

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Online Mediation, Online Work, and Especially Online Training – Gains and Losses

Greg Bond (Bond & Bond Mediation / University of Wildau) · Tuesday, November 24th, 2020

The question recently occurred to me whether we would have reached the kinds of online worlds of work we now have in many fields without the need to do so due to Covid-19. Would it have happened anyway, just more slowly and perhaps with different nuances? Would we be spending so much time in home office, and doing our teamwork, communication with stakeholders, and dispute resolution online? Perhaps, but surely we would have had more time to work out how and exactly in which circumstances going online would be right. And where it might not be.

There are many benefits, and they have been mentioned by many people. Online work makes access for many easier, and the number of international meetings and webinars just in the field of ADR, with participation from all over the world, is certainly a wonderful development – because it enables more access. In my own teaching and training I have been able to welcome guests in ways I had not before, and I have been a guest in places I might before have travelled long distances to get to, or never attended. This makes me ask why I did not do more of this in the past. I was stuck in the mindset of the physical space.

The environmental benefits of not traveling are often mentioned too. I used to be a frequent business traveler, but have not been on a plane this year, not left the region I live in since February, and I am rarely traveling across the city. I certainly feel better and less guilty for it, on the one hand, while I also feel a loss in not being able to see friends and colleagues I had been planning to work with.

In work environments where people had and were happy with plenty of autonomy before the pandemic, home office probably works well for most. In others it means redefining instruction, control and feedback, and working out communication anew. We do not have the opportunity to see colleagues and team members by chance on corridors and in premises, or when someone just knocks at the office door and asks if you have a minute. So much information is exchanged and so many low-level decisions made during these informal meetings, quite aside from the social value. Online jours-fixe and availability by phone are different.

Online mediation, facilitation and coaching can work very well. Of that I have no doubt, and I have been able to conduct them in various settings from one-on-one coaching to mediations with over ten participants. In some circumstances they may work better than communication in physical, non-digital spaces. Barriers to participation may be lower, logistics easier, and – in my experience – focus can often be tighter. My role as mediator / moderator has been different too, and I have had

more control over process, as the process requires more or at least a different kind of control online. All of these things can be beneficial.

The biggest loss to the mediation world at present may not be in the conduct of mediation online, but in doing mediation training online. Here I am not talking about one-off webinars or workshops, but full training programmes. I am less concerned with the question whether on-line training can be recognized and certified by bodies with the authority to do this, as sooner or later they will nearly all go that way. I am more concerned with the quality of training.

Online work tends to invite the trainer to do more input sessions and talk more, simply because it is methodologically easier. Trainers who talk a lot in physical spaces will probably do so in digital spaces, while trainers who are comfortable with trainee-centred learning will find ways to do that online. But it is more difficult.

Online work lacks the physical contact that helps us strike up relationships. Mediation training is about relationships, in so many ways. These include working relationships during the training, in which trust is established and feedback then becomes constructive. This is harder online. They also include the relationships that lead to new professional contacts and networks, as we talk to participants in coffee breaks and go out for lunch or dinner together. Sometimes these become friendships. This is much harder online.

Online work involves sitting in front of a computer screen hour after hour, and most mediation training runs intensive courses based on intensive days, weekends or weeks. In a physical setting, people can literally move around and they can do so with each other. Breakout rooms are not going to replace this. I remember often being exhausted at the end of a day in my mediation training, and I know that many trainees are exhausted after a day online too. Sadly, for different reasons. After a good day of on-site training, the exhaustion is due to all the different challenges that the contents of the training and the interactions with people may bring. After a day of online training, however good it is – and it can be done well – the exhaustion is primarily due to the medium.

Online work allows so much more distraction than analogue work, because we are working with the same tool we use for all our other work and communication too. Nearly all participants, trainers and trainees alike will check e-mails and websites, communicate via phone and e-mail with people who have nothing to do with the matter at hand, and be distracted. However disciplined we are, we cannot be as present online as we are in training in physical spaces. This is a very significant change, or loss, of quality.

The quality of interaction between participants in mediation training is probably the most important key to learning, assuming the trainers are training well. This quality changes online, and we need to think carefully about ways to make it work there too. This may involve some thinking outside the box on methods. Online is not merely about trying to replicate physical spaces. In some ways it is a different product, but there is not yet enough clarity about how.

I am conducting online training, and I see ways in which it can be done well, and situations in which it makes sense. If mediation training is going to continue online, and I believe it will after Covid, then I would welcome a lot of peer discussion and exchange about methods among trainers and providers. Online training cannot and should not be the same as on-site training. But it should endeavor to use the medium it works with in the best ways possible, and, frankly, my guess is that we are only just beginning to think about what these are.


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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a group of five stylized human figures, with a magnifying glass positioned over the central figure. The background is accented with horizontal lines in blue and green.

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