

PANEL DISCUSSION TOOLKIT

Welcome to the panel discussion toolkit. We'll walk you through every step of running an incredible event! From discussion styles to planning and panelist selection, we've got it all. Relax and trust in the toolkit.

Questions, comments, or concerns? We're just an email away at letstalk@nemontario.ca.

What Is a Panel Discussion?

A panel discussion gathers diverse perspectives to consider a (hopefully) engaging topic, often facilitated by a moderator. It's not all about the panelists though, audience members are encouraged to ask questions and share perspectives as well!

Start With Why

The key to organizing a great panel discussion is to start with an objective, or your "why." Check out leadership expert [Simon Sinek's TED Talk: How great leaders inspire action](#) to learn more about his "Find your Why" model. Before any planning begins, think through why you're organizing a panel discussion. What do you want to accomplish? What do you want guests to get out of the experience? Get clear on your 'Why' first, and use that clarity of purpose to help you make decisions throughout the planning process. [How To Plan Your Event With Purpose & Passion](#)

Choose a Theme

What are people going to talk about? What are you interested in? If ethics and engineering interests you, have conversations with people in your workplace or community to get perspectives on how to explore the topic. Don't limit yourself to the engineering community, other disciplines like philosophy, art and history have interesting insights to share about ethics. Different perspectives spark creativity!

Think About the People

Once you've identified an interesting topic, it's time to brainstorm who else will find it interesting. An uninterested audience that doesn't ask questions can stifle the energy of an event. It doesn't mean your topic is boring, you just haven't found the right crowd. Think back to your 'why.' What are you trying to accomplish and what value do you bring to participants? The key to providing value is to know your audience.

What's the Format?

The good news is that you have options, the even better news is that no format is perfect so you can tinker and adjust to create your ideal setup. For a one hour panel, there are three popular formats to consider.

1. Q&A Style

- 2-5 min introduction of the topic and panelists
- 25 min of curated questions from the moderator
- 10-15 min of Q&A with the audience, ending with a summary and thanks

2. Initial Remarks Style

- 2-5 min introduction of the topic with each panelist taking 5 min to introduce themselves and their perspectives on the topic
- 20 min of curated questions from the moderator

- 10-15 min of Q&A with the audience, ending with a summary and thanks

3. Presentation Style

- 2-5 min introduction of the topic and panelists
- 10-15 min of panelists sharing their perspective on the topic uninterrupted
- 5-10 min of Q&A with the audience, ending with a summary and thanks

Planning the Event

1. Planning takes time

Depending on the scope and size of your event, you need anywhere from 3-10 weeks to adequately prepare. Consider how many attendees you'll have, the number of activities, and the general scale of your vision. No matter how long you think it will take, we recommend adding an extra week for good measure.

2. Get inspired

Attend a variety of panels before organizing your own, especially if you've never organized one before. This will help you think about what you might want to replicate or avoid.

3. Participation

Continue to reflect on your target audience as you make planning decisions.

- Are your panelists engaging and interested in the topic? Will it be an internal, company-wide or public event?
- Are you aiming to invite particular groups, like underrepresented groups or communities who are underrepresented in engineering and technology?

4. There's no "I" in team

You're great, but you can't do this on your own. Think about the help you'll need:

- How many volunteers do you need?
- What other team members will you need?
- What's your recruitment plan?

5. Tech

Play with your preferred virtual meeting platform to ensure you know how to use it. You'll need to be adept with breakout rooms and communicate how things work clearly and concisely.

6. What's the plan?

Create a project management plan to keep you and your team on track. Write out important logistical details to make sure you don't miss anything.

Selecting Panelists

Panelists can make or break the event. You want to attract panelists who can contribute to a thought-provoking discussion. Use your 'why' to help you select an awesome group of panelists.

1. Audience

Ask yourself: if your panel went perfectly what kinds of questions would your audience ask? How do you want your participants to feel after the event? Understanding what your audience appreciates in a panel makes deciding who should speak on your panel much easier.

2. Theme

The key learning objectives or theme of your event should inform the panelists you approach. Include panelists who hold different perspectives, like those from

government, advocacy organizations and technology perspectives.

3. Perfect panelists

Diversity in identity, disciplines, and worldviews are key to generating thought provoking dialogue. If your panel focuses on climate change, don't only select panelists from science backgrounds. If you do, you're limiting opportunities for discussion and challenging conversations.

Moderate with Confidence

You've worked hard organizing the event, don't forget about the moderator! They have to make sure all panelists have equal opportunities to speak, ask insightful questions and listen carefully. It's rewarding and challenging, and a great opportunity to practice facilitation skills.

1. Be prepared

If you've never moderated a panel before, get familiar with the basics, like your panelist introductions and questions. Sure, it's great to come up with fully formed and thoughtful questions spontaneously but it's harder than you think. If you freeze up, it'll be helpful to have the guidance of some pre-written questions.

2. Know when to move on

One of the hardest and most frequent challenges you'll face is knowing when to stop a long-winded panelist. The second hardest is doing it tactfully. It can feel awkward to interrupt someone, but think about the audience—they're probably ready to hear another perspective. Stop a long-winded panelist with a positive statement, you can say something like, "That's a great point, Joe, and I'd love to hear how Preeti would respond."

3. Direct your questions

Taking a hands-off approach and tossing out questions hoping someone will take the bait can cause awkward silences or lead certain panelists to dominate the conversation. Avoid this by directing your questions to specific panelists.

4. Sense-make

As a moderator you represent the audience in the panel. When panelists say something interesting, or confusing, jump in to sense-make for them. Use open ended prompts like: "Tell me more" or "Can you explain that in more detail?" Prompting your panelists to elaborate can take you away from prepared answers and into fruitful territory. Take "challenging conversations" and turn them into "generative opportunities". Help the audience see both perspectives.

Prep the Team

- Confirm panelists & moderator 4 weeks in advance.
- Schedule 30 min calls with each person to explore what they're most interested in sharing, and experiences related to the topic.
- Create a list of questions for panelists based on the calls.
- Think about what everyone is working on, has in common or disagree about to generate engaging conversation.

Thank-You Notes

After your event, celebrate and show appreciation! Send thank-you notes within 24- 48 hours after the event to your facilitators, organizing team, guest speakers, partners, sponsors and anyone who supported the event. It is a great way to show gratitude and maintain relationships.