

Conference roundup

EGOS Colloquium – July 2nd to July 4th 2020

This conference roundup is taking a slightly different angle, as this is a post-conference report, of the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) 2020 Colloquium at the University of Hamburg, Germany www.egosnet.org/2020/hamburg/GENERAL_THEME which was, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, held virtually. The theme of the conference was Organizing for a Sustainable Future: Responsibility, Renewal & Resistance.

This was the first conference I have attended virtually, and although it was disappointing to not visit Hamburg in person, I found the virtual conference to be very well-run and the set-up easy to use.

As publisher, myself and two colleagues attended and we had a virtual booth, where we were able to host PDF catalogues of our organizational study books and journals and other resources. We were provided with individual credentials to log in to the system and beforehand devised who was going to attend what. It was decided that my colleagues would choose specific chosen sub-themes while I would attend the virtual booth.

For attendees, they could visit the virtual exhibitor booths and ask to meet, this system was great, it would show a person in a “queue” and when clicking on them, they would automatically be brought into a meeting with you. I had a good number of conversations this way, and for everyone I spoke to, it was also their first time attending a virtual conference, so any hesitancy or feelings of awkwardness were soon dissipated.

There are a lot of plus sides for attending a virtual conference – firstly from a business perspective: costs are much lower, not only attendance fees, but the costs of travel, accommodation and subsistence are non-existent. Time costs are lowered too, having two laptops to work on meant I could be “present” on the virtual booth and carry on with my normal work on my other laptop, although I did cancel all normal meetings so I would be available to meet with attendees, and the time saving of not having to travel made a difference. I also think that any event that will reduce emissions from air travel and food waste is always a bonus. On a more general level, having a virtual conference opens it up for wider and more geographically diverse attendance than a physical conference would, not only because of reduced costs but because of not having to physically travel somewhere, particularly for those whose institutions wouldn't fund physical attendance. In short, the conference was on a more equal setting.

There are downsides of course, and for me the main one was the absence of those informal and spontaneous conversations that happen outside the rigid settings of a physical exhibitor booth. Whether it be at the bar, outside or as has happened previously, over breakfast at the hotel. Sometimes, because these conversations are more informal they have been more productive and lead to solid opportunities. In this virtual setting, there was no opportunity for this to happen.

In conclusion, whether the virtual conference is the way forward, or we move back to a physical one once it is safe to do so, or we instead evolve to a hybrid format of both, is unknown. Everyone will have a different opinion on this and there is no set answer, however, what this did prove is that a virtual conference can work.