



# GETTING IT RIGHT: FIVE STEPS TO PLANNING A SUCCESSFUL 100% ONLINE CONFERENCE

AN ICOHERE WHITE PAPER

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## INTRODUCTION

According to a recent Economic Significance Study, direct spending for meetings in 2009 totaled \$263 billion—43% of which went to travel and tourism commodities such as lodging, food services, and transportation. These enormous costs, combined with shrinking travel and professional development budgets, have made face-to-face conferencing a major expense for both planners and attendees.

Producing entirely online (also called “virtual” or “digital”) conferences is a powerful way of eliminating these cumbersome costs while still retaining the core benefits of a face-to-face conference. Dramatic technological advances in the last decade have enabled a new conference landscape, in which sophisticated web technologies are melded into an attractive website where attendees can easily navigate among events and special features, some in real time and some available on demand—all from a desktop, laptop or mobile device.

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*There is tremendous value in producing an online conference using a web-based collaboration platform. Conference sites can “live on” after the event ends, morphing into a valuable, facilitated online learning community.*

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During an online conference, live featured speakers and participatory events are rolled out on a schedule over the days or weeks of the conference, and recorded presentations and rich reading resources are often available on demand. Much like in a physical conference, participants in an online conference can attend presentations, have discussions with new and old colleagues, and earn continuing education credits for their participation. They might also network with colleagues, respond to polls, browse through the materials of sponsors and exhibitors, and share their expertise in forums that can persist long after the conference ends.

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*In general, a day's worth of face-to-face conference content equates to a week's worth of online activities.*

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What makes an online conference unique is that missing a live meeting does not have to mean missing that special content—an archived recording is typically available for on-demand viewing within only a few hours of the live presentation ending. Attendees can have the freedom to choose which program to view and when, and can also continue to engage in an interactive Q&A with presenters through asynchronous discussion threads.

Here is a quick summary of the many additional benefits that an online conference provides:

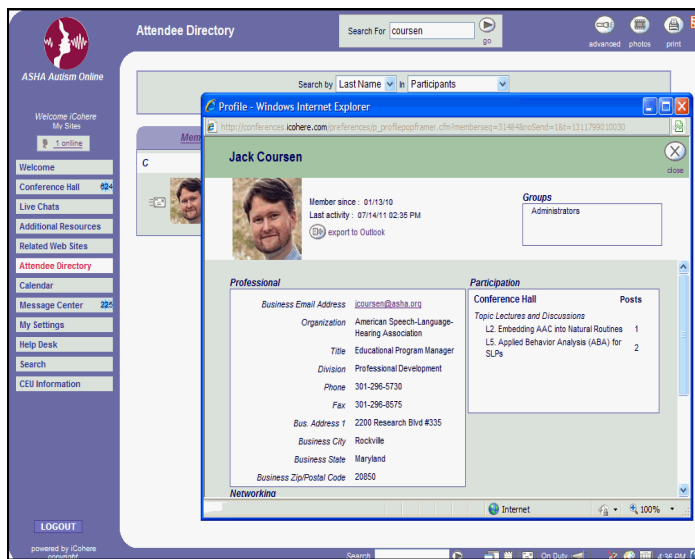
- ☑ An enhanced learning experience that connects attendees to an expanded network of individuals and enables them to view all of a conference's content
- ☑ Instant participation from anywhere in the world
- ☑ A global reach in assembling a stellar cast of presenters ahead of time
- ☑ Interactivity in myriad formats: text chat rooms, streaming video dialogues, conference calls with breakout rooms, asynchronous discussion threads, and more
- ☑ Ability to reach huge international audiences at minimal expense
- ☑ A web-based infrastructure that endures and can become the basis for ongoing professional development and collaboration
- ☑ Maximum content value at minimum cost

Conference Hall	Description	Views	Posts	Hide
Keynote Presentations	Enter here to view the 'Keynote Presentations' by Professor Andrew Scharlach and Jennie Chin Hansen	41	6	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week One Presentations	Click here to learn the latest about the unique characteristics of communities that are aging-friendly	96	30	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week Two Presentations	Click here to learn the latest strategies to help us make our communities more aging-friendly.	27	30	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week Three Presentations	Click here to learn how we can all work together to advance our efforts to create more aging-friendly communities.	7	20	<input type="checkbox"/>
Collaboration Café	Join other attendees in the Café to share stories, trade best practices, and discuss hot topics. This is the place to create your own collaborative discussion forums.	40	247	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leadership Lab	Weekly activities to further our understanding and learning, supporting our efforts as we work to create more aging-friendly communities. Includes reflective and inquiry exercises. Have fun!	9	14	<input type="checkbox"/>
Community Hall	Visit communities from around the world who are working to make their communities more aging-friendly.	7	60	<input type="checkbox"/>

With the right tools and planning, any company or organization can reap these online conference benefits for themselves. This paper provides an outline of the basic requirements of a 100% online conference and lists five key steps to success in the planning process.

