussion strains or working groups around certain topics or to make it easier to have some small talk with random people like you might do together in a room at a traditional meetup.

Time Limits

The free, unlicensed zoom version has some limits built-in, like a time limit that will make a conference of more than two people end after 40 minutes.

Be sure to check in advance if you are using an unlimited version. Be extra careful if you have more than one zoom account. Maybe your company's account has a paid plan, but your personal account has not. Better to check in advance than to find out

plan, but your personal account has not. Better to check in advance than to find out half an hour later when you see the warning on your screen!

Zoom: Pro's and Con's

Pros

✅ recommended by meetup.com
✅ video conferencing
✅ text chat
✅ screen sharing
✅ recording option
✅ popularity
✅ Breakout Rooms
✅ Multi-Share, Co-Annotation

Cons

🚫 restricted functionality of the web app
🚫 free meetings no longer than 40 minutes
🚫 no recording when hosted in the free version
🚫 privacy issues
🚫 "zoom bombing" (attracting unwanted visitors unless protected by a password)

Jitsi

Less popular in general, but appealing to technical users. While the free service offers little controls and options, you can either upgrade to the paid service 8x8, or you can host your own jitsi server to have full control about settings and features.

Jitsi was developed by Emil Ivov in 2003. It was originally called JsPhone, later renamed to the Bulgarian word jitsi (жици) which means cords or wires.

Pros

✅ recommended by meetup.com
✅ video conferencing
✅ text chat
✅ screen sharing
✅ recording option
✅ no time limit
✅ full-featured web app
✅ end-to-end encryption
✅ open source software

✅ open-source software
✅ option to host and configure a jitsi server

Cons

🚫 recording option requires dropbox account
🚫 no roles or authorization in the free service
🚫 password is only temporary

Google Meet (formerly Hangouts)

While the official name is now [Google Meet](), this is the same as a "hangout", a word still widely used because of the former name of the app, Google Hangouts.

In 2020, Google added the breakout rooms feature to its meet apps, [available for users of paid GSuite plans]().

Pros

✅ recommended by meetup.com
✅ video conferencing
✅ text chat
✅ screen sharing
✅ popularity
✅ pre-installed on most Android phones
✅ fully functional web app
✅ end-to-end encryption

Cons

🚫 limited number of participants (100 / 250)
🚫 grid view issues in older versions
🚫 privacy issues

Teams

Last and least, there is Microsoft. I have been using Skype, Skype for Business, and, lately, the video conferencing software in Microsoft Teams.

As the Linux version did not recognize that I had already signed up for Teams, I had to use the browser client, which does not even support Firefox. More than once the other people's images or presentations froze to a still image for several minutes.

Based on my own personal experience, I do not recommend using Microsoft software

for video conferencing.

Pros

✅ free to use

Cons

🚫 does not work properly, at least not on Linux

Conclusion

Whatever software you use, hosting an online meetup can be fun and valuable, if done right.

During the past twelve months, I have joined many online meetups and was a host myself for four times.

Although I am looking forward to actual meetings, conferences and parties, although I miss talking to people in real life and I know that online conferencing means missing out in many ways, I still recommend to everyone to host an online meetup!

Discussion (1)

Ingo Steinke 🎖 • Jul 1 '21   ⋯

Now there are virtual conferencing solutions like gather and wonder, that feel a bit like a vintage computer game where you have an avatar that can walk around, join rooms and tables, and chat and have video calls with nearby people.

This can be fun, although in my experience, wonder felt a bit glitchy and hard to control.

Another collaboration software that has been quite popular recently, is Miro, an interactive online board where you can draw and attach stuff. Using Miro as an additional resource besides your main video conference can be useful and fun, too!

Ingo Steinke

Web Development, Sustainability, Art and Music, Nature and Travel, Sustainability

LOCATION

Germany

WORK

Creative Web Developer at Ingo Steinke

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21 Sep 2019

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😡 Which parts of your job do you hate?
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