BEYOND PUBLIC SPEAKING FOR GEEKS

SUCCINCTLY

BY **LORENZO BARBIERI**

SUCCINCTLY EBOOK SERIES

Syncfusion®

Beyond Public Speaking for Geeks Succinctly

By

Lorenzo Barbieri

Foreword by Daniel Jebaraj

2501 Aerial Center Parkway
Suite 200
Morrisville, NC 27560
USA

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Technical Reviewer: James McCaffrey
Copy Editor: Jacqueline Bieringer, content producer, Syncfusion, Inc.
Acquisitions Coordinator: Tres Watkins, VP of content, Syncfusion, Inc.
Proofreader: Graham High, senior content producer, Syncfusion, Inc.

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Syncfusion, Inc.

Staying on the cutting edge

As many of you may know, Syncfusion is a provider of software components for the Microsoft platform. This puts us in the exciting but challenging position of always being on the cutting edge.

Whenever platforms or tools are shipping out of Microsoft, which seems to be about every other week these days, we have to educate ourselves, quickly.

Information is plentiful but harder to digest

In reality, this translates into a lot of book orders, blog searches, and Twitter scans.

While more information is becoming available on the internet and more and more books are being published, even on topics that are relatively new, one aspect that continues to inhibit us is the inability to find concise technology overview books.

We are usually faced with two options: read several 500+ page books or scour the web for relevant blog posts and other articles. Just as everyone else who has a job to do and customers to serve, we find this quite frustrating.

The *Succinctly* series

This frustration translated into a deep desire to produce a series of concise technical books that would be targeted at developers working on the Microsoft platform.

We firmly believe, given the background knowledge such developers have, that most topics can be translated into books that are between 50 and 100 pages.

This is exactly what we resolved to accomplish with the *Succinctly* series. Isn't everything wonderful born out of a deep desire to change things for the better?

The best authors, the best content

Each author was carefully chosen from a pool of talented experts who shared our vision. The book you now hold in your hands, and the others available in this series, are a result of the authors' tireless work. You will find original content that is guaranteed to get you up and running in about the time it takes to drink a few cups of coffee.

Free forever

Syncfusion will be working to produce books on several topics. The books will always be free. Any updates we publish will also be free.

Free? What is the catch?

There is no catch here. Syncfusion has a vested interest in this effort.

As a component vendor, our unique claim has always been that we offer deeper and broader frameworks than anyone else on the market. Developer education greatly helps us market and sell against competing vendors who promise to "enable AJAX support with one click," or "turn the moon to cheese!"

Let us know what you think

If you have any topics of interest, thoughts, or feedback, please feel free to send them to us at succinctly-series@syncfusion.com.

We sincerely hope you enjoy reading this book and that it helps you better understand the topic of study. Thank you for reading.

Please follow us on Twitter and "Like" us on Facebook to help us spread the word about the *Succinctly* series!

About the Author

Increasing partners' ROI on cloud investments with the right architecture is one of my objectives as a cloud solution architect working for Microsoft. Improving people's public speaking skills is one of my personal goals. Living a full life with my family and friends is what drives me every day.

I'm specialized in application development and architecture, Azure, Visual Studio, and DevOps. I like to talk to people and communities about technology, food, and funny things.
I'm a speaker, a trainer, and a public speaking coach. I've helped many students, devs, other professionals, and colleagues, by improving their stage presence, to deliver exceptional presentations.

I work for Microsoft, in the Italian One Commercial Partner division, helping partners and independent software vendors, but also developers, communities, and customers, supporting software development on Microsoft and OSS technologies.

I've managed teams of more than 20 people, and now I enjoy it when I can lead virtual teams to drive specific results.

I've been a Microsoft Certified Trainer since 2000 and am a former Microsoft MVP for DevOps and virtual machines. I speak at conferences in Italy, Europe, the United States, and virtually around the world.

Let's connect!

Feel free to connect with me on LinkedIn or to send me an email and tell me what you think about this ebook, what can I improve, and send me your feedback.

LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/geniodelmale

Email: geniodelmale@outlook.com

Note: Genio del Male in Italian means Evil Genius. Please, don't judge me by my nickname. I don't want to conquer the world or something like that! If you wonder why I use it as my nickname, it's a long story. Someday I'll decide to post about it! I can only tell you that my friends gave it to me many years ago.

Do good things come in threes?

Writing this second book about public speaking for geeks was an experience completely unique from writing the first one, especially for the topics, and also for the big changes in the way presentations are now delivered.

Who knows if three will be the magic number for this series? 😊

Chapter 1 Introduction

Did you already read *Public Speaking for Geeks Succinctly*? Then you can skip this introduction, apart from the last section that holds an interesting tip for PowerPoint users. If you didn't read it, this introduction will familiarize you with the main concepts of public speaking.

Start with value

We started *Public Speaking for Geeks Succinctly* with the essential concept of the book, a mantra that should be repeated by every speaker:

> Public speaking is not about me, the speaker! Public speaking is about the value that I want to send to the public.

People are investing their time to listen to your presentation, course, podcast, webinar, etc. Don't waste it!

What's the value of your presentation? Are you just giving information, or are you delivering value?

Always think in terms of value when proposing a session and deliver that value. Don't waste important time at the beginning of a session introducing yourself. Find a way to start directly with value, and then introduce yourself, if needed. You can always add your contact information at the end of the presentation, where people need that info, if they liked your content and your style.

There are many ways to start with value, and the most used are:

- Tell a **story** that shows value.
- Ask a **question** that uncovers value.
- Tell the audience **why** you're there, not just your title.
- Go **around** the table (if you're in a small room), but always keep control.
- Arouse **curiosity:**
    - Bill Gates released **mosquitoes** in his world-famous TED Talk about malaria.

The beginning of your session is the most important moment, followed by the session's end. Make it memorable!

The power of stories

Stories (real or invented, your brain doesn't care if the invented stories are plausible) are one of the most useful tools that you can use to improve your presentations.

You can use stories even in a technical presentation to explain why you're using a specific technique, why you're optimizing the performance of some code, why it's important to focus on usability, etc. Most geeks tend to directly present the technology, but without a relevant story, their audience will miss the reason why that technology is relevant for them.

Stories vs. facts

Facts don't stick in our brain if we don't already have a *place* for them. You can throw a lot of facts at your audience, but if people won't remember them after some time, the effectiveness of your presentation was very minimal.

Emotions are a powerful way to recall facts stored in your memory. Stories are often used to create or associate emotions to the facts that will follow.

As a geek, you're normally tempted to use facts as your only weapon to impress your audience: slides, demos, all created to show how good your work is, how well you know a specific technology, and so on. That doesn't stick.

Where do you find stories?

Stories are everywhere, all around us. Just pay attention to people, to strangers in the metro while you go to work, at a park, anywhere. A story can be genuine, or you can change it in some way to support your point. Just be sure to tell the truth if asked by some attendees.

Do you need help? *The Storyteller's Spellbook* by James Whittaker is a terrific book that helps you craft your stories.

If you need a story and can't find one, The Hero's Journey is a good template to create a new story. Many movies and books follow that path: *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Indiana Jones*, and hundreds of others.

Stage fright, introverts vs. extroverts, and saber-toothed tigers

You can't avoid stage fright, but you can handle it. Different people have different responses to it, but nobody feels *safe* on stage in front of a lot of people. Even experienced speakers and performers suffer stage fright.

That's natural because our brain was trained over the course of ten thousand years to pay attention to risks, and to choose between fight or flight. Did you ever hear stories of saber-toothed tigers that were the natural enemies of our ancestors, the cave people? To keep our feline-inspired metaphor, we need to think about our public like kittens that need to be fed with stories and knowledge, not saber-toothed tigers ready to eat us.

Introverts and extroverts can both be excellent public speakers. The *only* difference between them is that introverts need time by themselves to charge their batteries before the session and recharge them after it. Extroverts can charge their batteries being with the public, and after a session, they have a high level of energy.

“Public speaking for quiet people” is a great talk to watch to understand better how to be a great speaker while being an introvert. *Conferences for Introverts* is a great book for introvert readers, with a lot of practical advice.

Be a better version of you!

How many times have people told you: “Just be yourself and everything will be fine!”

It’s one of the most-used phrases, something that everybody tends to say to someone before letting them enter the lions’ den. **And it’s wrong**!

“Don’t try to be somebody else” could be better advice, but our brains prefer to receive a positive order instead of a negative one.

“**Be a better version of you**” should be the advice to give to someone before a presentation! It’s excellent advice because it pushes you out of your comfort zone. It says that you can always improve, even after many years as a public speaker.

To be a better version of you, you need **rituals**, like following a checklist of all the things you need to do before a session. You need to **know the environment**, so arrive early and look at the stage. Set up your environment and do the video and sound check before the session, or **know your tools** in detail if doing a remote live session.

Power posing is one of the best ways to get in your best state. Studies have shown that adopting a power pose can put you in a better state. One of the best power poses is the so-called Wonder Woman power pose, with your hands on your hips, feet wide apart, and shoulders back.

For more detail, you can watch Amy Cuddy’s TED Talk about power posing, and then you can read a recent Q&A with her with updates on the subject.

Even the best presentation can be ruined by lack of **eye contact**, because you’ll lose most people’s attention in a few minutes. Work on it, and when doing virtual sessions, look at the camera.

Never learn a presentation by heart! Learning a presentation by heart makes it prone to errors, pauses, and filler words that give your audience the wrong impression. Only learn by heart the beginning and the end of your presentation, if needed, so you can rock those (short) parts.

Never finish a presentation by immediately starting the Q&A. You should **close the session by delivering your final messages**, take the applause (if any), and only then should you start the Q&A. People have to know that the session is finished and that the Q&A is something extra.

What about the slides?

Chapters 3, 4, and Appendix B in the previous book were related to preparing your slides with PowerPoint and Keynote.

In this book, you won't find many tricks for the tools, apart from this one.

Use Ctrl+Shift+C and Ctrl+Shift+V to copy and paste text styles from one PowerPoint (or another Microsoft Office) document to another.

Of course, you can use Format Painter to copy the style of a text segment or other items inside PowerPoint, but that is an interactive tool that can be too limited sometimes, especially when working among multiple slides or multiple documents.

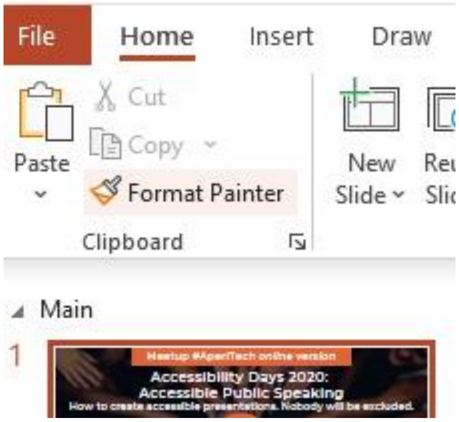

Figure 1: Format Painter in PowerPoint (and other Microsoft Office tools, too).

A [faster alternative] is to select the item that has the style you want to copy and use Ctrl+Shift+C and Ctrl+Shift+V to paste it where needed. It works perfectly cross-slides and cross-documents.

Chapter 2 The NEW Normal

At the beginning of 2020, the world changed due to a pandemic that impacted all sectors, that required social distancing, and that changed the world of public speaking for the coming months (or years, who knows?).

Most conferences changed their format and went online-only, and many others decided to accept a small number of people in person and stream the content for other attendees.

Video conferences became the norm for people who worked from home, and business travels were blocked or reduced.

Working from home

Most people (author included) who were working remotely before COVID-19 were able to choose what to do, where to do it, and when to do it, because their work allowed for independence and being measured by objectives rather than worked hours.

When children were at home, a truly remote worker could go to a café, to a co-working space, or to the office, or could simply decide to spend time with them and work later in the day.

Working from home became a necessity when offices closed, and people were forced to adapt, in most cases without the proper space or setup, and with family with them.

Public speaking when working from home is more difficult. The internet is full of videos of conference calls interrupted by family members and children, but you have to consider that it’s now normal to listen to crying babies while doing a conference call, or when presenting.

When working from home and delivering or attending virtual sessions, you need to think about the breaks that you need, not only for you, but to respect the timings and the needs of other members of your family. When planning for a virtual event, reduce sessions’ duration and take longer breaks. Or divide sessions into multiple days.

Don’t be afraid of interruptions

You’re taking your work to your home, not vice versa. That means your children could interrupt you during conference calls or, even worse, live events.

Of course, you should remember to lock your door if possible, but if you have problems at home, like crying children or a partner needing help, you can apologize a bit, solve the problem, and come back. People will understand the situation, especially if your office is still closed, or if the situation mandates that you stay at home.

Figure 2: [BBC interviewee interrupted by his children live on air](). Some days after the show, [BBC interviewed the whole family](), and it became famous worldwide.

Note: It happened also to the author that, during a full-day virtual course, he heard his wife calling him because their house was in the path of a small storm. She needed help with their child, and she was trying to rescue things in the garden. A 15-minute break saved both the family and the course.

Figure 3: Even a Scottish MP was photobombed by his cat during a virtual meeting (source: Global News). If you want to see the cat's face, you can take a look on Twitter.

Reserve time for your kids, even during courses, and set up boundaries

If your kids are used to spending time with you during the day, they'll search for you. Always schedule some time with them, especially during full-day courses, and then enjoy that time focused on them.

You'll be more productive and focused if you know that you'll spend some time with them when planned.

Try to signal that you're busy, perhaps with a sign on the door, or even a red light outside of it. Teach them to respect the sign, and that you'll spend time with them later, and do as you promise.

Sessions' duration

When planning for a virtual conference, a long conference call, or a video course, please keep in mind that people's attention when working from home is lower and shorter. Try to reduce sessions' duration, removing less important parts, eventually using the **Pareto Principle**.

Note: The Pareto Principle, also known as the 80/20 rule, says that most of the time, 80% of the effect comes from 20% of the causes. As an example, most salespeople agree that 80% of their sales come from 20% of their customers.

You can apply the Pareto Principle to your presentations, even recursively. If you have a course that lasts six hours, estimated to be deliverable in one day, with breaks, you can convey 80% of its value with a 75-minute presentation if you select the right materials, slides, and stories from the original course.

If you then have only 15 minutes to deliver your session, by again selecting the right content, you can still deliver approximately 64% of the value (80% of 80%). And again, and again.

Tip: The difficult part, of course, is selecting the right content to be delivered in less time. Focus on VALUE. Always ask yourself, can I remove this part without sacrificing value? When in doubt, remove it.

Meeting fatigue

Another reason to reduce virtual sessions' duration is the meeting fatigue, also known as zoom fatigue, where zoom is used as a generic word instead of meaning the brand Zoom, like you can use kleenex to indicate a generic tissue. Meeting fatigue applies to Zoom, Teams, Skype, Hangouts, or whatever software you're using.

Meeting fatigue is driven by your perception that other people in the meeting aren't physically there. They're flat images on the screen, and their voices are coming all from the same point.

Part of your brain knows that you're having a conversation with multiple people, or that you're listening to a speaker, while other parts of your brain disagree. This kind of cognitive dissonance can be problematic after some hours.

Here are two articles if you want to understand more about the issue:

- https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/coronavirus-zoom-fatigue-is-taxing-the-brain-here-is-why-that-happens/
- https://www.hanselman.com/blog/YoureTiredBecauseYourLizardBrainKnowsThatZoomMeetingsArentNatural.aspx?

Figure 4: Imagine the meeting fatigue of the attendees of this meeting with the president of the Italian Republic.

