

How to Make Virtual Meetings Work

The coronavirus is making many organisations re-think meetings. Why shuttle employees across the country – in the splutter of planes and trains – when they can dial in from their office or home?

As well as calling a halt to business travel, you may find yourself in lockdown, working from home. But don't fret if this is new to you. Virtual meetings ensure work still gets done – and let you **check in and collaborate with colleagues**, wherever they are. But teleconferencing and video technology pose unique challenges, too. Here are some tips to overcome them – and make your virtual meetings a success.

Please note: we have referenced a variety of software solutions and apps in this article. But it's important to find out what's available and permitted within your organisation. Talk to your IT department for specific guidance and advice.



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 a few days 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.

If the virtual meeting tech you use requires people to sign in, **send the log-in details** to all attendees at least a day in advance. And wherever you are for the meeting, make sure it's a quiet space, free from distractions. Try to avoid dialling in 'on the move' and encourage other attendees to do the same.

If you're forced to join from a public place, remote meeting app **Microsoft Teams** has a Background Blur feature that blocks out distractions around you. And **GoToMeeting** is mobile-friendly, making it easy to set up and start a conference from your smartphone.

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. It's also a good idea to encourage attendees to **dial in to the meeting ten minutes** early to test their connection. You can also offer an alternative way of contacting you if tech plays up. Like your mobile number or direct messaging handle.

Video conferencing apps such as **Cisco Webex Meetings** let you schedule, host and join a virtual meeting from the apps you work with every day. This removes issues that arise from the unknown. For example, you can join a meeting direct from your Office 365 or Google calendar.



3. Consider colleagues in other time zones

Scheduling virtual meetings can be tricky when attendees dial in from other time zones. Asking them to call in very early in the morning or late at night is far from ideal. If possible, aim to schedule your meetings so they roughly **fall within business hours for everyone**.

If this isn't possible, and the meeting takes place regularly, schedule it at a different time each week, month or quarter. This gives attendees in each time zone a 'turn' to dial in during their business hours.

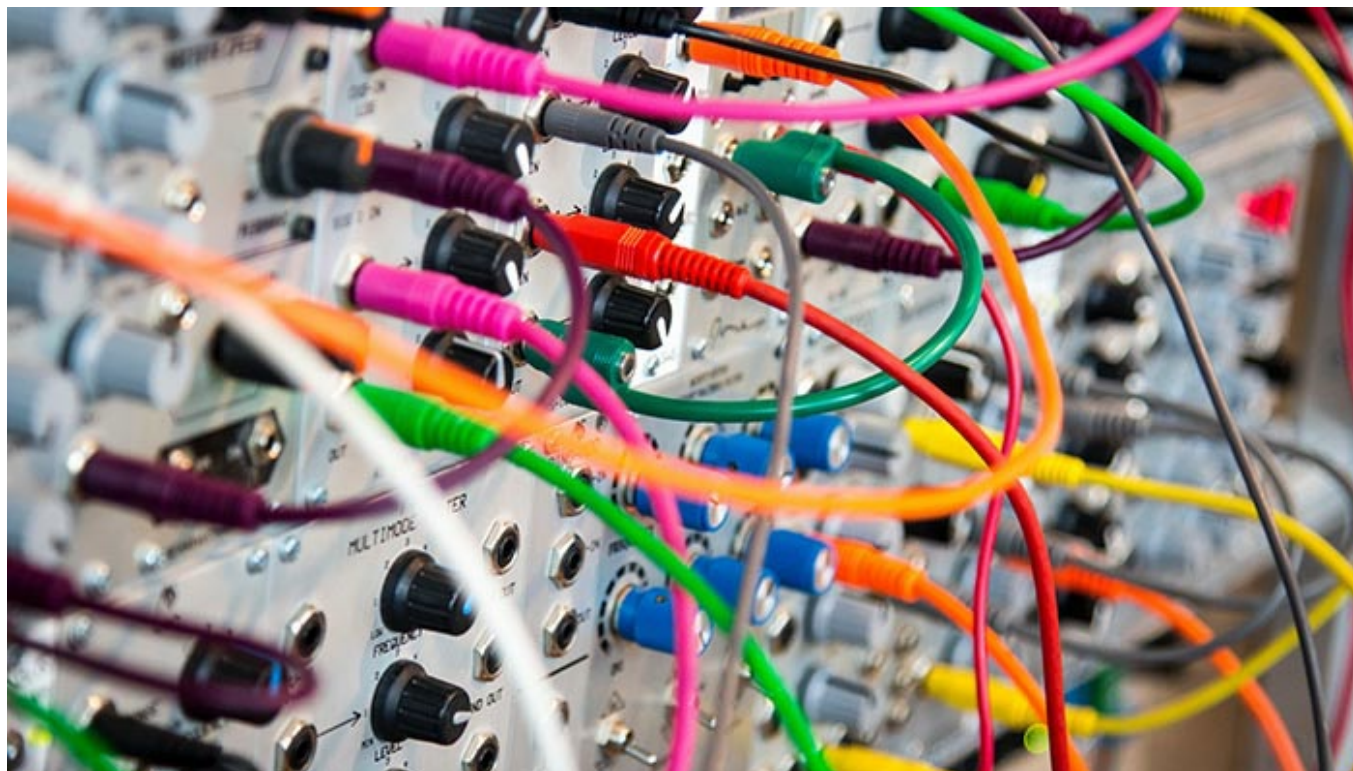
4. Smile, you're on camera!

