



Choosing a venue

The venue can make a big difference to the ease with which a group can meet its aims. There are wonderful stories of facilitators using the dust on the ground for diagrams, and pinning paper to curtains to display work, but if you can choose a more suitable venue in the first place, it really helps!

1. The room itself - large, light, flexible and with working walls.
2. An accessible venue, conveniently located for those travelling car-free.
3. Happy, helpful staff.
4. Great food and refreshments.
5. Outdoor space.

The room itself

The room itself - ideally it is large, squarish, with natural light and movable furniture which can be easily rearranged to create different layouts during the meeting if necessary. The main room should be big enough to hold all the participants cabaret style and still leave room for break-out spaces around the edges.

Choose a venue with good 'working walls' - flat, solid surfaces free of pillars, pictures and fancy mouldings. The venue should be happy for you to fix paper or a sticky wall to these clear smooth surfaces.

If your event involves showing visuals or video calling with participants based elsewhere, then your space will need to have a big enough visible screen plus enough space for your working wall.

Large TV style monitors are rarely large enough for visuals with a lot of detail on them. If there is a projector plus screen, ideally, the projector will be ceiling mounted so that it doesn't need its own table which then gets in the way of layout during sessions which don't involve projection. Ideally, the screen will roll away easily into the ceiling, allowing you to use the wall behind. Sometimes the wall is clean and blank enough to be projected onto directly, without the need for a screen.

For some meetings, for example stakeholder dialogue, the best way to make the real-time record in full view of participants, is to type it directly into a laptop whose screen is projected. Participants can see (and correct) the record as it is made. You know it will be legible, and there is no need to retype it later. You will still need working walls for flipcharts which need to be on display (e.g. working agreements, bike rack) and you may need them for diagrams or techniques like meta-planning (post-it brainstorming). If you also need to show visuals or video calls then you may need two projectors and two screens, so that the record can continue to be made and shown at the same time.

The location and accessibility of the venue

Choose a venue which is easy to get to if you are a pedestrian, cyclist, use public transport or have disabilities. Is it accessible once you are there: stairs and steps, lifts, wide doorways? Does the venue have a hearing loop or microphones?

Do you need interpreters and if so, is the room suitable for their equipment? (There is more on interpretation and translation here <http://www.penny-walker.co.uk/blog/2015/11/24/lost-in-translation>)

Happy, helpful staff.

If the venue staff are positive and want to help you solve problems, this makes a huge difference. Great staff will be helpful in moving furniture, finding workarounds, and generally make you feel that they are on your side.

What time can you get in to set up? Make sure you have time either side of the workshop times, to set up and take down. If you need to set up a laptop, access the internet, use audio equipment and so on, is there a technician who can help and when are they available?

How can you get hold of venue staff during your event, if you need them?

Great food and refreshments

Hot drinks on tap, in the room or very close by, are important.

When it comes to food, go for quality, not quantity. The best food is all eaten - not too much, not too fancy, not too likely to make you fall asleep in the siesta slot. The venue should be able to easily meet people varying needs, including being comfortable and confident to provide 100% plant-based food.

The venue should be able to flex the serving time if needed, and to serve food in a nearby space which is easy to get to. Food served in the room inevitably leads to disruption and a stale smell during the afternoon. And grease spots on your flip charts.

Seasonal, organic food cooked on site is best. Single-serve, single-use disposables and wasteful packaging should be avoided. The venue should provide jugs of tap water rather than bottled water.

Outdoor space

It's great if a venue has outdoor space to work in or at least gaze out at, depending on the weather. A view of the sky, interesting buildings, trees or water can help participants feel more alert and alive.