Note: To reduce meeting fatigue, some Microsoft engineers have developed new ways of showing meeting participants "all together" using AI techniques, such as segmentation of images and others, to separate participants from their surroundings and place them together in the same virtual environment.

Figure 5: [Together mode in Microsoft Teams.]

Public speaking while wearing a mask

It could also happen that you need to wear a mask while delivering a session, because social distance cannot be kept.

Be aware of reduced body language while wearing a mask. People cannot see you smile or make other facial expressions, and this can reduce the effectiveness of some parts of your presentation.

Figure 6: Masks that are suitable for lip reading, from Justine DB post.

Tip: You can also try a mask that's suitable for lip reading, like https://www.boredpanda.com/deaf-mother-makes-face-masks-with-mouth-window-for-lip-reading/. There are also commercial products available, like this one.

Always try to find other ways to express the same feelings, perhaps adding emojis or other images to your presentations (if the context allows that). Or use some props, like printed emojis that you can show to the public.

Hybrid environments

Hybrid environments will probably be common for the next few years, now that some companies have discovered that they can reduce costs by reducing travel without too much impact on the employees. And most people are still uncomfortable with traveling. Most conferences are adopting a hybrid model, where small numbers of attendees are in-person, and many others are connected online. This was already present before the pandemic, but the trend has drastically increased.

In hybrid environments, you have to understand your space on stage. But you also have to deal with the camera, so you should limit your movements, especially if it's a fixed camera without a camera operator.

Even when there's a camera operator, know your space, and know how the presentation will be displayed on the screen.

I did a great session (in Italian) at Codemotion Rome 2016, with practically no slides, but I didn't think about the recording. I moved too much, and when I looked at how the session was published on YouTube, I was disappointed. Of course, it was my fault, because I didn't talk with the operator. More than 60% of the screen was dedicated to my slides (that were just a placeholder) and 40% was dedicated to me, but I was moving too much, and the effect was terrible. Always know where to stay and limit your movements if the session is recorded or streamed online.

Figure 7: Great session in-person, unpleasant experience online.

Eye contact is essential in person, but don't forget to look directly in the camera from time to time to have virtual eye contact with remote people. They will enjoy it.

Chapter 3 Remote Public Speaking: Live Sessions, Recorded Videos, Podcasts, and Conference Calls

Even experienced public speakers are afraid to speak in private or to speak in front of the public when they are recorded. Conference calls risk being annoying and distracting if the content and presentation style are not adapted to the media. Learn to do a wonderful job even when a remote attendee consumes your content.

Start with VALUE

We have already seen the “start with value” rule in the previous book, and in Chapter 1.

Starting with value is even more important when delivering virtual sessions. People don’t care about you, they care about the content. With reduced attention spans due to work-from-home conditions, or distractions in the office, you have to fight to keep them attentive during the session. You cannot lose them in the first minutes. Three ways to start with value in a virtual session are:

- Tell a story—the story must show value.
- Ask a question that uncovers value.
- Tell them why you’re there, not only who you are.

You can try to use other ways, but going around the table or using props in a virtual session is not as effective as in physical sessions.

Know your tools

Knowing the tools used for remote presentations, both by the speaker and the attendees, is essential to the success of the session.

As a speaker, spend time learning how to share your screen, work the camera, configure the microphone, let people in, mute people, use the chat, etc.

If you’re not sure attendees know how to use the tools, consider sending them an email in advance with a short guide. Or add a slide, after presenting the value of the session, to show how to interact with you.

If somebody’s helping you manage the questions, they could post some guidance in the chat to help people figure out how to interact with the session.

Smiling and posture

The first thing that one should consider when recording a virtual session, or when delivering a live session with the webcam turned on, is SMILE!

Smiling improves your executive presence, especially if the smile is sincere and not fake. If you're giving sad news, or in cases where smiling is not appropriate, it's better to keep the webcam off.

Posture is another important thing to consider, even with the webcam turned off. If you're talking about important things, always keep your spine straight, chin up, and your shoulders back. Don't lean on the back of the chair. You can use a stool.

> ***Tip: Imagine having an invisible string on the top of your head that you can pull and become a little bit taller.***

Of course, setting up a corner where you can record or deliver live presentations while standing is even better. People can enjoy your body language a little bit better, depending on the framing.

If you deliver your session while standing, don't move too much, because all your small movements are naturally amplified by the video.

Figure 8: Rudy Bandiera (famous Italian influencer) doing a virtual session with a dedicated stand-up station.

Note: Seasoned speakers know that presenting burns a lot of calories. Even when seated, you can burn a lot of calories if you keep your energy high when presenting.

Define timings, plan breaks, recap often

You probably already know that I'm not a fan of having an agenda slide with all the topics on it, because it wastes important minutes at the beginning of a session. I prefer sharing all the essential information before the session, for example, via email.

But, when doing a virtual session longer than an hour or ninety minutes, I always talk about timing, breaks, etc. I'll do it after stating the value of the session, before going into the main content.

Breaks are important for long virtual sessions, especially if the attendees are working from home, because they also probably need to sync with their partner, feed their children, etc.

Always reserve time to recap after important sections, and be sure to check notes with the attendees, plan all the follow-ups, and so on.

Storyboard of the session

Some people prefer to have full control of the session while planning and developing it. If you feel more confident, you can create a storyboard of the session with detailed timings for all the slides, exercises, breaks, etc., and print it to use as a reference during the session delivery.

Note: Most of the time, virtual (and in-person) sessions tend to deviate from the storyboard from the beginning. Be prepared to correct it and adapt on the fly, or to ignore it if it's too detailed and too complex to be fixed on the fly.

Call people by name

Most calls and virtual sessions feel impersonal, because after some time, people forget who said what due to the difficulty of remembering names (and other details) without looking at people directly. It's important to call people by name; it makes them feel included, more focused, and they learn more.

One trick a speaker can use when the participants list is known in advance is to print the list of attendees. Leave blank spaces after each name to record important words or sentences in.

During the session, one thing that normally impresses people is saying something like "as Lorenzo said this morning when we were talking about…". This is something that is natural when delivering sessions in person but is rare virtually.

If the session or the course includes exercises, questions, etc., then the presenter can extend the attendee name template, including blank columns to take notes, but also columns related to each exercise and question. In this way, it's much easier to write only the important parts of the answers.

Attendee Name	Notes	Exercise 1	Exercise 2	Question A	Question B	Question C

Figure 9: Sample Excel file with an empty list of attendees, with spaces for notes, exercises, and questions for each.

If you have multiple monitors in your configuration, you can easily use an Excel file and write notes in the proper cells. If you have only a single monitor, and in most cases also with two monitors, it's better to print the file and write on it.

Use multiple monitors and the right hardware

You can do virtual sessions using just one laptop, using the built-in monitor, webcam, microphone, and speakers. Of course, you won't be too impressed by the results.

Note: One typical error that people make when using just one monitor is to project the designer view of PowerPoint instead of projecting the actual slides full screen. They normally do that because they can control the slides, but they lose a lot of effects, and the result is unprofessional.

A better configuration would be:

- **Headphones** (wireless or wired) **with a microphone.**
- At least **two monitors** (one external monitor is OK if you're also using your laptop).

With two monitors, you can use one monitor to share the screen and the other to search for information, move through the slides, look at the chat, etc.

Headphones with a microphone should be used to avoid disturbing other people in the room too much, and to avoid keystroke sounds that could be heard using an internal microphone.

An even better configuration can include:

- An **external microphone**, mounted on a flexible arm or on the desktop.
- **Headphones** (wired or wireless) **or**, if working in an isolated room, **some good speakers**.
- **A good webcam, with optional backlighting**, that you can position near the screen you're looking at when presenting to give the impression of good eye contact.
- **Three monitors** (at least).

I've moved to an external microphone, mounted on a flexible arm, and the voice quality has dramatically improved. I haven't spent too much on it, but the difference is clear. I'll not use the built-in or the headphones' microphone again, if possible.

I prefer using wireless headphones. With the external microphone, and if I can turn the webcam off (sometimes it distracts people having a small icon of you while projecting the slides), I can walk around the room without being blocked by the cables.

The external webcam is useful if you're projecting a screen that isn't the same as the built-in webcam's. I normally use the built-in one in my setup.

Three monitors are the minimum for me. I can project one, use another to control slides, and have the other one available for the meeting chat, other chats, a browser for a quick search in documentation, etc.

I discussed my home setup (before the external microphone) here, and my colleague, Fardau, has an even better configuration, and has discussed his professional setup here.

Recorded sessions vs. live sessions

Recorded sessions and live sessions are completely different beasts. There are many speakers (including myself) who prefer doing live sessions, even with their flaws. During live sessions, you're forced to continue even if something goes wrong, if a demo doesn't work, etc., like in a physical session. You can feel the energy and the nervous tension of the speaker.

Recorded sessions should be perfect. People know that the show is not live, and they won't forgive errors, because you normally have the time and resources to cut your video and produce it. A trained eye can spot distinct parts of a recorded session because energy levels of the speaker differ over time.

Tip: My friend, CoderDave, has written an interesting post with [tips and tricks](#) that he uses to produce his recorded technical sessions.

There's also a compromise that I use a lot: **recording a live session**. I like it because I deliver a live session, and people can feel my energy. But the session is recorded, so people who cannot follow the session live can see the recorded one, knowing that it wasn't post-produced, but taken live from the show. In rare circumstances, though, the recording of a live session fails, and in that case, you'll be forced to create a new one from scratch.

Note: In the previous section, we talked about different configurations. One typical difference between recorded sessions and live sessions is the use of headphones. That's very uncommon in recorded sessions, but typical during live sessions, especially if people can ask questions live during the Q&A using their voice.

Memory, notes, quotations, and the presenter view

Memory is a bad ally when doing sessions because people tend to forget important things, or they fear they'll forget something.

Some speakers use slide notes to capture important things, and then use the presenter view to show them on the secondary (typically the laptop) screen.

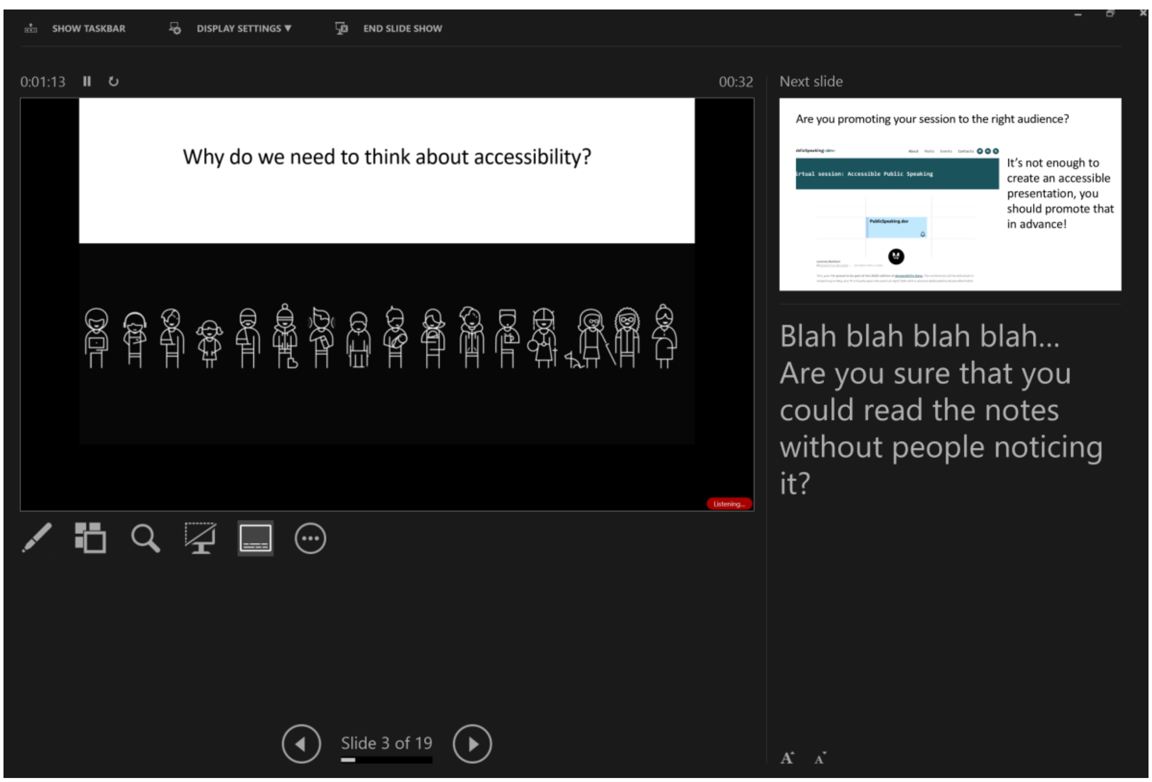

Figure 10: Presenter View in PowerPoint, with the next slide and the notes.

What they don't understand is that people will catch you immediately if you try to look at the notes in the presenter view. This is true both for physical and virtual sessions.

If something is crucial for your presentation, put it in the slides, not in the notes. If you cannot put it in the slides, use a piece of paper instead of notes on the screen. People will tend to forgive you more for looking at a piece of paper than the secondary screen.

Always pay attention to quotations, because most of the time, we remember them wrongly. Please check their accuracy and if you cannot learn them by heart, write them in the slides or on paper.

Music

Music is vital during virtual events, and sometimes even during conference calls.

You can use music:

- **While waiting for people during a virtual session**, with a message on the screen that says something like "session will start at [time]. Music is playing in background. If you cannot hear it, please leave a message in the chat."
- **During exercises** and stop it when the time is over, so people will immediately understand that it's time to come back to the session. Always choose a soundtrack that's not too noisy during the exercises.
- **To energize people during a long event**, coupled with some physical activity, perhaps with the webcam turned on, if the platform allows that.
- **During quizzes, polls, and other activities**.
- **To entertain people during breaks**.

While using music is important, you shouldn't forget people who cannot hear it, or people who, for example, may have taken off their headphones during an exercise. Always couple music with an appropriate slide, and don't rely only on the audio.

Tip: Most conferencing software has an option to stream computer audio to the attendees, but it's usually disabled by default.

Copyright

Streaming copyright-protected material over the internet can lead to problems, depending on regulations that can be different country by country, and that can be different in public events or private conference calls.

Check with an expert in copyright laws on what kind of content can you use inside your virtual sessions, or use content that has a permissive license, like the Creative Commons.

Images, videos, transitions, and animations

Images are crucial in a presentation, and one can be tempted to use many kinds of them in the same slide deck.

Always try to be consistent when using images in your presentations, at least in consecutive slides or sections. You can change the style from time to time, but you should avoid mixing images with assorted styles, resolutions, sharpness, grain, stock photos with icons, etc. People tend to notice differences even more when they have your slides streamed on big monitors.

Videos, transitions, and animations should not be abused in virtual presentations because most people have limited bandwidth (for people who are watching streaming content at the same time).

If you need to play a public video, always include the link (perhaps in the chat) so people can see it directly on their PC and not streamed from yours if they have bandwidth problems.

> ***Note: Animations can be important, for example, when describing processes, or when discussing lists. Don't use fancy animations; use appear, fade, or other simple effects to avoid visualization problems on attendees' computers.***

We already talked about copyright-protected material in the previous section. The same suggestion to contact an expert before using licensed materials, or using content that has a permissive license, is applicable to images and videos.

If you're a Microsoft 365 subscriber, you now have access to thousands of images and icons, including stock photos and cutout people who were shot in many different poses.

