

One casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic was in-person professional conferences. Organizations, including the American Society of Clinical Oncology, American Association for Cancer Research, and Oncology Nursing Society, had to quickly pivot and radically transform the delivery of the traditional in-person conference to a virtual offering accessible to thousands of oncology healthcare professionals. However, what may have felt catastrophic has revealed unique opportunities to engage individuals in professional offerings, including those who, because of cost or travel, may not have previously participated. In this article, the authors present insights into how to optimize virtual learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

AT A GLANCE

- The coronavirus has radically transformed the way professional conferences are conducted, with many transitioning to a live or enduring virtual format.
- Virtual conferencing has both benefits and challenges that should be considered when deciding whether to participate.
- Diverse virtual education offerings can expand access to oncology nurses seeking to enhance their knowledge of oncology care without the barriers to in-person attendance.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; coronavirus; continuing education; conferences; virtual

DIGITAL OBJECT

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Virtual Conferences

Optimizing oncology nurses' experience

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Healthcare conferences have historically been a context for state-of-the-science updates, professional networking, and the opportunity to engage with individuals from diverse professions, industries, and practice settings. The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO, 2020c) website lists about 150 oncology-focused conference offerings in 2020, which can attract as many as tens of thousands of participants (see Table 1). However, COVID-19 has radically transformed conferencing because of travel limitations, restrictions in large group gatherings, and transmission risk (Gottlieb et al., 2020). As a result, conference organizers have been faced with the difficult decision to either cancel or pivot to a virtual format. The latter has provided unique opportunities for individuals to engage in novel ways with evolving conference formats. Although COVID-19 may have been the catalyst for a transformation in how individuals access and engage with professional development offerings, these changes are unlikely to be temporary and provide insight into how technology may be further leveraged to promote affordable and accessible educational engagement for healthcare providers. In this article, the authors present benefits and challenges in optimizing learning experiences in the evolving landscape of virtual conferencing.

Going Virtual

As early as February 2020, keen-eyed attendees at the American Society for

Transplantation and Cellular Therapy (ASTCT) meeting in Orlando, Florida, may have noticed something slightly amiss: a handful of display spaces devoid of their assigned posters because their international presenters were facing an emerging virus back home. Even as that conference occurred, the first cases of COVID-19 were emerging in the United States (Holshue et al., 2020). Scientific conferences became a source of grave concern, particularly after a cluster of almost 100 cases were tied to a single company meeting in Boston (Rimmer, 2020). Organizers' forthcoming oncology conferences quickly faced a weighty decision—proceed as planned or move to a virtual event?

The American Association for Cancer Research (AACR, 2020b) was the first to face this decision and, within six weeks of its scheduled in-person conference, transitioned to an entirely virtual event. Modifications from the in-person format included free registration for all participants, a release of all abstracts, and free access to AACR journals for the duration of the virtual offering (AACR, 2020b). A record-breaking 61,000 registrants from 140 countries participated, setting the stage for what is now an indefinite period of virtual oncology conferencing.

Conferences have taken diverse formats (Rubinger et al., 2020) to accommodate the need for a virtual approach to content delivery, including synchronous, asynchronous, and blended formats (Brady & Pradhan, 2020). Descriptions of these formats are as follows: