



CHOREOGRAPHING “CREATIVE COLLISIONS” AND COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION DURING COVID-19

(Released as part of GIID's [COVID-19 series](#))

A defining characteristic of innovation districts is their horizontal relationships—connections across actors and sectors spanning research universities and medical institutions, companies and smaller firms, start-ups, and intermediaries. Many innovation districts have worked tirelessly to build and facilitate these horizontal connections, an effort that has included orchestrating or “choreographing” collisions between people as a way to stimulate new relationships and new ideas. Their work has also supported collaborative innovation, where institutions and/or companies work collaboratively to conceive new inventions or advance joint research.

Today, with COVID-19 writing new rules of engagement, new questions are being raised about the unique value proposition of innovation districts: geographies of innovation powered by physical proximity, density, and, crucially, horizontal relationships across actors and sectors. For example, how are districts continuing to nurture, grow, and differentiate their innovation ecosystem when many researchers, workers, and other actors are working from home or in highly separated spaces and places?

In July 2020, The Global Institute convened a peer sharing session with district leaders as part of [a new global network of innovation districts](#) to understand the range of strategies and tactics being used to engage and connect district actors. How are district leaders, in other words, keeping the community flame alive and authentic when physical distance is the new normal?

Early insights from this network session suggest that districts should use this time to drive innovative practice, writing a new chapter in the fast-evolving district playbook. The pillars of today's playbook are:

- **Experimenting with strategies and formats to virtually connect district actors and others.**
- **Designing new ways to creatively—and safely—make essential face-to-face connections or on-site collaborations possible, such as utilizing public space for outdoor events or staggering occupancy in co-working spaces and other district assets.**
- **Adopting hybrid formats that allow for both virtual and face-to-face connections, where, for example, online gatherings are augmented by in-person visits to district spaces, restaurants, or other amenities.**

Because rates of COVID-19 cases differ widely across cities, regions, and countries, each innovation geography needs to carefully assess what is viable and safe. Listed below are insights from leaders who are boosting creative collisions and supporting collaborative innovation across actors during COVID-19.

- “Collisions are never accidental; you have to organize and plan them.” Now, with COVID-19, the level of intentionality needed to support collisions has grown exponentially. In some districts, teams are prioritizing the need to creatively engage actors and deepen relationships. They are also looking beyond the physical borders of the district to forge new connections in response to the growing appetite among district actors to engage nationally and internationally.
- Engage the local community. The pandemic presents an urgent need for district actors to come together as a group to demonstrate the district's value to adjacent communities, especially for residents who are disadvantaged or vulnerable.



- Be they virtual or hybrid, take the time to identify software tools that are right-sized for the event type and audience. "Some companies and anchors have banned Google Meet and Zoom while others insist on Webex," explained one district leader. And look out for tool inconsistencies: Regardless of which tools are used, a helpdesk should be available to sort out connection or technology problems in real time. With respect to the design of meetings, districts spoke about keeping everyone who takes part stimulated and engaged. Examples included virtual rooms for people with different interests to connect in break-out conversations.
- Whether the meeting is small or large, allow participants to actively engage with one another. "People actively asking questions helps facilitate accidental collisions." As one district leader cautioned, "When people sit and absorb content but do not contribute, there is much less of that kind of new relationship building or emotional engagement, the kind of connectivity we're trying to drive—another kind of vision, imagination, energy level amongst the group."
- Dedicate time for intensive follow-up to understand the needs and pain points of district actors. Feedback surveys and Net Promoter Score tools are essential. District leaders explained how impact measures and measurement models must account for alternative leading indicators when staging a virtual event. They also noted that "outcomes such as new partnerships or relationships do not differ as much" from those used for in-person activities prior to COVID-19.
- Everyone is getting used to doing business online. Recognize that trust needs to be deliberately nurtured. One district leader summed up the challenge of strictly virtual formats as follows: "To what extent can you trust someone on a screen when you've never met them?"
- Continue to demonstrate the value of the district's physical assets. Whether by giving participants in a virtual event a discount at restaurants located in the district, or by developing ways for socially distanced teams to share access to resources (such as labs) that are in demand, or by some other creative means, take advantage of the shifts brought about by COVID-19 to make effective use of the district's physical assets.

The network session concluded with a challenge: Each district should experiment with formats and strategies that encourage creative collisions and collaborative innovation in this new world. ***The discussion also surfaced a mandate for The Global Institute, which is to identify hybrid formats—those that bring together virtual and (to the greatest extent possible) in-person exchanges—that are helping to create new horizontal relationships across actors.***

Given the likelihood of a longer period of social distancing—not to mention an already high level of app, webinar, and Zoom "fatigue"—district leaders want to understand the range of hybrid approaches, whether bold and ambitious or small and one-off, that are being introduced by their peers.

The Global Institute is now reaching out to districts globally to discover where this experimentation is occurring. That is, what events, meetings, and conversations that mix virtual and physical encounters are taking place in innovation geographies around the globe?

Meanwhile, we are encouraging network participants to actively share new insights with their global peers. Specific approaches are included [here](#). By helping to orchestrate our own cross-pollination among districts, GIID hopes to accelerate this new innovative practice and support district leaders who are rewriting their playbook.

Get in touch with us at info@giid.org if you have something to share or are curious to learn more!