

The Rise of Virtual Meetings: *Driving Engagement in a Virtual World*

WHITE PAPER

You don't have to look very far to see that virtual meetings are on a meteoric rise. A combination of several factors is providing the means and motivation to fuel the growth.

These factors include:

Access

Laptops, tablets and smart phones with embedded webcams have become the norm. Where before to be "virtual ready" an organization needed a dedicated room with hardwired cameras and microphones, today people are participating in virtual meetings while sitting at their desk, driving their car or standing in a grocery checkout line.

Price

Advances in web-based technologies have created easy-to-use, affordable tools that make virtual communication available to large and small businesses alike. Further, the "freemium" model provides tools with basic features that people can use at no cost, while providing more advanced features with an additional fee.

Need

As with nearly every business cycle, when the economy declines, travel budgets get cut drastically. Traveling for the monthly or quarterly team meeting becomes a luxury that many no longer can afford. The "flying someone in for a face-to-face" becomes frowned upon. But in the last economic downturn, virtual meetings were a viable option.

The tools were there at a reasonable price. The access vehicles were becoming more universal. So when the need arose, there was a ready answer. People took it and the meteoric rise began.

The acceleration to virtual is expected to continue and expand in new areas. According to Valerie Schreiner, vice president of product management and product development at Blackboard, the trend is moving away from formal, calendar meetings: "The expansion seems to be in ad hoc, instant access types of meetings. Rather than rely on asynchronous communication to establish a synchronous meeting, if I can see you are available and initiate the conversation now, we can hold a virtual meeting right away."

In addition, rather than just stand-alone systems, virtual meeting platforms are beginning to show up embedded in other applications such as customer relationship management systems and enterprise resource planning systems.

Virtual Meeting Skills: Far Behind

While the demand for virtual meetings is increasing, the skill of meeting leaders to run those sessions effectively is not. By their nature, virtual meetings are more complex, require more planning to be highly effective, and must be executed in a different way to drive engagement, buy-in and commitment to action.

Many meeting leaders actually plan less for a virtual meeting than they do for a face-to-face one. It's as if they believe that using technology and NOT having people in the same room combine to reduce the need for preparation.

In cases when a virtual meeting leader recognizes the need for preparation, the focus is on learning how to use the tool. Tool expertise is indeed critical. But preparing by just learning the tool is not enough. As Agnes Jozwiak, brand manager of ClickMeeting, put it, "The priority should be on what you want to present, not on the tool you are presenting on."

Lack of preparation and lack of skill in running virtual meetings results in meetings that:

- Don't start on time because people have difficulty with the technology
- Don't have key people present due to firewalls and other blockages
- Don't have a defined purpose due to lack of preparation
- Don't stay on topic because the meeting leader allows the meeting to wander
- Don't keep people engaged because people frequently multi-task since they aren't seen
- Don't address conflict because the leader often doesn't see the body language information that communicates silent disagreement
- Don't deal with dysfunction because the meeting leader is distracted with the technology

As you prepare to schedule that first virtual meeting, you realize there are several areas you must consider. Among those are:

- The company licenses one of the popular virtual meeting platforms. How will you get the skills you need to lead these virtual sessions?
- What training will the participants need and how will you arrange or assure they are aware of the need for some training? How will you ensure the participants take the necessary training? What will you do in the sessions to get the participants "up to speed" so the task force will capitalize on the virtual meeting platform tools?
- What are some of the key differences you will need to consider as a virtual meeting leader that are different from a face-to-face meeting leader?
- Will you need different or special rules of engagement for the virtual meetings?
- How will you juggle both the meeting and those inevitable technical challenges that occur when using technology?
- What alternatives might you have to the typical engagement activities used in face-to-face meetings to ensure involvement by the participants and the buy-in needed to achieve the task force objectives?

You want to demonstrate how virtual meetings can be a powerful tool for reducing expenses for many of the face-to-face meetings your organization has conducted that could be conducted virtually. You have an excellent opportunity to establish a precedent for how virtual meetings can help the bottom line. To be successful, you have to answer two key questions.

What does success look like with virtual meetings and how do I achieve it?

To create a vision of a successful virtual meeting, start by identifying the common problems with virtual meetings and why they haven't worked well in the past.

The Problems with Virtual Meetings

Many virtual meetings are un-engaging, uninspiring, unproductive and ineffective. Participants in training sessions over the past two decades often identify the following problems with face-to-face meetings. Virtual meetings are hampered by many of these same issues as listed below.

Common Problems Shared by Virtual and Face-to-Face Meetings

- **Insufficient planning** surrounding the purpose, agenda, participants, timing, and information needed.
- **Lack of commitment** by participants to prepare for the meeting, arrive on time, stay until completion, and give full attention to the meeting topics.
- **Lack of interest and engagement** generated during the meeting that results in low energy and low participation.
- **Lack of control** by the meeting leader to keep the meeting on track and within time limits while maintaining an appropriate level of detail with balanced, respectful participation.
- **A sense of futility** by participants, believing that their efforts won't have an effect, or **a fear of retribution** if they speak up, causing them to not participate fully with open and honest dialogue.
- **Lack of respect** by meeting participants for each other as evidenced by such behaviors as interrupting one another, talking over one another, verbal attacks, and side conversations (for virtual meetings this takes the form of participants using the chat feature to have private conversations with one another during the meeting).
- **Inadequate decision-making process** leading to lack of consensus, decisions not being reached, conflict, or conflict-avoidance behaviors.
- **Insufficient follow-up** by not documenting decisions and assigning actions, or not following-up to ensure that assigned actions are completed.

Virtual meetings also have their own set of unique challenges. The following table identifies 10 problems unique to virtual meetings and also touches on some of the techniques to address them.

Problems Unique to Virtual Meetings

- **Lack of awareness that virtual meetings should be run differently** and, as a result, the meeting leader plans and executes the virtual meeting the same as a face-to-face meeting. This is a common problem and avoids addressing the key challenges virtual meetings bring.
- **Inadequate planning for the technology issues associated with virtual meeting platforms** often derail virtual meetings right from the start. While planning can't prevent all issues, having a plan can eliminate some and minimize the impact of others. It is also critical that people test the use of the technology in advance of the meeting to minimize the impact of technology issues.
- **The meeting leader trying to run the meeting while also addressing people's technical difficulties** can cause the leader to do

a poor job of both. With virtual meetings of more than a few people, have a moderator whose job it is to assist participants with questions about the technology and help with the flow of the meeting. This frees the meeting leader to focus on starting, executing and closing the meeting.

- **Assuming participants are equally well-versed in using the virtual meeting platform** can result in lesser skilled participants dropping out or reducing their involvement. Some type of training and orientation in advance can minimize these issues.
- **Not preparing in advance when and how participants will use various features of the tool** results in lost opportunities to increase productivity, effectiveness and engagement. During your preparation, you will see how to augment your agenda design with details about how you will use the virtual meeting tool.
- **The increased likelihood that participants will multi-task** in virtual meetings means that the meeting leader must adjust by both increasing the frequency of engagement as well as varying the types of activities. When the meeting does not include video that allows everyone to see one another, participants can frequently disengage and begin working on other activities unless specific steps are taken to maintain engagement. Engagement in any meeting is important; however, with virtual meetings, since the meeting leader is unable to read body language, engagement is even more critical.

The frequent use of polls, whiteboarding, round-robins and other engagement strategies can make a significant difference. In fact, some type of engagement every 10-20 minutes of a virtual meeting is necessary to keep the meeting productive.

- **The difficulty in “reading the room” and detecting dysfunctional behavior** before it becomes a problem can be significant with virtual meetings. While the use of video technology can help in providing some visual cues, missing the early signs of dysfunction can be disastrous.

The use of increased engagement and having a moderator monitoring the question and answer panels and viewing any participant chatting can help in detecting dysfunction. As well, careful preparation in the placement of webcams and assigning someone to be the “eyes and ears of the meeting leader” in instances where multiple participants are in the same room can further minimize dysfunction.

- **The inability to pick up on early signs of disagreement** because the leader has not adjusted to the virtual environment by using more frequent consensus checks, polling, white boards, the “raising of hands,” and other features that may be a part of the virtual meeting platform.
- **The lifeless virtual meeting leader** is a frequent issue because many meeting leaders do not recognize the importance of leading their virtual meetings with a higher level of energy than face-to-face meetings to compensate for everyone not being in the same room.

Run virtual meetings at an energy level three (versus one, which is a person's normal speaking voice).

This is just one technique that can project the extra energy that can make a big difference to the virtual meeting participants.

- **Poor timing of a virtual meeting across multiple time zones** can lead to overall poor performance by many participants. Timing can be a scheduling issue as well as an issue of duration. With multiple time zones common when conducting virtual meetings, the time of day for all participants may not be ideal. Virtual meetings should be limited to two hours or less, unless there is a substantial break of 30 minutes or more.

While these lists may appear daunting, the good news is there are tools and techniques to address them and courses that help facilitators master these techniques. To have a highly engaging, highly effective virtual meeting requires significant planning and preparation.

When used correctly, the virtual meetings platform can be an effective tool for varying engagement approaches. Organizations can save time, eliminate unnecessary meetings and have masterful virtual meetings that lead to better results with significantly higher levels of buy-in and commitment to action.



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