How to Make Virtual Meetings Work

General Advice and Tips

Virtual meetings are needed to ensure work still gets done and let you check in and collaborate with colleagues, wherever they are. However, they also pose unique challenges, too. Here are some tips to overcome them – and make your virtual meetings a success.

1. Be prepared
In virtual meetings, time is precious. To ensure you use your time wisely, it’s vital to prepare well in advance. So, send a clear and concise agenda before the meeting. This lets attendees know what to expect and helps them plan for the meeting. You could also invite attendees to submit their questions in advance. Make sure your find a quiet space, free from distractions, and encourage your colleagues to do the same. Try to avoid dialling in ‘on the move’ and encourage other attendees to do the same.

2. Test your tech
Virtual meetings can be derailed by technological problems. You can’t anticipate every issue, but you can identify – and rectify – any bugs by testing your tech an hour or so before the meeting. You can also offer an alternative way of contacting you if tech plays up. Make sure everyone has shared a variety of methods for maintaining contact.

4. Smile, you’re on camera!
In virtual meetings with video capability, remember you’re broadcasting! Your body language and posture impact the message you’re trying to get across. Even if people can’t see you, your tone of voice and other verbal cues (such as sighing or tutting) alert your fellow attendees to your mood and attitude. So, talk to your laptop camera just like you would to someone in person. And ask all participants to switch on their cameras if possible. This helps you know who’s talking and builds better engagement. Speaking of which, make it easy for other people to see and hear you during the meeting. During a meeting, avoid obstructing the webcam and remember to look directly into the lens of the webcam to establish eye contact with other attendees. But try to avoid staring into the lens, as this can be off-putting.

5. Help people connect
To work together effectively, it’s important to give people the opportunity to chat and continue to build rapport, even if they can’t meet in person. If you have time, ask people to share something interesting they are doing outside of work.

6. Lead the meeting actively
When leading a virtual team meeting try to help everyone follow the conversation and signal to the speakers when it’s their time to speak. When asking questions, be specific and direct your queries to particular individuals. If you ask everyone an open question, chances are you’ll face an awkward silence or everyone clamouring to answer at once.

7. Communicate clearly
In virtual meetings, effective communication is key. So, speak slowly and clearly, pause after each key point, and it may be useful to ask attendees to announce themselves by name before adding any comments or questions. It’s also a good idea to confirm people’s understanding from time to time. If your comments are met with radio silence, this might signal there’s a problem with your tech, communication style or message. So, check your fellow attendees are following what you say. It’s also important to avoid relying too heavily on supporting material. While you may need to refer to certain reports or figures every so often, attendees shouldn’t have to study docs too closely. Finding the right table or page can distract and suck away time.
8. Appoint a meeting facilitator
For large virtual meetings with several attendees, consider appointing a meeting facilitator. They can ensure everyone dials in successfully and fight any tech gremlins that appear. You might also want to make the meeting facilitator the point of contact for anyone who loses connectivity during the call. If you’re using a ‘chat’ function to take questions or comments from attendees, the facilitator can monitor incoming messages. That way, you can focus on leading the meeting.

9. Observe virtual meeting etiquette
As with any professional encounter, it’s important to be polite when interacting with others during virtual meetings. Avoid checking email or other messages during the meeting if possible. You could miss something important and the other attendees will notice you’re distracted. What’s more, avoid the temptation to have side conversations with people during the meeting.

10. Take your time
Remember to be patient and wait a couple of seconds for people to respond before speaking again. If you do inadvertently interrupt someone, apologise and encourage them to continue. Phrases like ‘please carry on’ and ‘you were saying?’ can diffuse these situations.

Finally, remember to be patient with establishing new ways of working. Working as a virtual team is a new experience for many people and can be a cause of some stress. Take time to regularly review how this is working for people, share ideas as to how your virtual meetings can be improved and remember to thank everyone for the extra effort this may require.

*based on an article by Good Practice, accessed via AdvanceHE*