## OVERVIEW OF ONLINE CONFERENCE REQUIREMENTS

An online conference is made possible through a web-based conference platform. This platform should include the following features, integrated in a seamless, easy-to-use web site: (Note: not all of these features must be used in an online conference; a platform vendor can configure your site to include only the necessary features.)



- ADA 508 compliance (as required)
- Advertising and sponsor space
- Attendee directory and search
- Attendee profiles
- E-mail communications
- Help Desk for participants
- Live chat
- Live webcasting
- Mobile phone or tablet support
- Multimedia player
- Online vendor “booths”
- Pre-recorded presentations
- Promotional web pages
- Registration/payment system
- Resource center for documents
- Social networking with links to Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and other popular social sites

## OVERVIEW OF THREE 100% ONLINE CONFERENCES

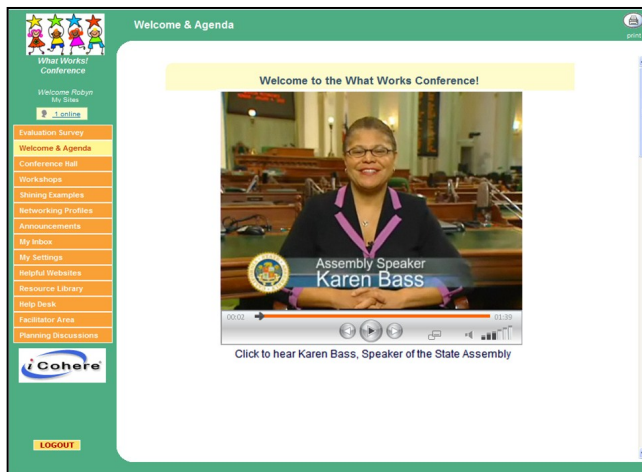
Any organization, regardless of its audience and IT capacities, has the ability to produce a successful online conference. Here are three different organizations that have produced 100% online conferences with outstanding results:

- ◆ **American Speech-Language Association (ASHA)**
- ◆ **California Teachers Association (CTA)**
- ◆ **Abt Associates** for United States Agency for International Development SHOPS (Strengthening Health through the Private Sector)

	<b>ASHA</b>	<b>CTA</b>	<b>Abt Associates</b>
<b>Conference</b>	<a href="#">Autism Online</a>	<a href="#">What Works!</a>	<a href="#">Access to Finance</a>
<b>Length</b>	Two weeks (done twice)	Three weeks	Two days
<b>Registrations</b>	1,442	800+	360+
<b>Standard Fee</b>	\$800	\$79	Free
<b>Target Audience</b>	Speech-language pathologists	Preschool teachers, administrations, policy-makers, advocates	Health care entrepreneurs, investors, commercial banks, donors, NGOs, and business consultants
<b>Overall Goal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introduce speech-language pathologists to online conferences</li> <li>- Provide continuing education credits to speech-pathologists</li> <li>- Generate a new revenue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Promote strength-based methodology for preschool learning environments</li> <li>- Engage audience in a collaborative dialogue</li> <li>- Provide member value</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Advance knowledge and best practices in the use of financial services in strengthening the health care supply chain in developing countries</li> </ul>
<b>Results</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participation satisfaction ratings increased from 4.31 to 4.71</li> <li>- Generated gross revenue in excess of \$400,000</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Keynote address logged 1,688 views and 87 posts</li> <li>- Participants said they loved the new ideas, the networking, and the interactive give-and-take</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Over 360 people from 58 countries were represented</li> <li>- A single day logged over 8,000 minutes in discussion boards</li> </ul>
<b>Live Sessions</b>	12	12	3
<b>Pre-Recordings</b>	14	5	15



For **ASHA'S Autism Online Conference**, ASHA assembled 20 pre-recorded lectures totaling 27 hours of content. All registered participants in the conference could earn ASHA continuing education credits or professional development hours by viewing these pre-recorded lectures, posting to presentation-specific discussion boards, and participating in live text-style chats with presenters. Because the number of education credits participants earned corresponded directly with the hours they participated in lectures and chats, this encouraged extremely active involvement in the conference. The discussion boards were a particular success, logging over 35,000 posts.



