EAHIL 2020 Conference "Be Open, Act Together" from the organizers' perspective

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If it seems you have it all planned out, it's true – it only seems so
In June 2019 no one yet knew what global changes the next year would bring. After we came back from the EAHIL 2019 Workshop in Basel, Switzerland, we set about organizing the next EAHIL event. On the one hand, it seemed like a huge challenge, but on the other hand, we eagerly anticipated it.
Before the EAHIL Workshop in Basel, we had already been meeting on a regular basis as the EAHIL 2020 Local Organizing Committee (LOC) carefully planning our next activities. When COVID-19 was conquering more and more countries, we already had a lot of issues planned: the conference venue, the city tours of Lodz (Łódź) and two other Polish cities, the conference gifts. The registration process had already started and the authors had been sending us their posters. To put it simply, the machinery was put into motion.
Everything changed when the pandemic struck; at first, we did not know if that was just a temporary situation or how serious it was and was going to be. Yet a time came when we could not wait any longer – we made the difficult decision to make the next EAHIL conference an online event and move it from June 2020 to November 2020. The experiences that we gained during the preparation of the event are invaluable, and the new knowledge and skills that we acquired will undoubtedly prove useful in the future. We would like to share our knowledge and experience by providing a few tips on the issues that, in our opinion as organizers, are essential for the organization of an online conference, especially an international one.

Plan A: preparing the on-site conference
In 2018 a gap appeared in the annual EAHIL event schedule after the event that was supposed to be held in Italy in 2020 was cancelled. The team at the Medical University of Lodz decided to take advantage of this opportunity – we submitted a proposal to organize the 2020 event in Lodz, Poland. During the EAHIL 2018 conference in Cardiff the EAHIL Board informed us - the future EAHIL 2020 Local Organizing Committee - that our proposal had been accepted. During the EAHIL Basel workshop we promoted the 2020 EAHIL event at a stand (you might remember the fudge sweets we were giving out) and by the end of July 2019 the preparations for this great and prestigious event were in full swing.
It is worth noting that the proposal submitted to the EAHIL Board contained a detailed concept of the organization of the EAHIL conference in Lodz, including the budget and also the suggestions for the conference venues and the side events. All those plans were supposed to be implemented in June 2020, however, in March 2020 it turned out that the conference was at risk. At that time, the preparations for the event were quite advanced: we were ready for the 300+ participants who had started to register for the conference, the conference venues had been reserved, the sponsors had chosen their sponsorship offers and the conference programme (including the presentations, the posters and the side events) was almost complete.

The pandemic

For some time, we hoped that the EAHIL 2020 conference could take place as planned and that the threat would pass and the national and international restrictions would soon be removed. When we realised that the conference in June was unrealistic, we began thinking to postpone it until autumn, still as an on-site event. Unfortunately, the situation did not improve with time: more and more countries were closing their borders and universities were restricting business trips. The number of people infected with COVID-19 was also continuously growing.
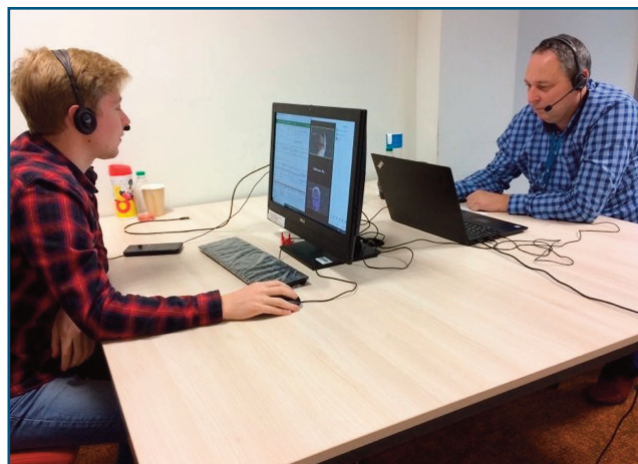
Since the restrictions applied to the whole world, an international conference suddenly seemed irrational. We started to fear that even if the situation in Poland in autumn would be better so that we could hold the event as planned we simply might not have any participants. With both safety and financial considerations in mind we decided to organize the EAHIL 2020 conference as an online event in November 2020.

The total cancellation of the event was not an option for us as it would mean that all the time and effort put into the preparations by the International Programme Committee (IPC), the LOC team and also the authors of the abstracts, posters, workshops and Continuing Education Courses (CECs) would have been wasted. After receiving the EAHIL Board's approval we set about implementing changes to the original plan in order to deliver the conference as a virtual event. The situation was unprecedented. We were to organize the first ever EAHIL event held in the virtual world with no previous experience in that matter whatsoever.

