

ONLINE JAM (INCLUDING ASK ME ANYTHING)

/ Intensive online brainstorming, or Q&A with experts /

WHAT IS AN ONLINE JAM?

An Online Jam is a virtual gathering to exchange ideas and views on a predetermined topic, or to ask questions of a panel of experts. The interaction takes place at a specific time, usually for about one - two hours, on a social network platform – either an enterprise (internal) platform such as Yammer (where these events are called YamJams), or a public (external) platform such as Twitter (Twitter Chats or Tweet Jams). Discussion takes place via text posts, sometimes with images or files attached; audio and video are not normally used.

There are two basic types of Online Jam. The first is for members of a team or community who are geographically separated. The Online Jam allows quickly gathering their inputs and holding a brainstorming session.

The second type of Online Jam is called an ‘Ask Me Anything’ (AMA) session. It involves one or more experts, or persons with unique experiences/insights, responding to questions from interested participants, in real time. AMAs are becoming increasingly popular because they offer an easy way for participants to interact directly with experts and ask them whatever they want.

An Online Jam is different from a Skype/Lync meeting: In an Online Jam, all inputs are documented in writing so the record can be easily shared afterwards without the need for someone to take minutes or listen to a recording. An Online Jam is also different from an E-Discussion: An Online Jam takes an hour or two, and all participants are present at the same time. By contrast, an E-Discussion takes place over days or weeks, with participants contributing on their own schedules.

REQUIREMENTS:

- *Facilitators: minimum two; the more participants expected, the more facilitators there should be.*
- *Enterprise social network platform (e.g. Yammer) or public social networking platform (e.g. Twitter).*
- *Participants: from 10 to 100 or even more.*
- *Optional (for an Ask Me Anything): one or more experts/persons to answer participant questions*



WHEN AND WHY TO USE

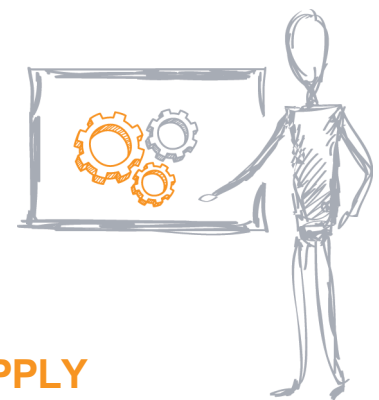
Online Jams are useful for quickly generating ideas and sharing views among members of a team or community. They allow interaction across distances without travel costs, and if well-run they are efficient for addressing lots of topics and for capturing the responses in text on the platform. As a secondary benefit, they also help familiarize team members with using online discussion platforms.

The output of an Online Jam is a record of all questions, answers and discussion, copied directly from the social networking platform and sometimes lightly edited for grammar and spelling (but not changed in substance). In addition, the facilitator can prepare a discussion summary to distil long conversations into a shorter format. The record of an Online Jam can serve as a reference and/or as a basis for planning and implementing related projects/ initiatives.

Online Jams are good when you need to gather ideas quickly and get a team focused on a particular activity or initiative. If you need deep reflection on challenges or issues, e.g. in order to develop policy or refine guidance, then an E-Discussion may work better. Refer to 'E-Discussions' in this Toolbox for more information.

Ask Me Anything sessions are useful for quickly getting answers from experts to lots of questions—sometimes more questions and answers than face-to-face meetings of the same duration. They also offer allow participants to interact directly with experts, without having to fly everyone in to the same location. An expert can be anyone with relevant experience and insights from theory and practice concerning a relevant topic, someone well-known in a particular field, or even a person who has just completed a particularly interesting/important project or assignment. Participation in an AMA session may be open to anyone in an organization, to staff from multiple organizations, or even to the public.

Facilitators of an Online Jam need or AMA to be very familiar with the platform, and all participants, including any experts, need to have at least basic familiarity. Facilitators should be able to identify the key points of an online conversation, and summarize them quickly, in order to effectively guide the session.



HOW TO APPLY

Prepare in advance

This guidance is for planners and facilitators of an Online Jam/AMA.

1. Decide on your objective, your audience (participants, plus any experts), and what type of session you need: a standard Online Jam (to gather inputs and/or brainstorm with specific participants, for purposes of planning) **or an AMA session** (to disseminate knowledge from experts to participants).

▲ If you are doing an AMA, you may make the session open to a specific group within your organization, to your entire organization, or even open to the public.

▲ If you are doing an AMA, you will need experts. Identify one or more, and invite them to participate. Advise them of how the session will work and what their role will be: answering questions online in real time from participants, on predetermined topics in which the experts have particular knowledge or special experience.

2. Decide what discussion platform to use.

▲ If your participants and experts are all internal, you can use the organization's social networking platform (e.g. Yammer). Do not use external platforms for internal-only discussions!

