



VIRTUAL MEETINGS A BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

How to prepare and pull off effective Virtual Meetings

Virtual meeting: a meeting where some or all of the participants are interacting using telephone and/or on line applications.

Whether it's for a short, targeted working session or as a means to allow members or key presenters to join a face-to-face meeting that they otherwise (for whatever reason) aren't able to join in person, being able to virtually participate in a meeting has some wonderful advantages. However, being able to plan, chair, facilitate and participate in a successful virtual meeting brings a number of challenges. Virtual meetings require more attention to detail than face-to-face meetings to overcome both the technical as well as the interpersonal challenges posed by not having all participants face-to-face. Use of this Guidelines document will ensure that SAE meetings will be as productive and rewarding as possible.

PREPARATION

There are a number of types of virtual meetings:

- On-line presentations with little discussion. Good for training or informational briefings
- Large face-to-face meetings with some virtual participants (either attendees or presenters) who for whatever reason can't be there in person
- Large teleconferences (best reserved for status updates and information sharing)
- Small working groups (tasked with editing a document or presentation, or working together on some sort of deliverable)
- Small discussion group (no visual aids necessary)

Determining the type of meeting will aid in understanding how best to structure and conduct the meeting.

- What is the purpose of the meeting: Information sharing? Brainstorming? Group editing? The more interactive the meeting or the more participants need to provide input, the more attention needs to be paid to on-line tools and ways to keep participants engaged and connected.
- Who needs to participate? How many people and is everyone virtual or are a few joining a face-to-face meeting virtually? Meetings where everyone is virtual should be kept short and focused, no more than 90 minutes, to avoid losing people to multi-tasking. Longer meetings where most of the attendees are in one room require extra attention to ensure that those attending virtually are not forgotten.

A successful meeting involving virtual attendees depends on good planning. What you do before the meeting is as important as what you do during the meeting.

Have a clear agenda – Establish an agenda which clearly sets out the topics to be covered, the desired outcome and expectations for attendee input for each agenda item (information, vote, decision, etc.), the amount of time assigned for each item, and who is responsible for presenting. This keeps attendees focused, on-topic, and engaged. If at all possible schedule agenda items by time-of-day so that those calling in for a particular topic will know when to expect that item to be covered.

Choose times carefully – Select meeting times taking into account different time zones. If the meeting will last more than 90 minutes, build in deliberate breaks. If participants are joining for specific agenda items, place those at the beginning of the meeting or after a significant break to allow people to drop off when done.

Know who will attend – Ensure SAE staff sends out the meeting announcement containing all the information necessary to connect to the meeting and require an RSVP.

If the meeting is a face-to-face meeting, know ahead of time who will be participating virtually. This is important for ensuring enough phone lines, but also to help ensure participants are included and accounted for. Pay special attention to those who will be joining from different time zones. Reach out to them one-on-one prior to the meeting to confirm their attendance. This will help long distance attendees feel more welcome and allow the meeting to be structured to better accommodate different times.

Design the meeting with a common visual focus – Unless the meeting is just a short, small-group telephone call with a very simple agenda, plan to always have something visual to help focus attendees' attention. Use PowerPoint slides, the White-Board function, desk-top sharing, and any other tools to give participants a visual focus. Prepare a meeting "lobby" or "Stand-by" slide to use before the meeting starts so people joining know they're in the right place. Also prepare visuals to announce breaks, etc.

Plan the meeting with specific opportunities to engage all attendees – This is especially important so that virtual attendees don't succumb to multi-tasking or feel forgotten by the group. Look at the agenda and determine which items would benefit from input, and which tools would best support engaging the virtual attendees. On-line polling, annotation tools such as high-lighting and pointers, on-line white boards, etc. can be used to ensure all participants are active contributors.

Send out all material ahead of time – Ensuring participants have the agenda and any documents or presentations at least two days prior to the meeting (two weeks is better) is critical to making sure participants are prepared. This means that you must insist that presenters have their materials submitted in enough time to make such distribution.

Arrange for the right equipment – Virtual meetings and virtual attendance at face to face meetings can't be done on the fly. You must arrange to have the right equipment available, a conference call-in number set up, microphones strategically placed around the room, or other equipment that may be necessary to facilitate the meeting.

Have a back-up plan – Virtual meetings depend on technology which may not always function as planned. This makes having documents and presentations ahead of time important in case the on-line part of the meeting is unavailable. Include a contact number of a staff person in case an attendee needs to alert the group that there are connectivity or other problems. Also, make sure a staff person has a contact number for each virtual attendee so that they can be contacted in case the agenda changes or there's some major disruption to the meeting. This way no one is left hanging or wondering where the meeting went.

