

The Ultimate Guide to Remote Meetings in 2020

Learn how to set up effective virtual meetings with distributed team members

In today's workplace, you're just as likely to be working with someone in a different part of the country (or a different part of the world) as you are with someone in a different part of the office—which is why getting a clear understanding of how and why remote meetings work, and how to make them work for you, is so important.



Online meetings may be a normal part of a team's everyday workflow, but how to make them maximally efficient can be a bit of a head-scratcher: What's the best virtual meeting tool to use? And how do you make sure you cover everything that needs covering before everyone hangs up or disconnects? If running a virtual meeting feels like one big question mark, don't sweat it. Let's take a look at everything you need to know about running effective remote meetings with distributed teams.

Choosing the right online meeting tool for your remote team meeting

There is an abundance of technology out there that makes the process of running an online meeting easier, faster, and more collaborative—the key is figuring out which of these tools is right for your team.

When choosing remote meeting tools, ask yourself:

What is the key functionality I need for this remote team meeting to be successful?

Do you need to be able to see everyone's reactions as you share new product ideas? Try a video conferencing software. Do you need everyone to be able to work on a press release collaboratively? You likely want to use something like Google Docs. Do you need everyone to watch a presentation or demo in real time? Then screen-sharing software is a must.

The point is, the "right" tools depend on your needs. And although every team is different, they all benefit from an online meeting tool that has both video and audio

functionality at the very least. Research says that 55% of communication is body language, while another 38% is tone of voice—all of which is necessary to creating a communal atmosphere during a virtual meeting.

How many people need to be involved in your remote meeting?

The tools that are most effective for a one-on-one virtual chat aren't necessarily the same tools as those that are most effective for running a meeting with 20 remote workers spread across different time zones. Make sure the meeting software you choose can accommodate a large number of attendees without going haywire.

How can technology make online meetings more efficient?

At its best, technology in the workplace should be used to streamline processes and make information more accessible to teams and team members. It should also help people stay focused on what's important. So when you're assessing potential online meeting tools, see if they include useful additional features—like screen-sharing and recording capabilities—that allow you to share the meeting with attendees afterward, while sparing them from being distracted with note-taking during the meeting.

Laying the foundation for successful virtual meetings

When you work with an in-person team, there are plenty of opportunities throughout the day to stop, chat, and connect. Those informal conversations and connections help build a rapport that carries over into meetings, making people feel more engaged and perhaps more comfortable voicing their opinions or offering critical feedback. One study found that workers who shared a funny or embarrassing story about themselves with their team produced 26% more ideas in brainstorming sessions than workers who didn't. And the benefits of having a best friend at work have also been well documented.

But remote team members don't necessarily have those opportunities, which is why leaders and managers have to be proactive and create them. If most team members haven't spoken or met before, they'll likely be reluctant to share or debate ideas in front of others. So before making virtual meetings a regular part of your team's workflow, it's important to get everyone comfortable with communicating with each other.

A great way to do that? Build a "virtual watercooler"—a communal place online where team members can get to know each other and connect outside of structured meetings. Giving distributed teams a shared space to connect online helps them:

- Get comfortable (and, let's face it, feel less awkward) communicating across digital channels with people they haven't met in person
- Get to know other members of the team and their expertise
- Feel like they are an equal and integral part of the team, despite their geographic location
- Identify any potential issues when it comes to communication styles or differing points of view ahead of meetings

A virtual watercooler can be a specific place (like a Slack channel) or a set of shared traditions (like daily video check-ins or a weekly virtual happy hour). As long as it connects your team and familiarizes them with one another before meetings happen, it will help lay the foundation for successful online meetings.

Set an agenda and agree on remote meeting guidelines

If you want your scheduled remote meeting to be efficient and successful, you need to plan your agenda.

"The best remote meetings have a session agenda [set] beforehand so that people come in knowing what it is they will be talking about," says Galindo. "If the meeting doesn't have that, then you spend 15 to 20 minutes just figuring out what it is you are even trying to do."

For every virtual meeting, it's important to create a clear meeting agenda that includes:

- Key talking points
- Meeting structure (for example, when and for how long you plan to discuss each talking point)
- Team members/teams that will be in attendance
- What each team member/team is responsible for bringing to the meeting
- Any relevant documents, files, or research

Just as important as the meeting agenda are the meeting guidelines: the rules and expectations of how the team is expected to contribute to the virtual meeting.

"You want to make sure that everyone enters [into the meeting] with clear guidelines of expectations and knowing what [everyone is] going to be doing and how to manage the virtual space," says Galindo.

So, for example, can everyone speak freely or will the team leader call on someone when it's that person's turn to contribute? Does everyone need to have their

camera on at all times or just the presenter? Should people mute their phones while others are speaking?

Setting a clear meeting agenda and guidelines (and sending them to the team at least 24 hours in advance) will help ensure that everyone is on the same page before the virtual meeting takes place.

