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## Five Tips for Better Virtual Meetings

by Karen Boda and Rebecca Hinkle

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# Five Tips for Better Virtual Meetings

by Karen Boda and Rebecca Hinkle

With more than two-thirds of business professionals engaging in virtual work, virtual meetings are a standard feature of the business landscape. But that doesn't mean they're easy to navigate. Working around the obstacles posed by distance requires careful planning and thoughtful execution.

Here are some simple guidelines that we have seen make virtual meetings successful. By following them, one global service team was able to decrease by 20% the time it took to resolve customer issues.

## 1. BE VERY INTERACTIVE

One reason virtual meetings do not flow as naturally as in-person meetings is that establishing camaraderie at a distance is difficult. Yet it can be achieved if the meeting participants make an effort to engage with their colleagues from afar.

- As attendees join the meeting, greet each one with a hearty hello and take a moment for small talk: ask about the weather where they are or comment on a local news item.
- Take a personal interest in your teammates, just as you would if they worked in the office next door. E-mail or phone them outside of meetings to get to know them.
- If your teammates hail from other parts of the world, use this to learn something new. Ask neutral, friendly questions about customs, holidays, even politics. The attendees will exit the meeting better informed about one another.
- Leave your phones off mute, especially in a small meeting. Interaction, asides, laughter, and spontaneous questions establish context and rapport, and facilitate open dialogue.

When one company we worked with adopted these simple techniques, camaraderie increased significantly, which in turn boosted collaboration, knowledge sharing, and productivity. And attendance at virtual meetings soared to nearly 100%.

## 2. USE TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE COLLABORATION

Technology that enhances two-way communication and active collaboration can make virtual meetings almost like being there—one team at a Fortune 100 company experienced a stunning 90% drop in decision-making

### THIS ARTICLE EXPLAINS HOW TO MAKE VIRTUAL MEETINGS MORE PRODUCTIVE BY:

- Increasing their interactivity
- Enhancing camaraderie and putting all participants on a level playing field
- Using technology smartly

time in virtual meetings after it put technology to work. Useful high-tech tools include virtual rooms for attendees, white-board functionality for note taking, voting tools for anonymous feedback, cameras so colleagues can see one another, collaborative online presentation capability, informal chat rooms for side discussions, and the ability to raise your hand virtually and ask questions.

- Investigate which tools will work for your team and train everyone in their use; many teams find it useful if one member is designated the technology champion.
- Test the technology before every meeting, or request that everyone dial in 10 minutes early to iron out any last-minute problems.
- Create a backup plan. For instance, send the presentations or documents by e-mail before the meeting, so if the technology does fail, the meeting can still be productive.

## 3. RESERVE MEETINGS FOR TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Have you ever attended a meeting where all you did was listen? If one-way meetings are bad in person, they're deadly over the phone, especially when participants are scattered across the globe and it's the middle of the night for some.

- If you need to get important information to everyone on the team, don't use a virtual meeting. Try a Web cast or e-mail.
- If you ask for input, and silence is the response, does it indicate agreement, disagreement, or simply a lack of engagement? In the absence of visual cues, the only way to be sure is to call for a vote, conduct a round-robin to solicit opinions, or take an anonymous poll.

#### 4. LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD

It is common in virtual meetings for some employees to participate while sitting together in a conference room, while others are alone in their offices or other locations. Employees in the conference room have the benefit of side conversations with their colleagues and shared coffee breaks. The individuals not in the room may feel excluded and wonder whether their input is equally valued.

- Make it a rule: if anyone is alone during a virtual meeting, everyone is alone. Have each attendee dial in from her own office to level the playing field.
- To be fair to attendees who are not in the same time zones as most of their colleagues, alternate meeting times so everyone is inconvenienced equally. It is tough to be the person on the other side of the world who always has to attend meetings in the middle of the night.

Most of the members of a team we were called in to help were concentrated in corporate offices on the East Coast of the United States, with a few members scattered across Asia. The Asia-based employees attended meetings several times a week during the night, without the benefit of the face-to-face interaction enjoyed by their colleagues in the conference room.

But after the team adopted the practice of alternating meeting times and requiring everyone to call in from his or her own office, the quality of participation increased; all attendees felt equally engaged and energized to contribute. Idea generation improved, and the team was able to create better processes for supporting the Asian customer base.

#### 5. ESTABLISH A NO E-MAIL OR INSTANT MESSAGING POLICY

This is obvious, but it's worth emphasizing: just as it's rude to have side conversations during a face-to-face meeting, it's rude to converse on e-mail or instant messaging during virtual meetings. To encourage compliance, try what one team did: it decided that anyone who broke this rule would be assigned the next action item. This proved a highly effective deterrent! ♦

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*Karen Boda and Rebecca Hinkle are cofounders of Twinstar Consulting LLC, working with clients in the areas of global teams and talent management. Previously, they job-shared several global executive positions at Hewlett-Packard. They can be reached at MUOpinion@hbsp.harvard.edu.*

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