**CTA's What Works! Conference** highlighted four different strength-based approaches to early childhood education: appreciative inquiry, nurtured heart, positive deviance, and resilience. The conference was designed to be highly interactive, fostering democratic dialogue on these four approaches through weekly session workshops, panel discussions, shining examples of successful strength-based child care programs, and a "collaboration playground" conference hall. After the conference, almost 90% of participants reported that what they learned would help them in their work with children.



**USAID Abt Associates' SHOPS Access to Finance for Health Conference** was also dedicated to beneficial collaboration, reaching out to health care professionals, financial stakeholders, and other relevant parties around the world to address financing health care in developing countries. USAID gathered top experts from the World Bank, IFCT, the Medical Credit Fund, and many more organizations to present on such issues as water credit initiatives and financial social marketing management. Participants from 58 countries around the world, including Nigeria, Ghana, and Haiti, logged in to the conference.

## FIVE KEY STEPS TO SUCCESS

Whether the decision to hold an online conference is driven by financial considerations or the need for member outreach or beneficial global dialogue, the fundamental process for planning and implementation remains the same. These five success factors outline important steps to creating a 100% online conference.

### *1. Know your audience.*

At the heart of a conference's success is audience participation. Before you endeavor to produce an online conference, make sure you are investing in content with broad audience appeal. Identify your target audience, and then focus your conference content accordingly: consider what topics and themes would interest them most, what potential benefits your conference can provide, and what roster of guest speakers would be most attractive.



ASHA, for example, attracted a large audience of speech-language pathologists by creating a conference on autism—one of the hottest topics in the field of speech-language pathology. They added further value to their conference by offering attendees with the continuing education requirements necessary for speech-language pathologists to remain in practice. As a result, registration far exceeded their expectations: though they had only anticipated 300 sign-ups, over 850 people enrolled in their online conference.

### *2. Give yourself sufficient lead time for planning.*

Ideally, an online conference should have 6 months devoted to planning and logistics. An online conference is a complex organized event, and its success will be proportional to the time that is allotted to gathering the right presenters, editing the presentations, configuring the website, and marketing the event. Starting targeted marketing efforts early is a crucial pre-conference activity. ASHA begins circulating e-mail announcements months in advance of their conferences so that people can plan ahead to attend. Their annual physical catalog also includes a list of all upcoming online conferences side-by-side with all in-person conferences. This timely electronic and physical marketing can help attract a larger-than-expected number of registrants in a niche field such as autism.

### *3. Design a conference that offers a variety of content that is new and engaging.*

After you have drawn your audience to your site, it is crucial to maintain their interest by diversifying your conference content. Different people have different learning styles: some people learn best by reading, others by seeing, and others by hearing. By having a combination of text, visuals, and audio, you can appeal to these various learning styles. USAID, in their SHOPS Access to Finance 2011 conference, featured an array of content, such as a live streaming session with the World Bank, panel discussions, online text chat, and PowerPoint presentations with enticing visuals.



Another important technique in keeping your audience engaged is to not immediately release all of your content on the first day of the conference. Particularly if you are holding a lengthy conference, you want participants to have new things to look forward to every time they log in. By spreading content to different days, you have a much greater chance of engaging members and inducing them to return later on. CTA, for example, held a fairly long 3-week conference, but by rolling out new recordings, live workshops, and Q&A sessions week to week, they found that attendees were consistently logging on to the conference site to view new subject matter and post on the latest topics.

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### **Types of Content for Participants**

- Live video webcasts
  - Presentation archives
  - Live chats
  - Pre-recorded presentations
  - Streaming movies
  - Phone conferencing
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#### *4. Provide opportunities for interaction and connection between conference members.*

Creating a successful online conference rests largely on maximizing the participation of conference members. Aside from diversifying and spreading your content, you can promote participation by integrating audience interaction into your online conference. Live chats, message boards, and breakout sessions during a conference call are just a few ways that this can be done. These tools, though simple, can have a powerful effect, enhancing and enlivening the learning experience in addition to promoting deeper and more lasting connections. By fostering a sense of community, an online conference can be elevated from an unremarkable temporary event to an experience that is truly meaningful and lasting.

