TIPS AND TRICKS FOR VIRTUAL MEETINGS

Get the date in the diary

Being prepared is key to running effective virtual meetings.

Send out a calendar invite well in advance of the meeting and make sure that everyone confirms whether they are attending or not. This will help to ensure that everyone sets aside time for the meeting and knows how long to allow for it.

A smart notification system can help to make sure you don't waste time with people being late, forgetting about the meeting or being unprepared. Make sure all participants receive a notification at least 15 minutes before the meeting.

Find a tool that works for you

Choose software that suits your setting and the people who will be joining the meeting. There are various factors to consider when making your decision – will you want to make a presentation, share your screen, use breakout rooms, have simultaneous translation, record the meeting, use a chat facility etc. Also think about the equipment people will be using to join the meeting – are they likely to have a stable internet connection, will they be using their phone? There are plenty of video conferencing tools to choose from so you should be able to find one that suits your needs. Some of the most popular are:

- Zoom
- Slack
- Uber Conference
- WebEx
- Skype
- Google Hangouts
- GoToMeeting
- Microsoft Teams

Structure your meeting

You will need someone to facilitate the meeting. It is important for them to welcome people to the meeting so they feel at ease. *If you plan to record the meeting you must ask for consent before you begin*. The facilitator should explain how long the meeting will last and what the structure will be. For example, if you are having presentations, it is important to tell people when they will have a chance to ask questions or give their views. The facilitator should control who is speaking, introducing anyone who is making a presentation and, in discussion sessions, gathering any questions and making it clear whose turn it is to speak. If the meeting only has a few participants then it is possible to let people talk freely, but with larger groups the conversation needs to be more structured. It is up to the facilitator to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak and no one dominates. If you meet with the same people regularly it can help to stick to the same format for the meetings so that everyone knows what to expect.

Stay focussed

Every meeting should have a clear objective with an agenda that is shared with participants in advance. Remember that people only have limited time. Focus the discussion on key topics, decisions that must be made, or progress blockers. If something can be solved through a google search it shouldn't be on your meeting agenda.

Be interactive

It can be much harder to engage with people and have a participatory discussion virtually than in person. There are many small things you can do to try and encourage everyone to be engaged and to give opportunities to join in. Where possible ask people to have their cameras on. Face-to-face contact really helps to facilitate discussions. Many tools exist to help make meetings more interactive. For example: virtual white boards where people can add sticky notes or comments (try Miro or Jamboard); splitting the group into smaller working groups if the software has a breakout room option; or having a real time vote or poll (see Menti).

Encourage respect

Your virtual meetings should be an opportunity to work together, share views and build consensus. It can be helpful to layout some ground rules at the beginning of the meeting, reminding everybody of the need for mutual respect and collaboration.

Keep meetings short and exciting

Ideally keep your meeting under an hour so that everyone stays focused and makes optimum use of the time. If necessary, you can schedule up to two hours if you make the meeting interactive and break up the time. If you can't fit all the talking points into an hour or two, maybe more than one meeting is needed or some tasks can be completed before the meeting by a small working group. Virtual meetings are very different from in person meetings so never attempt a long workshop online. Short interactive sessions are much more productive.

Agree on next steps

Always reserve 5-10 minutes to wrap up, and agree on next steps. At this point, decide if a follow-up meeting is needed, and assign tasks including writing up any action points / meeting notes and agreeing on deadlines.

Help us learn

This is a living document and we would love to learn from you. So if you have any tips or tricks on how to run virtual meetings then do send them to us at infognp@gnpplus.net.