TECHNOLOGY

The ability to hold a meeting where some or all of the participants are located in different places is entirely dependent on technology. Teleconferencing, Web-conferencing, Video-conferencing, VoIP are all tools which make virtual meetings possible. However, successful use of these tools requires planning and attention to detail.

Know what tools the meeting will require – Look at the agenda and determine what virtual tools will be needed for a successful meeting. Will people be connecting via teleconference only or will they also be using an Internet collaboration tool (such as WebEx, NetMeeting, Defense Connect on Line)? If they're using a collaboration tool, will they be automatically dialed in, use VoIP, or will they dial in separately from the computer connection? What desktop applications will be shared (Word, Excel, PowerPoint)? Will any of the materials require real-time editing and will this be done by the presenter or by all attendees? Will on-line balloting be needed, what about a white board for collective brainstorming. Make sure all participants have the necessary tools and are prepared and trained to use them. Take into account the available bandwidth and on-line tools and avoid videos if there is insufficient capability. Also recognize that some organizations restrict access to some Internet collaboration tools so it is good for the host and remote participants to do some checking days (not just hours) before the meeting. See "Do a dry run," below, and "Have a Back-Up Plan, above.

Make sure remote participants can hear – if you've ever wondered what it is like to have a hearing loss, just try to participate by phone in a large face-to-face meeting. One of the most frustrating things for the remote participant is knowing that something is being said but being unable to hear clearly enough to understand. The remote participant will try, for a while, to make sense out of the noise, but will likely, eventually tune out and start doing local email or other tasks at his or her desk. Avoid this trap by doing all you can to make sure those participating remotely can hear what is going on. You can help by trying to have adequate microphone coverage throughout the room and then requiring that people use the microphones – even those who say, "Everyone can hear me..." If there is only a spider phone available, or one or two microphones that participants must pass around – the chairperson should insist that people use the microphones for their presentations and interventions, and that they refrain from side-bar conversations that can contribute to excessive background noise for those trying to hear from their remote locations.

Make sure participants are prepared – Ensure that all required information to connect to the meeting and take advantage of the tools is sent out ahead of time. Those participants who will be presenting or have responsibility for agenda items should be contacted ahead of time to ensure it's clear who will be running the presentation or using any other on-line tools (performing real-time edits, conducting polls, etc.).

Visually inspect the meeting host site ahead of time – If SAE is hosting the meeting, either an all-virtual meeting or a face-to-face meeting at an SAE office with some virtual attendees, they are familiar with the room set up and the available computing tools and this step is not necessary. However, if the meeting is being hosted elsewhere, then the SAE committee staff person must inspect the hotel, convention center meeting room, or member facility if the meeting is being hosted by a committee member, and determine all available equipment. Then, the chairperson must conduct the meeting taking full recognition of the equipment that will be used. In other words, if all that is available is a single speaker phone then the chairperson must make every effort to ensure that speakers move close to the phone for their presentation or comment.

Do a dry run – Don't wait until five minutes before the meeting to find out you can't connect to the internet, you don't have access codes, microphones don't work, phone jacks or computer drops aren't live, or software isn't loaded. Set up a test meeting to confirm that all equipment works. Have someone log into the test meeting to test connectivity. Have the same person testing the log in functionality move to another room and then test all the microphones to make sure they all work. If the only microphone is a central teleconferencing (spider) phone, do a sound check from different parts of the room to ensure that virtual attendees will be able to hear all face-to-face attendees (this is one of the most important steps for ensuring that virtual attendees can hear and stay engaged!). Depending on the quality of the sound, presenters or those speaking may have to use a separate microphone or move closer. Open and ensure that all on-line tools and desktop sharing work. And recommend that participants check with their IT departments to ensure that appropriate software permissions are in place before the meeting begins.

Have Technical Support available – Whenever technology will be used to support virtual participation, make sure that appropriate technical support is available. Notify technology support person(s) of the meeting date/time, the technology being used, and ensure that an appropriate method of contact (phone number, text message, etc.) is agreed upon should help be required.

Monitor email from remote participants – it is really helpful for remote participants to have someone actually at the meeting with whom they can communicate. This way, if there is something that needs to be communicated relative to the remote participation (as opposed to a question or comment relative to the content of the meeting) such as a disruption of service or requesting a copy of a presentation, or something similar, it can be done without interrupting the flow of the meeting.

