

Making the Most of Virtual Meetings

By BNET Editorial

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Virtual meetings are becoming increasingly popular as businesses go global. They can be held using a variety of technologies, and allow people who might never have the chance to meet in person to come together to share their views and concerns, make plans, and arrive at important decisions. They save time and money on travel and accommodations.

While virtual meetings are not the best solution in all cases, if you do choose to hold a virtual meeting, this article explains how to get the most out of it.

What You Need to Know

What is the best location for a virtual meeting?

If you don't have a private office, you will probably want to find a spare meeting room in which you can make or take the call. This means that your colleagues won't be disturbed if you need to speak more loudly than normal. If others in your office are participating, be sure there is seating for all. It also helps to have plenty of space on which to lay out all relevant paperwork.

How can I avoid feeling pressured or making decisions I'll regret later?

Any meeting can put a certain amount of pressure on participants, and virtual meetings are no exception. Particularly when issues are being discussed over the phone, there is a tendency to want to avoid silences. Those who are adept at such meetings will sometimes use this tactical maneuver to force you into a decision you are not ready to make. At these times you may feel tempted to say something you don't mean, or agree to a plan that you're not sure will work in terms of logistics or costs, just to get the other person off the phone. Resist this, take your time, and remember that you can always tell the other person you will get back to him or her as soon as you can, once you have done a little more research.

What to Do

Think About Whether a Virtual Meeting Makes Sense

There are many circumstances when not having all the participants in the same place works just fine. Catching up with your project team from time to time, or beginning to plan for a large meeting or conference are examples of this type of occasion. As long as you have an agenda (see below) and a clear idea of what you want to achieve, you should be able to move through most items painlessly.

Sometimes, however, it makes more sense to meet face to face with the person or group. This is much the better option, for example, if you are:

- attempting to defuse a situation that has become overly heated or contentious;
- trying to make a convincing case for someone to approve or fund your project;
- meeting with a potential or important client who you want to impress;
- concerned about a language barrier that may cause communication difficulties.

In all of these cases, you will probably get better results if people can see you in person. Situations that are already tense can be made worse if the person you are speaking to can't see your body language or facial expressions—for example, a light-hearted aside could be misconstrued as a derogatory remark, and cause offense.

One of the benefits of virtual meetings is that they are cost-effective. But before you think about the virtual options open to you, think through all the implications carefully. In cases where the stakes are high, it may be worth investing in a business trip.

For instance, if you need to demonstrate physically how something works—whether it be a piece of equipment or a software package—it makes much more sense to be there in person than trying to communicate via an Internet or video connection. The other meeting participants will be able to see much more clearly what you are trying to show them, and they can also ask questions or raise issues right away, rather than taking up valuable time later with e-mails or phone calls.

Consider the Various Options Beforehand

Teleconferencing

Teleconferencing is the most popular and easily accessible way to hold a virtual meeting. By allowing several people to join in at once on the same phone call, everyone gets to hear things firsthand from the others and contribute to the conversation. Teleconferencing is a low-cost way to bring together people based in many different locations, and most telephones can support this service. If yours doesn't, a host of teleconference providers can be found online.

However, there are some drawbacks to this option, including:

- *time differences*. It can be difficult to find a convenient time for everyone taking part in the conversation, particularly if they are in far-flung parts of the world.
- *lack of visual connection*. Without being able to see each other, the participants may not be sure that they are all referring to the same document, looking at the right version of a contract or specification, and so on.
- *insufficient control*. Again, as you have no visual clues as to who is eager to speak first, who is confused about what is being discussed, or who may be upset and ready to erupt, it is extremely important that someone be in charge and ready to keep things on track. Without careful control a teleconference can descend into a free-for-all where everyone speaks at once. Read on for advice on how to keep things running smoothly in various formats.

Videoconferencing

Videoconferencing and its online counterpart, *Web conferencing*, are also popular options for virtual meetings. Videoconferencing uses a live video link to connect people in different locations so that they can see and hear each other and conduct their meeting in real time. It is a useful tool for communicating with remote workers, staff at geographically dispersed offices, or clients in remote locations. It is also used in distance learning courses.

There are two basic options for videoconferencing. The more expensive one involves investing in all of the necessary equipment for full-blown videoconferencing using ISDN lines, dedicated equipment, and large screens, which guarantee a high quality experience. Unless you hold videoconferences regularly, this is probably not worth the investment, especially if your company is small.

The other option is to use a company that provides offices with videoconferencing facilities. There are a range of organizations that offer this service, and some spaces can be rented by the hour or even less, allowing a good deal of flexibility. However, if you choose this route, it is more important than ever to circulate your agenda in advance and have a good idea of how many issues can be addressed during the meeting and how much time to allot to each. Be realistic in your planning, so that you can book the room for the right amount of time and not feel pressured to make decisions in a hurry. Then keep the meeting moving and try not to get bogged down in details or side issues. If you think that you still need more time, either arrange another short meeting or talk through any final details by teleconference. If you are chairing the meeting, make sure to keep all participants informed of decisions.

