

# Virtual meetings, gone wrong - a guide for the bewildered

Years ago, a colleague challenged me to decode a cryptic equation:

$$OA + NT = EOA$$

I had no idea.

He explained it as follows

$$\text{Old Approach} + \text{New Technology} = \text{Expensive Old Approach}$$

Regrettably, that seems to be the formula that has plagued many virtual meetings; worse, in these isolated times, more and more of us are struggling with back-to-back virtual meetings - with little improvement in productivity or meeting outcomes.



## So, what was wrong with (many) traditional face-to-face meetings?

Do any of these ring a bell:

- poor preparation?
- unclear objectives?
- domination by one or more participants?
- unclear criteria for decision-making?
- unchecked cognitive bias?
- a poor record of the meeting and its decisions?

Add poor use of technology and these problems become even worse.

## Reinventing the meeting

Evidently, we're missing a trick. Instead of using new technology to *mimic*<sup>1</sup> face-to-face meetings, we should be looking to *reinvent meetings*. With careful use of certain tools, this is not only possible: it is the key to *vastly more effective meetings*.

Don't get me wrong – technology is not a 'silver bullet' guaranteed to deliver perfect meetings. Having used electronic collaboration tools for over 25 years, I have certainly had my share of failures. And, nowadays, we are overwhelmed with a vast array of competing products, all purporting to solve our every problem. It's a minefield – so much choice! so little clarity!

Let me nail my colours to the mast – having tried many of these tools in anger - my preferred choice is:

**Zoom (videoconferencing) with MeetingSphere (electronic collaboration).**

Here are my top 10 tips for smarter virtual (reinvented) meetings: Before, During and After.

### BEFORE: Plan! and Engage!

1. **Plan! Plan! Plan!** – This might sound obvious – but it's amazing how unclear some meetings can be. A basic discipline for every paper presented to a Board is that it should clearly marked: 'For Information', 'For Discussion' or 'For Approval'. The same thinking applies to every other meeting too. Really understanding why you are meeting, ensuring the right people are there and working out the smartest approach to interaction goes a long way to ensuring a successful meeting (or, making you realise why a meeting is not required in the first place!). **Be clear on your objectives, your participants and your process.**
2. **Design the meeting for active participation** - all face-to-face meetings are supposed to be meticulously planned to ensure we get the best from those attending - many, however, are not. The research makes it clear that active learning

### Three 'Secret Sauce' Ingredients of Electronic Collaboration

**Anonymity - to debate the point, not the person** - the use of anonymous brainstorming/rating allows the proverbial "elephant in the room" to be called out and addressed without reference to the person who suggested it. Over the years, this is perhaps the single most powerful feature I've used in collaboration tools (which, in a conventional face-to-face setting, has no equivalent).

**Parallel working – to energise and accelerate the meeting:** a 'sequential' polling of each meeting participant may well be polite, but people's attention drifts remarkably quickly. That's why the facility for everyone to add their ideas at the same time is so much better: it gets everyone's voice heard and it's fast (in one recent meeting, over 70 ideas were suggested (and recorded) in less than 6 minutes).

**Equality – to ensure all voices get heard:** a by-product of anonymity is that every voice gets heard – not just the most senior, or the loudest, voice in the room.

<sup>1</sup> Even though many have issued excellent guidance on adapting to use of virtual meetings (such as "Good Practice for virtual board and committee meetings" by the Chartered Governance Institute), they often overlook how electronic collaboration has the potential to reinvent meetings (see 'Secret Sauce' box, above)

techniques are superior to the traditional lecture<sup>2</sup>: people participate most effectively when they have to interact with others. By deliberately designing opportunities for interaction (think Breakout Rooms and collaboration), it's possible to ensure a far higher level of participation. **Plan from the perspective of each person's experience of the meeting – plan to make it interactive.**