USAID, for example, did not design their conference to generate revenue; in fact, they kept it free because they wanted their conference to be a meaningful forum for discussing best financial practices in health care models. During the conference, they discussed important humanitarian health issues such as water credit initiatives and affordable credit quality improvement. When the conference had concluded, they continued to encourage members to collaborate on these key issues by keeping the “SHOPS Café” discussion board open for conversation.

ASHA engaged their conference participants through several asynchronous discussion threads monitored by presenters. These threads were lively and worthwhile, thereby adding to attendees' conference experiences: during the first iteration of their conference, they logged 35,000 discussion posts. According to Karen Niles, Director of Professional Development for ASHA, participants report that in the online environment, “they had better interaction” that was both valuable and “topic-focused.”

#### *5. Work closely with a dedicated event coordinator and online conference platform vendor.*

If you are new to online conferences, an experienced and dedicated event coordinator can be an invaluable during the planning process. The job of an event coordinator is to put himself/herself in the shoes of your conference's attendees. He or she, working closely with the platform vendor, anticipates what would be most attractive to attendees, and then helps design the site so that it features appropriate visual interest, design aspects, and targeted intellectual stimulation. Essentially, an event coordinator is responsible for orchestrating the entire attendee conference experience.

An experienced, partnership-oriented conference platform vendor can also prove a valuable resource to newcomers to online conferences. By providing training, technical support, and plenty of “hand holding,” the platform vendor can help you feel more at ease with online conferences. A joint venture with an event coordinator or platform vendor can often help take an online conference to the next level of professionalism.

With “What Works!,” Yale Wishnick, the former manager of CTA Institute for Teaching, explained: “We wanted to make sure that administrators, providers, parents, community leaders, and teachers were heavily involved in this.” The conference was therefore a “major collaboration effort.” During the planning period, an event coordinator from iCohere teamed up with CTA to figure out how to best reach out to their specific audience and make them comfortable in an online conference setting. For example, knowing that their primary audience was preschool teachers, CTA’s event coordinator helped them set up their conference so that all live sessions were held at night or during the weekend so as to not conflict with teaching schedules. In doing so, CTA attracted high participation rates in their conference and received positive participant feedback:

How would you rate your overall conference experience?



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*One workshop during the CTA “What Works!” conference boasted over 1,600 views.*

*56% of the conference participants reported that the interactive workshops were the best part of the conference.*

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## SUMMARY

Organizations are finding that traditional in-person conferences are not always as effective as online conferences at helping them meet their goals. In terms of generating revenue, cutting costs, extending brands, and reaching out, online conferences offer expansive new possibilities. Increasingly facile leveraging of the Internet has spawned a new generation of online conferences that meet and in many ways exceed the expectations we have held for our in-person professional meetings.

Nowadays, production of a successful 100% online conference is a well-understood process. By following simple steps, it is possible for any organization to launch multi-day or multi-week programs. Moreover, by using a social collaboration platform as the basis for a conference, these programs can create long-lasting value by transforming into an ongoing online community where collaboration continues even when the program ends.



## **ICOHERE: EXTEND YOUR CAPABILITIES. REDUCE YOUR MEETING COSTS. EXPAND ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS AND CONFERENCES.**

iCoHERE is an online collaboration platform provider that has been producing multi-day to multi-week online conferences since 2003. We can extend your in-person meetings and conferences to remote Internet-connected participants nationally or internationally in a highly interactive manner. We can also produce entirely online (also called “virtual” or “digital”) conferences focused on specific topics of interest.

### **Our “Soup-to-Nuts” Approach:**

- Live video webcasting & chat
- Online discussions
- Participant networking
- Help desk
- Mobile access
- Registration & payment processing
- On-demand recorded presentations
- High accessibility
- Live captioning
- Session archives

We are a customer-focused technology company that provides a proven, cloud-hosted platform with facilitation, media production, and support services for professional online collaboration projects and events. Our integrated system is flexible enough for online conferences, collaborative eLearning courses, large-scale webinars, and online communities of practice. We offer training and support through every step of the planning, configuration, and execution process, ensuring that our clients fully understand and maximize their experience with our feature-rich cloud-hosted platform.

For ten years, our team has been working with associations, non-profits, and government agencies, helping them successfully meet their goals with online communities, courses, and conferences.

**iCoHERE is pleased to offer initial consulting and planning services at No Charge.**

Please call Lance A. Simon for an appointment and demonstration at  
(202) 870-6146 or e-mail [lance@icohere.com](mailto:lance@icohere.com).