Web conferencing

Web conferencing, the cheaper and more common PC/Web-based videoconferencing, uses existing PC and Internet technology and occupies a window on a PC. While the quality of transmission varies, it is improving all the time. Web conferencing offers a range of useful tools including a virtual whiteboard, shared access to documents, and many of the assets that go with the more expensive choices.

As with videoconferencing, there are a range of service providers, including Webex and Microsoft, that your business can use to get the most out of online meetings. Most allow you to pay for a single virtual meeting or to sign up for a monthly or annual subscription if that best suits your needs.

Prepare Yourself and Others Thoroughly for the Meeting

Even though the participants are not all in the same room, you will still need to prepare for the meeting, perhaps more thoroughly than if it were face to face. There will not be the usual “warm up” time, when people are settling in, greeting one another, and perhaps talking about the weather. Once the introductions are made, you will have to launch right into the business of your meeting. And at the end of it, you will still need to come away with some decisions having been made. This will all go much more smoothly if you have spent time thinking about what you want to accomplish and how you will proceed.

If you are chairing a virtual meeting, once you know that all participants can make the day and the time you suggest you should do the following:

- Prepare and circulate an agenda well in advance.
- Remind everyone the day before the meeting of the time you have agreed on and make sure that they are comfortable with the technology involved.
- Set some ground rules at the outset so that everyone knows what to expect and how to benefit the most from the time you have (see below for more advice on this point).
- Sum up key points regularly

Take Charge and Keep Everyone Focused

Even in face-to-face meetings, the chair needs to run through a few guidelines so that everyone is aware of basic arrangements. This is even more important in virtual meetings, as it can make the difference between a useful and well-ordered session and a confusing exchange of ideas.

- Ask everyone to introduce themselves at the beginning of the meeting, and check that everyone you are expecting is there.
- Explain that everyone will get a chance to voice their comments, but that only one person should speak at a time. Also state that the person speaking should be allowed to finish and not be interrupted, no matter how urgently some may wish to respond.
- Be more proactive than you would normally be about tackling unfocused comments. If you feel the conversation drifting, keep pulling participants back into the primary discussion and try to keep things on track. Also, if you are not sure who the speaker is addressing, ask him or her if their comment was directed at anyone in particular. Be tactful if you need to intercede in this way. Watch your tone carefully so that the speaker doesn't feel under attack. Sarcasm or irony don't

come across very well when other people can't see your facial expression or body language, so you need to strike a balance between seeking clarification for the good of the meeting and coming off as too serious. Keep your intonation upbeat and positive, while still maintaining a rather assertive position as the leader.

- Be patient with participants whose first language is not the same as yours. Even if they speak your language well, it may take them a little while to get up to speed with native speakers. Ask everyone to speak clearly and slowly and not to use too much jargon.
- Don't take silence as agreement. Depending on the technology you are using, there may be a time delay if telephone lines or Internet connections are not ideal, so make sure you give each participant time to contribute. Occasionally, the relevant connections may have broken down altogether, so it is a good idea to sum up regularly, asking each participant to acknowledge their understanding and assent with what has been decided. "Is everyone clear on this?" or "Are there any questions about this decision?" are phrases that anyone should feel comfortable responding to.
- At the end of the meeting, make plans for the next time you will meet, if appropriate. It will save a lot of time if everyone can confirm their availability when you are all together.
- Thank everyone for their participation and repeat the time of the next meeting.

Make sure you follow up with a note of all decisions agreed on. Most people see meetings as a chore, and will stop contributing or even listening actively if they feel that nothing ever happens as a result. If you are the person responsible for coordinating the outcome of a meeting, sum up decisions and assignments promptly, making a note of who is doing what and what the relevant deadlines are.

What to Avoid

You don't give the meeting your full attention

Just because other people can't see what you are doing does not mean that they won't be aware that you are not paying attention. You may think that you can answer your e-mails (quietly), clean your desk, or eat your breakfast while still participating fully in a teleconference, but you can't. Treat virtual meetings as you would any other type and give everyone your full attention.

You don't make use of an agenda

Like face-to-face meetings, virtual meetings need an agenda to help everyone be prepared, on time, and on track. Everyone's time is precious, so if you are in charge of organizing or chairing a virtual meeting, make sure you get an agenda out to all those involved well in advance. If you are a

participant and on the day before the meeting you still haven't received one, contact the chair and ask them to get one to you.

Where to Learn More

Web Sites:

Microsoft: www.microsoft.com

Webex: www.webex.com

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