3. **Engage them before the meeting starts** – use of electronic collaboration can transform your meetings. Providing the opportunity to get people's ideas (brainstorming) or asking them to select the best ones (voting/rating) means everyone comes to the meeting having reflected on the matters at hand. That provides the platform for active discussion and debate – and smarter decision-making. **Make smart use of brainstorming and voting to ensure every participant is ready to engage from the start of the meeting.**

#### **DURING: focus on getting the most from your meeting participants**

4. **Make it human – reconnect!** Yes, face-to-face meetings are known for the chit-chat and social intercourse before any meeting gets started. But using Breakout Rooms in Zoom can make this even more immediate for participants (in a recent workshop, I was able to assign 66 participants to 22 breakout rooms at the press of a button – making for a much more intimate basis for discussion. Two days later I used the same technique to get board members chatting before we got into a difficult agenda.) **Keep it personal using small groups.**
5. **Energise them from the outset** –. An engaging start will help ensure a high level of engagement throughout the meeting. Rehearse your opening to make an immediate impact. **Remember: you only get one chance to make first impressions (make appropriate use of brainstorming and voting to keep the meeting moving at pace).**
6. **Mix it up – change groups:** effective meetings require effective dynamics. By changing the composition of groups for different breakout room sessions (or changing the numbers in each breakout room), meeting participants enjoy a much richer experience. **Keep it varied – allow for lots of different interactions (Zoom makes it easy to change the composition of Breakout Rooms).**
7. **Allow them to Switch Off** - a curious benefit of Zoom is that everyone sees everyone else's face front-on. Many would argue this is much better than having to look left and right to see people's reactions. But this comes with a price: research shows that people tire more rapidly, being self-conscious about how they look and how their presence is being judged by everyone else on the call<sup>3</sup>. It's a good idea, therefore, to provide an occasional comfort break. **Pace your meeting with comfort breaks.**
8. **Improve continuously** – most meetings fail to evaluate what went well and what needs to improve. Only by deliberately asking for feedback on those two issues can we ensure that meetings keep getting better. **Ask participants how to improve the next meeting (use MeetingSphere for swift, anonymous feedback).**

#### **AFTER: Follow-up fast, and smart**

9. **Feedback promptly** - once the meeting is over, ensure you provide feedback to all participants as quickly as possible. With MeetingSphere, it is trivial to produce a Word report (or to provide ongoing electronic access) to everything the participants have entered or rated during the meeting. **Make your meeting meaningful with a concise summary of key decisions and planned actions.**
10. **See what Artificial Intelligence (AI) can do for you** - there are several tools which enable you to take an audio recording and have it converted to a transcript for analysis by an AI program. While many programs are still at an early stage, the promise of automated meeting notes, analysis of sentiment (positive versus negative sentiment), automatic extraction of agreed action points and more, provide an exciting array of productivity tools for us all. **Keep experimenting (but do pay attention to GDPR!).**

Applying these tips should enable a new equation:

$$NA + NT = CENA \quad (\text{New Approach} + \text{New Technology} = \text{Cost-Effective New Approach})$$

**No guarantees – but this is a new approach that is definitely worth trying.**

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<sup>2</sup> "methods and practices that actively involved learners in acquiring, using, evaluating, and reflecting on new knowledge or practice had the most positive consequences on learner outcomes" "Meta-analysis of the effectiveness of four adult learning methods and strategies", Dunst CJ, Trivette CM, Hamby DW, Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute, North Carolina, USA

"students overwhelmingly supported the use of cooperative-learning groups", "Active Learning in the College Classroom", Faust JL, Paulson DR, California State University, Journal on Excellence in College Teaching, 1998

"There IS evidence that active learning, student-centered approaches to teaching physiology work, and they work better than more passive approaches", "Where's the evidence that active learning works?", Michael J, American Physiological Association, Dec 2006

<sup>3</sup> "How to Combat Zoom Fatigue" Fosslien L., West Duffy M., Harvard Business Review, April 2020