



Flexible, Remote and Online Working guide

Part 5: Effective online meetings

The recent rush to remote working has dramatically increased the time we all spend online – and in online meetings in particular. This has both reduced our flexibility at a time we need it most, and made it harder to get substantive work done.

Just as swiftly, the internet has begun to overflow with online meeting fails that range from the endearing to the wildly inappropriate. Family member cameos and TMI¹ trips to the bathroom. Unfortunate avatars and NSFW² backgrounds. Technical stuff ups and surprise hacker drop-ins.

Not only is the move to meeting online fraught with such unforeseen dangers, it can also be more challenging and more exhausting than when meeting IRL.³

Part 5: Effective online meetings

There is much that we can learn from organisations whose teams are based in different time zones, states or countries, particularly now that more of us are working more flexible hours online.

More meetings? Or less? The answer is: YES.

Many of our organisations currently find ourselves in a Catch 22 situation, in which our calendars are too full of online meetings to find time to make those meetings more effective.

This is not to say that all meetings are bad. We already know that remote working requires us to communicate more often and in more different ways, and online meetings are an important part of that strategy.

However, taking time to review (and reduce) existing meetings and to consider new ones more strategically will help us manage our work and teams more effectively in remote or hybrid working environments.

As a general rule, this means:

- Fewer (but better) workload meetings.
- Fewer mandatory meetings.
- More welfare check-ins, one-to-ones and team social interactions.
- More time to actually get work done.

¹ Too much information

² Not safe for work

³ In real life

To decrease the number of meetings we have, however, we first have to increase their quality by:

- Finding a clear PURPOSE: Does the meeting need to happen? Why? What is its purpose? What does it need to achieve? Try to be as specific as possible. Try not to do too many things at once. If you can't articulate a clear purpose, you probably don't need the meeting.
- Choosing the best PLATFORM: Is a meeting the best way to achieve the purpose? Will it still do so for those who can't attend (without creating more work)? How else could the purpose be achieved? Try to find a way for people to participate asynchronously (so they don't have to be online at the same time).
- Streamlining the PROCESS: If you decide a meeting is the best way to go, how can you make it more effective? Start late and finish early. Reduce the meeting time or frequency. Create a clear agenda and stick to it.
- Testing the PREMISE: What will need to happen if someone is unable to attend the meeting? How will they catch up or contribute? Will they have time to read/watch the documentation? Will you have time to update them?

Agenda = Minutes

Create a clear agenda (with timings) to make sure everyone knows why the meeting is happening and what it needs to achieve (its purpose). Knowing the topic and required outcomes in advance helps make meetings more focused and productive.

Agendas should also include information about how participants will be expected to interact (one-on-one, group chat with video, webinar, Q&A, etc). Knowing the format in advance helps make meetings both more interactive and accessible.

For internal meetings:

- Send out the agenda in advance as link to a shared document, not as an email or attachment.
- Ask presenters to update the agenda with brief dot points before the meeting (with a contribution deadline). This can help them frame their thoughts, speed up their presentation, and document it afterwards.
- Ask participants to update the agenda with any questions before the meeting. This can help people contribute who may not be able to attend, help presenters prepare their responses in advance, and help document the discussion for others.
- During the meeting, add action items and relevant discussion points to the agenda as you go (or delegate someone to do this for you). If needs be, follow up with presenters afterwards to ask them to add their notes.

Making this the responsibility of the meeting's Chair will provide another filter for whether the meeting is really needed, and minimise the work involved in following up those unable to attend.

Invitations

Make sure email invitations include the meeting time (for all participant time zones), not just the meeting link, and that they include both online and phone dial-in options.

Try to set team meetings during core hours, and record or repeat them to accommodate different work days or time zones if required. If participants are likely to include people with different working days or those based in different time zones, try to reduce time zone bias by scheduling regular meetings at different days or times. Even better, think about ways to achieve the same outcomes in ways that don't need everyone online at the same time.

For internal meetings, don't forget to include a link to the agenda and instructions on how and when to update it (as above).

For external meetings, don't forget to ask people to RSVP with their access requirements.

Get ready

Yes, the days of quiet, distraction-free home working spaces are over, but try to aim for a space as free of distractions as possible. Or stick up an 'On the Air' sign to signal to other members of your household when you're going to be online.

Position your camera with your eyes approximately one third below the top of the screen, and try to speak directly to it.

Check your lighting to make sure everyone can see you, and that there's no light pointed directly at the camera (including glare from mirrors or windows).

Use headphones with a built-in microphone if possible, to reduce background noise.

Log in a few minutes early to make sure your video and audio are working OK.

Use your video

Unless you have connection or access issues, try to use video for as many and as much of online meetings as possible.

Using video is awkward, but important. It helps keep us focused, avoids multi-tasking, and helps us read non-verbal cues.

However, it's important not to make using video mandatory, and to create a safe space where people aren't hassled about their lack of video. People with fatigue conditions may not want their workmates to see them working lying down, for example.