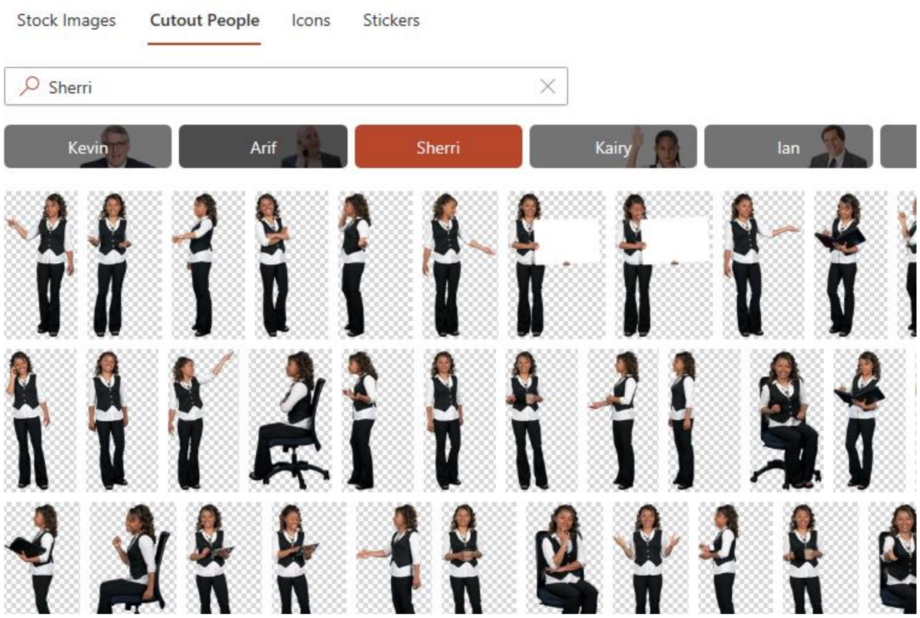

Figure 11: New premium content in PowerPoint for Microsoft 365 subscribers.

If you prefer to use images that are not linked to a subscription, Bing allows you to search for Creative Commons or public domain images, and PowerPoint integrates that feature directly into the application. This can be a lifesaver, but always check if the license is correct before using the image.

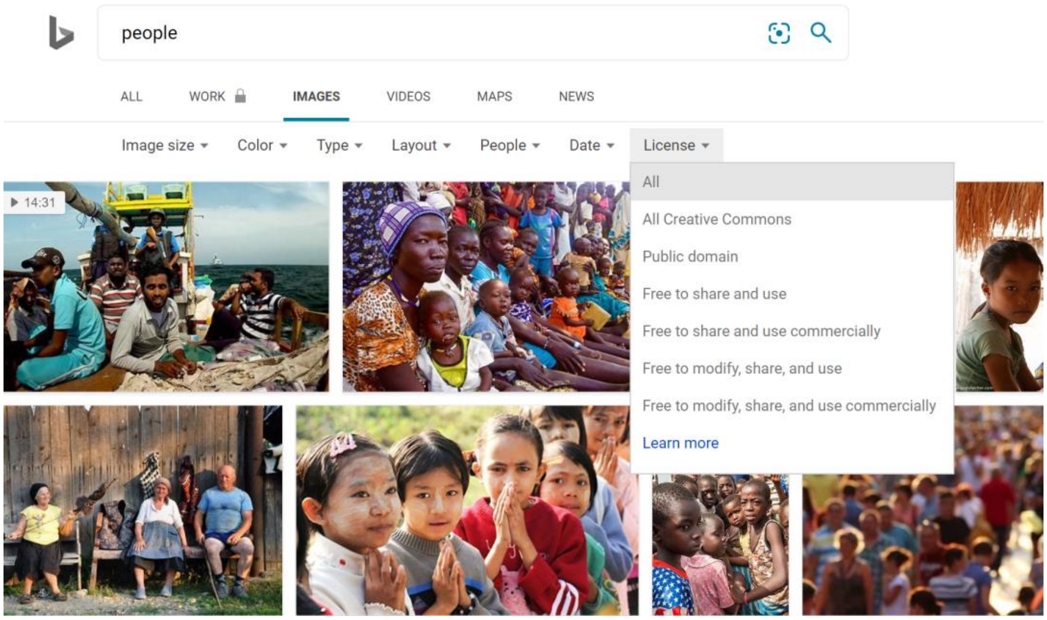

Figure 12: Bing image search, with options to specify the image license.

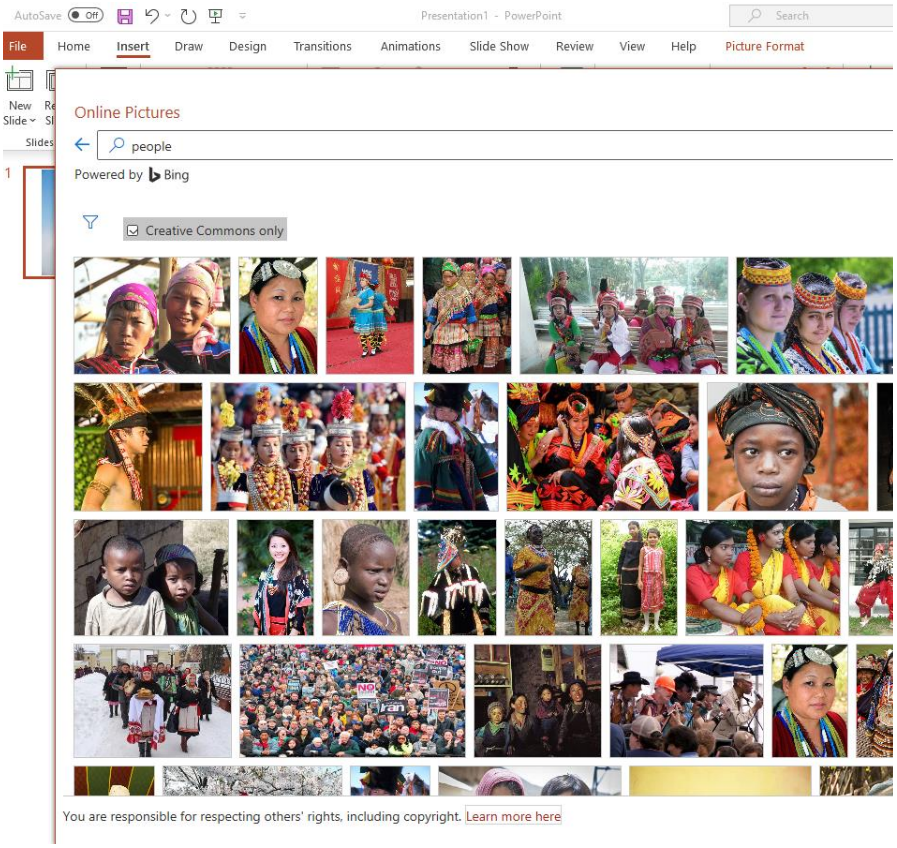

Figure 13: Searching for an image inline in PowerPoint.

Podcasts

Podcasts are a special type of virtual session where only the audio is recorded. They're normally published on a regular schedule, and you can use dedicated software to subscribe and listen to them.

Note: Most of the things that you find in this book are relevant also to podcasts, including the parts about posture, body language, etc. The way you talk is influenced by your body language. If you record a podcast while relaxed on a sofa, your voice will reflect that, as we already saw in a previous section about posture.

If you need more information about creating a podcast, you can take a look here.

Of course, you don't need slides during a podcast, but sometimes people prefer having something to follow so they don't forget important parts. Slides, some printed material, or a list can be useful.

(Virtual) sessions and personal branding

We'll talk about personal brands and personal branding extensively in Chapter 6, but if you want to create and improve your personal brand, virtual sessions are a great way to do it, especially if they're recorded and available online.

Note: Keep in mind that the opposite is also true. A bad session available online can reduce your opportunities to be selected as a speaker in conferences, events, etc. If the session is under your control, always check its quality before publishing.

Even if you cannot publish online the full recording of a session, you can always publish your slides (if they aren't subject to copyright and don't contain reserved information).

Figure 14: Add the link to the published slides directly at the end of your presentation, before the Q&A.

Use the last slide to invite people to connect with you on social networks, especially on LinkedIn if you're interested in a professional connection.

The QR code generated from the LinkedIn app is a powerful addition to the final slide.

Figure 15: Author promoting his QR code to connect with people on LinkedIn at the end of a session, and actual results after that session.

After you've published your videos and the slides, don't forget to promote them on your social channel, and also add them to the Experience section of your LinkedIn profile.

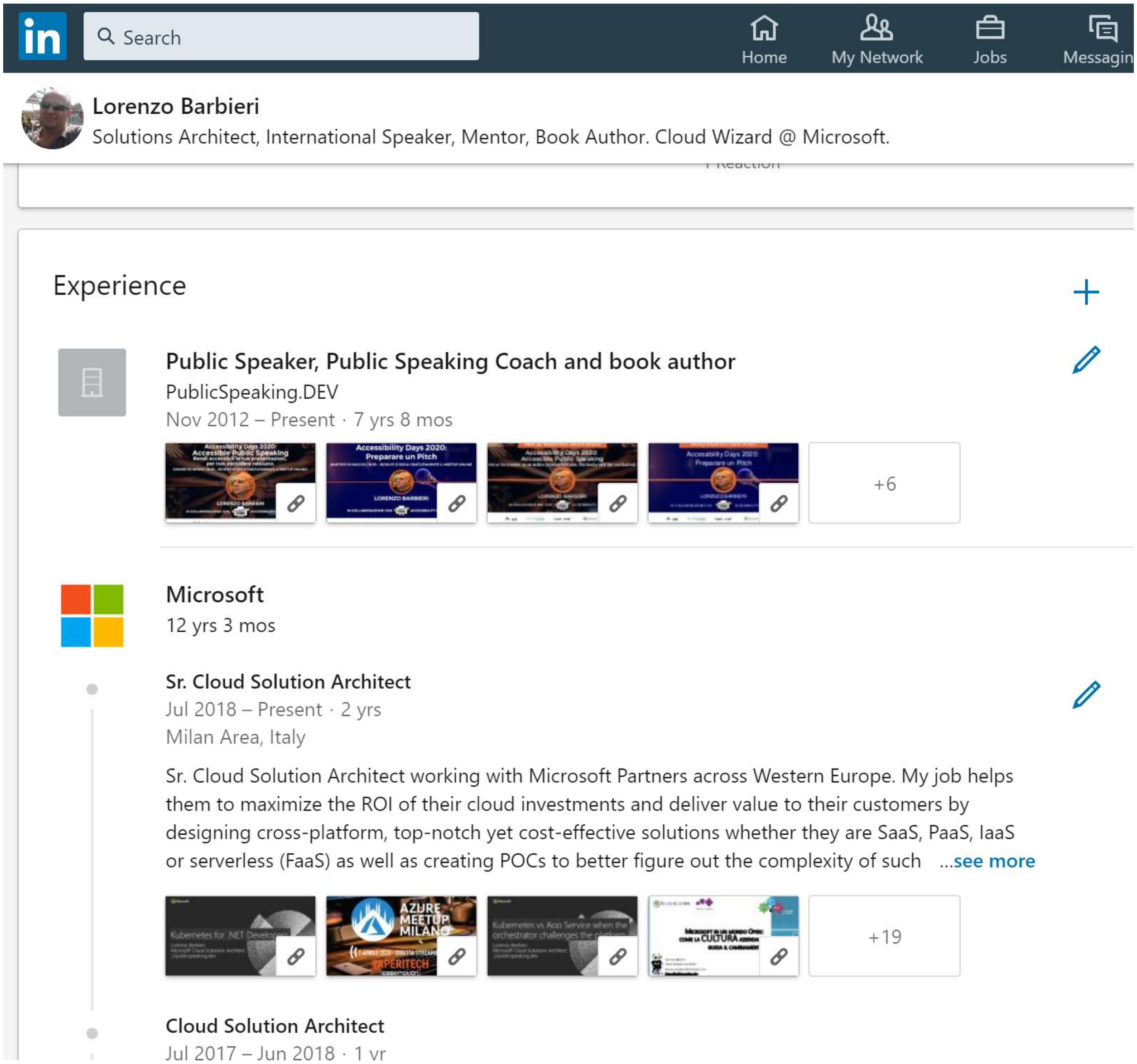

Figure 16: Sample LinkedIn profile with slides and videos.

YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, LinkedIn video, Twitch, etc.

When “old” people (like the author 😊) think about a virtual session, they normally think about having a virtual event, promoting it to an audience, perhaps through a (virtual) meetup or a company portal, and delivering it at a specified time.

Social media has completely changed the traditional approach. You start by publishing your content on a platform (the list in the section title is incomplete and growing every day) and then promote it to gain followers, or subscribers, or whatever they're called in the platform you're using. Then, they can see your other videos promoted by the platform the next time they open it, or they'll receive a notification when you're publishing something, live or recorded.

Being a YouTuber (or whatever the term is on other platforms) can be a full-time job or can be part of your full-time job. You can choose to publish on only one platform or go on multiple platforms at the same time, depending on your strategy.

Consider that every platform has its own rules and audience. Also, sometimes an account is closed by the platform owner without much space for manual inquiry or intervention, so it's better to diversify your range of activities. That way, if one account is closed (perhaps in error, or due to complaints) you still have other ways to do your work or to promote yourself.

Branded masks, clothes, webcam wallpaper, desktop wallpaper

Everything is a brand, including branded masks if you need to deliver your session in-person in a closed and small location. There are many companies that print masks with custom colors and logos. Sometimes it can be worth the money.

Delivering a virtual session doesn't mean that you cannot invest in the physical part of your personal (or company) brand.

If you have a good webcam or camera, you can dress with branded t-shirts (or whatever branded apparel you like), and people will notice it.

In most software, you can select a virtual background for the image streamed by the webcam, and you can use it with a custom image containing your logo, for example. Or like in the picture from the section on smiling and posture, you can have a dedicated corner in your (home) office with your logo.

Be consistent and use the same (or a similar) image for your desktop wallpaper. People will notice these small but key details.

Questions and answers during live events

Questions and answers during live events can be difficult to manage, more difficult than with in-person events.

In both cases, you can tell the audience that you will answer most of their questions at the end of the presentation, and this, in most cases, is the safest bet.

During in-person events, it's easier to accept questions while you're talking because you can see raised hands. You acknowledge that and then, when you've finished your sentence or section, you listen to the question. The difficult part is getting back on track after the answer, but that depends on your ability as a speaker, and also on the time you have.

If you decide to take questions during virtual events, they can become distracting. You see the chat during your presentation, and your brain starts reading the messages. Your eyes are focused on the chat window, so you can lose virtual eye contact with the attendees.

It's much better if somebody is taking care of the questions in the chat while you're speaking, or perhaps you defer Q&A to the end of each section of the presentation.

If the conferencing software that you're using allows to people to open the microphone and start talking, it's better to control that feature. Many events can be damaged by people leaving their microphones open with a background of phone calls, babies screaming, or unpleasant comments, etc.

Chapter 4 Accessibility and Inclusion in Presentations

Fonts, colors, screen resolutions, contrast, language, jargon, image captions, live captions, accessible PPTX and PDF, etc. There are a lot of things to know to make our presentations accessible to everybody when you're on stage, during virtual sessions, and when you publish your slides.

Accessibility terms

People with disabilities shouldn't be defined by their condition. **The first step to make your presentation more accessible and inclusive is to use a language that conveys respect to all people, in the slides and while presenting.**

Don't refer to people as normal, mute, disabled, crippled, etc. Always use terms like without disabilities, unable to speak, people with disabilities, with limited mobility, and so on.

