**Facilitating inclusive and collaborative hybrid meetings**

As we begin to come back together in person, hybrid meetings, where some attendees are gathered together in person while other attendees are remote, are likely to become a permanent part of how we function.

Fortunately, by leveraging technology and tools, being thoughtful in meeting design, and providing strong facilitation we can create hybrid meetings where all attendees — whether in the room or far away — can feel engaged, valued, and equal.

Hybrid meetings need careful facilitation to ensure everyone has an equal experience and opportunity to contribute. Without an effective approach, hybrid meetings can lead to something called ‘presence disparity’, where those attending remotely have a poorer experience than those who attend in person.

Some meetings aren’t suitable for a hybrid approach and are better with everyone in person or everyone attending remotely. The following meetings may be suitable for a hybrid approach:

* Provision of information with the opportunity for questions and answers
* General updates, such as progress status, reviewing actions or information exchange
* Team catch-ups or decision making.

The following types of meeting may be less suitable or may be more attainable over time with practice:

* Detailed discussions or debates or in-depth collaboration.
* Creative or idea generation meetings
* Long (in excess of 1.5 hours), detailed meetings with multi-media.

**Top tips to get the most out of your hybrid meetings**

Use the core skills of facilitating meetings and group sessions including:

* Asking open questions to encourage equal participation and diversity of views
* Listening to and observing all attendees
* Summarising what is being said and checking whether anything has been missed
* Creating discussions and activities that are fully inclusive for remote and in-person attendees and allow individual thinking/reflection as well as participation and collaborative working.

Be clear about the purpose of the meeting (such as decision-making, information-sharing, collaboration) and check it’s suited to a hybrid approach:

* Communicate the intended outcome so everyone can prepare
* On the invite, make sure the video call information is included as well as any materials that attendees, remote or otherwise, might need to have during the meeting.

Design meetings with all attendees in mind and in particular, review each activity or exercise focusing specifically on how remote attendees will engage. Consider what remote attendees need to see in order to fully engage, from the faces of in-person attendees through to shared presentations and live content creation. Consider what tools and techniques, digital or otherwise can be used to maximise everyone’s interaction. Examples include:

* If you need to poll the group, use a phone-based survey tool like Menti to collect everyone’s input in real time. This puts remote attendees on an equal footing, versus a show-of-hands or relying on verbal feedback
* To capture meeting notes, use an online whiteboard or digital collaboration tool such as Mural, so everyone can see what’s being written as it happens
* If the meeting design calls for putting people into breakout groups, the easiest solution is to include all the remote attendees in a single group. While simpler, this sends them the wrong message by reinforcing their physical absence. It’s likely worth the extra logistical and technical effort to integrate remote attendees across several breakout groups to accentuate their equal status. Plan this carefully – you may need extra Zoom links, extra laptops, or extra space for in-person attendees to split into separate work areas. Suggestions are:
  + If there are a small number of remote attendees, the simplest way is to keep the remote attendees and a number of in-person attendees in the meeting room and ask the other in-person attendees to congregate elsewhere in break out groups
  + If you are going to run any activities in pairs, it is good to pair up each virtual attendee with a physical attendee and they can agree how to communicate with each other, whether by phone or laptop.

Avoid ‘presence disparity’ and work to ensure each attendee has a consistent experience and equal voice:

* Remote employees may struggle with being interrupted or talked over in meetings more than others
* Take steps to involve remote attendees by providing everyone a chance to speak, calling on everyone by name if necessary
* Use functions like chat or hand-raising and explain how questions or comments will be answered at the beginning.
* Remind those in the meeting room to avoid side conversations that remote attendees cannot hear or take part in; and for those participating remotely to avoid chat interactions
* Where possible, avoid using equipment in the room (such as a flip chart or visual aids) that those attending remotely are unable to properly see. Present slides via the remote technology in use. The larger meeting rooms across the estates are due to be fitted with two screens, one to see remote attendees and the other can be used for presentations, documents etc.
* Don’t start in-person conversations before the meeting starts (or before remote attendees have joined), or continue conversations after the remote attendees have left
* Make sure remote attendees can contribute throughout – don’t just bring them in at the end, maybe seek their views as a starting point to discussions.

Encourage your teams to establish their own principles for hybrid meetings:

* This may include how often to meet physically and for what purpose, what technology to use and how to ensure that communication is inclusive
* Collaborate with your team to try things out, review what does and doesn’t work and to develop the principles over time.

And finally, a few more small points of detail that make all the difference:

* Minimise casual chat which is impossible for remote attendees to engage with
* Consider a quick opening warm up activity that mixes up remote and in-person attendees (to help create the energy that would ordinarily be created by attendees chatting over coffee in the room before the meeting starts)
* It’s nice to have food treats during team meetings, but consider how your remote colleagues might feel if they’re watching their colleagues eating goodies they don’t have access to
* Encourage remote attendees to turn off their Outlook so they are not distracted by it
* Check the equipment before the meeting to make sure it is working properly.
* If you have a presentation at the meeting, make sure you have it accessible on a second laptop in case of need.