▲ If your participants include some externals (e.g. staff of other organizations), you need to ensure they have access, either by holding the Online Jam on a portion of the organization's social network that allows external participants¹, or by holding it on a public platform such as Twitter.

▲ If the event is open to the public, use a public platform like Twitter.

▲ All participants and experts should have some familiarity with using the platform.

¹ For UNICEF, networks used for accommodating internal and external participants have included Yammer, UNICEF Exchange, the UNICEF Private Sector network, and the UN Knowledge Management Network.

3. Plan the discussion/question topics for the session: Based on your objective, decide on your overall topic of discussion, and then define specific discussion questions or sub-topics. **See Annex 2 for examples.**

▲ **If you are doing a standard Online Jam (no experts), use discussion questions** instead of subtopics, in order to better stimulate contributions from participants.

▲ **If you are doing an AMA, use subtopics,** and involve the experts in choosing them. The subtopics will help guide participants' questions

4. Ensure you have a specific group/ forum/ discussion space in which to hold the Online Jam. If your platform permits, it is recommended to have a dedicated group/discussion space that you use only for Online Jams (in order to better manage the high volume of messages that come from Online Jams). If you don't have such group, create it now. Some platforms, e.g. Twitter, don't have discussion spaces; in that case, create and use a hashtag (see 'Tips for Success' below).

5. Choose a date and time, and determine who should be invited. Keep in mind the different locations and time zones of participants and any experts. If possible, try to hold a single Online Jam/AMA for all participants. This is easier to organize – especially if you are doing an AMA session where the experts must be present – and more likely to generate momentum in the discussion.

6. Advertise the event among the target audience:

▲ If your event is only for a small group, then communicate it directly to them via emails or posts in their existing online group(s). If participation is required – for example, if your Online Jam is a part of a team’s workplan – make this clear in your communications to them.

▲ If your event is for a broad audience, communicate it widely, for example by announcements in multiple groups on the organizational social network, posters, intranet sites, etc. If you are inviting public participation then your outreach should include public communications, starting with a notice on a public website. Include photos and brief bios of key experts if necessary.

▲ In all cases, provide the date/time, description of topic and subtopics, and a link to the group/forum that will host the Online Jam. Describe briefly how the Online Jam will work. If needed, include a reminder of the basic details on how to access and use the platform, and provide links to additional information.

▲ See ‘Annex 1: Sample Online Jam notice’ below for an example.

7. Upload any needed reference materials

to the Online Jam group, including any practical guidance you might have about how to use the platform (e.g. Cheat Sheet, Online Jam etiquette, etc.) and any substantive documents.

8. One day before the discussion, send an email reminder to all required participants and experts.

When you are ready to start

This guidance is for facilitators, experts and participants.

9. About 10 minutes before the scheduled start of the discussion, facilitators send an email to confirmed/ expected participants with a subject line similar to ‘Discussion on [insert topic] begins in 10 minutes’. Include a link to the discussion space/group in the body of the email.

10. At the scheduled time, facilitators begin the discussion with an announcement (a post) in the discussion group, briefly introducing the event, welcoming everyone, summarizing the rules and providing one or two key technical tips (e.g. how to reply correctly, how to turn off email notifications if needed).

▲ With fewer than 20 participants, you can ask all participants to introduce themselves and briefly mention how they are connected to the topic of the Online Jam.

11. If running a standard Online Jam: Facilitators post the first discussion question and ask participants to reply to it with their answers, comments, and related questions.

If running an Ask Me Anything session: Facilitators post the first topic for questions, and invite participants to ask questions about that topic by replying to it. The experts should reply in the same thread. If participants have a completely new question for the experts, they can post it as a new thread.

12. While a standard Online Jam is ongoing:

- ▲ **Facilitators** ensure that the discussions stay on topic, and give guidance and technical help to participants.
- ▲ **Facilitators** also post additional questions for discussion. If there are 5 questions for a one hour Online Jam, then allow about 10 minutes discussion for each – or less, if discussion peters out – before moving on to the next question
- ▲ **Participants** respond to questions from facilitators, give their comments and inputs, and react to inputs from other participants.

While an AMA is ongoing:

- ▲ **Facilitators** ensure that the discussions stay on topic, and give guidance and technical help to participants.
- ▲ **If the objective of your AMA is to answer as many questions as possible**, then assign at least one facilitator to keep track of questions, and allocate unanswered ones to specific experts as needed.²
- ▲ **Experts** follow the discussion and respond to any questions directed at them, by facilitators and/or by participants, in the appropriate discussion thread.
- ▲ **Participants** pose questions directed at experts.