Here you can find a list of accessibility terms that you can use in your slides and while presenting: https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/style-guide/a-z-word-list-term-collections/term-collections/accessibility-terms.

Why do we need to think about accessibility?

Accessibility is useful for everybody, not only for people with different abilities.

Adding subtitles to a presentation can help people in noisy environments, even if they don't have hearing loss. Adding subtitles to a virtual session can help people working with children and people with limited bandwidth, because they can read the subtitles instead of relying on audio. A presentation could be subtitled in another language when different people talk in different languages in the same country or online, or when people are learning a new language.

Having the right colors, contrast, and fonts can make the presentation clearer to people who have temporary visual impairments, like they've lost their glasses, have a cataract, or have allergies, just as some examples.

Accessibility is useful for everybody!

Promoting the session to the right audience

Is your session accessible? You should promote it!

Not all sessions are accessible at the moment, and the feelings of various speakers on the topic are different. Most speakers don't even know that presentations can be easily made more accessible.

Are you using special effects?

Every time you go to an amusement park, before entering special attractions, you can find warning signs if the attraction is dangerous for some kinds of people.

If you're using special effects in your presentations, like videos, noises, or special props, you should warn attendees in advance, like they do in theaters and in big conferences.

Preparing the presentation

Creating a new, accessible presentation is fairly easy. [Adjusting a long presentation to make it accessible]() is another story. It's easy, but it takes time.

Accessibility Checker

Guidelines are useful, but an automated tool that checks a presentation is even better.

PowerPoint includes an Accessibility Checker that can be found in the bottom-left corner of the screen.

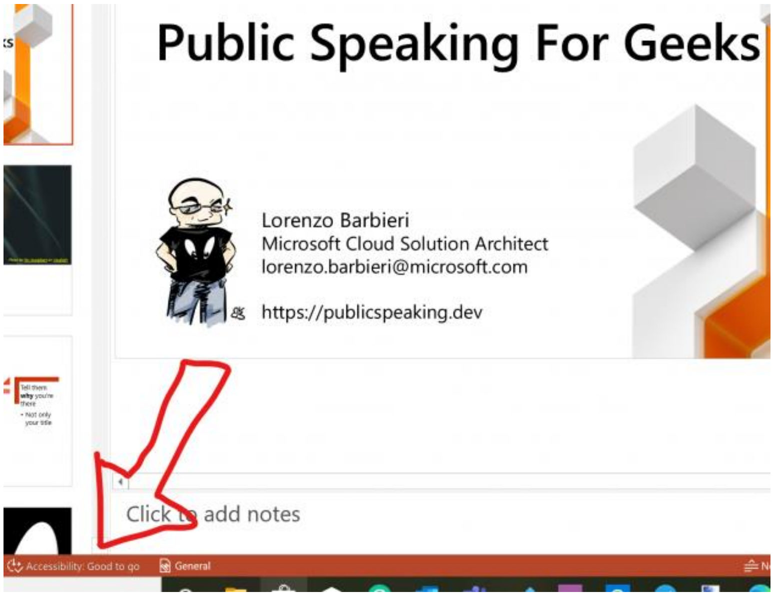

Figure 17: Accessibility Checker is always checking for accessibility in the background.

The Accessibility Checker can also be found under **File** > **Info**.

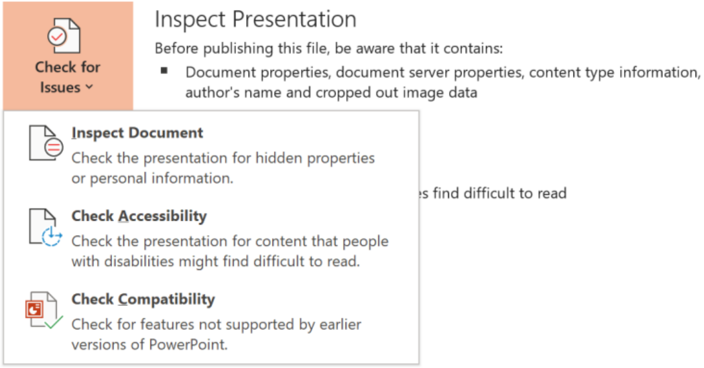

Figure 18: Another way to run Accessibility Checker.

The Accessibility Checker shows errors and warnings based on the recommendations we'll see in the next section. It also explains why something should be fixed, the steps to fix it, and even provides direct actions to fix it.

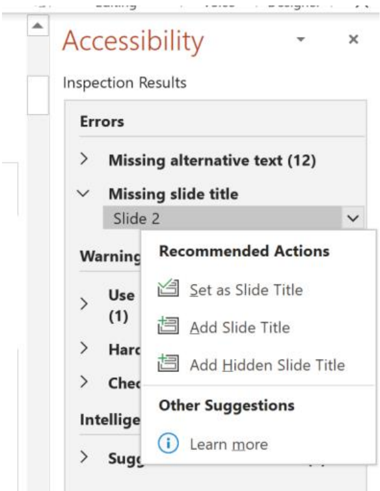

Figure 19: Recommended actions to fix accessibility.

Some recommendations are easy to fix, while some require rethinking the slides, animations, or videos. In the end, you decide if something should be fixed or not, depending on its importance for the presentation.

But, before working on the slides, the first step is to check the template we are using for accessibility, because if we fix the template, most of the work is already done.

Figure 20: Accessibility Checker with errors and warnings.

Is the template accessible?

Most conference templates are bad, and a lot of them are also not accessible. This is unacceptable.

Tip: When I receive a conference template that's not accessible, I open the Accessibility Checker and send the report to the organizers, asking them to fix it. If they won't do it, it's a bad sign.

If you don't know where to start, PowerPoint already includes a guide to create accessible templates.

Figure 21: Making Templates Accessible guide in PowerPoint.

If you want to search for that guide, or if you want to look at some sample accessible templates, just search for them.

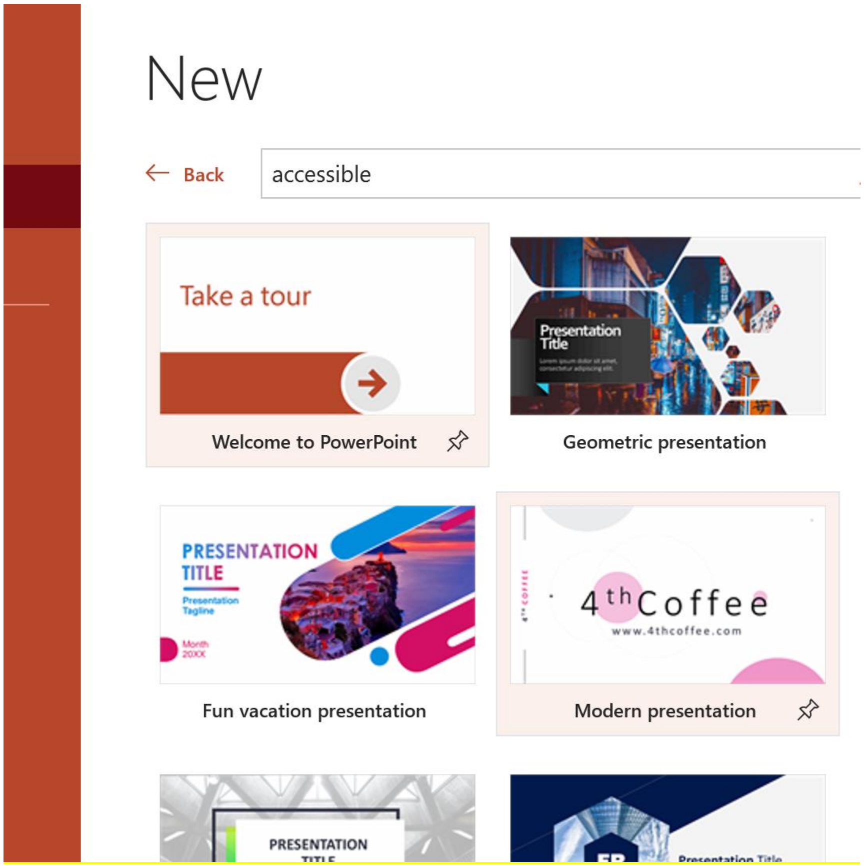

Figure 22: Finding accessible templates in PowerPoint.

Now we'll see what the principal recommendations are to make your slides accessible.

Slide layout

If you use a built-in slide layout, it ensures a hierarchical reading order of text blocks. Look at the available layouts and customize them if needed, but don't start adding text blocks to a blank layout if you don't want to spend ages fixing the reading order (discussed later in this chapter).

Each slide should have a unique slide title

People who are blind, have low vision, or have a reading disability rely on slide titles to navigate the slides. If the titles are not unique, or are missing, it's more difficult to navigate among the slides.

If multiple slides need to have the same title, consider adding numbers, like “Introduction 1 of 3,” or something like that.

If a slide doesn't have a title, you can select a meaningful item and mark it as the slide title. You can add a slide title, or you can add a hidden slide title.

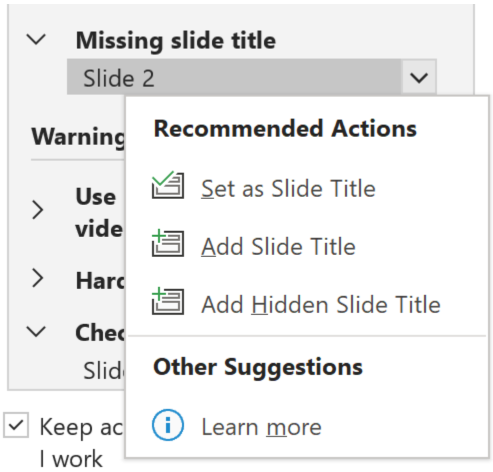

Figure 23: Fixing missing slide titles.

Reading order

Screen readers describe content on the screen, and they normally read elements in the order they were created. To ensure your content is read back in the order you intended, you should set the reading order.

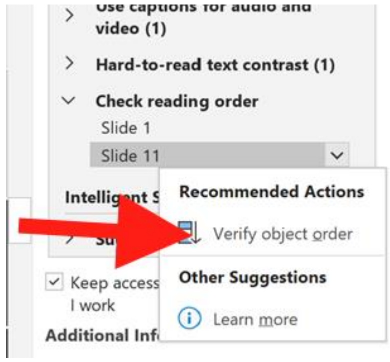

Figure 24: You can set the reading order directly from the Accessibility Checker.

In the Reading Order pane, you can arrange the reading order of all the objects. You can mark pictures and other objects as decorative by clearing the check box so they will be skipped by the screen reader, and you can even set the alternative text of pictures and other objects.

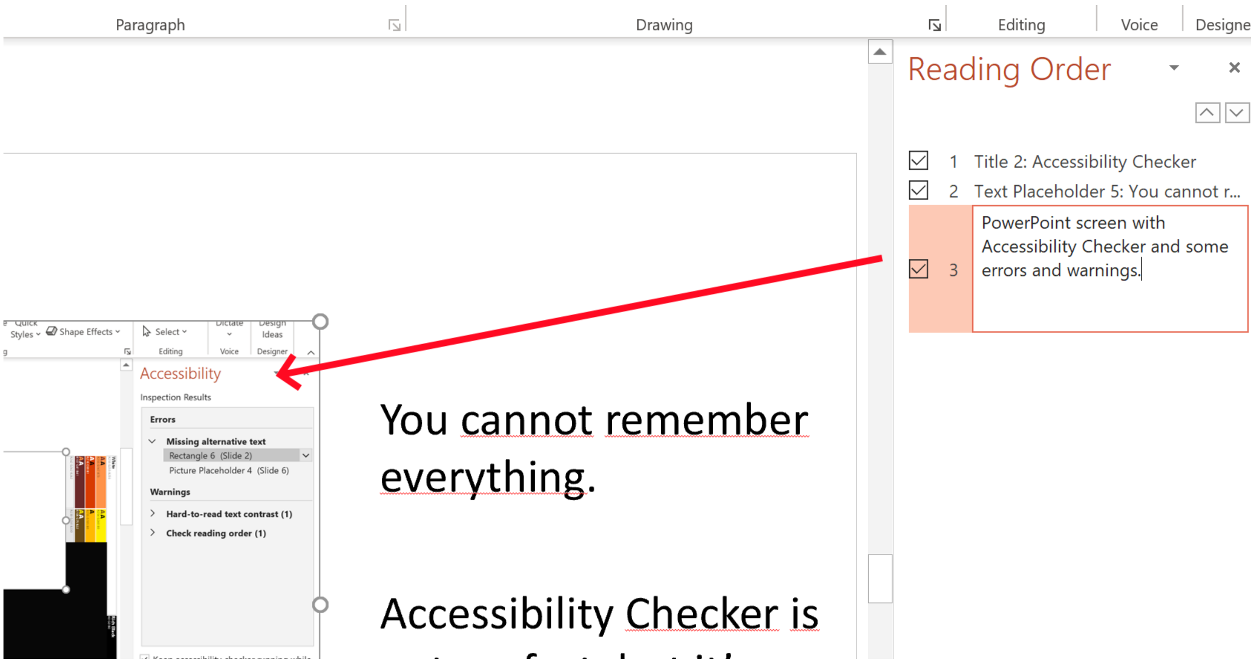

Figure 25: Setting the alternative text directly in the Reading Order pane.

Alternative text

Alternative (alt) text helps people with screen readers understand the content of slides by describing shapes, pictures, charts, tables, SmartArt graphics, and other objects.

You can set the alt text from the Reading Order pane, in the object context menu, or in the Accessibility Checker directly.

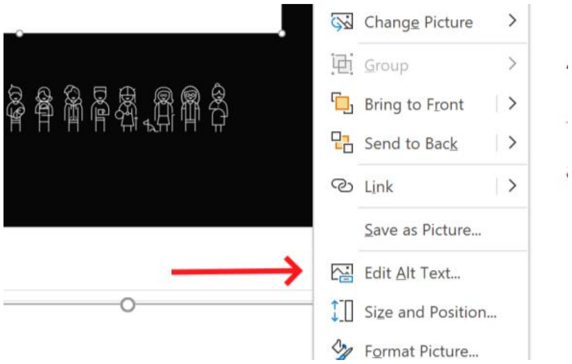

Figure 26: Setting the alt text directly from an object context menu.

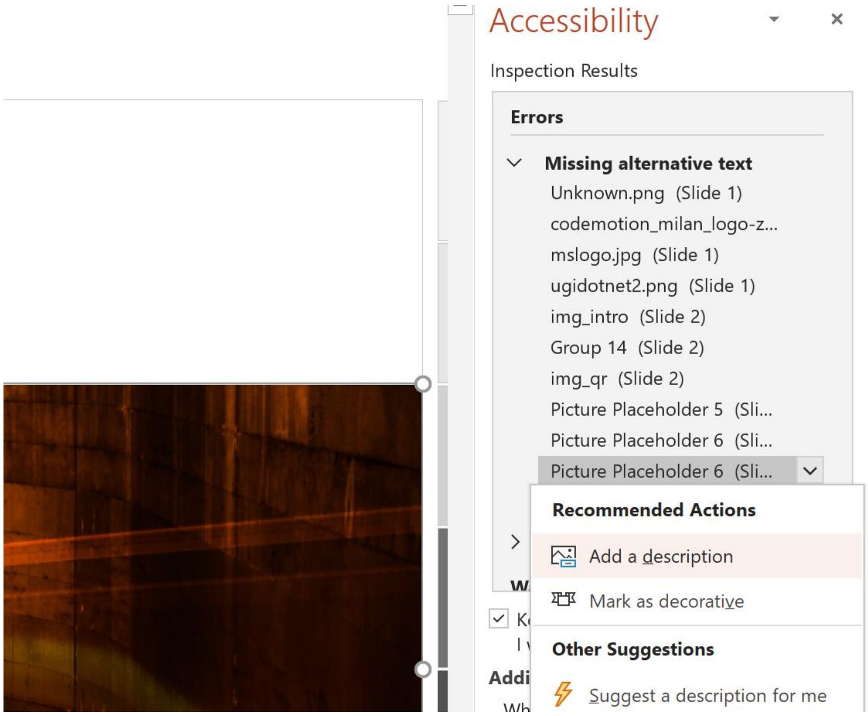

Figure 27: Setting the alt text from the Accessibility Checker.