PARTICIPANTS HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES, TOO - VIRTUAL MEETING PROTOCOLS

A successful virtual meeting requires participants to be diligent about a number of behaviors. Accepting responsibility for and adhering to the following practices will help ensure a productive meeting and engaged participation.

Respond to meeting notices – Make sure meeting organizers are notified of who will or will not be attending. This allows the appropriate number of lines to be reserved and doesn't keep attendees waiting for a participant who never logs on. If a participant is only planning to attend a portion of the meeting, make sure the organizers know.

Arrive early – Arrive at, log into, or call in to the meeting early to ensure that all software and connections are working correctly.

Know how to use the meeting technology – Participants should make sure they are trained on all the technologies being used to support a virtual meeting. Most Internet collaboration tools offer on-line training modules and there are numerous on-line websites offering tips on how to take advantage of on-line meeting tools such as electronic polling, group editing, white board functions, etc.

Limit background noise – Mute phones unless speaking. Be aware of background noises (heavy breathing, typing, pets, children, traffic, etc.) and avoid subjecting the rest of the participants to these as much as possible. For those in a face-to-face meeting with a few virtual attendees, limiting background noise is especially important as the microphones in the meeting room tend to stay live. Know where the microphones are located. Avoid rustling papers, eating, typing loudly and all side bar conversations so that virtual attendees can hear clearly.

Identify yourself – Knowing who is participating and a meeting and who is speaking at any one time is critical to a successful meeting. Participants should identify themselves when joining a virtual meeting. For meetings using Internet collaboration tools, ensure that each participant is listed by name and organization in the participants list and that phone numbers are linked with participants' names. Always identify yourself when speaking. This is especially important when the majority of participants are face-to-face and just a few are virtual. It's easy to forget that there are virtual participants who aren't able to see (and thus identify) the speaker.

Avoid multitasking – In a "connected" world it is hard to keep participants from checking their email or otherwise multi-tasking even when they are sitting at the table. It is especially tempting for remote participants. But participants should be responsible for giving the meeting their full attention. Turn off cell phones, resist checking e-mail, and stay with the meeting.

Speak clearly – Virtual attendees do not have access to body language and other non-verbal cues to help determine intent, meaning, interest or agreement. Speakers should speak slowly, clearly and avoid addressing in-person attendees to the exclusion of those participating virtually. Be explicit about thoughts, opinions and feelings. The only way others can know a virtual attendee's stance on something is if the attendee is very clear about verbalizing those opinions. Don't let silence be taken for approval if that isn't the case. Speakers should pause often to allow others the chance to break in to ask questions or voice their opinion. Do not speak while others are talking and avoid interrupting speakers. Ask for clarification on any point or issue that isn't clear due to issues with sound or lack of face-to-face feedback.

Be polite – Good manners are especially important as people work to overcome some of the challenges of meeting virtually. Remember that virtual attendees cannot see body language, so speakers need to be mindful of how attitudes come across without visual cues.

Make your presence known – Sometimes the chair or facilitator of a meeting with virtual attendees seems to forget about those who are not physically present. Most of the time politeness dictates that you would not interrupt a speaker or try to break in to a conversation or presentation. But, if you are to participate effectively from your remote station, sometimes you must assert yourself. If the speaker begins to fade out it is your responsibility to break in and ask for a remedy. If you want to ask a question or make a comment and there is no other way to indicate – you need to find a place to break in to and ask to be put into the cue for comments or questions. Don't sit quietly on the phone and then complain later that you were not given a chance to speak.

CHAIRING AND FACILITATING A VIRTUAL MEETING

As with conventional face-to-face meetings, much of the success of a virtual meeting rests with the chair or facilitator. Careful attention to the following practices will help ensure a smoothly run and productive virtual meeting where all participants feel included and engaged.

Set expectations prior to the meeting – Ensure that agendas, presentations, documents, and background materials are sent out ahead of time. Verify that participants have replied to meeting announcements and personally contact individuals if possible to ensure their attendance. Make sure attendees know to join the meeting early and how to contact a staff person with technical problems.

Clearly establish who is present – One problem with virtual meetings is not knowing who is participating or worse, forgetting about people who are attending virtually. To the greatest extent possible always provide a visual cue for who is participating. For voice-only meetings, send out a list of attendees ahead of time that participants can refer to during the meeting. For meetings where Internet collaboration tools (such as WebEx, NetMeeting, or Defense Connect on Line) are used, make sure that all attendees sign in using their full name and affiliated organization so everyone has a list of those attending. For face-to-face meetings with a few virtual attendees, provide strong visual cues in the meeting room to help the in-person participants remember and include the virtual attendees. Make tent name cards for the virtual attendees and place them on a table in the middle of the room. Post the names of virtual attendees on a large flip chart in the front of the room. Post a large map and indicate on the map the locations of the virtual attendees. For virtual attendees to an in-person meeting, provide a list of attendees who are gathered for the face-to-face meeting. Mail out the list of attendees at the beginning of the meeting or display a slide of attendees.

