

NEWS

PROJECT

BRIDGE - Building the  
Right Investments for  
Delivering a Growing  
Economy

📍 Rotterdam, The  
Netherlands

TOPIC

Jobs and skills in the  
local economy

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## A Word Amongst Friends

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The pandemic and its aftermath have major consequences for international work. City authorities, and those working with them, need to adapt and develop new ways to collaborate. Here, Eddy Adams explores the implications of this, based on his recent experience working with the UIA Rotterdam BRIDGE project.

### A Word amongst friends

How many of you recognise this face? John Gilbert was one of Hollywood's early superstars, rivaling Valentino at the height of his fame. So, why have you probably never heard of him? That's because his career collapsed after his failure to make the transition to the talkies.

What's the connection between this and UIA? Well, we are currently living through another great transition moment. The twin drivers of the recent pandemic and the climate emergency are likely to have lasting consequences on the way many of us work and travel. This is a big deal for transnational working – and for those who work internationally supporting cities.

### Our new reality

Just how much things have changed was evident in my recent final UIA Expert visit to the Rotterdam [BRIDGE](#) project. Previously, this involved a long train journey from York to Rotterdam, two full frantic days cycling between partner meetings before jumping a train home, processing a mountain of material and writing my journal. This time it was a bit different.

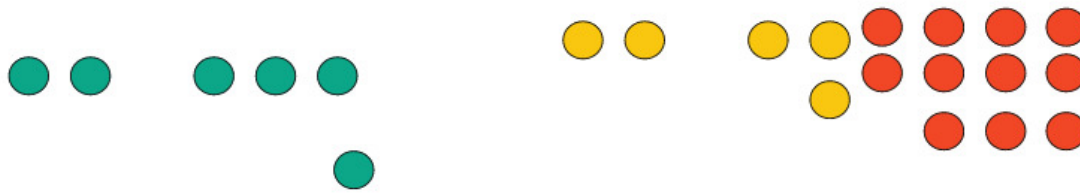
Although I directly connected with around 20 Rotterdam partners, I never left my (home) office. Reflecting on this, I can see pros and cons of the virtual experience that I thought might be worth sharing.

## How this translates on the ground: pros and cons

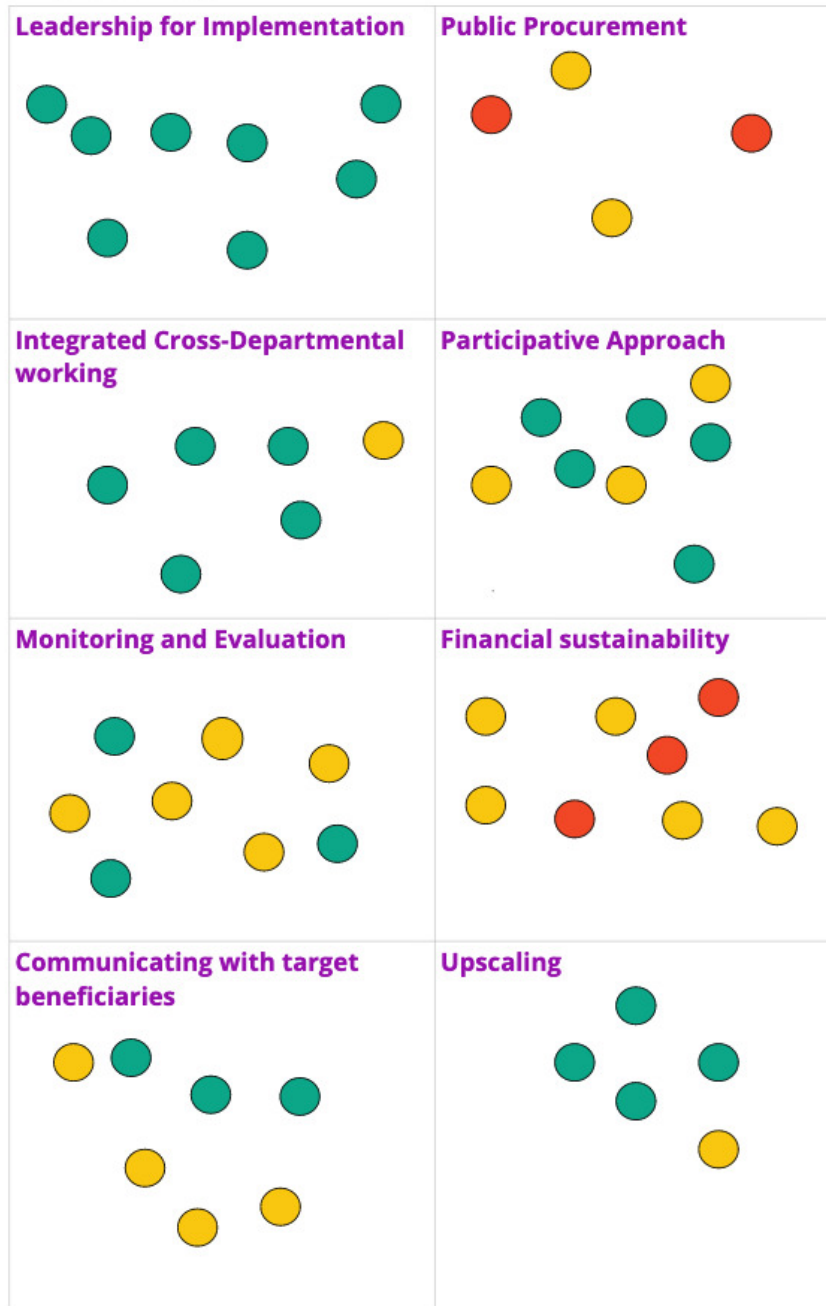
As UIA experts know, advance preparation is always an important part of getting these visits right. You have to identify the right people in advance, sort the schedule, develop the content guide and design appropriate processes. That advance element was even more important this time. And rather than two days, the meetings were distributed over five, taking account of the intensity of online meetings.

