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Hybrid Meetings for Corporates a Guide

In the new hybrid-as-the-norm world companies struggle to make important meetings feel special without investing in new technology platforms

How corporate events are changing and why it matters

Today, we're in the midst of another digital revolution brought on by the pandemic. Gathering all employees in the cafeteria, atrium, or auditorium for a town hall meeting is no longer an option. Hybrid is the new norm, and it's here to stay.

So, companies need a way to deliver compelling content to a dispersed workforce that spends most of its time on Zoom calls.

It's an entirely new and different context driven by three significant shifts.

Shift #1: Employee expectations have changed

When the pandemic first hit, the initial goal was to keep information flowing in any way possible. Employees were far more understanding if a meeting lacked experiential elements.

Now, internal communication and IT teams are feeling the pressure to elevate meeting production levels to capture the hearts and minds of their employees. The moments that matter need to be on point and brand.

Shift #2: Content delivery is different

In the past, many internal events or important state-of-the-business messages from executives were written, pre-filmed, and streamed out to employees.

Now, companies want to use their existing platforms (e.g., Teams, Google, Zoom) to deliver content for employees to consume both synchronously and asynchronously. Because these platforms aren't going away, companies need to make events delivered via these platforms more distinct and special – especially when it's the CEO or other executives.

Shift #3: Building a strong hybrid culture is critical

Much of the conversation about hybrid work centers around the workday – how many days people will be in the office vs. working from home. What this conversation misses, however, is the importance of building a strong hybrid culture.

More than ever before, leaders need to reach their entire workforce in a way that feels different than “just another Zoom call or Teams meeting.”

Whose problem is this to solve?

In our experience, the need for a broadcast solution comes from two primary sources within an organization:

Information Technology (IT) – In some cases, the executive team realizes their meetings are going poorly, and they reach out to IT for support (in turn, the IT team reaches out to us).

Corporate Communications – In other cases, the internal communications team seeks ways to deliver a better experience for key internal culture moments. So, they partner with us and their IT team to deliver that experience.

In addition, we frequently partner with internal marketing and branding teams to add branded elements to the broadcast experience.

Professional production and broadcasting around hybrid events are the solutions

Production and broadcast techniques are the proper approaches to address these workplace shifts. It gives you the ability to deliver compelling content – the kind that makes a connection with your workforce – no matter where employees happen to be while maintaining a professional look, feel, and brand of a broadcast.

You can layer in professional-level production to create an experience using broadcast tools like:

- Lighting
- Microphones
- Cameras
- Green screens
- Backdrops
- Professional switching
- Graphics/titling

It's almost like creating your meeting in a television studio. It's a more polished, branded, and professional experience delivered through whatever platform your company already uses.

The result?

All-hands or town hall meetings that feel special create a deeper, more meaningful connection with the audience.

What is Meeting Equity – And Why Does it Matter Now?

As we inch toward a post-pandemic world, there's a significant challenge facing companies of every size across all industries. Called meeting equity, it has the potential to significantly affect how engaged and productive your team is and, in turn, how successful your company is.

In this post, we'll define meeting equity, outline why it's important and share 4 tips to create meeting equity within your company.

What is Meeting Equity?

After two years spent working remotely, it's clear that hybrid work is synonymous with the future of work. Going forward, it will be a rare exception to have everyone join a meeting from the same room.

This join-from-anywhere workplace makes it more challenging to ensure:

- Everyone has a similar meeting experience
- Everyone feels their contributions are valued equally

Whether you call it meeting equity, meeting equality or proximity bias, the basic idea remains the same. It's time to create virtual meeting experiences that make it easier for everyone to fully participate regardless of location.

Why is Meeting Equity Important?

Most of us are reasonably new at trying to create equitable meeting experiences. At most, we have about two years of dabbling in meeting equity during what often felt like a temporary solution. Now, the future is clearer:

- Remote meeting platform use continues to grow – from March to June 2020, the use of Microsoft Teams increased nearly 900 percent. And it's continued to grow swiftly ever since. Microsoft Teams now has 145 million daily active users, up from 75 million in 2021.
- Working remotely is here to stay – according to Gartner, 31% of all workers worldwide in 2022 will be remote (a mix of hybrid and fully remote). And the U.S. will lead in terms of remote workers for 2022, accounting for 53% of the U.S. workforce.

4 Tips for Creating Meeting Equity

To address meeting equity, we need first to get honest about something. It is easier to focus on and feel more connected to people in the same room—because of this, creating meeting equity won't happen on its own. Instead, it would help if you had a combination of culture, tools, people and commitment. Here are 4 tips to help you create meeting equity at your company.