Plan B: preparing the online conference

Thus, the organization process began once again. What we needed to do first was to cancel all reservations regarding the on-site conference or to change them into a virtual format. Cancelling the reservation for the conference venues proved the most difficult. The second major step was revising the conference programme and communicating with over 60 authors who had presentations, posters, workshops and courses submitted and accepted. Fortunately, most authors took up the challenge and decided to take part in the online conference.

Not only did we carry on preparing the virtual event, but we also moved our discussions and meetings into the virtual world. We took advantage of the online communication resources more than ever. Through emails and virtual meetings, we designed the shape of the EAHIL 2020 online conference – the sessions and the meetings, the poster exhibition, the side events and the tours were all going to be held online. Once again, we prepared sponsorship offers, designed conference gifts and planned city tours – all in a new virtual format. The hotel halls and rooms were replaced by virtual rooms on the ZOOM platform, the tours were made into video recordings and the sponsors and exhibitors' stands transformed into a webpage on the EAHIL 2020 conference website.

Having decided on the new shape of the event, we proceeded to redesign the registration form, the guidelines for the authors of presentations and posters and the conference programme. Then our focus shifted to the online platform which we had never used before – ZOOM. Firstly, we needed to test it ourselves and then let the authors, sponsors and registered participants try it out before the conference so that we could avoid as many technical problems as possible. However, ZOOM was just the beginning of the list of applications we were going to use. Normally, during on-site conferences and workshops all the talks and discussions in between the sessions are as important as the sessions themselves so we realised that we also had to provide the conference participants with some means of communication during the event. We considered several options and finally decided to set up the virtual coffee rooms on the Discord platform. For the conference programme, all the instructions and guidelines as well as the place for the participants to leave comments and opinions we chose Padlet.

Build your team

People are the foundation of any activity – their knowledge and skills as well as their willingness to get involved. The EAHIL 2020 LOC team consisted of 14 people from 4 Polish medical institutions: the Library of the Medical University of Lodz; Fumed - the Foundation for the Medical University of Lodz; the Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine in Lodz; and the Main Library of Wroclaw Medical University. With the benefit of hindsight, we can easily identify the personal qualities that were the most important in our team and proved pivotal for the success of the event.

The most essential qualities are flexibility and multitasking. There were a few situations when we had to respond in the last minute and adjust to the needs of the moment – both our own as organizers and of the conference participants and, especially, the authors. The whole team had to be constantly ready for making any kinds of decisions in an instant in order to adapt to emergencies and unexpected circumstances concerning both the organizational and technical issues. Multitasking was crucial during the conference – each team member was operating a number of different devices (e.g., two computers) and a number of various applications simultaneously (ZOOM, Discord, Excel files with essential information, Padlet with all the links, e-mails).

The distribution of tasks played a key role – it was crucial to know who is responsible for a given issue or task as it enabled effective task management as well as allowed us not to interfere with each other's tasks and not to duplicate the work. At all times, additional people were engaged to provide support when necessary, especially with the larger tasks such as running particular sessions. A number of people were given the ZOOM co-host roles so that we could run the sessions even if unexpected difficulties occurred and a number of people were given access to the conference e-mail box so that all the many questions and requests of the conference participants and sponsors were answered smoothly.

One of the most invaluable aspects of conference organization is the presence of IT specialists on the team. The EAHIL 2020 LOC team was lucky to have two of them and they contributed greatly to our success by sharing their knowledge and skills as well as engaging in the whole process, learning new tools and searching for solutions to problems. It is definitely worthwhile to have such people on your team even if in your everyday work you do not seem to have problems with operating applications such as ZOOM platform or instant messaging technologies. The geek-like curiosity of our IT specialists saved us many times when they searched for hidden options in the software and checked various settings; and also, when a computer of one of the main hosts crashed while a presenter was waiting for the screen-sharing option to be activated… In such stressful situations the IT support is of critical importance. Our IT colleagues also designed the EAHIL 2020 conference website.

The personal traits that were also essential for the effective organization of the conference were creativity and openness of the LOC team members, as well as their ability to make good use of their individual qualities in the virtual world. People of various personal qualities and skills adapted very well to the new reality; especially the librarians with good administrative and organizational skills as well as the communication and linguistic

ones (we worked a lot in English). Some of our team had previous experience in organizing on-site conferences, however, due to the ongoing situation we all entered the learning-by-doing mode. We acquired new knowledge, tested new solutions and learned from both achievements and failures.

