Holding Accessible and Inclusive Virtual Meetings

Virtual meeting platforms can empower people with disabilities to participate in political activities conducted online. During stay-at-home orders as a result of COVID-19, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), along with many other nongovernmental organizations, is instituting new measures to reduce potential in- person transmission. However, virtual communication platforms should be inclusive of and accessible to all participants. While many of these platforms already have some accessibility features, it is important for meeting organizers to follow good practices to ensure that the way the meetings are conducted is also inclusive of all participants. IFES has compiled lessons learned from collaborating with our disabled persons' organization partners around the world.

The Disability Inclusive Voter Education (DIVE) mobile app in Pakistan was designed with accessibility features for users with disabilities. © IFES

Ensuring Inclusion in Virtual Meetings

Prior to the video or audio conference, ask participants if any accommodations are required to ensure accessibility.

- Offer sign language interpretation or captioning. Invite the interpreters to join via video conference.
- Provide materials, meeting agendas and documents in accessible formats prior to the event.
- Ensure that the platform used is compatible with screen readers and other assistive technologies.
- Identify yourself by name before speaking or presenting. Not only is this helpful for persons with visual and auditory disabilities to identify who is speaking in conferences with larger groups, but everyone can benefit from this practice. This also helps sign language interpreters and captioners.
- Speak clearly and slowly at a medium volume.
- Implement a hand-raising technique – available natively on some platforms – to help to ensure participants do not speak over one another.
- Share your screen if you are presenting and describe any visual information, including photos.
- Share and read out loud any important details in the instant messaging box such as links to documents and questions raised.

A table describing some common reasonable accommodations for persons with different types of disabilities is available on the next page.

Disability Type	Possible Accommodations*
All	Materials and agenda should be available in accessible formats, such as audio and simple text. Ask in advance if the participant has access to resources needed to effectively and efficiently join the video or audio call from home. Identify yourself by name before speaking or presenting. Budget for a notetaker. Send a follow-up email including important information after the online meeting.
Auditory: A person with an auditory disability may have difficulty hearing, even if using a hearing aid, and may be deaf or hard of hearing.	Budget for a sign language interpreter if requested to join the call. Use Live Transcribe or Otter, details below. Pin screen of interpreter or transcriber so it remains visible.
Visual: A person with a visual disability may have difficulty seeing, even when wearing glasses, and may be blind or have low vision.	Send materials in advance of the virtual meeting.
Physical: A person with a physical disability may have difficulty walking or climbing steps and may use a wheelchair or other assistive device.	Ensure that the participant has an accessible workspace at home.
Psychosocial: A person with a psychosocial disability may have a condition that affects cognition, emotion or behavior, such as a person who has depression or who has post-traumatic stress disorder.	Provide agenda for the meeting in advance. Set up appropriate lengths of meetings. Split the meeting agenda into separate sessions or allow breaks as needed.
Intellectual: A person with an intellectual disability may have a limited ability to learn at an expected level and function in daily life, such as a person with Down syndrome or who has autism.	Use wordless or easy-to-read formats for materials and agenda Ensure materials are available in simple text

*Always ask persons with disabilities about their preferred accommodations, which may not be included here. At the same time, do not assume that all persons with disabilities will need or want these accommodations. It is important to remember that not all disabilities are visible to others. Some people have disabilities you cannot see and may still need support, which is why you should always ask first before giving assistance.

Accessibility Features of Virtual Meeting Platforms

Common accessibility features can support participation of persons with auditory, intellectual, physical, psychosocial and visual disabilities. A summary of the features that are most helpful to people with different types of disabilities is available in the table below.

Feature					
	Auditory	Intellectual	Physical	Psychosocial	Visual
Light/dark mode or high contrast		X			X
Font size, zoom or reverse colors		X			X
Subtitles	X	X			
Works with assistive technologies	X	X	X		X
Keyboard shortcuts			X		
Alt-text for photos					X
Raise hand	X	X	X	X	X
Accessibility help desk	X	X	X	X	X

Each virtual conferencing platform includes different features available from those listed above. A comparative table with some of the most-used platforms is available below.

Inclusion Insights

Platform										
	Light/dark mode or high contrast	Font size, zoom, or reverse colors	Captioning	Works with assistive technologies	Keyboard shortcuts	Alt-text for photos	Raise hand	Multiple channels	Accessibility help desk	Other information
Skype (version 8)	Yes	Yes	Yes (11 languages)	Screen readers (JAWS, SuperNova, NVDA)	Yes			Yes	Yes	Skype recently improved the accessible names and labels of controls, e.g., red phone icon to hang up states "End Call"
Skype for Business			CART can be added[1]			Yes		Yes	Yes	
Microsoft Teams				Screen readers				Yes	Yes	
Zoom	Yes		CART or automatic transcript	Screen readers (JAWS, SuperNova, NVDA, VoiceOver, and Android Talkback	Yes		Yes	Yes		Separate channels for language translation
GoToMeeting[2]	Yes	Yes						Yes	Yes	

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[1] Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) is also called open captions or live captioning.
[2] GoToMeeting is used by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Conference of States Parties Civil Society Coordinating Mechanism organized by the International Disability Alliance.

What are channels and how can they be used for accessibility?

Channels allow users to create private or public groups; send group chats, files, screen captures and images; and start an instant group meeting with or without video. They are dedicated sections within a meeting to keep conversations organized by topics, projects and more. Sharing information through channels is an effective way to ensure that persons with disabilities are also able to access any content and important information that is shared.

Additional Resources

- Live Transcribe and Otter live-captioning services
- Accessibility tips for ensuring inclusion of people who are Deaf or hard of hearing in virtual meetings
- Hand-raising tool for virtual meetings
- Accessible U's good practices for accessible virtual meetings

Live-Captioning Service Details

Live Transcribe

- Users must have an Android 5.0 and up to download the mobile application. Live Transcribe is currently only compatible with mobile phones.
- Free download
- Live Transcribe currently supports over 70 languages and dialects.
- Live Transcribe supports quick-switching between two languages.
- The app displays nonspeech sound so that you know if someone if knocking on your door or if a dog is barking.
- Transcripts are saved for three days.

Otter

- Users must have Android or iOS to download the mobile application.
- Users must have an Apple, Google or Microsoft account to use Otter on a laptop or computer.
- You do not need both devices to use Otter. Either a mobile phone or laptop/computer will work.
- Otter Free plan provides 600 minutes per month and the plan does not expire.
- Otter Premium provides 6,000 minutes per month for USD $9.99/month or $99.99/annually.
- Student and teacher discount for those who provide verification (support@otter.ai)
- If you do not have an unlimited mobile data plan, you can switch on "Data Saver" or "Stream audio on Wi-Fi only" in Settings.
- Otter currently supports English.
- You can connect your Otter account with your Zoom account and automatically sync all your recordings of calls and meetings to your Otter account. On the otter.ai web app, you can click on the "Connected apps" option in Settings and connect your Zoom account.