- **Tip #1: Signal your intent.** Spend some time learning how to host hybrid meetings. Then, let your team know you're committed to creating equitable meeting experiences. Invite their input and ideas for how to make meetings more equitable.
- **Tip #2: Document a process.** Your organization is probably already revising some of its organizational effectiveness norms to adapt to a hybrid reality. Consider creating meeting equity guidelines to guide everyone's efforts as part of this work. For example, Google created three pillars of collaboration equity to emphasize the importance of representation equity, participation equity and information equity.

- **Tip #3: Use the right technologies for the room.** Modern meeting room technology solutions include options that support meeting equity. For example, is your platform click-to-join? Can users show up and log in to the meeting room with any device? How do people in the room appear on screen to those who are remote when a meeting begins? Does the system maximize the use of an HD Pan/Tilt/Zoom camera that provides a 90° diagonal field of view so anyone who might speak in the room can be seen? Is the audio high quality regardless of location?
- **Tip #4: Lead by example.** Once the right systems are in place, leaders and participants can drive meeting equity by showing what equitable practices look like. For example, if you're dialing in, participate – demonstrate that you're listening, engaged and ready to contribute. If you're in a conference room with others, draw in the people who are working remotely, amplify their voices and acknowledge their contributions.

Hybrid Meetings: Benefits for the Enterprise

Hybrid meetings have changed how we view communications and collaboration in business environments. For large enterprise organizations, it changed how business gets done, and how employees are recruited and retained, and it provided countless operational efficiencies. The popularity of hybrid meetings also suggests they could be the future of corporate communications.

While hybrid meetings have been around for years, the pandemic increased the demand within organizations for flexibility and virtual meeting options. When done correctly, hybrid meetings promote effective communication, are easy to handle, and allow all employees to join meetings no matter where they are.

The overall benefits for companies and employees lie in increased productivity and cost-effective collaboration.

Hybrid Meeting Benefits for Employees

Today, hybrid meetings are an essential part of a modern office and working environment. Reducing travel costs and time for employees is one of the biggest advantages. However, hybrid meetings give employees freedom and autonomy by allowing them to work where and how they want and offering them a real work-life balance.

Despite these real employee benefits, most employees want (and need) a mix of working from home and working from the office. The office remains a place of social exchange and cooperation.

The Business Benefits of Hybrid Meetings

One significant cost benefit for organizations is new-found ways to optimize space in the office. Shared workstations, for example, can result in a smaller real estate footprint. For multinational companies, the most essential cost-saving measures are linked to travel costs and travel times for key employees.

Cloud video conferencing platforms like Microsoft Teams have made video conferencing accessible to a broader audience, and with constant improvements, the future of hybrid meetings as a necessary form of workplace communication is assured.

What's Next for Hybrid Meetings?

As hybrid meetings become an integral part of workplace practice and culture, the need for local and global organizations to future-proof is crucial.

We may be a few years away from evolving beyond a camera, screen and headset to a fully digital, virtual reality workplace (i.e., the metaverse), but it's not too early to recognize that developing the proper technical infrastructure is the next step to future-proofing a business.

Today's focus should be ensuring hybrid meetings start, flow and end without a hitch. The adverse impact of a mismanaged hybrid meeting due to a poor technical infrastructure reduces productivity and produces dissatisfaction among end users – your employees. When collaboration and communication become complex, remote workers are left feeling frustrated.

Consider the following three practical adjustments to improve hybrid meetings with the technology available today.

- **Adjust Meeting Room Sizes.** Large conference rooms are less relevant in a hybrid work model due to the reduced number of employees physically in the office on any given day. Reconfigure meeting spaces into several smaller meeting rooms or flex spaces to accommodate the demand for hybrid meetings.

- **Enhance Audio and Visual Technologies.** Good acoustics are also an integral aspect to consider. Some areas can be optimized with media technology, but if a conference room has poor acoustics, the best media technology will not improve the audio quality. An essential aspect of technology in the conference room is the clarity of exchange, especially when meeting participants attend from around the world. Global hybrid meetings often include a variety of dialects and accents. High-quality speakers and suitable microphones help filter noise and prevent echoes. And professional video conferencing cameras ensure speakers in a conference room or at home are clearly seen.
- **Adopt Certified Platforms.** Conference room technology must also be easy to use with certified room systems like Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Cisco Webex.

While many companies have already adopted hybrid meeting platforms and their technology approach, such meetings continue to evolve from day to day. It's not too late to enhance proper technical infrastructure to maximize the efficiency of hybrid meetings. With a few changes, organizations will realize the benefits of this modern working style.

How to Host Hybrid Meetings

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are a high priority for virtually every company. And so they should be: according to the 2021 CNBC | Survey Monkey Workforce Survey, the majority (78%) of workers say it is important to them to work at an organization that prioritizes diversity and inclusion, and more than half (53%) consider it to be “very important” to them.

One of the ways companies are failing to demonstrate equity and inclusion is in their approach to hybrid meetings. With hybrid work here to stay, hybrid meetings are now the norm. And they’re significantly more complex than in-person or online meetings to master.