Visual cues are extremely important to keep people connected and included. The Chair or facilitator should keep a list of attendees and have quick access to participants' phone numbers in case of a technology glitch. **Reconfirm** attendees after all breaks. Add the names of new virtual attendees or remove the names of those who have left the meeting to keep in-person participants mindful of those connected remotely. Inform virtual attendees when new people join an in-person meeting or leave the meeting (remember, they can't see who's in the room).

Verify connectivity – Before starting the meeting verify that everyone is able to hear and/or see properly.

Review processes and protocols at the start – At the beginning of the meeting, review how the meeting technology will be used (e.g., polling, white boards, editing, etc.), set ground rules, and establish goals and objectives for the meeting. Remind participants of virtual meeting protocols and expectations for staying engaged and successful virtual interactions.

Instruct attendees on processes/tools for providing input – At the beginning and then periodically throughout the meeting, review how attendees should signal their desire to ask a question or comment on an item (using the “raise hand” software function, typing a question in the Chat window, jumping in verbally, etc.). Assign someone (usually staff) to monitor the Internet collaboration software or chat-window and alert attendees when a question is raised or someone wants to talk.

Keep participants focused with visuals – If Internet collaboration tools or video conferencing are being used, ensure that there is something on the screen to help attendees know the current topic. Between agenda items and presentations, return to the agenda and highlight or otherwise indicate the current topic. Before the meeting begins and during breaks, display a visual which indicates when the meeting will start or resume (e.g., “Welcome to the X-YY Committee Meeting. Meeting will begin at 8:30 am EST” or “Committee X-YY is now on Lunch Break. Meeting will resume at 1:30pm EST”). There are a number of stop-watch computer applications which can provide a real-time countdown as an additional visual.

Follow the agenda – Following the agenda and sticking to assigned times will keep participants in synch with what's being discussed. Sticking to assigned times is especially important if individuals are joining just for certain agenda items. If a change to the agenda is necessary, remind participants often of what the change is and how it impacts the rest of the agenda. Use visuals to let participants know which items have been completed and which remain. If necessary have someone contact virtual attendees who are joining for a specific item if their item has moved in the agenda.

Encourage feedback – Throughout the meeting, the chair or facilitator should actively seek out and provide feedback for virtual attendees. Conduct frequent process checks (every 15 minutes or after each agenda item) to provide opportunities for individuals to offer input and to keep participants engaged. Check in with virtual attendees by name and if possible ask direct questions (e.g., “Tim, do you agree with that last proposal?”). Encourage use of available feedback channels (e.g., chat function in the collaboration software). On-line polling is useful to keep attendees engaged and to ensure agreement on important issues. Establish a private channel (even if it’s to use e-mail) if participants need to communicate directly with the facilitator about process issues.

Maintain control of conversations – using speakerphones or video conferencing is very different from talking one-on-one or meetings when everyone is in the same place. With remote participants it is difficult or impossible to receive real-time feedback. For that reason it’s important to control discussions to maintain order, encourage dialogue, and offer opportunities for feedback. Avoid addressing local audiences to the exclusion of remote participants. Engage in dialogue rather than one-way briefings whenever possible. For example, ask individual participants to comment after each slide in a PowerPoint. Shift focus between members from different stakeholder groups, sites or locations to keep people engaged (e.g., “Let’s check with those members from civil aviation to see if this works for their applications.” “Those of you on the phone from companies outside of North-America, do you have different regulations?”). Do not allow members to engage in lengthy two-person discussions to the exclusion of the rest of the participants. Those need to be taken off-line. Do not allow any one participant to monopolize discussions without offering others a chance to break in. Always know how to mute an individual if it becomes absolutely necessary to take back control of a meeting.

Build team rapport and keep virtual attendees engaged

– People take in the majority of their information visually. For meeting participants who aren’t co-located, the chair or facilitator must make an extra effort to help people feel part of the team.

- **Allow time for introductions and small talk to help build relationships.** If people are engaged in small talk at a face-to-face meeting, pull virtual attendees into the conversation with directed questions.
- **Address participants by name.** This includes people in face-to-face situations calling on each other by name for the sake of those who can’t see who is talking. Using people’s names not only reminds everyone of who’s in attendance, but it helps to keep virtual participants engaged and away from multi-tasking.