In virtual meetings, 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. Before, test your in-built camera, as some show unflattering angles. It might be worth using a small plug-in one. During a meeting, avoid obstructing the webcam and don't wear accessories that could clink against your microphone. 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.

Tech like the **Meeting Owl** makes maintaining eye contact easier. Its 360° video displays all attendees on-screen. And its clever camera and mic pick up and zoom in on the person talking.



5. Help people connect

To work together effectively, it's important to give people the opportunity to build rapport, even if they can't meet in person. If you have time, ask people to **introduce themselves** at the start of the virtual meeting. If appropriate, ask everyone to share something interesting they did at the weekend, or what's going on in their local area at the moment.

Some apps encourage ice-breakers. **CyberLink U Meeting**, for instance, has a PerfectCam feature that lets you add computer-generated makeup to your face. A great foundation for some fun.

6. Lead the meeting actively

David Pearl, author of *Will There Be Donuts? Start a Business Revolution One Meeting at a Time*, likens the role of a virtual meeting leader to that of a good talk show host. Like Oprah, they pass the discussion from one speaker to another.

Do that and you'll 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 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.

If people outside your organisation join the meeting, **avoid using jargon** or in-house terms they might not understand. 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 page on a printout can distract and suck away time.

Messaging apps such as **Slack** can let you share your screen and highlight sections with a 'crayon'. This helps people focus on what you or the speaker is saying.

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. Afterwards, ask the facilitator to send round any follow-up information to the attendees.

If a facilitator isn't possible, apps such as **Google Hangouts Meet** make teleconferencing easier by providing a dedicated dial-in number. That way, people can join in on the go and won't drop out.



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 see you're distracted.

What's more, avoid the temptation to have side conversations with people during the meeting. Unless it's productive to do so! Apps such as **Zoom** let smaller groups break off from the meeting to brainstorm, then re-join to share their ideas with the wider group.

10. Take your time

Finally, remember there's sometimes a time lapse between transmissions on long distance or video calls. So, 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?' diffuse these situations. But if buffering becomes a constant issue, the **BlueJeans** app boasts Dolby Voice, which promises better video and audio quality with less lag.

Did we miss any important pointers? What's your virtual meeting top tip?

[1] David Pearl, *Will There be Donuts: Start a Business Revolution One Meeting at a Time* (HarperCollins, 2012).