A person whose role was also essential was our graphic designer. His work made the conference visually consistent - in our opinion, it was even more important in the virtual world than in reality. In addition, we collaborated with a number of people from outside of IPC and LOC who carried out various tasks during various stages of conference organization – for example creating the call-for-abstract and registration forms, preparing legal documentation and GDPR consulting.
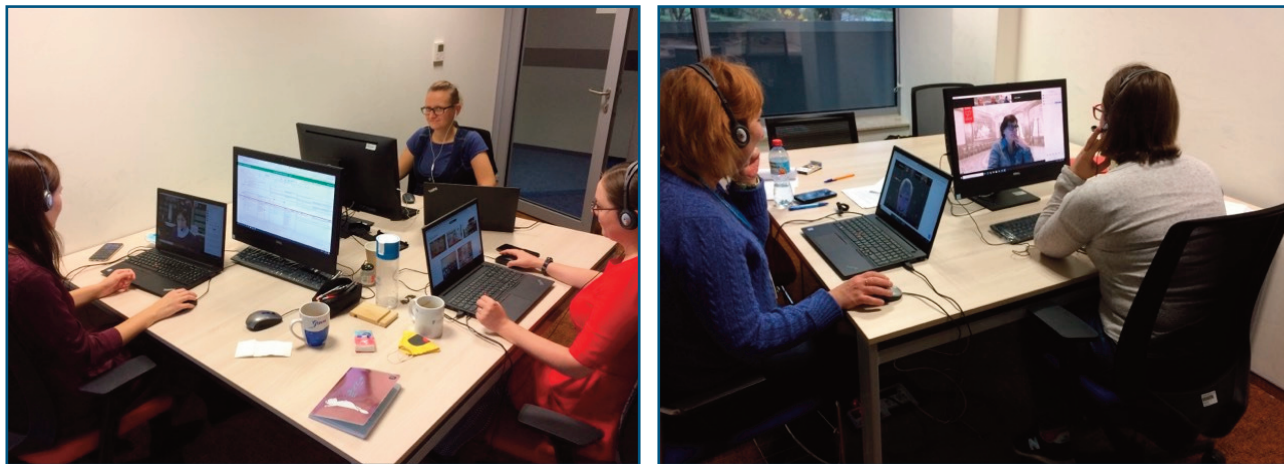
Communicate effectively

Effective teamwork was the foundation of our activities, however, with our team dispersed due to the pandemic it was necessary to change the attitude – we opted for several communication channels and working both collectively and in smaller task teams. We made use of Office 365 tools for e-mails, task management and for creating, storing and sharing files. It was also crucial to hold online meetings which took place on MS Teams and ZOOM platforms where we met both as the whole LOC team and as separate task teams. As the preparations for the conference were being finalized, we communicated swiftly by Discord and phone.

Manage the process effectively

A considerable emphasis was put on the planning and work organization which was the main task of the LOC Chair. This role required a vision of the whole endeavour, setting goals to achieve and knowing the team members well. The LOC Chair divided the tasks into consecutive stages and delegated them to particular LOC members; she also monitored the progress and indicated the best ways to reach the goals. Yet, we also took many decisions together as a team and many ideas occurred through brainstorming during LOC meetings. Cooperation was crucial and each team member contributed to the final shape of the event.

Another significant aspect of the conference organization was the testing of ideas and chosen solutions. When we decided to use the ZOOM platform for the conference, we replaced MS Teams with ZOOM for our regular LOC meetings in order to get to know it before the actual conference. Similarly, we implemented Discord into our daily communication so that we knew how it works before we introduced it to the conference participants. The testing of the tools allowed us to predict potential problems that might have occurred during the event. The testing approach included conference rehearsals during which we simulated the real-time conference sessions and other conference events such as sponsors' virtual booths. Such simulated conferences enabled us to identify potential technical problems and verify our plans. The tests resulted in checklists which enumerated particular steps to be taken by designated LOC team members during the real conference sessions, from their

beginning to the end.

We held both internal platform tests and the external ones – we invited all interested participants, authors, moderators, trainers and sponsors to test the ZOOM platform before the conference. There were several such test sessions at different times so that everyone could learn how to use ZOOM. Additionally, during the conference we allowed the authors and moderators to join the session rooms in advance so that they could make some last-minute checks of the platform and its functions. Consequently, the repeated testing approach proved very useful and effective as there were no major technical problems during the EAHIL 2020 Online Conference. Some of the troubles that we experienced came from the situations beyond our control such as poor internet connection of some conference participants and presenters.