- **Provide color commentary.** Because virtual attendees can’t see what’s going on, be diligent in describing what’s happening (e.g., “Carol is passing out copies of the presentation, people on web should see it in their e-mail in a minute or two.”, “Michael looks like he really didn’t like that suggestion. Michael, please share your thoughts.”, “Everyone in Warrendale seems to agree with these points. Let’s check in with our European participants.”). Don’t forget to describe things that happened during breaks, lunches, or evenings for multi-day meetings. This is very important to ensure that virtual attendees don’t feel left out of “in jokes”. The chair or facilitator may even want to assign a special role to someone in the room to provide this kind of commentary for remote listeners.
- **Provide extra visuals or information to virtual attendees.** Look for creative ways to make virtual attendees feel a part of face-to-face meetings. If the meeting is not using video-conferencing, quickly snap a picture of those gathered in person and post it. Encourage remote attendees to share pictures of where they are. Take pictures of what the group is having for lunch and have virtual participants do the same. Share the website of where the group is going to dinner. These things may sound silly, but as long as they are done in a manner that is respectful of attendees and doesn’t distract too much from the purpose of the meeting, they really help to build team relationships.

Conduct a meeting evaluation – At the end of the meeting, it is useful to poll all participants on what worked and what didn’t work well. Give team members a chance to air issues and make suggestions for improvements. Use a “round robin” process to solicit input from every participant. Seek specific feedback on ways to improve the virtual experience from the standpoint of either technology and tools or meeting procedures and processes.

FOLLOW-UP IS IMPORTANT

Just as in regular meetings, timely follow-up to virtual meetings is very important.

Post or e-mail minutes as soon as possible. Make sure minutes include a list of all attendees to remind people of who was there. Attach all material shared as well as any material generated during the meeting (mark-ups, lists, etc.).

Provide a clear list of any action items – Make sure actions are described so that it is clearly understood the deliverable, the due date, and the person(s) responsible. Make sure that virtual attendees as well as in-person attendees take part in assuming responsibility for actions.

Encourage additional feedback – Request that attendees forward on any additional suggestions or comments for ways to improve future meetings, especially with regards to the virtual aspects.

Reach out to those who were absent – Everyone who was absent from a meeting should be contacted by someone who was in attendance. Those who missed the meeting should have the opportunity to be brought up to speed and to ask questions about the outcome of the meetings. Absentees should also be polled as to why they were unable to attend and if they have suggestions for ways to improve their chances of participating in the future (e.g., change the meeting times).

SUMMARY

Virtual meeting attendance is here to stay as a way of doing business. Careful construction, chairing and facilitation of a meeting where all or some of the attendees are virtual, can be extremely valuable in helping to keep work moving, engaging a broader number of participants, and overcoming budget and travel restrictions. However, successful implementation of virtual meetings means diligently following the guidance set down in this document. Review this document before each virtual meeting. Encourage all participants to follow these best practices. And share lessons learned regarding these or any additional best practices.

BEST PRACTICES FOR VIRTUAL MEETINGS TIP-SHEET

Preparation

- Determine the type of meeting
- Have a clear agenda
- Choose times carefully
- Know who will attend
- Design the meeting with a common visual focus
- Plan the meeting with specific opportunities to engage all attendees
- Send out all material ahead of time
- Arrange for the right equipment
- Have a back-up plan

Technology

- Know what tools the meeting will require
- Make sure remote participants can hear
- Make sure participants are prepared
- Visually inspect the meeting host site ahead of time
- Do a dry run
- Have Technical Support available
- Monitor email from remote participants

Participant Have Responsibilities, Too - Virtual Meeting

Protocols

- Respond to meeting notices
- Arrive early
- Know how to use the meeting technology
- Limit background noise
- Identify yourself
- Avoid multitasking
- Speak clearly
- Be polite
- Make your presence known

Chairing and Facilitating a Virtual Meeting

- Set expectations prior to the meeting
- Clearly establish who is present
- Verify connectivity
- Review processes and protocols at the start
- Instruct attendees on processes/tools for providing input
- Keep participants focused with visuals
- Follow the agenda
- Encourage feedback
- Maintain control of conversations
- Build team rapport and keep virtual attendees engaged
 - Allow time for introductions and small talk to help build relationships.
 - Address participants by name.
 - Provide color commentary.
 - Provide extra visuals or information to virtual attendees
- Conduct a meeting evaluation

Follow-up is important

- Post or e-mail minutes as soon as possible.
- Provide a clear list of any action items
- Encourage additional feedback
- Reach out to those who were absent