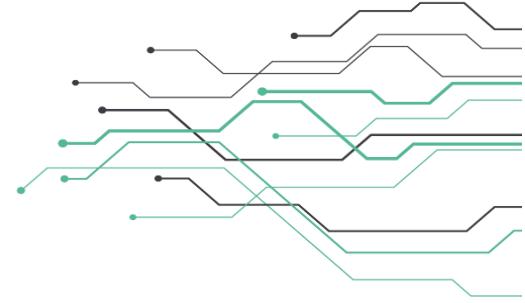




Experiences of Co-Creation During the Pandemic: It Went Quite Well

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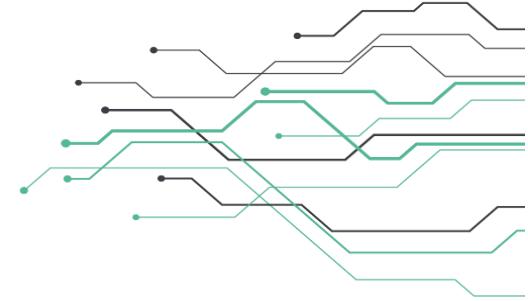
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Åbo Akademi University's Experience Lab, the only academic partner in a URBACT network, conducted an evaluation survey of the experiences of online co-creation during the pandemic. The results were interesting; on the whole, the digital transformation has been a success, and the experienced advantages outweigh the challenges with some margin. The tools and methods have, by and large, been satisfactory and easy to use, and working online has met a wide approval as being efficient and time-saving. Some caveats exist, though; especially in long processes, the physical meetings with new people at some points during the process are still important, and the digital co-creation requires more preparation and facilitation from the process leaders for a successful result.



This round of URBACT projects took place in special circumstances, as the Covid-19 pandemic forced everyone to rethink their approaches to co-creation. In some cases, the work in the local groups was entirely transferred online, while others employed mixed – hybrid – models. Pretty soon, the IoTXchange network discovered the challenges of the approach – but also new possibilities, that emerged from the fact that the work took place online.

Åbo Akademi University and its Experience Lab are a unique partner in the network and the program – a university in a setup intended for cities. Since our main concern is with



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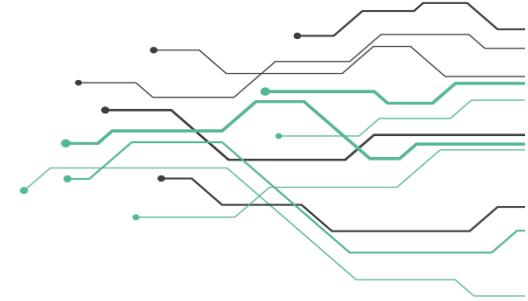
the user experiences of digital solutions – the encounter between human and technology, we wanted to find out how the network partners and their stakeholders had managed to develop their integrated action plans and small-scale actions under the forced digital transformation taking place in 2020 and 2021.

A survey was designed, consisting of two parts; an interview form aimed at the network partners' staff and key stakeholders, and an e-questionnaire aimed at stakeholders. As the URBACT program is conducting its own evaluations for all participating networks, this survey was designed to specifically focus on the experience and conditions of working online, regardless of the themes or topics the partners were addressing. Between February and April 2022, seven hour long semi-structured interviews were conducted, and a total of 25 answers were submitted on the survey, and the preliminary results were shared as the network met in person in Razlog on April 28th and 29th.

Starting from the background – how people had been working - the modes of working reflected the different approaches to lockdown and the differing circumstances. Three out of four had been working online, while two out of three had met physically. The general experience of work during the pandemic was reported positive by 19 out of 25, while the negatives were zero. Also, almost a third of the respondents had experienced a change in their attitude, perhaps reflecting a coming to terms with the advantages of working virtually. Many people reported efficiency gains from having to travel less – but in long processes, the importance of at least some face-to-face meetings was stressed as well-

Looking at the tools, 23 out of the 25 found them easy to use, and 24 respondents felt they added value to the process. All 25 felt that the co-creation process felt like a success, and 22 had learned new things such as daring to test new ways of working, improving their communication skills, as well as getting a better understanding of both the process and its subject – the Internet of Things. We also asked the respondents to rate some of their experiences on a scale from 1 to 7 - where 1 = disagree completely, 4 = don't agree or disagree, and 7 = agree completely. The results were encouraging for the process leaders, as some of the statements got very high ratings: It was a nice experience 6,04, It allowed me to keep up with new ideas and innovations 6,00, It enabled me to come up with new ideas 5,96, and the interaction was pleasant 6,04. Finally, when asked whether they would recommend others to participate in similar processes, all 25 respondents gave a positive answer.

While the results aren't statistically significant, they nevertheless convey a positive message to those responsible for initiating and leading co-creative development work



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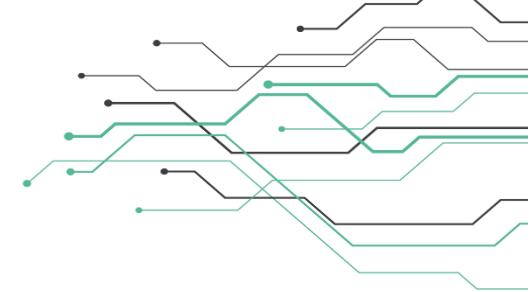
even in difficult conditions. Turning to the project partners, their experiences were also mostly positive, even though the work had been challenging at times. The digital tools for visual collaboration, such as Miro, were a challenge, and creative tips and tricks were in demand – and in some cases, supporting the ULG members' motivation for virtual participation was difficult, and the dropout rates felt high. This was, however, not always related simply to the online factor.

A common theme emerging was the realisation that online co-creation requires more preparation from the organizer – and in cases of hybrid arrangements with some participants presence and others online, this is especially important. We asked the project partners responsible for running the ULG processes for their best tips for success and got a number of good advice – here is a selection: Select good team members, keep it simple – participation, interaction, tools, choose good facilitators that lead, inspire and engage, keep the meetings short, take breaks, cause disruption, and make the schedule in time – don't wait until the last minute.

The full report of the survey can be available by contacting Åbo Akademi University's Experience Lab: www.explab.fi or Kimmo Rautanen by e-mail: kimmo.rautanen@abo.fi.



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