

# How to run successful virtual meetings

With more people working remotely and on flex hours, virtual meetings have become the most convenient way to gather a team.

**Donna McGeorge** explains how to make your virtual meetings more efficient and effective

**DOING ANYTHING** by distance takes twice the time and is half as good. We have to navigate time zone differences, language barriers and technological inconsistencies, while still running effective meetings. The three biggest criticisms of participants in virtual or distance meetings are that people are not fully present on the call and are checking emails or having side conversations with their phones; that often the speaker or presenter simply reads the slides; and that they go on for too long and much of the content is not relevant to everyone.

Unfortunately, if our face-to-face meetings are bad, then it's likely our virtual meetings will be twice as bad (at least!). Good protocols, for physical or virtual meetings, are important. Some tips for handling virtual meetings follow.

- **Be prepared** – make sure everyone knows why they are there and what is expected of them. Send out an agenda, or at least a purpose statement, so that people are clear about the reason for the meeting.
- **Be punctual** – start and end on time. As the meeting convenor, be online at least 10 minutes earlier so you can manage any tech issues.
- **Be present** – and keep it short. Distractions are everywhere, so by keeping virtual meetings to 25 minutes or less, you are more likely to keep people focused. In addition to improving how we meet generally, when it comes to virtual meetings there are other things we need to consider.

## Use the camera

This is particularly useful for one-on-one meetings or smaller groups; not so useful once you have more than six people on the call. Using the camera creates a stronger connection, and we gain access to the visual cues that an auditory interaction can't provide. Of course, there are exceptions. Your teammates on those late-night conference calls don't need to see you in your pyjamas. When videoconferencing:

- **Speak clearly and slowly.** This is especially important for multicultural meetings. Accents can be hard to understand.
- **Move and gesture slowly and naturally.** Depending on the bandwidth, movement can slow things down, or create pixelated images.
- **Look into the camera.** Don't look at yourself on the screen.
- **Dress appropriately.** Often we think that distance means we can be more casual, but this is not true; we still need to be professional. You also need to think about colours and patterns that may be jarring on the screen.
- **Put your microphone on mute.** When you are not speaking, be aware of background noise and keep your movement to a minimum.
- **Use the 'hands up' function.** This is a better way to let people know you have something to say, rather than speaking over the top of others.
- **Stay focused and present.** Keep focused on the task at hand, just as you should at an in-person meeting.

## Run it like a radio show

Next time you are listening to the radio, pay attention to how the announcer refers to the



## WORKERS EXPECT MORE WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY



**75%**

of the workforce will be millennials by 2020, who believe they can work from anywhere at any time



**75%**

of business travellers take three devices with them, with their primary device being a smartphone



**62%**

of people work from home or at offsite locations



**88%**

of HR managers report that employees have quit due to a lack of telework flexibility

audience. Typically, they don't say, 'Welcome everyone out there in radio land'. They say things like, 'Thank you for joining me today'.

This is because they realise that the relationship between the radio announcer and listener is one-on-one. The listener is often alone in a car, or sitting at a desk, or listening via headphones, so referring to 'everyone' creates a disconnect.

It can be the same when running virtual meetings. In many cases the participants are sitting in a room, or at their desks with headphones on, looking at a screen. Even when using the camera, the radio principle applies to create inclusion and engagement. Instead of saying things like, "Thank you all for coming" or "Many of us have", try saying, "Thank you for making the time", or "You have".

### Tell 'em and tell 'em again

Everyone in a meeting has to have a role. This is especially important in a virtual meeting. You need to be very clear on what

level of participation you need from everyone involved. Let them know in advance that you may call on them specifically for input or information. Remind them that we can't afford for people to not be fully present. In addition, to get the best from your virtual or distance meetings, you also need to:

- use the video to see people's faces, not to share slides
- be considerate of other attendees' time zones and schedule meetings appropriately
- encourage those in remote locations to speak or contribute first
- encourage those dialling in to book a room or private space for the meeting (not just be at their desk)
- use different methods of communication to remind people of your expectations of the meeting; for example, instead of sending out an email, maybe take the time to send a personal instant message to make sure people are clear

- make sure the meeting charter for recurring meetings is available to all
- run a training session on how to effectively use the technology; don't just assume people know how

Given a choice, face-to-face meetings are always going to be more effective, but for those times when you need to do virtual meetings, remember that, as the meeting leader it's up to you to set the tone and expectations, no matter where in the world people are. **MPA**

**Donna McGeorge** is a speaker, author and mentor who helps people make their work work. Using a creative, practical approach, she improves workplace effectiveness while challenging thinking on leadership, productivity and virtual work. She's the author of *The 25-Minute Meeting: Half the Time, Double the Impact*. Find out more at [www.25minutemeetings.com](http://www.25minutemeetings.com).