If an object is meant to add only visual styling and it doesn't have any meaning, you should select **Mark as decorative**.

Using the power of image recognition, PowerPoint can also automatically generate a description.

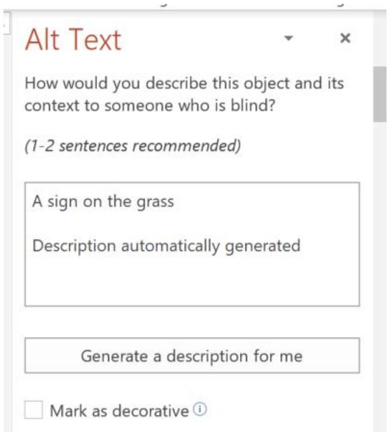

Figure 28: Autogenerated descriptions for alt text.

When you have hyperlinks on the slide, they can be difficult to read, especially if the underlying text is something like "click here." Try to add the hyperlink to meaningful text, and if that's not possible, you can use a ScreenTip that appears when you hover over the text, and that can be read by a screen reader. Always add an underline to color-coded hyperlink text, even if the result looks less polished, so that people who are colorblind can tell the text is a hyperlink even if they can't see the different color.

Font families and sizes

Always use a larger font size (18 pt. or larger). Don't trust the way slides appear on your screen, because small fonts are difficult to read when projected, or when using a remote presentation tool that also includes the participants, chat, etc. Use sans serif fonts and sufficient white space between sentences.

For headings, use the predefined styles. When you can't use those, consider adding bold, using a font that's natively black or bold, or simply using a larger font. Don't rely only on color to identify headings or other key areas.

To help people who have dyslexia or low vision, you should use familiar sans serif font families, such as Arial or Calibri, to reduce reading load. Even Comic Sans is a good font for people with dyslexia. Fluent fonts (Fluent Calibri and Sitka) were also found to ease reading by reducing visual crowding.

All-capital letters and excessive italics or underlines are difficult to read, so use them only if needed. Add plenty of white space between sentences and paragraphs, especially when projecting or using a remote presentation tool.

Contrast

To help people with low vision, use sharp contrast between text and its background. Always use dark text on a white or off-white background. If you have a dark background, use white text (or yellow in some cases) on it.

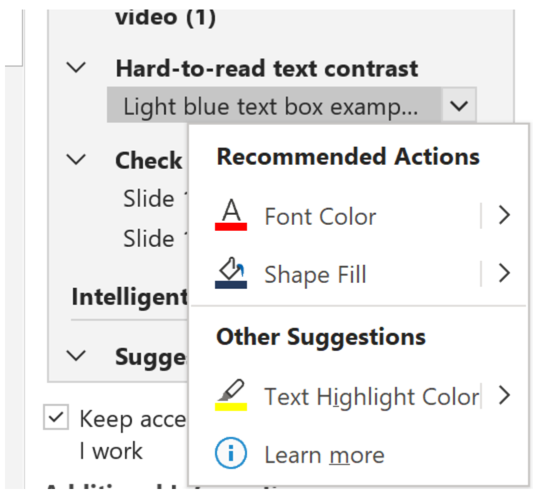

Figure 29: Accessibility Checker can spot hard-to-read text contrast.

Shapes and colors

You shouldn't rely only on colors to deliver information. For example, never use a single red or green light to show success or failure; there are people who cannot see the difference between those colors. Use different shapes and always supply a legend if the meaning is not universal.

Tip: Switch to the View tab and select** Grayscale **or** Black and White**. You should scan each slide in your presentation for instances of color-coding. This action is easy if you do it regularly when creating new slides.

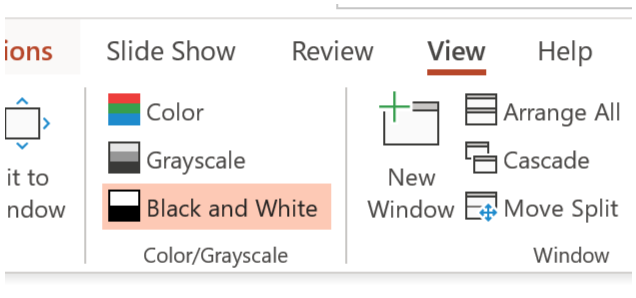

Figure 29: Look at your presentation without relying on colors, with Grayscale or Black and White views.

Use a simple table structure

Screen readers track their location in a table by counting table cells and use header information to identify rows and columns.

If a table is nested inside another table or if cells are merged or split, screen readers can't provide meaningful information about the table.

Videos

Consider adding subtitles, closed captions, or video descriptions to your videos.

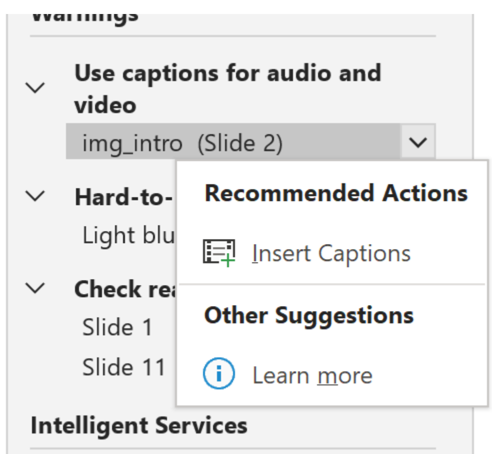

Figure 30: Use captions and subtitles if available.

PowerPoint supports the playback of video files with multiple audio tracks, closed captions, and subtitles.

Note: Currently, only PowerPoint for Windows supports insertion and playback of closed captions or subtitles stored in files separate from the video. For all other editions, you should encode them into the video using an external program.

Delivering the presentation

Accessible slides are important, but the way you deliver the presentation is even more important.

Body language

You shouldn't rely only on your body language and gestures to deliver your message.

Shouting at a slide, saying, "Can you see it?" multiple times without explaining what your audience is supposed to see is not respectful. You should explain what's wrong or good in the slide after some seconds of waiting.

Relying only on your facial expressions can be bad, even for people in the front rows.

There are countless examples, but in general, don't rely only on your body language, expressions, and gestures.

Jargon and accessible language

Have you ever heard presenters use a lot of jargon, most of the time industry- or company-specific, without explaining the meaning? It's a common error for people used to talking to internal audiences.

Always reduce the use of jargon and acronyms; if you need to use them, the first time you introduce a concept or an acronym, explain it.

Acronyms don't work well with automatic subtitles (see next sections). If you need to use them, it's always better to check how they're displayed, and perhaps spell them out.

Are you speaking too fast?

Some people prefer to read your lips, instead of reading subtitles. Therefore, you should always look at the camera, or look at the attendees, and never talk looking at the screen.

Some presenters speak too fast, especially when doing a presentation in another language.

To help people who are reading your lips, and to ease the comprehension of cognitive algorithms that generate subtitles, you should speak loudly and clearly, and not too fast.

Present with subtitles

Live subtitles are essential for people who are hard of hearing, even temporarily (due to background noise, bad network connection, speech in another language, etc.).

The latest version of PowerPoint can show live subtitles, even in a different language. Subtitles can be shown below, above, or overlaid on the slides.

Note: Subtitling requires an active network connection.

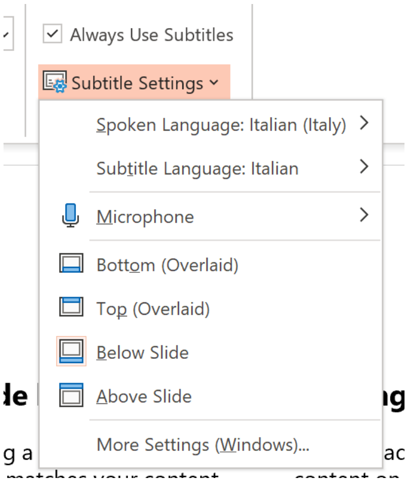

Figure 31: You can use subtitles in the latest versions of PowerPoint.

Other ways to add subtitles to your meetings

Zoom, Google Slides, Teams, Skype, and many other programs are adding options to enable subtitles for virtual and in-person meetings. The list is continuously increasing, so check the documentation of your favorite software to see how to enable it.

Publishing the presentation online

There are many ways to publish your slides online. One of the most-used services is SlideShare, part of LinkedIn.

SlideShare supports many formats, including PPTX and PDF. When sharing your accessible slides on SlideShare, always check them full screen, because sometimes the importer screws up some fonts and other details. In that case, the best solution is to export your slides in PDF format directly and import the PDF from SlideShare.

Tip: In [this post](), I cover many techniques that could be used to improve how presentations will look inside SlideShare.

Adding subtitles and closed captions to a video

If you haven't enabled subtitles in your presentations, or if you can't use subtitles, you can always add them to your recordings using video-producing software or directly in the platform you're using to share videos. For example, YouTube supports both custom subtitles and automated captioning (for select languages only).

Distributing other materials

Have you created collateral materials while preparing your presentation? Demo scripts? Why don't you share those materials together with the slides and all the other files? They can be used, for example, with a screen reader to improve the comprehension of a demo.

Is your website accessible?

So, you created an accessible presentation, curated your language, videos, and special effects. and then you published everything on your website, and it's not accessible?

Figure 32: Accessibility fail (source: https://www.memecenter.com/fun/64537/Wheelchair-AccessibilityFAIL).

Accessibility is an end-to-end journey: don't stop it at the last step.

Everybody should enjoy your presentations!

If you've a delightful story to tell, don't limit its audience because of accessibility problems in your slides and talk.

Tip: Every time I prepare a new presentation, I use the Accessibility Checker from the beginning. If I need to use an old slide deck, I plan some time to improve its accessibility, so I can also enjoy the new accessible slides in the future. As I already said, accessibility is a journey, let's begin it!

Chapter 5 The Power of Diversity

Are you a diverse speaker? Are you part of a minority? Did you ever feel discriminated against? Are you a white, middle-aged man who has never felt discriminated against?

In this chapter, we'll talk about why diversity is essential, and how to work around diversity issues, find engagement, find mentors, and why it's vital to support others, regardless of their gender, age, race, religion, etc.

Lack of diversity is a business issue, not just an ethical problem

Let's first be clear about this chapter. In most fields, even worse in the technology one, lack of diversity is a huge problem. It's a huge problem because gender, sexual orientation, race, and religious groups are often discriminated against, or are undervalued. Sometimes, a member of a marginalized group speaking at a conference might not be held in as high regard as other speakers because of a misperception by attendees that the speaker was only invited based on gender, race, etc., when the speaker is actually well-qualified.

For most people, ethical issues are important, but since they're mostly personal, it's rare that they lead to a persistent change, at least in the short term. What should change is the perception of these kind of issues.

Together with being ethically important for a lot of people, diversity can also be a great business driver. **Having a team with diverse skills and values often results in improved performance.** And this can lead to greater changes in a shorter time.

> ***Note: Before doing a keynote that talked about various themes, including diversity, I spoke with a friend who told me the story of a bug in the banking software his company was developing. It was related to the different ways most men and women did an operation. Their all-men team didn't catch the bug before going into production. After that episode, he worked even harder to find women to increase the skill level and the abilities of the team, including diverse thinking. That story helped my keynote deliver the message.***

Today, having conferences with all white males as speakers could be a problem for the brand of the conference, for the speakers (and their employers), and for companies that sponsor the events, even months after the conference ends.

> ***Note: I always tried to improve diversity in the tech field by mentoring people from diverse groups, by doing sessions together with people younger than me, by helping people applying and being selected for conferences, sometimes emphasizing their diversity. Some years ago, I sent a submission for the call for papers (CfP) for a conference and was accepted. I was working hard in that period, so I didn't notice that all the speakers were white, middle-aged men. I went to the conference, did my***

session, and then went back to work. After some months, the conference organizers and employers of many speakers were mentioned in many tweets about the lack of diversity in that conference. That was a lesson I'll never forget: you should always check for diversity and actively work for that. After that episode, I was selected for another conference that had the same diversity issues, but that time I worked with the conference organizers to find some alternatives, to improve not only diversity, but also the business value of the conference itself.

More diversity and inclusion change lives

Talking about these topics is always problematic, especially when doing it in abstract ways.

It's one thing to work for more diversity and inclusion because you care and because you see real value, but it's another thing when it directly impacts your life. Here are two stories that were told during Global Diversity CFP Day in Milan, an international conference created to help members of underrepresented or marginalized groups to become tech conference speakers, at the beginning of 2020:

- Diversity and Inclusion in IT Conferences—a post by Codrina Merigo.
- When Inclusion Can Change a Life—a post by Sergio Meloni.

If you're an aspiring speaker, especially if you're part of an underrepresented group, try to find a local mentor you trust, look for experienced speaking mentors, follow Twitter accounts such as Diversify Tech, QueerJS, Women in Technology, Women Who Code, Global Diversity CFP Day, Black Girls CODE, and many others.

More diversity is a process, not a destination

The main problem when talking about diversity and inclusion is related to people saying something along the lines of "those speakers were selected ONLY because they belong to that particular group."

These kinds of comments are responsible for having speakers from an underrepresented minority thinking that they were selected only because they belong to the minority, leading to (in some cases) or increasing an impostor syndrome (we'll talk about it in Chapter 7).

The best way to overcome these (and other kinds of arguments) is by doing an excellent job preparing the speaker, especially for people new in the role. If you're a conference organizer, or if your role is to select speakers and ensure the quality of the sessions, you should do dry runs and ensure that the sessions will be the best possible. This is true for every speaker, but it's even more important for new speakers coming from minority groups, because they have all eyes on them. Also be sure that the speakers tell some stories related to their experiences, giving a personal touch to the sessions, making them unique.

Note: If I attend a conference and the speaker is not at the expected level, I don't blame the speaker, I blame the organizers, unless the speaker is a famous one and that day was a bad day. Mandatory dry runs for new and, if the stakes are high, also for seasoned speakers is a way to improve sessions' quality.

No excuses

Sometimes conference organizers say that they tried to improve diversity, but they couldn't find anybody. It's not enough to post the call for papers for the conference and wait. Organizers should take an end-to-end approach, where they also measure the results of their diversity and inclusion efforts.

In 2019, I wrote a long post about the topic, and I want to share it here.