Where possible, avoid the only thing on screen being a series of icons with attendees' names or initials. Not having a visual reference makes it harder to concentrate on and understand what's being said, and harder to monitor how it's being received. It's also more exhausting for everyone involved. Try to start all meetings with your video on, even if you don't end them that way.

Blur your background

If you have lots of activity going on around you (or just want to protect your privacy), use the 'blur background' functionality or upload a neutral virtual background. Avoid backgrounds with moving objects or flashing lights (and keep them G-rated in work environments, please).

Keep yourself on mute (except when you're speaking)

Get into the habit of turning your microphone off when you're not talking. This will not only help the Chair run an effective meeting without interruptions or unnecessary distractions, but can be an important access requirement for people with sensory or processing issues.

If you join a meeting mid-way, resist the urge to announce yourself out loud (use the chat box instead).

Speak clearly (and to camera)

Try to speak directly to your camera and slightly slower than your usual pace.

Try to leave pauses to give people time to respond (but make sure they're real pauses rather than problems with the technology).

Introduce and describe yourself

It's good practice to include a description of yourself and your surroundings as part of your introduction and/or acknowledgement of country. (For example: I am a light-skinned woman in my forties with heavy-rimmed glasses and close-cropped dark hair. I am sitting in my home office on Kurna land in Adelaide, in front of a triangular-shaped shelf covered with computer equipment and books).

Get into the habit of saying your name before you speak too. This is particularly important for larger groups and external stakeholders (where you might not know the access requirements of all of your participants) or when some of your participants are dialling in via the phone.

Describe what's on your screen

If you share your screen, don't assume everyone can see it. To make sure your documents are accessible to blind and vision impaired users, people with poor internet connections, or those with smaller computer monitors, make sure to read any written information on your screen out loud and describe any visual pictures or diagrams. Getting into this habit is also helpful in making sure shared agendas, documents and presentations are as simple and easy to understand as possible.

Use 'chat', not chatter

Making sure everyone can contribute in meetings can be more difficult in remote settings. Avoid asking open questions like "has anyone got any updates?", which are likely to lead to multiple people starting to answer at the same time.

If you have a comment or question, use the 'raise your hand' or 'Q&A' function or write "I have a comment/question" in the chat box (or even the question itself).

The same goes when answering questions too – write your answer in the chat and wait for the Chair to call on you, rather than speaking over each other.

When it is your turn to speak, be polite, don't hog the mic, and let other people have their turn.

Check your connection

If connection issues occur, act quickly. Turn off your video unless you are speaking - or altogether if that doesn't work. Or dial in on the phone instead.

If you can't hear someone else, or want them to repeat something, let them know as quickly as you can via the chat too – don't wait until they're finished so they have to repeat the entire thing again.

Avoid multi-tasking

It's much easier to multi-task our way through online meetings than it is when face-to-face (particularly when not using video). But this can make meetings longer and less effective, be distracting for everyone else, and lead to resentment (or worse) if not paying attention is seen as disrespect. If you're in a meeting, you should be in the meeting.

Encourage collaboration

Getting teams to collaborate or interact creatively can be more challenging in remote and online environments.

- Start with some small talk. Unlike more agenda-led meetings, collaboration and creativity are often more effective when people are more informal and comfortable with each other.
- Avoid (external) multi-tasking, but give people something to do (such as chairing, note-keeping, time-keeping or digital inking).
- Create time for thinking (such as staying online together silently while everyone takes some time to write down their ideas).
- Create time for sharing. Use effective chairing techniques to make sure everyone's ideas are heard.
- Create tools for consensus (such as a show of hands, online polls, or asking people to add their initials next to preferred options in shared documents).
- Remember that everyone has different learning and communication styles. Use multiple delivery methods (such as verbal presentations, visual aids, diagrams, video clips, reading or writing, statistics, stories, group discussions, pair work, or independent exercises). Ask people what works best for them.

Avoid side chat (or snide chat)

Depending on the purpose and the time available for your meeting, it may or may not be appropriate to include some informal, social or team-building moments within the agenda.

This could include acknowledgement (praise or emoticon applause), shared workspace or canine co-worker pics, using gifs or emojis to share responses or emotions, or even just chatter (about both work or non-work topics).

Be clear about when side-chat is appropriate, and try to keep gifs, emoticons and side-chat chat until the end – or at least keep it to between agenda items, so the Chair or speaker can see if any questions come through.

And be careful of snide-chat. The sort of gentle teasing or banter we're used to in office environments can be harder to convey in writing or online. Humour is subjective at the best of times (let alone a time when everyone is particularly sensitive).

Record your meeting (or not)

Video meetings can be recorded. However, recordings are only helpful if people have the time to watch them. And the act of recording a conversation may also be intimidating if it's not usual practice to do so. So think about:

- If/why you need a recording
- How you will communicate that to everyone (including letting them know how the recording will be used).

About the writer

Kate Larsen is a Non-profit & Cultural Consultant with more than 20 years' experience as a leader and senior executive in the non-profit, government and cultural sectors in Australia, Asia and the United Kingdom. She has particular expertise in the areas of workplace culture and wellbeing, online communication and communities, and increasing access for marginalised groups. This includes experience managing remote-working teams at a state and national level.

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