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How to Run Effective Virtual Meetings
Communicating Well With Technology

Sam has just finished a virtual meeting with his team, and it didn't go well.

Compared with the face-to-face meetings he's used to, the online conversation was fragmented and hard to follow. The loudest team members monopolized the discussion, and Sam couldn't get everyone to contribute. He came away feeling that he hadn't achieved anything meaningful.

Organizations use virtual meetings in place of face-to-face ones because they're quick to arrange, they're inexpensive, and they bring the most relevant people into the meeting, wherever they're based. However, virtual meetings can be hard to get right, and they need a different approach from regular meetings.

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Engage your audience online so you're not talking to an empty room.

In this article, we'll look at what you can do to prepare for and run an effective and productive virtual meeting.

Running a Successful Virtual Meeting

While the basics of etiquette still apply, running virtual meetings requires a different approach from chairing face-to-face ones. Use the strategies below to plan and host a successful virtual meeting.

1. Choose the Right Technology

Look at your agenda to choose the most suitable platform to use. The best platform for a quick "check-in" can differ from the right one for brainstorming or decision-making sessions.

You can choose from several virtual meeting platforms, including:

- **Skype™**: This offers basic online group phone and video calls, which work well for short update meetings or check-ins. You can also record calls for team members who can't

attend.

- **Citrix™ GoToMeeting**: With GoToMeeting, users can share screens, and the platform works on tablets, smartphones and other mobile devices.

- **Cisco WebEx®**: This platform offers HD video, and allows participants to work together during the meeting.

Take time to review each platform carefully before you decide which one to use. Some features, like web polling (which makes it easy to gauge people's opinions) or online whiteboards (good for group brainstorming sessions), can be worth some extra cost.

Keep in mind that video conferencing has its benefits and its drawbacks. It can provide participants with important nonverbal cues, and encourage them to stay engaged. However, some people might feel uncomfortable and self-conscious using it, which may stop them participating as much as they would in a voice-only meeting.

2. Work on Specific Skills

A virtual meeting's success often depends on the guidance of a **facilitator** , so it's important to learn the skills and tools that you'll need to succeed in this role.

When participants haven't met before, **ice breakers** can encourage everyone to relax and get acquainted before discussing business. You could ask attendees to introduce themselves and give some information about what they do; then do an exercise that helps them find out more about one another. Think about and try out ice breakers well before the event to ensure that they'll have the desired effect.

And make sure that you're completely comfortable with the virtual meeting software. Rehearse using its tools and facilities beforehand – you need to be able to operate them effortlessly during the meeting.

3. Spend Time Preparing

Virtual meetings may need more preparation than regular face-to-face ones. For example, how will you deal with conflict in this virtual space, and keep the discussion focused and on track? What if software difficulties prevent your most important team member from attending?

Work some extra planning time into your schedule, so that you can prepare adequately both for the meeting itself and for any technical challenges that may occur.

Next, think about your objective. Who should attend? What exactly do you need to discuss? Decide what you want to cover, and estimate how much time each item will take. Be punctual with your start and finish times; remember, just because your meeting is virtual, that doesn't mean it's polite to arrive late or leave early.

For longer meetings, try to organize your information into 10- to 15-minute segments. This accommodates shorter attention spans and helps keep everyone engaged and focused. Make it clear when you have reached the end of each section – perhaps by a change of pace in your delivery – so that attendees are ready to go onto the next part.

When you schedule the meeting, consider everyone's **time zone**. Try not to arrange it so that it falls outside a participant's normal workday. When you cannot avoid this, check in with them personally to make sure that the time is suitable. If you set up regular meetings with the same team members, consider moving the times around so that those people don't always have to attend before or after their scheduled working hours.

Several days before your event, send out login details to everyone involved. Include the URL where necessary, the agenda, a list of attendees, and the meeting's start and finish times.

And consider assigning someone to handle any technology issues that might arise during the meeting. Delegating this task will allow you to focus solely on guiding the discussion.

Our article on **Running Effective Meetings** has more tips that you can use to prepare for your event.

Tip:

It's important to limit the number of participants attending virtual meetings, whenever possible. This helps you ensure that everyone has the opportunity to get involved. This is particularly relevant for brainstorming or discussion sessions, and for when you need to make decisions.

4. Set Ground Rules

Ground rules are an important part of virtual meetings, because they guide the behavior of everyone attending.

For instance, you might ask participants to log in to the meeting five minutes early, so that everyone can connect and check their audio and video.

Another common ground rule is to ask attendees to mute their lines until they are ready to speak; doing this cuts down on distracting background noise.

If the call is audio only, ask everyone to state their names before speaking. This way, people in the group will be able to follow who's said what.

Last, encourage everyone to limit any **distractions** , such as background noise, so that they can focus entirely on the meeting.

5. Communicate With Virtual Reality in Mind

In face-to-face meetings, people pick up important cues from facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. However, these are often lost in virtual meetings, which is why you need to take this into consideration when communicating with participants.

First, strengthen your **active listening skills** . Put your entire focus on the person who is speaking. Demonstrate that you've paid attention by summarizing what he or she says, or by asking a relevant question.

Make sure that you communicate how you feel through your choice of words – this is particularly important if you're not using video. So, if you're unsure about something, say this and ask for clarification. You might say, "Sarah, I'm really excited that our numbers are so high, but I'm worried about the drop in new clients. How do you feel about this?"

You also need to guide the discussion. For instance, imagine saying, "Hi, everyone. Let's start with some introductions and background. Who wants to go first?" In a virtual meeting, you'll probably hear silence, since no one is quite sure who will go first. And then everyone speaks at once. This is especially true if you don't use video.

Instead, guide the discussion by saying, "Hi, everyone. Let's start with some introductions and background. Jan, why don't you go first, followed by Bill and Dean?"

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If your meeting brings together attendees who are there in person and others who are on the call, pay particular attention to accommodating those who aren't physically in the room.

For example, it can be difficult for virtual attendees to hear discussions between team members in the room. Remind all participants to speak into a microphone when they ask a question or join in the discussion. Encourage them to speak one at a time: trying to follow multiple voices at once can be challenging for those on the call.

6. Get Everyone Involved

One of the biggest challenges with virtual meetings is that participants can find it hard to get involved and contribute. Your job as the facilitator is to make sure that team members have plenty of opportunities to speak up.

During the discussion, pause regularly and ask for attendees' input. Use the **Round Robin** technique and ask everyone to comment on the subject matter. This encourages people to stay focused, and helps you monitor their emotions and attention levels.

Keep everyone engaged by using activities and questions that require their participation. If people are engaged, they are less likely to get distracted, and you will retain their attention for longer. Some meeting platforms have a feature that allows users to "raise their hands" virtually in response to questions, or you can use integrated social media to improve engagement.

Key Points

Organizations increasingly use virtual meetings to communicate with team members around the globe. However, these require different communication and preparation strategies compared with face-to-face meetings.

Spend extra time preparing for your virtual meeting. Familiarize yourself with the platform in advance, and come up with a contingency plan to handle common glitches. You might also want to appoint someone to handle tech issues as they come up, so that you can focus solely on facilitating the meeting.

Communicate with the digital environment in mind. Don't ask open-ended questions to the whole group; instead, call on people by name to encourage participation.

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