

HR Insights

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Improving Virtual Meetings

There's no denying that virtual meetings have become a workplace norm. Several factors fueling that growth include access, price and need.

Most laptops, tablets and smartphones have built-in webcams and microphones so employees can dial in to a virtual meeting from anywhere and at any time. These technology advancements have created affordable and easy-to-use tools to help businesses—both small and large—stay virtually connected. Web-based technology will continue to advance to keep virtual communication attainable and meet business needs.

The demand for virtual meetings increased as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic closed offices, introduced social distancing and halted business travel. As the COVID-19 threat shifts and offices reopen, virtual meetings will continue to be a viable way to conduct business with employees, customers and other stakeholders.

Virtual meetings require more planning than in-person meetings to be effective. This article explores common challenges and best practices to help meeting leaders drive attendee engagement, acceptance and commitment to action.

Common Challenges

Virtual or not, meetings can be hampered by problems such as insufficient planning, lack of engagement and insufficient follow-up.

Virtual meetings also come with their own unique challenges surrounding technology. Meeting attendees may have trouble accessing the meetings or using the platform. If the meeting leader is unfamiliar with features or capabilities—like screen

sharing—they may waste meeting time while learning on the fly.

Technology and computer problems may be out of one's control. With any meeting, the facilitator should be flexible and have a Plan B. For example, your video conference call may have to become an audio call or be rescheduled altogether if video was vital.

Before the Meeting

Start right to end right. To ensure a successful and productive virtual meeting, keep in mind the following steps before the meeting even begins:

- **Choose the technology**—There are many web and videoconferencing platforms available, so find the right software and features to support your business. Choose one platform and stick to it. After attendees download the platform once, it'll be easier to join meetings later.
- **Create an agenda**—Attendees may have a full calendar, so be clear on the purpose of the meeting and provide a timed agenda with topics and assigned facilitators. This will help invitees decide their attendance if they have multiple meetings at the same time. Share this prework at least 48 hours in advance.

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- **Establish ground rules**—It might be helpful to have an agreed way of working, such as stating your name before talking or muting when not speaking. This helps keep the meeting efficient and remove distractions.
- **Test the technology**—It's important to join the meeting at least five minutes early to test your connection, microphone and video.
- **Look professional**—If using video, present yourself with appropriate grooming, hygiene and attire. That means mirroring what you would wear in person and keeping in mind whether it's an internal or external meeting.

When it comes to virtual meetings, it's crucial to invest in preparedness. Setting expectations beforehand can go a long way and positively impact a meeting's effectiveness.

During the Meeting

Meeting hosts and attendees may have slightly different roles when it comes to facilitating the virtual gathering, but there are some general tips that can help everyone. Once it's time to dial in, keep the following tips in mind:

- **Choose a moderator**—This should be established in the agenda. The moderator will keep the meeting moving and engage attendees. If attendees don't know each other, make those introductions to help everyone feel connected and welcome.
- **Stick to the agenda**—The host should consider assigning a time checker to keep the meeting on track. When possible, end a few minutes early to give people time to get to their next meeting.
- **Encourage interaction**—Encouraging people to speak up, especially in a virtual setting, is not always easy. Everyone should actively be doing something to support the meeting's purpose and objective (e.g., talking, screen sharing, monitoring the side chat channel, note taking and running slides). This move transforms someone from an attendee to a participant.
- **Turn on video**—Video is effective and makes people feel more engaged because it allows attendees to see each other's non-verbal clues. That, in turn,

humanizes the virtual meeting room and strengthens personal connections.

- **Do not multitask**—A virtual meeting is not the time to check and respond to emails or text messages. The use of video could cut down on multitasking.
- **Expect (and accept) the unexpected**—In a remote work setting, it's not unlikely to have a crackly connection or interruptions from a barking dog or talking child. Approach those unexpected moments with empathy.

When wrapping up the meeting, provide attendees some time to ask questions or share concerns. That could help increase engagement and ensure that attendees are still present and listening. Every attendee should have an opportunity to speak, whether or not they were assigned agenda topics. Approach meeting etiquette as if the gathering was in person.

After the Meeting

Once the meeting is finished, it's important to check for understanding and share a recap of what was discussed. If the meeting was a casual check-in, there may be no need for a recap. However, if there are any outstanding action items or missing attendees, it could be helpful to send a recap to outline next steps and responsibilities. If this was a standing meeting, it might be an opportunity to share the next meeting's agenda as well to give attendees time to prepare. It's all about sharing a transparent record of work progress.

Other Considerations

There's no denying it's much easier to communicate when you can see someone's face. While it's usually recommended to always use video, if employees or other stakeholders are facing online meetings all day, a compromise can be to allow audio-only times so everyone can focus solely on what is said, and forget about how they look.

To learn more about improving virtual meetings, contact Marshall & Sterling, Inc. today.