Branches and virtual events

COVID-19 has led to many branches cancelling or postponing events. With social distancing set to continue in many jurisdictions for some time yet, a good option is to take your events programme online. While some branches have seamlessly transposed events into webinars, others are struggling to know where to start. This is for those who need a bit of help.

Some basic tips for getting started
We appreciate this is a completely new area for many. We also appreciate that you’re unlikely to be tech-experts, and in some cases you might be quite the opposite! What we can say is that platforms like Zoom and Webex are pretty user-friendly and intuitive, and the thought of running an event is often far worse than the reality. Our main advice would be:

- Have a think about what sort of event you want to run – do you want it to be interactive or one-way? What size audience do you want/expect? Are you going to charge for it, or could you get sponsorship? If sponsorship, how might that work?
- Do a bit of research into the other platforms around (we have provided some insights below), and pick a platform you feel comfortable with and which will enable you to run the sort of event you want to run. If you are already comfortable with a platform – that’s probably your best option.
- Set up a basic account, or get a trial account, and have a read/watch of the training information available (you can sign up for free training webinars, which provide a good overview, and there is plenty of reading material available)
- Have a go. Host a small ‘event’ with just a few other branch committee members, or some friends or family, to try it out and experiment with the functionality. Once you are confident, maybe do a small event to start with, say 25 people max (first come first serve). This will hopefully give you confidence to build up to a bigger event.
- Remember that you can usually purchase a support/assist package for technical support during the live event. This may well be worthwhile for a bigger event, and may make it less stressful.

Can STEP Head Office manage the event for us?
If you don’t feel comfortable managing an online event yourself, then please get in touch and we can discuss how we can assist you in running your event. Contact our events team at events@step.org

What platform?
Our team have done some research into virtual event platforms to help branches. There are many platforms on the market and if you are familiar with one already, then that may be your best option. However, Zoom Webinar would be our top choice, as it is suitable for both small and large live streams, easy to set up and manage, accessible customer service, inexpensive option, subscription on a monthly rolling basis. We have provided bit more detail on this, and some links to useful resources, on the following pages.
We should also note that there are a number of full virtual conference platforms, which provide a more solid platform for large-scale events and conferences, particularly where you have multiple sponsors involved. It is unlikely to make sense for branches that only do smaller events to use these, but if you are running a large conference in addition to a number of smaller events, it might be a good solution. If you want to discuss these more extensive solutions, please contact our events team, who have some experience in this and can provide further information. events@step.org
Zoom Webinar

What is it?
Zoom Webinar is a video conferencing software that enables you to conduct large online events with video, audio, and screen sharing for up to 10,000 viewers and 100 video panellists.

Zoom Meeting vs Zoom Webinar
Zoom Webinar is an add-on to Zoom Meeting Pro. While the following relates to the specific webinar add-on, it should be noted that Zoom Meeting Pro might also work for your event. Zoom’s Meeting and Webinar platforms offer similar features and functionality, but have some key differences in that Meetings is designed to be collaborative, with all participants being able to screen share, turn their video and audio on, and see who else is in attendance, whereas Webinar is designed so that the host and any designated panellists can share their video audio and screen and attendees can be view-only – albeit with the ability to interact via Q&A/Chat/Polling if the host allows it. You can see a detailed comparison here: https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115005474943-Meeting-and-webinar-comparison

Webinar capabilities

- Live streaming
- HD video and audio: up to 100 live video panellists can interact with the audience and use virtual backgrounds. Engage up to 10,000 participants.
- Recording for on-demand viewing. Please note that pre-recording of a video or podcast is not available with Zoom.
- Full-featured host controls: mute/unmute panellists, promote attendee to panellist giving them audio and video capabilities
- Engage the audience: Q&A dialog box, polling, attendee raise hand and participant chat
- Ability to brand emails and registration pages
- Revenue generation: generate revenue by requiring PayPal payments during registration to attend events or access recordings. The system does not yet support credit card payments.
- Reporting and analytics

Resources
There is a huge amount of online support and training, and we would recommend any branch using Zoom (Meetings or Webinar) to attend their free training sessions, which are very comprehensive. Some other useful resources are below.

- FAQ
- Short demo (1min)
- Running engaging online events [recommended reading]
- Branding a webinar
- Contact

Cost

- Zoom Meeting Pro: £11.99 per month*
- Zoom Webinar (add-on) for up to 500 participants: £112.00 per month*

Total per month: £123.99 + VAT

*Billed monthly. The cost decreases if billed annually.
Zoom Webinar is an add-on to the Zoom Meeting Pro subscription and cannot be purchased separately. The cost of Zoom Webinar varies depending on the number of participants: from £32 per month (up to 100 participants) to £5,192 (up to 10,000 participants). View pricing

Support
Event management support, including technical support during the live event, is not included in a Zoom subscription but it can be added for $250 per hour (around £202). A minimum of three hours is required for an initial engagement of a one-hour live event. More information

Security
Zoom’s security has been under the spotlight in recent months. Zoom released a security update in response to these concerns, with new privacy controls and a new encryption standard. These help prevent meetings from being hijacked by hackers, or ‘Zoom-bombed’. There is, however, an onus on the organiser to learn about and use the available security functions (waiting rooms, password protection, locking meetings, etc) to ensure the meeting or event is protected.

Zoom tips and recommendations

Before the webinar
- Always do a test-run with the speakers a few days before the webinar to ensure everything runs smoothly. Make sure you have ‘practice session’ enabled in Zoom – this will allow you and the speakers to do as many test-runs as you would like before the start of the webinar.
- Make sure the speakers have noted down the dial-in phone number, Webinar ID and Participant ID received in the Zoom invitation in case of connection issues on the day.
- If you are organising a large webinar, and have the budget for it, you may consider contracting ‘Zoom support’. Click here for more information.

During the webinar
- Ask the speakers to join 30 minutes before the start of the webinar to test their camera/audio and do a final run-through. During these 30 minutes, you will remain in the ‘practice session’ mode and then click on ‘Broadcast’ when it is time to start the webinar.
- Join outside of your remote desktop environment (if your company has one) and use a headset, as the audio quality tends to be better then.
- Close down all applications other than Zoom when the webinar is taking place.
- Mute your phone when you are not speaking to avoid interference.
- If you see the message ‘unstable internet connection’, do not hesitate to turn off your camera – it will free up internet speed.
- We recommend using Google Chrome, Safari or Firefox as your web browser. Internet Explorer tends to be less reliable.

Zoom settings
We recommend the following settings and best practices:
- Disable the ‘chat function’ for attendees if you are holding a large webinar as it can otherwise distract from the live streaming.
• For interactivity and audience engagement, use the Q&A and polling functions available.
• Send a welcome message to attendees to encourage them to use the Q&A function.
• Make sure that ‘Active speaker view’ is ticked when you have individual speaker presentations and ‘Gallery view’ when you have panel discussions.
• Remember to click on ‘record’ at the start of the webinar if you want to share the recording with attendees afterwards. Alternatively, you may select to ‘automatically record webinar in the cloud’ in the settings beforehand.