It is vital to be open to new technologies (applications, tools and technical approaches) when organizing such a huge and engaging event as the EAHIL 2020 Online Conference undoubtedly was. Such attitude was very convenient when occasionally the conference participants submitted some unusual requests or we faced unusual challenges. Knowing the various tools and applications and being open to tackling problems proved very helpful and necessary in such situations.

To sum up our thoughts on the planning, informing and testing, we would like to point to a few concepts. First of all, do not fear new tools – they will be very useful. On the other hand, do not underestimate the participants' comfort – the more tools you use the more stressful it gets for the presenters and the moderators. Surprising ourselves and others with exciting innovations is definitely worthwhile, nevertheless, it must be done sensibly. Secondly, test and check if everything is working properly, as often as possible. You may not predict every trouble, but you will be ready for the unpredictable. Thirdly, plan ahead and take arising opportunities to achieve goals before the deadline. The last few weeks before the event are so hectic and stressful that it is better to have fewer tasks left to deal with. Lastly, inform - both your team members (team communication) and the participants. Do not hesitate to disseminate the same information or give the same instruction multiple times – it will help you avoid unexpected problems. In our case, we failed to provide exact information to the presenters to register as conference participants as it seemed obvious to us. We were wrong.

The zero hour

The time immediately before the conference involves a lot of tension and anticipation which can ease with the thought that all the necessary preparations have been made. Yet, what is the most important at this stage is the time discipline. From the very beginning of the first EAHIL 2020 session to the last, we put particular emphasis on proper timing and informed the presenters about the exact time allocated for their presentations. Each announcement involved repeated requests for time discipline so that the conference could run uninterrupted. As LOC members, we strived to make sure that each conference session started and finished on time. It was essential since we had to open the next one early enough to allow the presenters and the moderators a last-minute platform check and to be able to check the list of participants eligible for the session. Also, the moderators were informed that their role involved supervising the time limits for the presentations. As LOC we were present all the time during the EAHIL 2020 event in order to react whenever necessary, yet it was the moderators who, apart from keeping the time discipline, also kept record of the participants' questions to the presenters, announced and thanked the presenters and invited for the following sessions. We are extremely happy that everything worked out well and everybody complied with the time discipline; if not, we took matters into our own hands. This only shows that a LOC team not only prepares the event but also takes part in it, actively addressing the arising needs and problems.

The benefits

The organization of a big international conference is a complex undertaking but also a great adventure, especially when you organize it twice in two different formats: on-site and virtual. The benefits that accrue are invaluable; despite the huge amount of work, stress and facing the unknown, it is an opportunity to extend

your knowledge, sharpen your skills and develop new ones. Generally in the modern world, as well as in the current COVID-19 pandemic situation, it is highly advantageous and also crucial to learn new technologies and electronic work and communication tools. Despite the double effort, our LOC team gained twice as much as well – we learned a lot in various areas of expertise and we learned it twice in two different realities.

Preparing the EAHIL 2020 Online Conference was like an accelerated course in new technologies and interactive educational tools, in interpersonal skills and teamwork, in crisis management and staying cool, and also in creativity and visualization skills. The EAHIL 2020 adventure strengthened the relations between the members of the organizational team and provided opportunity to collaborate and share experience between librarians from various institutions both locally (LOC) and internationally (IPC). The positive feedback that we received during and after the conference was very satisfactory, increased our confidence and reassured us that the effort paid off. The EAHIL 2020 Online Conference will definitely stay in our memory for a long time.

EAHIL 2020 in numbers

We were **O**pen for 4 days and **A**cted **T**ogether for 30+ hours of sessions

4 days

250+	participants
34	countries
14	LOC Members
3	LOC Members' locations in Poland
18	IPC Members
13	IPC Members' locations

30+ hours of sessions

7	themes
14	sessions
2	keynote speakers
27	presentations
28	posters
4	Interactive Workshops
2	sponsor workshops
2	CEC's

Countless smiles

131	EAHIL 2020 Discord users
2	virtual tours
2	online social events
1	quiz with 3 winners
1	lecture about Lodz
1	piano concert
9	sponsors
6	Sponsor Virtual Booths

And also: **91** Zoom rooms **22** Padlets **∞** Countless coffees and teas drunk by participants

Online conference
16—18 November 2020
Łódź—Poland

MEDICAL UNIVERSITY OF LODZ

Fumed
Foundation for the Medical University of Lodz

NOFER INSTITUTE OF OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE

European Association for Health Information and Libraries

The photographs in this paper are by Tomasz Przybył