> *In my career, I often discuss metrics and how they shape business and results.*
>
> *There's no "good" metric, per se, since when there's a metric, people start behaving to maximize it. So, a good metric alone can polarize your business and lead to worse results. Therefore, most companies use a balanced scorecard with different metrics that in the end should lead to more balanced business results.*
>
> *I've been thinking about diversity and inclusion in the communities and events world for some time, and I've concluded that you cannot merely "measure" one of the outcomes, for example, the number of diverse speakers over time, or the number of new speakers, or the number of young speakers, and so on.*
>
> ***Measuring only one of the outcomes can tell you that you have a problem**. For example, an event with an all-men speaker line-up for several editions, for sure, has a diversity problem. A community where the same people speak at all the events has a problem.*
>
> *But, if you only measure the output, you don't consider the process, the context, and the difficulties of finding the right balance.*
>
> *An event should be successful, so you need the right number of experienced speakers who will attract people. But you should continuously search for and find new talents, to ensure diversity, but also to guarantee the survival of the initiative in the long term.*
>
> *I hate when I ask the organizers if they're working to ensure diversity, and they say, "We have a call for papers." In the corporate world, when you have a metric, you cannot just say, "We did a Facebook campaign." You have to work on different strategies, and you should measure the results and work to reach your target.*
>
> ***I think that in the community and event world, people should do the same.***
>
> *Do you have short- and long-term metrics? Are you actively working to reach them? Do you really care about them?*

Here are some example metrics, covering outputs and process:

- *Number of first-time speakers over time.*
- *Number of diverse speakers over time.*
- *Number of diverse speakers who were directly invited to apply for the CfP.*
- *Number of first-time speakers who became regular speakers.*
- *Number of diverse speakers you've nurtured and grown over time.*
- *Evaluations for recurring speakers vs. first-time speakers. How to improve both.*
- *Number of channels that can be used to attract new and diverse people.*
- *Networking with other communities to exchange people and grow together.*
- *Activities to attract and to increase the value of new, diverse, and recurring speakers.*
- *How many dry runs you have done over time.*
- *Rough number of people from underrepresented minorities attending your conferences[1].*

These numbers don't happen using magic. They require work. They require dedication. But these are topics for some upcoming posts.

Sharing the results with the community

I like it when people share the metrics and results with the community from time to time. Community members or event participants can see the whole picture, and they can also suggest new people or new ways to reach new people.

Sometimes, I hear complaints about how a community is managed, but most of the time, people change their minds once they know the numbers, the process, and the hard work behind those numbers.

Think about sharing not only your code of conduct, but also what you are doing to improve the situation.

Note: Don't share only numbers and what works well. Please share also what doesn't work, and what could be improved.

If something seems controversial, do a dry run!

Different people have different sensibilities around diversity and inclusion. You can't, of course, please everyone, but you can try to gather a lot of different feedback from different people.

[1] Number of people from underrepresented minorities could be difficult to measure for virtual meetings, and could pose privacy problems for physical conferences, but it could be useful to know at least a rough estimation. More people from diverse minorities attending and feeling part of the community means more people could send a proposal in the future. Thanks to my colleague Guenda for the suggestion to add this metric to the list.

Note: Dry runs are not only for sessions. As I've already [done many times on my public-speaking-related blog](), I've also discussed this chapter with different people before sending it for review.

Code of conduct

The first thing I check for when submitting a proposal to a conference is the presence of a code of conduct (CoC), and whether the CoC is inclusive, respectful, and open to anybody.

It's so easy to have a good CoC that I don't trust it when a conference or an event doesn't have one.

If you're a conference organizer and need some suggestions to create a CoC, you can look at this post from Flavia Weisghizzi: https://publicspeaking.dev/diversity-inclusion/why-and-how-to-create-a-code-of-conduct-for-your-events/.

Having a proper CoC can't prevent inappropriate behaviors, like mansplaining (see Chapter 8) and other subtle, or not so subtle, biased behaviors. The CoC can be used as a reference to explain to offending people that their behavior is a violation of the CoC and won't be tolerated.

Sometimes presenters don't feel that something is offensive until they're told so. Always try to talk to people about the issues, before taking proper actions.

Every conference, physical or virtual, should have a way to report CoC violations. Those should be evaluated according to the CoC, to local laws, and to common sense, whenever possible.

Always use inclusive language

Language used in presentations, slides, blog posts, and documentation should be inclusive, respectful, and should promote equal opportunity.

There are many guidelines that you can follow:

- Guidelines for Inclusive Language—Linguistic Society of America.
- Bias-free communication—Microsoft.
- Inclusive Chromium code—Google and others.

English has the concept of a singular they that can be useful in this context.

Having inclusive language is not related only to the English language; for example, this article talks about a guideline for the Italian language.

Most of these guides refer to gender-neutral language, but race-neutral is a critical point, too. Terms such blacklist, whitelist, master, slave, etc., should be replaced whenever possible, as many companies are already doing:

- Inclusive Chromium code on racially neutral language.
- GitHub abandons 'master' term to avoid slavery row.
- George Floyd: Twitter drops 'master', 'slave' and 'blacklist'.

If you think that awareness on these topics is something recent, there are articles from 15 to 20 years ago discussing the ban of offensive technical jargon. Perhaps it's the right time now.

Other cultural differences

Being inclusive and respectful of diversity involves many different and unrelated fields that are sometimes difficult to know in advance.

Therefore, it's always better to do a dry run of material with somebody who could be sensitive to the topic.

> ***Note: Since I started doing presentations for an international audience, I discovered that there are many things that could upset people. In one slide, I said that "bullet points kill people," with my avatar lying on the floor. That slide was tweeted by a friend and received a negative comment. Another time I was at a conference, one of the speakers came to me, knowing that I'm Italian, asking if the joke that he had on a slide was funny or could be disrespectful to Italians.***

If you can't do a dry run, you should try at least to look up cultural differences and things to avoid with people from certain audiences. The internet is full of articles about cultural differences, like this one.

If you're doing a virtual session for a global audience, you should be prepared to explain things that you don't even expect to regarding the content, or even worse, the perception of your talk.

Now it's our turn!

What can we do to improve diversity and inclusion (at least in the tech field)?

We can help conferences give free tickets to people from minority groups.

We can help (aspiring) speakers from minority groups to create, improve, and submit their proposals.

We can help those speakers do dry runs and give them honest feedback.

We can avoid participating in conferences where the speaker line-up is not diverse enough (for small meetups and events, you can look at their speaker line-up over time), or we can offer help to the organizers to improve diversity and inclusion.

We can avoid taking part in conferences that don’t have a code of conduct, politely asking the organizers to add one.

We can mentor aspiring speakers.

We can invite aspiring speakers from underrepresented minorities to submit proposals to our conference.

We can ask famous speakers or organizations to help us spread the message that our conference is open for proposals from underrepresented minorities.

We can do a round of blind selection for sessions, without knowing who submitted the sessions, to see if there are biases while selecting them, and work to reduce those biases.

We can talk about diversity and inclusion until our industry has overcome this problem.

“We” is the most important word. We the speakers, we the organizers, we the attendees.

Chapter 6 Personal Branding for Geeks

Have you sent hundreds of proposals without receiving any answer? Do you want to be invited to speak at big conferences? You need to invest in your personal brand, do some marketing work, and give people a reason to listen to you.

What is a personal brand?

I like this definition from Wikipedia:

> "Your brand is a perception or emotion, maintained by somebody other than you, that describes the total experience of having a relationship with you."

You can work on your personal brand, but you can't completely control it because it depends entirely on the impressions you give to others.

> ***Note: Even if you work for a company, you have your own personal brand, sometimes associated with the company's, sometimes completely disconnected. You must always work on your personal brand, because it's not good for your image or career just to be identified with your company's name.***

Amazon's Jeff Bezos defined (personal) brand as "what other people say about you when you're not in the room." Don't limit it to thinking that personal brand is only your reputation.

Having a good brand helps you in your job, but sometimes in your personal life as well, in ways that you cannot imagine when you start working on it. Everything is easier when your good reputation precedes you.

> ***Note: I can remember dozens of times when I was introduced to a new customer and they said, "I know him, he's Genio Del Male" (my blog/Twitter alias, which in Italian means evil genius; see the About the Author page at the beginning of the book). Most of the time, it is easier for me to convince my customers because of my brand. Of course, you should keep working on your brand, because it can also become a memory of an ancient past. I have a lot of colleagues who worked with me as evangelists for Microsoft and were well known in the market, and now people barely remember them. On the other hand, others are still relevant today because they continued to work on their brands, or their brands were so strong that they lived on years after they changed jobs.***

Having a strong personal brand can also be seen as having insurance for your future, especially in these troubled times. Nobody can assure you that your personal brand will make a difference, but not having it will for sure make one, in a negative way, since nobody will know you and it will be more difficult to emerge from among the crowd.

Everybody has a personal brand, even if they don't do personal branding

Most people confuse a personal brand and personal branding. We already defined what a personal brand is. Your personal brand exists even if you don't do anything about it.

Personal branding is the process and the strategy used to increase the value and the perception of a personal brand.

Never underestimate your online brand and reputation

Even if you have a very strong personal network, people who know you and trust you, you must work on your online brand and reputation, because it's crucial when you need to do something new, when you send your proposals to new conferences, and also when you have business meetings with new customers.

In general, conference organizers and new customers will try to find you online, look at your profile on LinkedIn and other social media, look at your website, and so on.

> ***Tip: Every now and then, open a private window in your browser, and search for your name, or your brand. Look at the results through the eyes of your customers or conference organizers.***

If you don't like what you see when you search for your name or your brand online, you should work hard to change it. Most of the time, when people talk about rebranding, they talk about companies. But many influencers, politicians, and sometimes "normal" people have tried to rebrand themselves because they had a bad or outdated image.

Having a personal brand doesn't exempt you from knowing your stuff!

Let's first clarify this point. Having a personal brand and working to improve it doesn't exempt you from knowing the matter you're talking or writing about.

I know a few people who have a strong personal brand, but when I talk with them, I can feel that they haven't mastered their stuff. You shouldn't be a know-it-all, but if you're speaking and writing about a topic, after a while people expect something more from you, and they'll probably be able to tell if you've really mastered your stuff or not.

You shouldn't be an expert when you start working on your personal brand

This point seems to contradict the previous one, but that's not true, because the starting point is different. In the last section, the focus was on people who are already famous in a field, but not as competent as their brand suggests. In this section, we're talking about the journey to establish a personal brand in a field.

Is it possible to work on your personal brand while you're studying or improving in a field? Yes, of course it is.

You should make it clear that you're on a journey. People will follow your journey and will trust you even more at the end of it. You'll become a brand without even noticing it.

Note: It's always fun when, after a journey like this, you search for a topic and find one of your articles, blog posts, slides, or sessions from some time ago that you've completely forgotten.

Think ahead when choosing a name

A lot of people, including the author, have chosen a brand name and later regret that decision. There are many reasons that a brand name can become stale or outdated, or become too restricting:

- Your brand is related to a product, technology, or methodology that changed its name or evolved. For example, my friend Matteo Emili's Twitter alias @MattVSTS was related to Microsoft Visual Studio Team System product naming. Microsoft already changed the name of the product many times, but for Matteo it is too difficult to change his alias, both for practical and sentimental reasons.
- You define your brand name using a language, and then decide to broaden your scope, and nobody will understand your brand. For example, my GenioDelMale brand that means evil genius is both in Italian (limiting its international appeal) and could lead to misinterpretations once translated, because the irony or some special meaning could be lost.

In most cases, it's much better to stick to your real name, or use a brand that's not country- or technology-specific, like my friend Matteo Pagani, also known online as qmatteoq.

Do you need a logo?

If you decide to create a name for your brand, you can also think about having a logo related to that brand.

Note: When I started using Genio Del Male as the name for my blog and as the alias for my social media presence, I decided to use a logo (two white eyes on a black background), and after a while I also created t-shirts and hoodies with the logo on them, together with my Twitter alias. After some time, a friend of mine drew a picture of me (in my typical Wonder Woman position 😉) and I started using it as my avatar during my sessions. In some sessions, to show the power of the Morph transition, the avatar floated around the slides during slide changes.

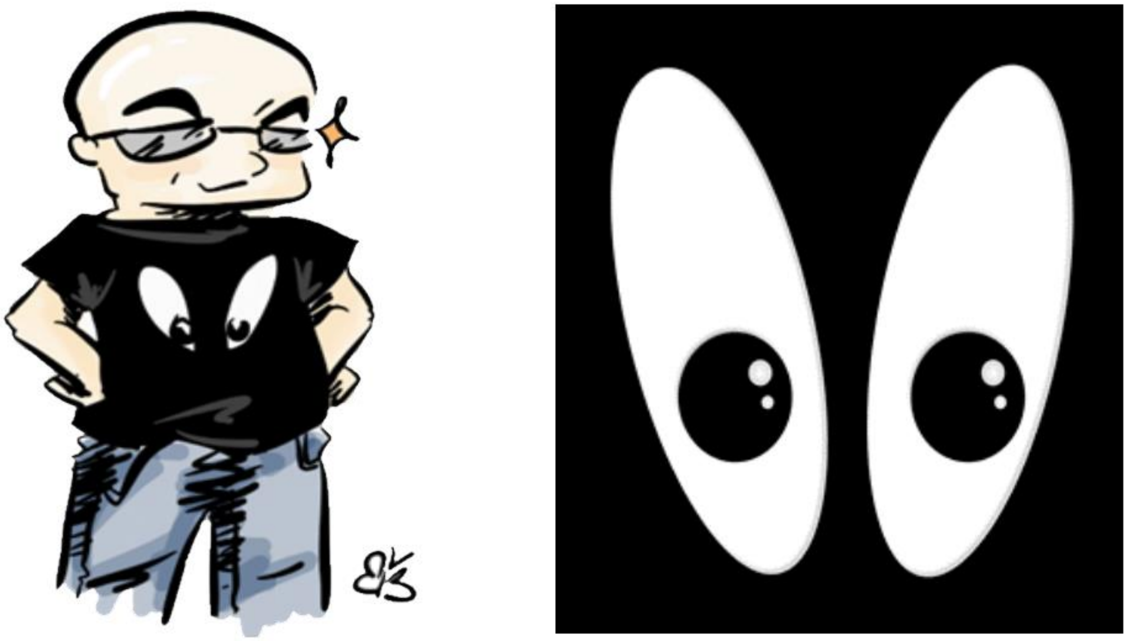

Figure 33: Author avatar and logo

Don’t worry if you don’t have a logo. A nice picture of you, especially on your blog, and on your personal social media pages, is even more important than having a logo.

If people follow you or read your blog, they’ll see your face from time to time. When they meet you, they can recognize you, even at customer meetings, or while walking around in a shopping center.

Note: The first time I went to the United States to attend a conference, I was walking in the partners’ pavilion when I was called by a woman who recognized me because she read my blog. It’s a small world, I thought.

Find your niche

People think that it’s not easy to find their space, since most topics already have a lot of experts.

You have two ways to find your space:

- You can do a brute-force attack on the system, posting a lot of content relevant to a broad topic you want to associate your brand with. But you’ll need a lot of time and effort to start obtaining results.
- You can find your niche, perhaps a part of a broad topic that few people are exploring. There are a lot of public speaking coaches, experts, blogs, and books. This is why I decided to focus on public speaking for geeks. It’s less crowded and gives me a lot of satisfaction and much more visibility, even if it’s in a small group of people.

Once you find your niche, try to explore it, and try to see if there's interest. Try to nurture it. It could take some time.

Note: When I started proposing "public speaking for geeks" sessions at conferences, it was poorly received by conference organizers. So, I started to write about it. I went to many small meetups, I kept sending proposals, I did some webinars. In the end, I was invited to do the sessions in many Italian and international conferences.

You shouldn't stay forever in your niche. You can find other, unrelated niches, or you can expand your niche to include other topics, like I did for public speaking when I started talking about diversity and inclusion, accessibility, code of conduct, etc.

If you're not sure what to do, try to find a mentor who can help you evaluate your strengths and search for direction.

Write before you speak!