If you’ve ever remotely attended a hybrid meeting, you might have experienced how inequitably in-person and online participants are treated. All too often, remote participants are forgotten, ignored, talked over, excluded, and penalized for not being in the room.

It’s happening without those in the room even realizing it. Training in how to run hybrid meetings that are inclusive and equitable should be on every learning and development calendar.

I trawled the internet to find the best advice on how to ensure your hybrid meetings are effective and engaging for all – in-person and remote – participants.

Provide strong facilitation

Bob Frisch and Cary Greene, Partners, Strategic Offsites Group

Managing a hybrid meeting is harder than when the whole group is in person or on Zoom together. One person — a staff member, an outsider or a meeting participant — should be assigned to guide the conversation and keep it on track.

Despite the effort you may put into meeting design and logistics, it remains far too easy for in-person attendees to dominate the discussion. A facilitator should draw the remote participants in, keep them engaged and ensure their voices are heard, not interrupted or talked over. At times, the facilitator may need to call on in-room or remote participants to ensure that all voices are heard.

Strictly manage meeting time and attendance

Evan LePage, Senior Content Manager, Unio

In an office environment, all participants know that a meeting's late to start when they see an empty boardroom. But all the person at home sees is their own face staring right back at them. This is just one example of why it's important to strictly manage meeting time.

In general, it's hard to take part in really long video calls. It's tough on the eyes and drains focus. So plan meetings to be as short as possible. Then, when you're in the meeting, make sure to stick to the agenda and keep to time. Everyone — no matter where they're located — will appreciate that. It can help to select a timekeeper to move things along.

Then there's meeting attendance. With hybrid meetings, really spend extra time considering your attendee list. Make sure to invite only those who absolutely need to be there in order to achieve the desired outcome of the meeting. Feel free to make other attendees optional if you want to be inclusive. This ensures that you're not forcing employees into a bunch of meetings where they might be unable to provide value.

Ensure you're still face-to-face

Antonia Bowering, Principal, ABstrategies LLC

Re-arrange your meeting room so that everyone physically present is facing the video screen. Ideally, you'll be positioned in a semi-circle. The net effect is that all the participants are in a circle and people feel more included. They can see what is in front of all the meeting participants (including whether they are checking their phones or laptops!).

Discourage side conversations

Carrie Williams Howe, Owner; Carrie Williams Howe Consulting

If hushed conversations are taking place so that those on the phone cannot hear them, you have an equity issue on your hands. If important topics are being addressed during breaks, folks who are not there drinking coffee with you are not able to participate. Be vocal about this – ask people to speak up so others can hear them; or update virtual participants on break-time conversations when you re-group. There is no harm in saying, “Hey Corin, you’re making a really great point there but I don’t think folks on the webinar could hear it; can you repeat it so we can all benefit from that point?”

Notice people unmuting themselves

Ayesa Lubag, GlueUp

Another great way to ensure that remote participants feel appreciated and heard is by looking at the screen for cues that someone wants to speak up. Depending on the video conferencing platform, participants can either unmute themselves or use the ‘raise hand’ feature. You can then say: “Aaron, you seem to have unmuted yourself. Would you like to add anything?”

All remote colleagues turn video on

Anonymous, Timely

It may not be fair, but when a remote employee attends a meeting and doesn't turn their video on, there can be an unspoken sense that they don't want to participate. If their microphone is muted too, it can seem as though they're not there at all. Whenever possible, remote colleagues should keep their video on so

everyone can see they are engaged in the meeting. Reading facial cues becomes especially important when everyone is on mute.

Rate the meeting

Jessica Wishart, Product Manager, Rhythm Systems

As your team is figuring out a new format, it's a best practice to collect some feedback from the participants. An easy way to do this is to ask everyone to write down a number 1-10 to rate the meeting's effectiveness. Ask each person to share their number and a short sentence explaining why they gave that number. You can collect these after the fact and read them or save the last five minutes to share in the meeting. Use this feedback from the team to ensure you've done a good job including everyone and make adjustments to improve as you learn what works and what doesn't for your hybrid team.

Recognize the risks of creating a two-tier team and strive to mitigate them

Robert Hooijberg and Michael Watkins, IMD Business School

This requires leaders to establish ground rules that encourage balanced participation and to ensure that the remote participants are minimally disadvantaged as much as possible. Scheduling some meetings within regular working hours for the remote participants, even when it inconveniences the team members at headquarters, also helps. It's hardly fair that remote employees must always come to leadership team meetings late in the evening when they are likely already fatigued from a long workday.

Ensure roles and responsibilities are clear (and visible)

Dr Penny Pullan, Founder, Making Projects Work

Ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear, agreed and shared out amongst all of the team. While it might be easy to ask someone in the meeting room to write

down actions on a flip chart, this makes it harder for remote team members to read. A better choice is for someone in the room to share actions on a shared screen, so that everyone can see it. This has the added advantage that the actions can be shared electronically immediately after the meeting too!

