



Engagementworks

Community Engagement Basics

Session 7 – Video 2

**The Benefits and Constraints of
Engaging Online**

The Benefits and Constraints of Engaging Online

Introduction

In this lesson we -

- discuss the benefits and constraints of engaging online
- talk about some emerging lessons, and
- outline some future challenges



Here are some of the benefits -

- **Flexibility:** accessible 24x7, any place as long as you have an internet connection. Time-poor people can connect whenever they like, from wherever they are, for as long as they choose – typically less than 10 minutes at a time, and as often as they like
- **Levelling:** reserved people who usually don't speak up can say as much as they like while "loud" people are just another voice and can't interrupt. Enables the silent majority to be heard. People who would not attend a public meeting or speak out in public.
- **Documented:** unlike verbal conversation, online discussion is lasting and can be revisited
- **Encourages reflection:** participants don't have to contribute until they've thought about the issue and feel ready.
- **Relevance:** provides a place for real life examples and experience to be exchanged.
- **Choice:** a quick question or comment, or a long reflective account are equally possible.
- **Community:** Over time shared information and open dialogue build trust and community ownership of decisions
- **Limitless:** you can never predict where the discussion will go; the unexpected often results in increased incidental learning.



- **Better decisions:** because online community engagement allows you to reach more people than more traditional methods, it is more effective in managing risk, testing assumptions, and being a good neighbour.

Constraints

The constraints of engaging online includes -

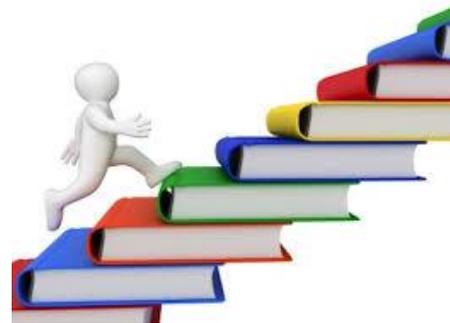


- **Text-based:** Predominantly relies on inputting text which can be challenging for those who don't like to write or have poor keyboard skills, but with the advance of broadband connectivity and voice and video conference technology – this will be less of an issue.
- **No physical cues:** without facial expressions and gestures or the ability to retract immediately there's a big risk of misunderstanding.
- **Information overload:** a large volume of messages can be overwhelming and hard to follow, even stress-inducing.
- **Threads:** logical sequence of discussion is often broken by users not sticking to the topic (thread)
- **Time lag:** even if you log on daily, 24 hours can seem like a long time if you're waiting for a reply; and then the discussion could have moved on and left you behind.
- **Inefficient:** it takes longer than verbal conversation and so it's hard to reply to all the points in a message, easily leaving questions unanswered.
- **Isolation:** some learners prefer to learn on their own and don't participate in the discussions.
- **Directionless:** participants used to having a teacher or instructor telling them what to do can find it a leaderless environment and that's where tutors come in.

Emerging Lessons

Despite the limited experience to date, some initial lessons for online citizen engagement in policy-making are emerging:

- Technology is an enabler not the solution. Integration with traditional, "offline" tools for access to information, consultation and public participation in policy-making is needed to make the most of information and communications technologies (ICTs).
- The online provision of information is an essential precondition for engagement, but quantity does not mean quality. Active promotion and competent moderation are key to effective online consultations.
- The barriers to greater online citizen engagement in policy-making are cultural, organisational and constitutional not technological. Overcoming these challenges will require greater efforts to raise awareness and capacity both within governments and among citizens.





Five main challenges for the future of online engagement of citizens in policy-making are -

1. Scale

From a citizen's perspective how can technology enable an individual's voice to be heard and not be lost in the mass debate? There is a need for policy measures and technologies to promote and maintain virtual public spaces that enable an individual's voice to develop into a community (public) voice. From a government perspective, there is the challenge of how to listen, and respond appropriately to each individual contribution. Fostering online communities and developing ICT tools to support such communities could enable a more collective approach.



2. Capacity



The second challenge is how to provide citizens with greater information on public issues and to enhance their capacity for listening to, and engaging in, argument and counter argument. At the same time, greater efforts are needed to raise awareness and capacity among government officials with regard to the opportunities and limits of new channels for citizen engagement in policy-making offered by ICTs. Accessible and understandable information and the opportunity to engage in debate, enabled by such tools as next generation mediated discussion forums, are basic preconditions.

Closely connected issues are those of bridging the digital divide and the involvement of traditionally disenfranchised groups in policy-making (e.g. those subject to social exclusion, youth). The challenge is to develop tools for online engagement that provide citizens with an opportunity both to participate in, and to understand, collective decision-making and to develop the skills for active citizenship.

3. Coherence

Governments need to take a holistic view of the policy-making cycle and design technology to support the processes of informing, consulting, participating, analysing, providing feedback and evaluating. Inputs received at each stage in the policy-making cycle must be made available

appropriately at the other stages of the process. This will lead to better quality policies that are more likely to be successfully implemented and better informed citizens. Consideration should be given to addressing if, and to what extent, knowledge management techniques could support the policy-making cycle.

4. Evaluation

As governments increasingly support the development of ICTs to enable citizen engagement on policy-related matters, there is a corresponding need to know whether online engagement meets both citizens' and governments' objectives. Evaluation tools to assess what value-added online engagement has, or has not, brought to policy-making must be developed. The benefits and impacts of applying technology in opening up the policy process to wider public input have yet to be evaluated and articulated.



5. Commitment

Engaging citizens online raises legitimate expectations that public input will be used to inform policy-making. Governments need to adapt their structures and processes to ensure that the results of online consultations are analysed, disseminated and used. This commitment must be communicated widely, demonstrated in practice and validated regularly (e.g. via annual reports, audits, parliamentary reviews).

Conclusion

There are advantages and disadvantages for engaging online.

From current experience there are cultural, organisational and constitutional barriers to be overcome.

There are challenges ahead, involving scale, capacity, coherence, evaluation and commitment.