Etiquette for online meetings

While different meetings will have different “rules,” there are some basic etiquette practices everyone should follow to create a smooth online meeting experience.

Think of them as the must-do’s of online meeting etiquette:

- Introduce everyone during the meeting, and give everyone a chance to contribute
- Don’t stare at your phone while other people are presenting
- Don’t interrupt other people when they’re speaking (or attempt to speak over them)
- Test all technology (including camera/video, Wi-Fi, and screen sharing) before the meeting
- Read the agenda, and come prepared
- Don’t work on other tasks (like checking email) during the virtual meeting
- Turn off all notifications and make sure your cell phone is on silent
- Make sure all team members are in a quiet area free from unnecessary distractions

When in doubt, just practice common courtesy. People want to be heard, seen, and respected during an online meeting—just like they do everywhere else.

Keeping remote team members engaged during online meetings

All the points we’ve covered—from scheduling to setting an agenda to practicing proper etiquette—are important in getting a virtual meeting up and running. But those are all moot if the team isn’t engaged when it comes time for the actual meeting.

Here are our top tips for keeping the entire team present for a remote meeting, from beginning to end:

Make time for casual conversation

A few minutes of friendly interaction before diving into a meeting can really build the necessary rapport for a successful sit-down—and keep the team engaged when the conversation jumps to business talk.

“In virtual settings you don’t have that face-to-face [interaction], so you have to work double hard to generate that trust and that rapport,” says Galindo. “And so I find that in a virtual setting, you need to be very intentional in creating that.”

Spend a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting checking in with everyone, catching up, or just having small talk about what’s going on in the office. Not only will it boost engagement, but it can also strengthen culture and deepen your relationship with your team.

Have everyone introduce themselves

If there are a lot of people attending a meeting, it can be hard to keep tabs on who’s who. Having everyone introduce themselves at kickoff (and especially before someone speaks or presents) is a good way to help everyone keep track of different team members and how they’re contributing to the meeting.

Give everyone a job

Have you ever been to a meeting and had zero idea why, exactly, you were there?

Not having a clear purpose for each attendee is the quickest way to kill team engagement. Before the meeting, make sure everyone on the team has a job; for example, have one team member write down any questions that come up during a brainstorm, have another take notes on key discussion points, and have another manage the slide progression during the presentation.

The best jobs to keep remote workers engaged during meetings are:

- **Interactive.** The job should require each person to contribute in real time and interact with the meeting and other team members.
- **Straightforward.** If the job is too complex, your team may spend more time trying to figure out what to do than actually participating in the meeting.
- **Frequent.** Ideally, each team member’s job is something they need to do over the duration of the meeting so that they’re engaged from start to finish, rather than being assigned a “one and done” task.

Giving everyone a job allows them to take an active role in the meeting and makes them feel like part of the action, instead of forcing people to be passive listeners—which, we can all attest, is boring and tedious.

Include introverts during remote meetings

It's important to keep everyone engaged during remote meetings, including the team members who might not be the most vocal or outspoken.

"As a facilitator, your job is to not only bring everyone up and empower them but also to create a space of safety for those individuals who maybe aren't as comfortable vocalizing themselves," says Galindo.

If there are people in the meeting who are less comfortable speaking up, structure the meeting in a way that gives everyone equal opportunity for their voices to be heard, like a round-robin-style discussion, where everyone gets five minutes to share an insight or experience they've had around the meeting topic.

If you notice that someone on the team is trying to contribute but getting overshadowed by more extroverted team members, carve out time for them to speak (and make sure the rest of the team is listening). Some team members may still be reticent to pipe up during a virtual meeting. Take the time to schedule a one-on-one to get that person's insights on how you can make remote meetings a more inclusive space for them. Even better, create a communal space or document online where people can add their thoughts, insights, and suggestions following the meeting.

The point is, introverts deserve to be just as engaged in online meetings as anyone else, but it may take some work on the facilitator's part to get them there.

Online meeting follow-ups

In order for a meeting to be effective, every person needs to walk out with a clear objective. The key things everyone needs to know are:

- Deliverables and next steps
- Who's responsible for following up on each item or task
- When those deliverables are due
- When the next meeting or check-in will be

And if you were the host, don't forget that an important part of meeting follow-up is checking in with attendees about how well the meeting went, whether you choose

to do so through a casual one-on-one conversation or by sending out a simple and anonymous feedback survey. Hearing from attendees may just give you ample ideas on how you can make future meetings even more inclusive and efficient for everyone involved.

Run virtual meetings with distributed teams like a pro

Successfully running a virtual meeting can feel overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be. When you follow this step-by-step guide, it doesn't matter if you're working with a team of two or a team of 10, whether team members are five miles away or 5,000— you'll have everything you need to confidently run a productive remote meeting.