

**What is e-facilitation?** E-facilitation refers to the ways in which different types of online dialogue (as opposed to face to face) are facilitated and managed. Email-based interaction is one of the most frequently used types of online dialogue because it is simple in terms of bandwidth requirements as well as technical understanding of participants. It is also a direct form of communicating, as messages go straight to the inbox of the participating individuals. This guide focuses on the particularities of e-facilitation – both generally speaking and in the SDC context.

Related guides:(1) linking f2f and online facilitation (2) nurturing networks, and (3) roles&responsibilities within a network.

**Why e-facilitation?** In today's globalised world we often find ourselves in situations where our colleagues and partners are working in different geographic locations. Also, most SDC networks use online dialogues as their main interaction tool. Online dialogues – especially email-based interactions – can help us do our work in an **inclusive** and **efficient** way, as well as **learn** from the experience of others. However, online group interactions often do not happen spontaneously. Once they have been set up, they require care and nurturing. E-facilitators can help create **ownership** and trust, as well as make online communication more efficient, results-oriented and participatory.

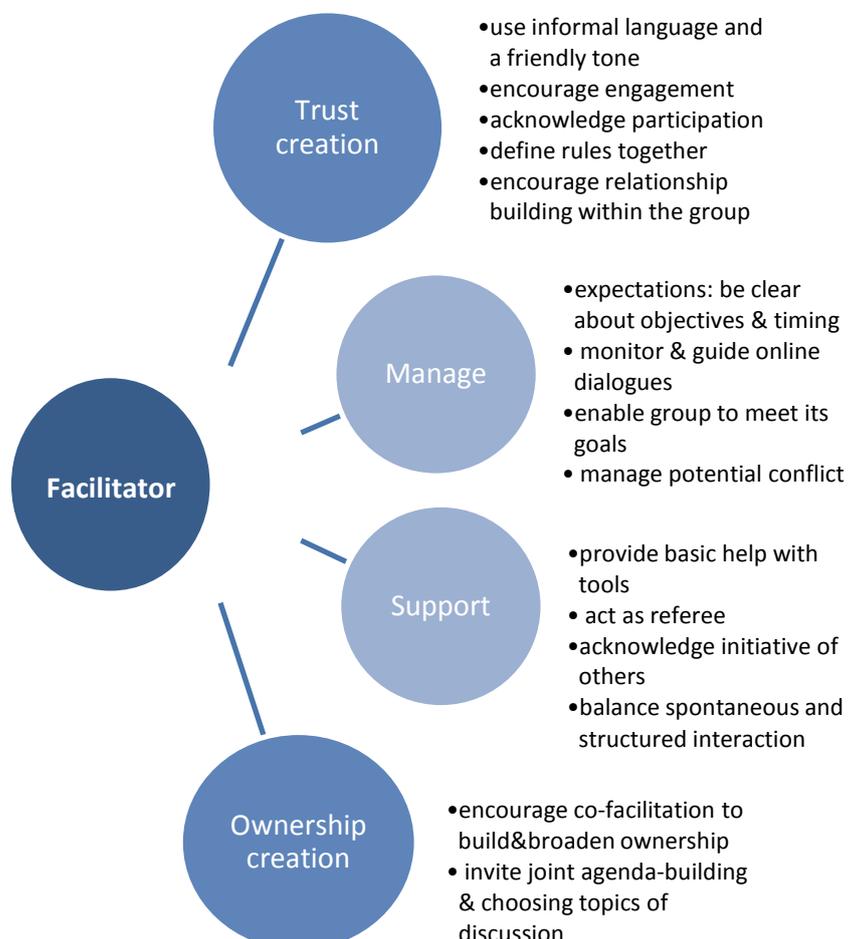
**What is special about e-facilitation?** In online spaces – just as in offline community spaces – people interact for various reasons, e.g., to communicate, share information, build knowledge around a practice or carry out a project. The community host or facilitator will encounter a range of behaviours that mirror offline behaviours, but might **manifest themselves differently in a text-only-environment**. Without non-verbal cues, it is easier to misinterpret a person's actions online. For this reason, a community should define its **norms** of communication.

**E-facilitation skills:** The clearer the purpose of the online dialogue, the easier it is to craft the facilitation approach. Depending on the context, the e-facilitator might be the convenor, online community owner or someone designated by the community owner or group. In the case of SDC networks, the Focal Point plays an important role in facilitating online interaction. However, many Focal Points have chosen to **share their facilitation role** - either with another SDC internal network member or with an external facilitator. Depending on the chosen co-facilitator, the Focal Point has a sounding board or can build the capacity of someone else in this area, thereby broadening ownership of the network. Thus, the Focal Point can co-facilitate certain dialogues or conduct e-facilitation in turns. Good **coordination** among all actors involved, e.g. Focal Point, facilitator, is necessary to ensure that the e-facilitation runs smoothly.