13. When the Online Jam/AMA is over, facilitators post an announcement stating

² If you want to go one step further in managing questions, then have the facilitators and experts connect via voice chat (e.g. Skype) while the AMA is running. A facilitator can then verbally allocate questions, and experts can volunteer to answer specific ones, saving time and making the process more efficient.

that the discussion has concluded, and letting everyone know where the summary note will be available once it is completed.

Follow up

14. Facilitators prepare a recap of the discussion. This is quite easy:³

- ▲ Include in the note all of the questions and responses from the Online Jam. Remove the names of questioners and respondents, and include only the actual questions and responses; if several responses addressed one question, put all the responses together after the question.
- ▲ Do only minor editing to fix any significant grammatical errors. Be sure not to change the meaning of the questions or answers, in order to faithfully preserve the discussion content.
- ▲ At the beginning of the recap, list the date/time of the event, the objective, the topics and subtopics covered, the names of any experts participating, and if desired add some brief comments on participants (number, where they were from; usually, names of participants who were not on a panel of experts are not included.)
- ▲ Optional: Although many Online Jams do not include this step, in some cases you might decide to also draft a brief summary in order to condense long online conversations into a shorter format.

15. Facilitators post the recap, and (if prepared) the summary, and send a message to all participants and experts with a link to it.

³ Some platforms such as Twitter enable use of additional tools such as 'Storify' which automate the process of creating a summary and allow facilitators to create stories or timelines.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS



Tips for facilitators

▲ Facilitators should have strong familiarity with the discussion platform to be used. Experts and participants should also have at least some familiarity with it.

▲ Facilitators should be able to summarize conversations on the fly, and able to reframe the discussion when needed, in order to focus on the key issues.

▲ Before the Online Jam, facilitators should privately ask a few knowledgeable and willing participants to help get the discussions started by being the first to respond, ask questions or provide comments during the event. This will encourage other participants.

▲ If there are lots of participants, Online Jams move fast. Facilitators have to guide participants to new questions by posting links to their threads, otherwise the momentum of the discussion may stay behind on older questions.

▲ During the Online Jam, replies to questions should be in the same discussion

thread as the question, and if the platform offers a 'reply' link after any post, this link should be used by anyone replying to the post. Facilitators may need to help inexperienced participants with the mechanics of how to reply correctly.

▲ Some social networking platforms, e.g. Yammer, allow users to receive email notifications of posts. Anyone receiving too many email notifications during an Online Jam should edit their settings; facilitators should be ready to offer guidance on how to do this.

▲ Although facilitators (and experts, if running an AMA) do not need to be in the same room, some may find it easier to manage an Online Jam if they are all physically together.

Tips for experts

▲ Experts in an AMA session should prepare answers to the most likely questions, but should also be prepared to answer other relevant questions on the spot. Experts may want to have pre-saved links to key references open in a Word document beforehand, to save time in finding links. They may also want to draft key messages they want to convey during the session, and share them at the right opportunity.

Tips on using public platforms

▲ If you are holding an Online Jam on a public platform like Twitter, you will need to define a 'hashtag'. This is a distinctive short word (no spaces) preceded by the hash symbol (#), which every participant should include in every post. Adding the hashtag makes it possible for others to

follow the conversation and for the conversation to be searched later. Example hashtags include #childrights2015 or #WASHBangkoksummit. It is also possible to run a series of online jams using the same hashtag, e.g. see #agchat on Twitter for regular weekly interaction with a community of practice. See this article for more information.

CASE STUDY / EXAMPLE



In July 2014, the UNICEF Office in the Democratic Republic of Congo decided to organize an Online Jam, to gather input on the topic of innovation and how it could be applied and integrated into the work of the Office. The selected platform was the organization's social network on Yammer. The discussion was planned as a standard Online Jam to gather inputs from across all participating staff in the Office.

The plans for the session were presented at an all-staff meeting; in addition the Representative (head of the Office) sent an email to all Office staff with session details and relevant guidance (including how to register on the social network, join the group, and participate in the Jam).

One week in advance, a dedicated group was created to host the Jam, and staff were invited to join, and also to post suggested discussion questions for the Jam. One day before the event,

the facilitators convened, reviewed the suggested questions and summarized them under four primary themes.

The Online Jam was opened by the Representative, who introduced the themes for discussion. The facilitators then took over, guiding the flow of conversation and assisting staff participants (who numbered 25 in total). The session lasted for one hour. Afterwards, the discussion was summarized into a report, and was used as the basis for a staff survey concerning some of the issues that came up during the event.

The Online Jam achieved the following results:

- ▲ Raising awareness of staff with regard to the importance and role of innovation in UNICEF's work.
- ▲ Raising the profile of the team supporting and managing innovation-related activities in the Office.
- ▲ Demonstrably increasing the uptake and use by participants of basic concepts from innovation in programme implementation.



REFERENCES

Decsey, Ernst. "Recipe for a good YamJam." digitalworkplace blog, <https://digitalworkplace.wordpress.com/2013/05/23/yamjamrecipe/>, accessed 20 July 2015.

Microsoft. "How to Ignite a Yammer Network? Try a YamJam." Office Blog, <https://blogs.office.com/2010/07/19/this-is-a-guest-post-written-by-austen-hunter-head-of-transport-operations-at-brighton-hove-city-council-bhcc-he-is-curr/> accessed 20 July 2015.

Yammer team. "Yam Jam: What, How and Why",
<http://www.scribd.com/doc/35307353/Yam-Jam-What-How-and-Why#scribd>, accessed 22 July 2015.

CREDITS

Author: Eric Mullerbeck.

Author of example: Angèle Bijanu.

Editor: Ian Thorpe.

Expert review panel: Lucy Braun, Angèle Bijanu, Kerry Albright, Paula Bulancea, Neha Kapil, Lina Salazar.

Design: Olga Oleszczuk.

Production: Edwin Ramirez.

September 2015.

 UNICEF, 2015

This Toolbox is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) license, except where otherwise noted.

Contact: Division of Data, Policy and Research, UNICEF
3 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA

knowledgeexchange@unicef.org

This Toolbox in its latest edition, as well as all individual tools, are available online for free download at <http://www.unicef.org/knowledge-exchange/>

Annex 1: Sample Online Jam notice

This is an example of the information to be included in a notice (email, announcement, etc.) about an upcoming Online Jam. You can adapt this for your specific needs.

On Wednesday 30 September, 12 noon – 1 pm Eastern Daylight Time (GMT-4), the UNICEF Knowledge Management Unit in the Policy, Strategy and Networks Section will host an Online Jam to discuss how to make best use of SWOT and PESTLE analysis for strategic planning. The event is open to all staff in UNICEF. A panel of experts will be online to answer your questions in 'Ask Us Anything' style. Experts will include Imani Cheboi of the School of Business at Wits University, South Africa; Bob Smith from the Stanford Business School, Stanford University, USA; and Wang Tao from the Singapore Management University, Singapore.

This Online Jam will give any interested UNICEF participants the opportunity to interact directly with these experts, ask questions and get answers in real time and have a discussion.

In order to get the most from this event, here is an outline of how the event will proceed, plus a few guidelines.

- o Facilitators: Ian Thorpe and Eric Mullerbeck will serve as hosts and facilitators for the Online Jam, coordinating the flow of questions and answers. Contact either of them if needed for more details, or to suggest topics for discussion.

- o Expert panel: Our three experts are all highly experienced in the application of group planning tools, specifically SWOT, in both the public and private sectors.
- o If you are unfamiliar with the SWOT methodology, read a description in the UNICEF Knowledge Exchange Toolbox, in order to make the most of the Online Jam .
- o The Online Jam will take place in the KE/KM Online Jams group on UNICEF’s external Yammer network, UNICEF Connect. Staff wishing to participate need to be a member of this group (just visit the group and click on ‘Join’).
- o At 12 noon EDT on Wednesday 30 September, a facilitator will kick off the Online Jam with a new thread in the KE/KM Online Jams group. The facilitators will post topics for questions as separate threads. Participants can immediately begin asking questions; our experts will reply.
- o If you have a question that is on a different topic (but still about SWOT) for the experts, please post it as a new thread. Questions on other topics should not be posted in the Online Jam; please visit another appropriate group.
- o Participants should adhere to online etiquette and good practices for the organizational social network. In particular, please use the ‘Reply’ function to pose your questions or give comments/follow-up questions. See links at the end of this message for more information and technical tips on how to use the platform.
- o The Online Jam will end at 1 pm EDT. The discussion contents (questions and answers) will remain available to all group members. In addition, the facilitators will create a summary note and will post it in the ‘Files’ section of the group, a few days after the conclusion of the event.

Thanks and see you all on Wednesday!

Annex 2: Examples of topics with questions or subtopics

A. *Example of topic with questions, for a standard Online Jam:*

Topic of Online Jam: Creating a new website for the UNICEF-sponsored initiative on eradicating violence against children.

Questions to be discussed:

- i. What written content do we need?
- ii. How can we get partners to contribute?
- iii. Do we have any photos illustrating programme activities?
- iv. How can we obtain funding to maintain the site into the future?
- v. How shall we measure, monitor and evaluate the value of the site?

B. *Example of topic with subtopics, for an AMA session with experts:*

Topic of Ask Me Anything Session: Building a protective environment for children in Rodinia

Subtopics – participants can ask anything about any of these:

- i. Legislation and policies
- ii. Alternative care options
- iii. Direct support to families
- iv. Social service workforce capacity building