The most important suggestion I received when I wanted to speak at big conferences, but was too junior for it, was **start writing**.

At the beginning, I was skeptical about that, but my mentor told me that writing allows you to show many things:

- You know the subject.
- You can organize your knowledge and transfer it to other people.
- You can summarize important things.
- You can refer to other people's work and complement it.

These qualities are expected also from a speaker, so writing helps you prove you have them. Then you should work on your stage presence. But writing can open a lot of doors, even better when you write for someone who will review your material before publishing it, like this book.

Note: Some people are scared of reviews like they're scared of dry runs, but, exactly like a dry run can dramatically improve your session, a review can dramatically improve your book, article, tip, etc.

In most conferences, when you send your proposals, they're often discussed with you and improved, even after being accepted. Conference organizers most of the time know their attendees very well. Great conference organizers want to give attendees the best content for their needs by improving speakers' proposals.

Connect with people on LinkedIn

There are two ways to connect with people on LinkedIn at the end of a session.

If, after the session, you meet a person you'd like to connect to, you can open the LinkedIn app, go to your network, and add a new contact.

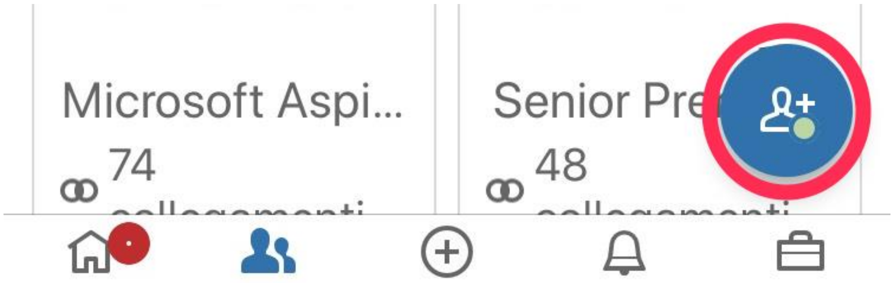

Figure 34: Adding new connections on LinkedIn.

You can also easily connect using the QR code directly from the search bar, by tapping the QR code button.

Figure 35: Easily scan a LinkedIn QR code, or create your personal QR code.

You can scan a QR code or show your personal QR code. [You can also use the generated QR code and show it at the end of your presentations](), as we already saw in Chapter 3.

Figure 36: Author's LinkedIn QR code, with some customization.

If you want to improve your LinkedIn profile, you can find a lot of interesting articles online. I liked this ebook: [The Proven Secret of an Outstanding LinkedIn Profile: How to Speed Up Your Social Media with AI]().

Another interesting ebook is [Personal Branding with LinkedIn: The Think Natalia Method]().

If you can read Italian, one free ebook from one of my favorite authors is [LinkedIn Personal Branding]().

LinkedIn Social Selling Index

The [LinkedIn Social Selling Index]() is a way to evaluate how your LinkedIn profile compares to other profiles in the industry and in your network. It's a number between 0 and 100, and higher is better. As you can see from the picture, "establish your professional brand" is an important part of the overall score.

You shouldn't look at it every day, even if the index is updated daily. It's not a perfect way to evaluate your profile, but it's a nice starting point, and useful to follow the trend of your activities.

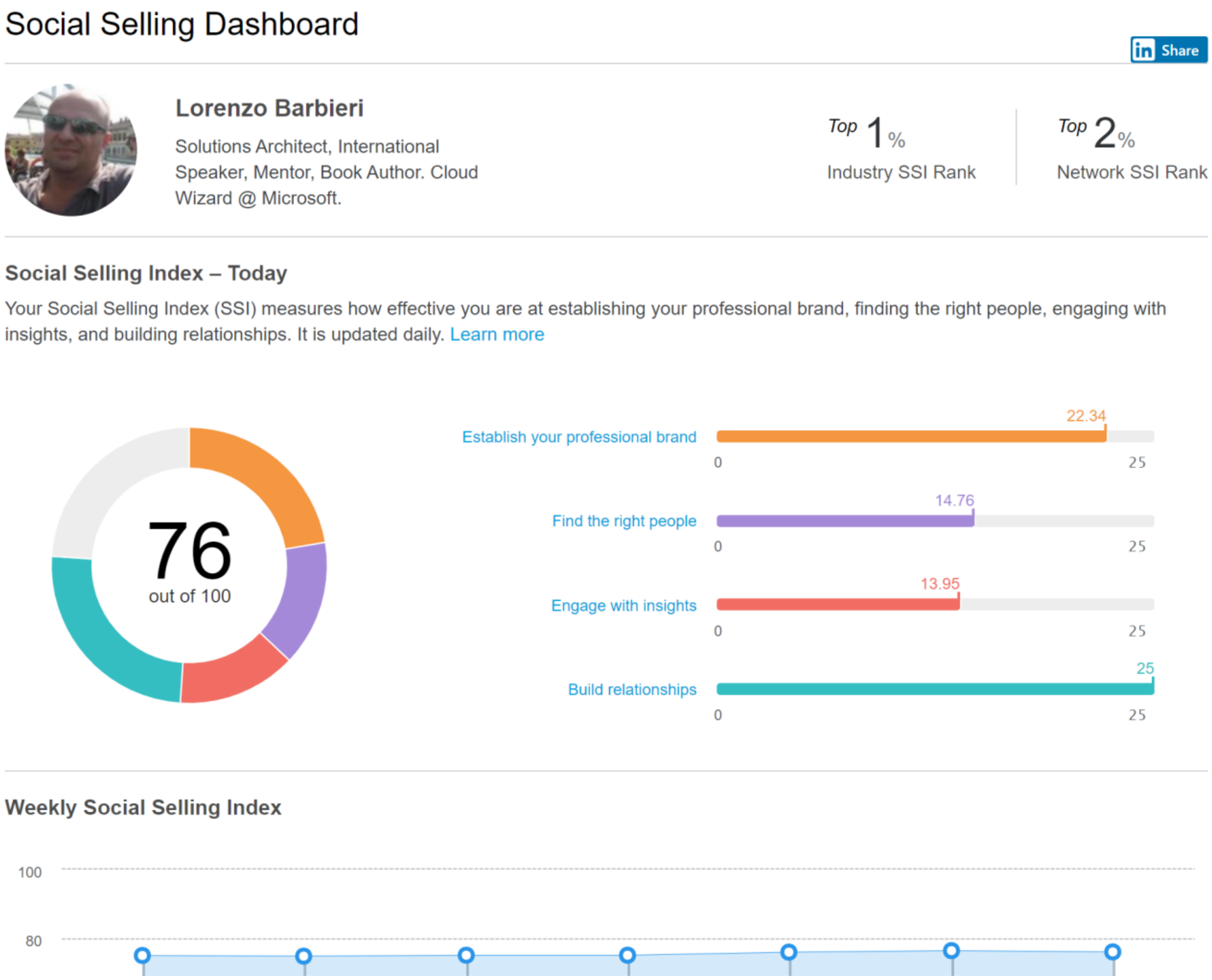

Figure 37: Author's Social Selling Index was 80+ on the best days, but still top 2% in his network.

What about other social media?

As we already discussed in Chapter 3, every social media platform has its strengths and its weaknesses, a different audience, different ways to interact with people, different algorithms that promote your content, etc.

Teaching the right social media strategy is outside the scope of this book: first, because the field changes every day; second, because it's part of your overall brand strategy, and the time, effort, and money you want to devote to your brand promotion, etc.

> ***Tip: If you want to pay to promote your content, always evaluate the different costs of different platforms, and the configuration options of the campaign that you're doing. Sometimes, you can publish content on one platform, and promote it on another one, because it's way cheaper.***

What happens when your personal brand grows too much for you to manage?

Sometimes, people feel that their personal brand has grown too much. They feel that they don't deserve the popularity (even if it's only in a small field, or among a small group of people).

If the situation is temporary, it could be an incentive to fill the gap, and then grow even more.

If the situation is persistent, or if it continues to come back, it could be a symptom of impostor syndrome, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 7 Impostor Syndrome and Other Difficult Phenomena Related to Public Speaking

I know a lot of people who could be excellent speakers, but they think they don't belong there. One reason can be impostor syndrome, in which there is constant doubt about one's accomplishments.

People with impostor syndrome will never feel 100% confident when giving a presentation, but there are many ways to work around it and obtain excellent results.

Note: Impostor syndrome, burnout, etc., can lead to depression and other serious problems. If you feel that you need help, don't be afraid to search for a professional who can work with you to help solve these issues. The suggestions in this chapter are not meant to substitute professional help.

Impostor syndrome

Impostor syndrome, also known as **impostor phenomenon** from a 1978 article that introduced the concept for the first time, is a psychological condition in which one doubts one's accomplishments and fears that others will see them as fraudulent.

People with impostor syndrome suffer from anxiety, fear of failure, and dissatisfaction with life, among other things.

Described at the beginning as a condition that was mostly found in high-achieving women, it was then studied in many demographics, including all genders, people with different occupations (from students to top-level managers), and completely different cultures.

Note: One difference between women and men is that women commonly face impostor syndrome in regard to performance, with a perception of ability and power guided by outperforming others, while men mostly fear being unsuccessful, or not good enough by themselves, without comparison to others.

Impostor syndrome can occur in people who never suffered from it before when something new happens in their work or academic environment; when there are new social interactions or new relationships (not only romantic ones); when there are comparisons made by colleagues or family members; or when there's a new manager or changes in the status quo. These are only examples, but it has been estimated that nearly 70% of all people will experience impostor syndrome at least once in their life.

Note: Impostor syndrome is an experience that occurs in an individual, [and it isn't considered a mental disorder](#).

Symptoms

Anxiety and stress are the most common symptoms, but sometimes impostor syndrome can lead to depression.

Never underestimate depression and other symptoms. The suggestions in this book are useful but cannot substitute for a trained professional.

There are many behaviors that can be explained with impostor syndrome (not all of them are present in a single person):

- Perfectionism (setting high performance standards, sometimes impossible to achieve, together with critical self-evaluation) is coupled with the fear that colleagues and managers expect too much from them:
  - Overworking and sometimes burnout are two common results, due to searching for perfection.
- Belief that failures are theirs, but successes are due to outside factors:
  - When people praise them, they tend to discount or completely ignore those compliments.
- They tend to stay under the radar. They avoid asking for a raise, avoid new opportunities and tasks for the fear of failure:
  - They are usually dissatisfied with their current job, but they don't do anything to change it.

Figure 38: Slide from Nicole Bartolini's presentation at Codemotion Rome about anxiety and impostor syndrome.

Note: Impostor syndrome is not only a confidence problem, and overconfidence is not a solution, like we'll see in the [Dunning-Kruger effect section](#).

Impostor cycle

The [impostor cycle](#) is one of the reasons why impostor syndrome is difficult to interrupt. Every event serves as a reinforcement of the previous ones, and with every cycle, negative feelings are increased.

Figure 39: Impostor cycle.

Looking at the impostor cycle, it's easy to understand why impostor syndrome is so subtle: success does not mean happiness, and every achievement increases fear, stress, anxiety, and self-doubt.

How to handle impostor syndrome

Most people who have symptoms of impostor syndrome don't even know about its existence. They just feel inadequate.

Knowing about the syndrome, and talking about it with a friend, a mentor, or a family member, or searching for professional help, is a huge step to fight it.

There are several types of people with impostor syndrome, but most of their behaviors are related to the search for perfection. Perfection is impossible, and we must accept that **nobody is perfect, because we are all humans**.

Instead of searching for perfection, you should **start documenting accomplishments**. Keep a written diary of personal achievements **and celebrate them** accordingly.

Every time you have a negative thought, you should challenge it with the help of your diary. Or by trying to relive moments of success or talking with someone and seeking honest feedback.

Is the Dunning-Kruger effect the opposite of impostor syndrome?

The Dunning-Kruger effect is often thought of as the opposite of the impostor syndrome. The Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive bias in which people with low ability at a task overestimate their ability, because they cannot recognize their limits.

Escaping the Dunning-Kruger effect requires being able to listen to negative feedback and study and practice a topic until it can be taught. **It requires time**.

Sometimes, some good dry runs can help speakers focus sessions on only the parts they can master. Find good mentors and let them judge whether you're really a jack of all trades, or if you're setting yourself up for a disaster.

> ***Note: While most people think that the Dunning-Kruger effect is the opposite of impostor syndrome, other people think that self-serving bias could be a better option. People with self-serving bias tend to credit success to their own abilities, while their failures could be ascribed only to external sources.***

Actor-observer asymmetry can explain why certain people are good judges when evaluating others and tend to be completely wrong when evaluating themselves.

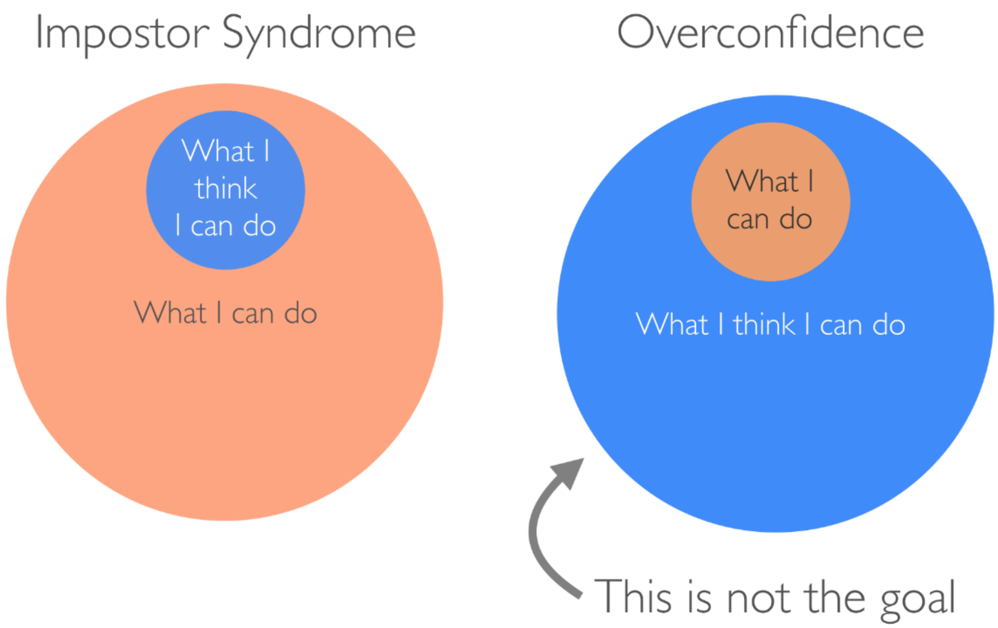

Figure 40: Impostor syndrome vs. overconfidence is a bad way to frame the problem (source: https://medium.com/counter-intuition/impostor-syndrome-is-not-just-a-confidence-problem-dea670e59f6e).

Social envy

As we saw in Chapter 6, social media is important to improve a speaker's personal branding, to increase the probability of being accepted or invited to speak at conferences, courses, etc.

Social media can also lead to social envy, a problematic form of social competition.

In the past, people mostly compared themselves to people they knew personally. It was difficult to compare themselves with people they saw in magazines or on TV.

Today, social media is normally used to share positive things about life, work, achievements, etc., and people can follow nearly everybody. These two facts can lead to social competition with other people, sometimes unconsciously.

Social competition, like many other kinds of competition, can be positive when your desire to obtain something is increased by the fact that somebody like you has achieved it.

Social competition can become social envy when it has negative effects on your life and on your relations with other people.

