

# USING WEB FORUMS EFFECTIVELY



Developing Australia's VET workforce to implement the national training system

Web-based discussion forums are emerging as a popular way to communicate and share learning and practice in VET. This flyer provides an introduction to web forums and tips for use.

## What is a web forum?

Web forums are a structured way for project team members to discuss topics of interest to the project. Members can enter ideas or comments into an easy-to-use template and post them to a specially designed web page. Other team members can read each posting and respond online. Documents to inform the discussion can also be posted to the forum as attachments.

The communication is 'asynchronous' in that there is a time lapse between a posting and a response. This time lapse gives participants space to consider their reply.

## Setting up a web forum

Many VET organisational web sites will accommodate web forums. These are not the only option. Other alternatives include using a facility such as EdNA Groups who provide a fully featured collaborative toolset based on the open source Moodle learning management system software.

The EdNA Groups facility allows for VET practitioners to set up free web forums and other tools to support teaching, learning and research within the the Australian education and training community. Groups can be public (open to all) or private (invitation only).

For more information contact [groups@edna.edu.au](mailto:groups@edna.edu.au) or [www.groups.edna.edu.au](http://www.groups.edna.edu.au)

## Benefits of web forums

Web-based discussions are especially suited to professional discussions in the vocational and technical education (VET) sector, given the diverse groups involved in the sector – including providers, enterprises, industry bodies and a host of other parties – who often do not share the same physical location.

Web forums can assist a group to focus on specific topics or maintain 'conversations' between project team members between face-to-face meetings.

Web forums may also:

- suit participants who like to think over a question or contribution posed by the facilitator or their colleagues
- assist with the development of new knowledge by project participants
- contribute to the increase or maintenance in trust, goodwill and sharing that bind together groups of people over time
- be useful to start or extend discussions before or after face-to-face meetings.

## When to use web forums

The project convenor/facilitator can use web forums at a number of points in time during the life of a project, for purposes such as the following:

- To extend discussions that start at a face-to-face meeting and are continued afterwards, online.
- To address topics that could not be covered at face-to-face meetings, due to time constraints.

Every group moves through stages, hopefully towards a mature point where challenging issues can be discussed in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Sometimes web forums are a powerful mechanism for facilitating such in-depth discussions.

## Tips for moderators

Facilitating a web forum is more of an art than a science – as communication and participants' identities are involved. Moderators need to use their professional judgment about the time, pace and focus of web forums, how much they let the members have their say and when to intervene.

At the start:

- Where possible, obtain agreement beforehand for a focus on a specific topic. For example, negotiate the web forum topics at the face-to-face sessions or conduct a 'vote' by email to all project team members about possible topics.
- At the first posting to the forum explain the purpose of the forum and how it will operate.
- Indicate how inexperienced web forum users can access offline support from you or more experienced members to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence to participate online.
- Provide a summary of 'netiquette': for example, don't criticise others' postings, just be constructive.
- Motivate the group by pointing to the possible benefits of a vigorous web forum.

During the forum:

- To commence interaction for any one discussion, ask some team members to send initial postings to the web forum.
- Lead the discussion, but be democratic and let enthusiastic participants have their say. Don't respond to every posting, and encourage other project team members to respond to their colleagues' postings.





- Monitor postings and ensure they are relevant and abide by the agreed 'netiquette'.
- To maintain interaction, occasionally ask questions online that open up fresh or different angles on the selected topic.
- At your face-to-face sessions, seek feedback on the web forums and ask for ideas about improvements.
- When appropriate, summarise the discussions online and make suggestions: for example, that one line of discussion will now close and a new one will open.
- Sometimes you might start a second or third discussion off to the side.
- If relevant, invite a subject specialist to be a guest facilitator or participant.
- Invite a project team member to take a specific role: for example, to lead the discussion on a specific aspect of the topic for the next week.

At the end:

Encourage the participants to summarise the main points they have learnt from the forum, evaluate the usefulness of the forum and comment on how the next forum could be improved.

## Potential pitfalls

Try to avoid:

- being judgmental in response to a posting – be encouraging where possible
- doing all the work – encourage other project team members to respond to their colleagues' postings
- boredom and overload – keep the discussion and the participants fresh.

## Tips for participants

If you are new to web forums, you may find them intimidating at first. Persevere, as you may find they assist your learning and you will be contributing to the building of collaboration and knowledge-creation in your project team.

To get started, some suggestions are:

- Wait and see what your colleagues post.
- Make your first posting a question of clarification or a compliment of a colleague's posting.
- Seek out colleagues who have participated previously in worthwhile web forums and ask them for some tips – or make a joint posting.
- Be brave, make a start and see what you learn.



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