

UKNOF 2020 Meetings & Operations Report

UKNOF45

UKNOF45 (January 2020) in London was a success despite a 17% reduction in registrations compared with UKNOF42 (January 2019), which was when registration fees were introduced as standard. This is because the overall income was stable and the number of no-shows was much lower than previous meetings with free registration. This was part of a plan to make attendance more predictable and lower risks associated with high numbers of no-shows.

The original UKNOF46

We were looking forward to returning to Manchester for UKNOF46 in April 2020 but kept a close eye on pandemic related changes from January.

We initially agreed with the venue to reschedule the meeting to late October. The venue was then not available in October and we were refunded.

The pandemic era

The pandemic placed extra demands on UKNOF, as our mission includes keeping the community together and growing it. This is increasingly important in trying times. The uncertainty of when we would be able to hold in-person events again meant we had to actively deliver events that connect, inform, and develop our community at a time of considerable change.

This challenge was an opportunity to make improvements in a period when people expected innovation. This allowed us to develop approaches to improve our accessibility to people at the start of their careers or without travel budgets in a way that was not previously possible.

The indirect costs associated with virtual events, especially during a period of innovation, were higher than the initial savings in travel and meeting venues. This is because UKNOF events rely on volunteer time and other professional services. The combination of those external demands with the need to develop and execute new approaches for UKNOF meant that some of this burden fell on the executive team. This included the creation of the Call for Presentations (CfP), timelining and managing the CfP process and liaising with the speakers before events.

We must thank the Programme Committee for soliciting and filtering content. UKNOF events are a team effort and could not happen without their strong support.

We decided to keep all future events online until it is safe to hold them in-person. At that point we will retain the additional Internet interactivity we have developed to hold hybrid events.

We predicted and saw three effects:

- Zoom fatigue from additional work meetings and other online events would lead to a decrease in participation.
- Engagement from a wider range of countries than before.
- Lack of volunteer time.

The format for the initial virtualUKNOF was quickly developed when it became clear that UKNOF46 could not happen in Manchester. We started with a short format meeting: two hours without breaks. The next two were slightly longer and included breaks. The last virtualUKNOF (November) was three hours in length including breaks.

We used feedback from participants to identify areas for improvement. Key changes were in timing and pacing - short format meeting of approx 2 hours in length including breaks should be around once every 8 weeks, and a longer format online meeting of around 5 hours including breaks should be once every 12 weeks. We also learnt the production skills needed for online events.

2020's bi-monthly cadence was initially important but demanded too much from volunteers. We have decided to return to three events in 2021. We will use a longer format of around five hours with breaks. This will help if we are able to return to in-person events which are planned to be hybrid in nature - a rich participant experience regardless of whether they are physically in the room or participating remotely. We will use standard UKNOF events naming and numbering for these longer format events and reserve the virtualUKNOF branding for shorter events.

We have continued to provide social opportunities after events and adapted our usual Pints n' Packets post meeting social to being an online version with "Bring Your Own" Pints n' Packets running as a Zoom meeting. These have been popular amongst our participants, however it is apparent that it is not the same as being in the same physical location. We have experimented with Gather, which offers a way to move around a space and chat to small groups. We are continuing to monitor this space to find the best options for people to meet socially over the Internet.

Income took a hit in 2020. However there was also a drop in direct costs. Some of the changes we made to offer less expensive ways for individuals and organisations to contribute to UKNOF helped offset the reduced interest in sponsorship in 2020. We are continuing to work with sponsors to help them find ways to get value from supporting online events.

A couple of sponsors had started to look at things differently as they could not see the end of the pandemic in the near future and wanted to promote themselves and stay ahead of the curve.

Implementation

We developed new strategies to support our existing approaches as we adapted to online meetings. We coordinated regularly with other NOGs and industry event organisers on the approaches they were taking. There are slight differences based on community expectations but many strong similarities.

We used an integrated approach that links meeting planning, meeting tools and logistics with communications, outreach and branding.

Online events require more detailed planning and intentional, planned communications with every potential participant in an event.

A long term strategy of increasing and diversifying engagement continued to be realised throughout 2020. A new Communications Committee (CC) was set up in January 2020 with an informal structure to begin with and led by me until a time we could formalise the structure.

The pandemic amplified the need for enhanced communications and outreach. This also tied in with the logo design the CC had been working on, which was introduced to the community between the May and July virtualUKNOF meetings, and the branding and look and feel was fed in to all online elements and meeting related tools including virtual backgrounds for all crew and speakers.

The look and feel aspect of the meetings was normally left to the AV and stage set up teams provided by the venues we held physical meetings in with input from us. The biggest change with online meetings is that all of this is now done in-house.

We are excited to have introduced a new online collaboration tool to the UKNOF community in the form of our hosted Mattermost based chat platform at the July virtualUKNOF meeting. Mattermost is a platform which is inclusive and attractive to people at the start of their career used to Slack-like ways of collaborating and available on different platforms including mobile devices. Apart from a few who still prefer to use the facility via the temporary irc bridge we have in place (which will remain for the foreseeable future), we are happy that close to 300 people have subscribed to it.

We recognised that online events need better social media promotion. We did this by joining Instagram and creating UKNOF “Company” Pages on both Facebook and LinkedIn as the official places for news from the organisation. Both continue alongside the existing community groups that were already in place for any chat and collaboration within the community. We also recognized the need to be active on Twitter between events.

We do joint marketing with other NOGs organisers and industry event organisers as a part of our social media strategy.

Outreach activities continued with other meeting organisers and members of the Community. Donor management also continued throughout with past, present and potential sponsors and patrons. There was ongoing Supplier management throughout the year - staying in regular contact with AV suppliers and venues, and reaching out to potential hybrid meeting technology suppliers to investigate their approaches and meeting tools.

2021

The new UKNOF46 and UKNOF47 will be online only long format meetings, as we revert to three main meetings per year in 2021.

We will continue improving operational strategies developed in 2020.

We would like to thank LINX, LONAP, Flexoptix and BT for co-hosting the May, July, September and November virtualUKNOF meetings, respectively. In particular, **Holly Ruff & Mo Shivji** from LINX, **Ian Chilton & Richard Irving** from LONAP, **Portia Rabonda** from Flexoptix, and **Simon Challinor & Tom Hill** from BT who were part of the crew during the meetings their respective organisations co-hosted virtualUKNOF.

We are grateful to our Patrons in 2020 - BT, LONAP, CenturyLink, Flexoptix, IPv4 Market Group and RIPE NCC for providing us with base funding, for UKNOF as a whole, in the calendar year 2020.

We learnt and changed a lot in 2020, and I would also like to thank everyone:

- Participants
- Individual Patrons
- Production crew
- Speakers
- Sponsors
- Volunteers and

the wider community for the encouragement and for their ongoing support.

Denesh Bhabuta
UKIF Limited Operations Director
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