Social envy is bad for two reasons:

- Usually, people forget or ignore that other people normally post about good things on social media. Behind a prize, a certification, a promotion, an accepted paper, or speaking proposal at a prestigious conference, etc., there could be dozens of failed tries, a lot of hard work, and sometimes the luck of being at the right place at the right time.
- It can lead to bad behaviors toward other people, and since the speaking community is not so huge, those behaviors could also backfire.

Social envy can be avoided by thinking that the challenge is always and only with ourselves. Instead of suffering for other people's successes, we can try to understand what led to their successes, how they were selected, etc. Most the time, successful speakers can become our mentors, or at least, find some time to help us find our path.

Tip: Try to get inspiration from the best speakers. If their talk is accepted at a conference, study its format, understand why it was selected, and work on your reputation. If the CfP is still open, try to send something that you feel is missing from the draft agenda. If the CfP is closed, try to reach the organizers with your ideas, perhaps there's still a place for something. Most conferences are changing and try new formats, like a series of virtual sessions before the main event, or a hands-on lab, and you can be part of that. If it's too late to apply this year, mark your calendar, and be sure to propose something next year.

Note: It took me many years to see my "Public Speaking for Geeks" session accepted by an international conference. I had to work on my brand, and on the proposal, because it wasn't good enough to be accepted abroad. In the end, persistence paid off.

Speaker's burnout

Burnout is a serious condition that can be sometimes confused with impostor syndrome.

Burnout is a **state of prolonged exhaustion**—physical, mental, and emotional—**coupled with excessive stress**. Burnout can reduce people's work and personal effectiveness, decrease ability to make good decisions, and lead to lack of interest in many fields, including important ones.

Note: Burnout can lead to illness, depression, and other problems, like cardiovascular disease, and should be treated by professionals.

Speaker's burnout can be caused by excessive travel, prolonged class hours, lack of sleep, bad evaluations, and in times of forced remote work, lack of boundaries between work and personal life and excessive zoom fatigue.

Here are some suggestions to prevent or try to cure burnout:

- **Avoid zoom fatigue, reduce unnecessary calls**, find other ways to communicate with your team and manager, and use remote presentation tools only to do virtual sessions.
- **Take time off, and if you're sick, don't work**, especially from home. Sometimes you need to stop presenting (in-person or virtually) for some days (or months) to recover from speaker's burnout.
- **Talk with your manager, or with your team.** Let them know that you need help. Perhaps they can do a course with you, or they can find a solution and distribute part of your presentations to the rest of the team. Hiding your situation can lead to longer time off.
- **Self-care and compassion**. Speaker's burnout can happen to anyone, especially in these rough times. Don't judge yourself, and if some of your team members need help, please show them compassion and empathy.
- **Understand why you burned out, perhaps with the help of a therapist.**

Other suggestions include eating healthier, setting boundaries between work and personal life, turning off notifications to reduce interruptions, sleeping more, and dedicating some time to joyful activities.

Burnout can happen also if the pandemic has totally reduced your speaking engagements.

Chapter 8 Troublesome Situations and How to Handle Them

Most of the questions I receive are “How do you handle this situation?” Let’s look at the most common situations and how to handle them, and let’s also look at some strange ones I’ve encountered in my 20-year speaking career.

Understanding and managing expectations

What are your expectations when attending a session? Most of the time, we attend a session without clear expectations. Sometimes we like the speaker, sometimes we like the topic, sometimes we have a free slot between one session and another in a long conference.

Expectations are important, both for the speaker and for attendees. If you arrive early in the room and there’s time, try to ask people already there what their expectations are. Try to understand why they’re in the room. People can have unconscious expectations, and they can judge your session based on those.

At the end of the session, try to understand if your session met some or most of the audience’s expectations, and what you can improve in the next one.

What to do with interruptions, questions

You are the star of the session. People are there for your session and for the value that you’re giving them.

Normally, people don’t like people who keep interrupting a session, even when they ask relevant questions. You should listen to your instincts and decide if you have time to explore the questions that you’re receiving, or if it’s better that you defer all the questions to the end of the session.

If the questions are relevant, take note of them, especially if you will deliver the session again in the future. You can incorporate some or most of the questions into your presentation material.

If you feel that the people who keep interrupting are there just to disturb the session, you can involve the rest of the audience to understand if they agree with them. Normally, they won’t, and that will solve the problem most of the time. If they agree with the heckler, you’ve a problem.

People don’t ask any questions

Sometimes you prepare for an interactive session, and nobody asks anything.

There can be multiple reasons for that:

- Cultural reasons: attendees from certain cultures ask very few questions in public, despite speaker insistence.
- Different seniority: junior people don't want to show that they don't know something, and some senior people are afraid of asking questions for the same reason.
- Audience hesitation: sometimes you just need to break the ice. Start with some warm-up questions, easy ones, that everybody can answer.

If people never answer, despite your efforts, stop asking for questions. Find other ways to interact with them. Anonymous polls can be a solution in most cases, both for in-person and virtual sessions. There are many easy apps and websites that you can use.

Can you do it in another language and vice versa?

It can happen that you prepare a session in your native language, and then people ask you to do the session in another one. Most of the time, especially in some European countries, people ask you to do your session in English, while you prepared it in your language.

Of course, you can always say, "No, I'm sorry." But most of the time, if you really know the session, and if you have a good knowledge of the other language, you can try to do it. First, ask other attendees if it's a problem if you do the session in the other language.

People who asked you to switch languages won't care if you don't know how to express something, since they know that you're making a strong effort to deliver that session.

Note: Working for an American company, and sometimes being asked to do sessions in English also when in Italy, is the reason that I've created my slides in English for years, even if they're for an Italian audience.

It can also happen that you've prepared your session in one of your second languages, and then you see that everyone in the audience speaks your native language. What can you do? If there's only one session in that time slot, and it's not the first one, you can ask people if they want you to switch languages.

If there are many sessions concurrently, if the event is online, or if the session is the first one, keep using the language that you agreed on with the organizers. People won't like that you change language a second time just because people who arrive late complain about the language.

How to talk in front of thousands of people

Talking in front of thousands of people is normally easy because you cannot see them!

Joking aside, what scares a lot of speakers is knowing that the venue is huge, seeing it empty, or seeing it while it is filling. But in most cases, when you're on the stage with all the lights, you cannot see most of the people.

Figure 41: Thousands of people attending Microsoft Build conference (source: Microsoft).

I usually find a row in the middle of the room and focus my eye contact on that row, moving slowly and trying to cover the space in a natural way. All the people in my line of sight will feel the eye contact.

If the talk is also recorded, always discuss your position with the camera operators, where it is better for you to present, and how far you can move. Remember to move slowly, since the video amplifies every movement.

Note: The most difficult part of talking in front of thousands of people is not doing it, it's all the work and preparation that gets you there.

Hardware failures and other technical problems

It doesn't matter if you're speaking in front of thousands of people or just a few when you have a hardware (or another technical) problem. It's not easy to stay calm and deliver the session.

At in-person events, a PC can be broken, the video cable adapter doesn't work correctly, the video cable is too long and the PC keeps losing sync with the projector, electricity can be out for the whole block, etc. In virtual presentations, you can have problems connecting to the server, being authenticated as a speaker and not as an attendee, network problems, etc.

In all of these cases, you should try to understand the problem and then decide if you can fix it in a few minutes, you need help from a technician, or you can do the presentation without technology.

Doing a presentation without proper slides and demos can be intimidating, but if you have good stories, you can do it, perhaps with the help of a good old whiteboard.

Tip: I normally have the presentation on my PC, on OneDrive, on a USB stick, and published privately on SlideShare, but sometimes that wasn't enough. If you need a connection to the internet to do your demos, consider recording them in advance, and use the video if needed. The best way to do it is to talk live on top of the video, so you can also pause it and add relevant information if needed. Recording a video and talking while playing it is also useful when you need a complex hardware setup or you're doing demos that require exact timings or other kinds of difficult configurations.

In every case, stay calm. The worst thing that could happen is the session is canceled and probably postponed to a later date. Or you will record it and publish it online after the conference.

People sleeping in the first rows, or with the webcam turned on

There are three reasons people sleep in the first rows, or in front of the webcam:

- You're incredibly boring, monotone, and your slides are dull. **It's better to do a lot of dry runs and improve your stage presence and content for next time.**
- You're speaking after lunch, late in the afternoon or evening, or early in the morning. Get over it.
- They're tired, perhaps the night before they didn't sleep enough. Again, get over it.

Note: Normally, if they sleep in the last rows, or with the webcam turned off, it's out of sight, out of mind. 😉

Sometimes speakers get upset because people leave the session and then come back later, leaving the door open, disturbing other attendees, or leaving the webcam on in front of an empty room. Don't be too severe; people have urgencies. If they come back, it means that your session is interesting.

Tip: If you're an attendee of a virtual session or a conference call, and your software allows you to use a custom background, you can do a stupid trick in order to leave the room without people noticing. Just take a screenshot of you in front of the camera and use it as a virtual background. Then try to sneak away as fast as possible, leaving your avatar attending the session.

Handling microphones

Most speakers aren't comfortable with a microphone. They always ask, "can you hear me without the microphone?" and if people say "no," their session will suffer.

Some speakers hate handheld microphones because they're not used to handling them, their body language is affected, and the sessions are not as they expect. I always suggest doing dry runs with a small bottle of water to get used to it and improve the impacted body language.

Handheld microphones can be bad when you need to do a demo and you don't have a microphone holder. In this case, you can ask some friends to help you during the demos, perhaps joking with them about their important role in the session.

Some speakers hate lavalier microphones[2], the small ones with a clip, like the ones used in television. Lavalier microphones can be problematic with some clothing, especially for women. If you need to present with a lavalier, you need a place on your clothes to which to attach it. Try to remove badges, necklaces, and other things that can bump into the microphone and make a lot of noise. In every case, you should try to hide the cables under your clothes to avoid tearing them.

Figure 42: My friend and colleague, Erica, after winning her battle with a handheld microphone.

If your session has a demo, you should remove all your bracelets and wristbands, because they could make annoying noises while typing if you keep the microphone near the keyboard.

[2] The term "lavalier" originally meant a jewelry pendant worn around the neck. The term's use as a type of microphone started in the 1930s when microphones hung from a speaker's neck.

What to do when two (or more) speakers have different seniority

Multiple-speaker presentations can be interesting, but sometimes they can also lead to problems and bad behaviors.

Here are some examples:

- One speaker takes control of the session and never gives the ball back to the other one.
- One speaker receives a tricky question, and the other speaker interrupts and answers the question without waiting for the first one.
- An attendee addresses a question to the wrong speaker, instead of the one who talked about the topic.
- One speaker explains something wrong (a topic or an answer) and the other speaker harshly speaks over them to correct what was said.

There are two ways to solve all these problems. The first one is when the senior speaker does some of the behaviors without malice. This can be easily solved using multiple dry runs, so the two speakers can sync. They can decide who can handle certain topics, they can simulate mistakes, or they can play different roles.

If there's no time for dry runs, it's much better to cut the session into two separate parts and let each speaker do one.

The second way to solve most of those problems is discussed in the next section, given that the two problems are similar.

Mansplaining

Mansplaining (one of the words of the year 2010 for the New York Times) means:

> **The act of explaining something to someone in a way that suggests that they are stupid; used especially when a man explains something to a woman that she already understands.**

Mansplaining is not normally a personal attack, but it describes a cultural behavior. It has evolved from its original meaning and now is also used when a man uses a patronizing tone when explaining to anyone, irrespective of the age or gender of the recipients.

Mansplaining can be seen when two speakers are presenting (as mentioned in the previous section), and one keeps explaining the meaning of the other's words. It can also be seen between a speaker and audience members, or in a social media interaction. Typical cases of mansplaining are attendees or readers who try to explain research or an article to the woman who wrote it.

There are many ways to fight mansplaining, considering that, as we already said, it's usually not a personal attack:

- "The Hip Check": a small verbal nudge to send a message like, "Let me discuss my background a little bit, before discussing your comment…"
- Humor: humor can be enormously powerful but remember to smile while delivering it.
- Redirect: instead of listening to the mansplaining comment, a woman can redirect the flow to another woman, asking for her opinion.
- Loud voice: sometimes a meeting becomes a race in which every man is shouting. A woman should find her loud voice and use it, to be heard.
- Call out: did you try all the other techniques, and nothing worked? Explicitly calling out the behavior can be the only way to stop it.

What happens if you take a break from speaking?

A lot of speakers, famous and not so famous, sometimes disappear and stop giving presentations. Perhaps they changed roles, perhaps they changed their lives, sometimes they simply took a pause, and they never come back to the scene.

This is why some speakers never take a break. They fear that they'll never be invited again to speak; they fear that their speaking career could end because of the break.

Taking a break sometimes can be useful, not only when you're experiencing speaker's burnout (as described in the previous chapter), and shouldn't be a permanent condition. Sometimes you've changed roles and you don't have meaningful things to say for a while, because you need to study new material, you need practical experience, and so on.

Let people know that you're taking a break from speaking in public, stay active (if you can) in the communities, and document your journey in the new field.

And then, when you're ready to come back, try sending proposals again, start from meetups or small communities, talk with your contacts and friends, and let them know you're back.

It could take some time, but if you were a respected speaker before the break, people will be happy to have you again on stage.

Keep running

The best suggestion I've ever received in my public speaking career is to "keep running" even if I realize I have a problem with the session.

It's like Wile E. Coyote, who starts falling only when he realizes he is running in midair and stops doing it.

Of course, some people will notice that you have a problem, that a demo is not working, or that you missed something from the slides. But most people won't notice anything, or won't care, because they're absorbed in the flow of your stories.

If a demo doesn't work, don't insist, unless it's the most important part of the session, and you know how to fix it. You can say, "let's try to see if we can make it work in the next minute" and ask for the public's help. Most of the time it's a typo, and they can see it and you can't.

To keep running is important, but always pay attention to dead ends. Sometimes it's better to admit the problem, take a deep breath, drink some water, and restart.

Figure 43: A mural of Wile E. Coyote on a wall of the Rotch Library at MIT (source Wikipedia).

How to talk when the stakes are high

As a geek, I've delivered many kinds of sessions with a lot of different audiences, from deep technical people to the CxOs of big companies.

The session that required the most preparation was a different kind: I officiated the wedding of two great friends of mine.

Figure 44: The author while officiating the wedding.

In this case, I couldn’t rely on technology: no PowerPoint, no props, no timer, nothing.

I used good old paper, with a BIG FONT and the most important parts highlighted.

You cannot rely on memory in this case. You should read most of the text and the official formulas with a clear voice, and you cannot improvise.

The last suggestion is to know your space. Don’t move too much (you’ll look awful in the video) and find a place to leave your notes when not using them.

And, as always in this kind of situation, don’t forget to smile and try not to cry!

Some concluding thoughts

Every situation has its own rules

Virtual sessions, small meetings, large meetings, live events, TV shows, podcasts; each situation is different and has its own rules. You should adapt your style to the media, and you should learn from the best in that field.

Should public speaking be taught in school?

Short answer: YES!

Public speaking is not a soft skill. It’s a superpower that can be taught. The sooner you start, the easier it will be!

Of course, you cannot teach a two-day workshop to fourth- or fifth-grade children, but you can teach them the basics about delivering value, and about telling a short story. Then you can improve on that every two or three years, until university…and more!

Public speaking should be continuously improved

You cannot stop studying public speaking. New media, new expectations, new career goals, etc., require different public speaking techniques. Always look for updated books, articles, blog posts, and videos. Don’t blindly trust old materials.