The four circles in the graph to the right contain **key skills or process responsibilities an e-facilitator typically has**. The bullets next to the circles point to some important elements that might guide a person in the role of an e-facilitator.

The **size of the circles give a rough indication of time requirements** because even though all responsibilities are important and complementary, some take more time to achieve than others.

For example, **while trust and ownership creation** require punctual efforts (as all other tasks), they cannot be completed within a very short time period. Contrarily, it does not take a long time period or process to manage expectations and provide support to online dialogues - which are the elements in the small circles.



**E-facilitation for what?** In the SDC context, online dialogues are used in various ways. For example, a network member may have a **question on a specific aspect** of his/her work that is sent to the group, for which a quick response is received (Q&A). Alternatively a network member may have a challenge or thematic issue for which a broader range of more **detailed responses** is sought. Other network members formulate various responses and the exchange can then be summarised (experience capitalisation through consolidated reply). Third, **scheduled discussions** – usually lasting 2-3 weeks – are held online in order to clarify thematic issues and build a consensus within the network (consultation). Also, e-discussions can be used for **collective problem solving** (ecooperation). Finally, online exchanges might be used to prepare a **f2f event** of the network or to follow up on it (see guide on linking face to face and online dialogues). As is the case with other activities within a network, key online dialogues should be planned and conducted to achieve desired objectives.

**Planning online dialogues.** While some online dialogues may take place spontaneously, others should be planned for in the network workplan. Some dialogues that should be planned are those that **relate to face to face events** of the network, e.g. to validate the agenda of an event, produce certain outputs, or continue discussions related to the event. Also, online dialogues aimed at **getting feedback** on specific documents produced under the rubric of the network should be included in its workplan. Planning those activities together with the network members and making the workplan (including the timing) available to the network, increases the level of participation and ownership of the results of such online dialogues. Besides the initial planning that takes place around the definition of the network **workplan**, more detailed planning is required before a specific online discussion can start. The story in the blue box below highlights some important elements to keep in mind.

**Dealing with different languages:** SDC networks are global and network members consequently have different linguistic preferences and capacities. It can be difficult and expensive to translate all dialogues into the relevant working languages. Many networks have **agreed on a working language** for their (online) communication, the aim being to communicate in that language and build the capacities of network members. Bearing in mind that working only in one language is difficult for some members in the short run, networks resort to additional means, e.g. inviting members to post text in their language and encourage those who do not understand that language to use **translation engines**, or **translating summaries** of discussions in several languages.

Juan Mamani Quispe from Bolivia is excited to co-facilitate his first online dialogue together with the Focal Point of his network, who is based in the Head Office in Berne. Together they will organise a **three week email-based discussion** on a topic that had previously been chosen in a participatory way by the network members. As Juan has a particular interest in the topic and wants to become more engaged in the network, he volunteered to co-facilitate the dialogue. Even before the online dialogue starts, he is pleased about his initiative as he has already learned several interesting things from his colleague about e-facilitation in the **preparatory stage**.

- For example that the **message** that initiates the dialogue has to be well thought through and structured.  
*The message Juan drafted as a co-facilitator was revised several times by him and the network Focal Point to make it as clear and explicit as possible. It became even more clear to Juan how important this is for his network where the members come from all over the world and speak many different languages. Understanding cannot be assumed!*
- He also realised how important it is to keep in mind that participants are taking part in the online activity while also handling **various other tasks** and that most email-based dialogues are **asynchronous** (meaning that contributions can be made anytime, by anyone from anywhere).  
*For this reason they have planned a three week period for the discussion, which provides sufficient time for everyone to contribute according to their schedules and yet doesn't demand too much time and energy from the network members.*
- He is confident that the **timing and context** for an email-based discussion are right, because the last discussion was held a few months ago. Also, just recently the network agreed on a few basic principles of interaction, a so-called **netiquette**: 1) You are responsible for your own words; 2) Assume good intent on the part of others; 3) Respect the stated guidelines of the network.  
*So, even though discussions might be controversial, Juan is reassured that he will not have to be too involved in dealing with potential conflicts as the rules of the road are clear.*
- He is also **convinced that the discussions will take off**, as two network members just confirmed via private email to him that they will produce an input each to feed into the discussion once it takes off. He also knows that the network Focal Point has several other network members in mind who could be contacted bilaterally if the discussion is slow to take off.

Although the online dialogue is well planned, Juan is aware that his work is not over yet: together with the network Focal Point he will acknowledge participation and encourage engagement during the three week dialogue. As he is fluent in Spanish and English, he might offer some ongoing translation services to his colleagues. Also, after the dialogue, he has agreed to summarise it (the facilitation team will make available multilingual summaries).

## Key Resources

[Facilitating Online Communities: Quick Reference Guide](#) (HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation)

[Good Practice in e-Collaboration - The Diplofoundation Experience](#) (Diplofoundation)