We mainly used Zoom for these sessions and MIRO for an initial partner workshop before the bilateral meetings. This 90-minute interactive session focused on a review of the overall BRIDGE experience. It also allowed us to home in on the eight UIA challenges. The session provided some nice visual outputs (the completed MIRO

boards) and a useful resource to bring into the smaller group meetings.



UIA Implementation Challenges



For example, I was able to ask partners how they had voted in the discussion about Leadership, Upscaling and the other challenges. Why had they voted, green not red, and what were the reasons for the overall responses. These follow-up exchanges yielded some profound insights, for example into how the team had managed resistance to cross-departmental collaboration over the course of the UIA project.

The entire experience underlined other benefits of online expert visits. Content is recorded, is reusable and it's also asynchronous. Someone who can't make the session can still contribute if they have the link. Overall, it can

allow us to work more efficiently.

## You can make miracles happen here

But of course, you lose things too. Notably, it's less personal. One of my most powerful experiences from BRIDGE came in a session with [young mentors](#) in Rotterdam South. They spoke about the challenges of their role, supporting young children about to make big career choices. They also spoke of the benefits they got from this experience, which included the chance to shape young lives. During this exchange, one of them told us that "You can make miracles happen here." It was a moment I'll never forget, but I wonder if it would ever have happened over Zoom.

Those kinds of revelations require a particular atmosphere that encourages openness. That's much harder to create online, especially if you don't already know the participants. As well as this intimacy, you also lose some spontaneity and the scope to improvise. In short, communication is less textured. And, of course, on the most fundamental level it needs good internet connections or it's a non-starter.

## So, what happens next?

The current period is a huge learning curve for all of us. But I think it's one we have to embrace.

At this point, the world divides into two types: those who think 'all this will pass' and who look forward to a 'return to normal' against those who see it as a permanent gamechanger. Personally, I think the most likely scenario is one where we travel less and rely on a hybrid mix of face-to-face and online experiences.

## Adapt or Die

For those of us working with cities across Europe this requires a major mindset shift. Who was it who said, 'adapt or die': Che Guevara? Steve Jobs? Mother Teresa? Whoever it was, it's an over-hyped phrase; yet, this really is one of those unique shift moments. Professionals working with groups internationally should be aware of this. Otherwise their own world may shift abruptly; like a bird flying into a windowpane.

What to do? Invest in new skills. Experiment and explore fresh ways of doing things. Look for new ways to gather evidence, get results and share stories. In short, embrace the moment while you can, or prepare to share John Gilbert's fate.

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