

# Remote meetings: Guidelines for getting more done in less time

BY NANCY SETTLE-MURPHY

You've just escaped from one more remote meeting that's robbed you of two hours that could have been better spent on 100 other actions on your to-do list. Everyone else on the call seemed just as frustrated that nothing significant was accomplished. To add insult to injury, another two-hour meeting must be set up to continue where this one left off.

Sound familiar? As more companies depend on the success of team members working in different locations, they struggle to address a common challenge: How can we get more real work done during our remote meetings?

Here are some quick tips for planning and running effective meetings when some of the participants work remotely.

## Structuring the meeting

- Limit each remote meeting to no more than two hours, including time for Q&A. Even when the topic is engaging and the conversation spirited, energy levels ebb noticeably after two hours.

- Invite the minimum number of people needed to accomplish your objectives. Make sure everyone understands their roles. For example, you don't want all 20 meeting participants thinking they have decision-making authority if in fact the decision rests with just a handful of people.

- When creating your agenda, focus first on your key objectives, considering which topics require in-depth conversations, and be realistic about the time needed. Better to carve out a series of two-hour sessions right up front versus having to repeatedly reschedule because you've run out of time.

- With a hybrid meeting, where some participants are face-to-face and others are remote, decide who really needs to participate remotely and at what juncture. It's usually best to design your meeting to maximize time for those in the

room, building in specific activities where remote folks can best participate.

- Focus meeting time on having the right discussions versus reviewing "presentationware." Nothing can tune out a virtual audience faster than a talking head reviewing a deck of slides.



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## Planning and prework

- Send out a detailed workshop overview document in advance, including meeting objectives, agenda, participants and roles, timing, logistics and prerequisites. It pays to err on the side of being overly explicit when setting expectations, especially with meeting time at a premium.

- When topics are likely to be contentious, phone participants in advance so that you can unearth any landmines that could otherwise derail your meeting.

- Determine which other communication methods can help you achieve your goals, either pre-meeting, post-meeting or during the session itself — such as web conferencing, bulletin boards or e-mails.

## Running the meeting

- Stick to your promised agenda. If you allow conversations to drift and lose focus

easily, participants are more likely to give themselves permission to tune out.

- Keep conversations lively and participants engaged. Vary the tone of your voice. Ask provocative questions or make bold statements. Try to include everyone in the discussion by alternating between free-for-all discussions and using a series of questions or statements to which everyone can respond or vote.

- Make sure you have everyone's buy-in regarding ground rules. Be prepared to call people on obvious infractions, such as persistent multitasking during critical conversations. Remind participants of their commitment to participate fully, and ask if they can postpone other work until after the call.

- If some participants have less mastery over the language than others, pause to test understanding. Be prepared to slow down if it's obvious that some are unable to follow the thread of the conversation.

- The judicious use of web conferencing capabilities can focus people on the discussion. For example, an electronic whiteboard can be used to capture ideas. Certain technologies allow people to submit questions or offer ideas instantly. People are less likely to revert to e-mail if they know their absence will be conspicuous.

- Before the meeting disbands, make sure everyone is clear on required follow-up and next steps, including meeting notes, action plans, progress tracking, additional communications and need for follow-on meetings.

And finally, solicit candid feedback, either during the call or afterward, to learn what could have gone better, and be open to improvements that will speed time to achieving results for the next call.

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