Use the buddy system

Anonymous, Hugo

With the buddy system, you assign an in-person meeting attendee to be a remote person's "buddy". Typically, the pair stays connected with a chat which gives the remote attendee an in-room representative. If your remote worker has a question or missed something, the in-person buddy can help make sure their remote buddy is heard.

Make remote participants full-sized

Anonymous, UCL Human Resources

Give remote participants a greater presence in the room. Use the main screen to show life size images of the remote participants. Additionally, it may be beneficial to set up two monitors - one on each side of the room. Large images can provide a constant reminder to include at home attendees in the conversation with visual cues being more important on a hybrid call. There are times when some staff members prefer to not turn on their cameras, so allow the option of not being on camera to create a more inclusive environment.

Pause and ask remote participants for input

Erin Fradelos, Senior Director, Global eCommerce and Digital Marketing, Owl Labs

Some people may have feelings of anxiety about speaking up in a meeting where they aren't physically present. Remote workers are not able to pick up on normal body language and social cues as well as those who are in a traditional meeting.

This could mean that valuable input could be withheld. To avoid this, pause the meeting periodically and solicit opinions from your remote participants. This

shows them that their thoughts are valued and keeps them more engaged throughout the meeting.

Creating Community in a Hybrid World: A New Leader Imperative

As organizations shift to a more permanent hybrid work model, they risk creating two cultures – one that exists in real life and another that exists virtually. The result? Employees who work remotely may eventually develop a sense of isolation and search for ways to strengthen their sense of workplace community.

A big imperative for leaders is to create connections among those who work remotely, i.e., the distributed workforce. Assuming you have remote workplace technology in place, the next natural question is: do you know how to use that technology to achieve your culture-focused goals?

Here are four of the big ideas we've been thinking about to get you started.

Tip #1: Be Inclusive

In its simplest form, meeting equality means people have the tools to participate fully in meetings and conversations no matter where they happen to be. Under this definition, tools including the right hardware and peripherals, secure remote access, video conferencing capability, file sharing, and messaging software are now essential to our work-from-anywhere world.

But meeting equality doesn't stop there. It also means looking at your overall meeting practices to ensure you encourage everyone to contribute and be successful. For example, do you: Facilitate conversations actively and consistently to allow for a variety of perspectives.

Look for opportunities to draw in less experienced or traditionally marginalized members of your team.

Provide an agenda or critical questions ahead of time so people who prefer processing time can formulate their thoughts.

Pay close attention to time zones to ensure you're not always scheduling early, late, or during lunch-hour meetings for team members in certain areas.

To build community among a hybrid workforce, find opportunities to reduce the isolation your employees may feel.

Tip #2: Be Intentional

A lot of the community building in an office setting was serendipitous. While we may have lost some of these moments, we can create others through thoughtful planning. For example, do you:

- Look at your week and identify opportunities to create community.
- Build connection time into your team meeting agendas.
- Take time in your one-on-one meetings to sincerely ask how people are doing.
- Encourage your team to stay connected with each other.

Don't make it complicated! Ask people to share highlights from their weekend activities, home project updates, or a podcast they think others would enjoy. The goal is to make community-building part of every team interaction intentionally.

Tip #3: Be Fluid

Although many of us have worked remotely or in a hybrid environment for many months, there's still a great deal of testing and learning that's evolving how we work. So, if you try a community-building tactic that doesn't resonate with your team, don't give up.

Check-in with your team, share your commitment, and ask for their ideas. Then, be willing to give new suggestions a try – even if they push your comfort envelope. Your team will appreciate that you're committed enough to keep experimenting until you find the right formula.

Tip #4: Be a Connector

Perhaps one of the most significant areas where hybrid work has changed the game is building community beyond the people you work with daily. With no cafeteria or hallway introductions, how will someone in the Legal department get to know someone in Product Development or Finance?

This matters because when employees are well-networked, they have more opportunities to learn and grow, even casually. This post from the World Economic Forum helps explain the critical role of social capital and how leaders support it.

It's the perfect time for you to take an active role in creating, supporting, and maintaining opportunities for your team to meet and network with people across the company. This not only strengthens the feelings of a community but also supports broader organizational goals.

Leveraging Technology to build community

In the early days of the pandemic, it became immediately apparent how vital technology is to remote work. It's the hardware and software that enables employees to collaborate and complete day-to-day tasks. But just getting the work done isn't enough anymore.

The next hurdle is leveraging technology to strengthen culture and community across the organization.

This is a career-shaping moment for the leaders who seize this opportunity.

**Want to learn
how to improve
hybrid meetings
for your
organization?**

Let's chat.

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