



Designing the Post-Pandemic Meeting

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Long before COVID-19, businesses around the world were grappling with a problem — how do you run a meeting when some participants are on the screen while others are in the office? Typically, the divide reflected headquarters vs. satellite, regional, or international offices. The problem was not restricted to the meeting itself, but also to the well-known phenomenon of “the meeting before/after the meeting”, i.e. the discussion and free-form exchange of ideas that takes place when those on the screen are muted or offscreen. Anyone working in the “other” office is familiar with frantic calls, emails or text messages to people “in the room,” asking what they missed. And so, a key challenge of the hybrid became the office version of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out).

When the pandemic thrust us all onto the online format, it created enduring difficulties for businesses and organizations. However, in this area, it seemed to provide an unexpected solution. Suddenly everyone was equal. Suddenly everyone, regardless of title or geographic location, had to fit into the same box on the screen. Participants were using the same tools to be heard, to participate, or to contribute. And now that we have all gotten used to this format, we face our next evolution: with vaccines rapidly increasing, we seem to be headed back into the office at some point in 2021. Great news! Well, not exactly.

Going back to the office does not mean going back to how it used to be, nor should it. We now recognize the benefits of remote work. This means that offices will be smaller and many people will not return. When a meeting is convened in the future, the division of room to screen will not be based on location. Every office and location will be divided between remote and in-office workers. Arguably, this is even more complicated than us all being remote together. How do we ensure that meetings are structured well and that collaboration and teamwork are not diminished?

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We can view the return to a hybrid model as a problem we need to fix, and many are doing just that: trying to “solve” the hybrid “problem”. We would like to argue the opposite: the hybrid model is not a “problem” but an opportunity, and it should not be “solved,” but rather explored, designed, and ultimately celebrated. What we have learned is that hybrid is no longer the problem, it is the solution. Giving presentations, running meetings, gatherings, and brainstorming sessions can actually be better in this hybrid mode.

Better?

We anticipate that, as we emerge from COVID-19, more people will have the choice between working from home or returning to the office. While some companies have decided to shift to remote on a permanent basis, the majority are trying to get a handle on a hybrid working environment. This type of situation would see some employees working remotely while others will continue to work in the office.

This sort of flexibility is a huge draw for talent: 68% of millennial job seekers said they would be significantly more interested in working for companies who offer the option to work from home. Many would even take a pay cut for this opportunity.

Allowing employees to work from home also ensures that each person can work from his/her place of greatest potential. It also allows us to tap into a global workforce, save on the carbon footprint, and is ultimately more equitable.

But Not Easy

We acknowledge that it is really difficult to engage people virtually and in-person at the same time. But it is inevitable — it's going to be happening more and more. Instead of going “back” to how we used to run hybrid meetings, primarily focused on the people in the room, we encourage companies and organizations to use a design cycle to imagine and realize the most productive and effective hybrid meetings — the meetings of the future.

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Here are some concrete tips to increase the likelihood of successful hybrid meetings:

It is crucial to dedicate a specific person or group of people to take responsibility for the design and facilitation of the meeting. Too often, no one is thinking about and working towards ensuring the meeting's success; this is often an afterthought. It is crucial to ensure that it is someone's job to design and run the meeting. The first step in designing effective hybrid meetings is to appoint someone who is trained to design effective ones.

Ask yourself: why are you meeting? Make sure the answer really makes sense. Do you really need to meet? Prioritize asynchronous work — have fewer meetings — and use meetings to be creative and do something together, rather than to simply share information.

Prioritize the design cycle to figure out what kind of meeting to create to achieve your purpose. Immerse with the participants in advance: what might they need to feel included? Ask yourself and them how might you best leverage their talents and perspectives? Frame the purpose of your meeting and be clear on what it is meant to achieve. Imagine creative ways to engage the participants and connect those who are in the room with those who are virtual; and Prototype — test different ways of gathering rather than getting locked into a predictable structure.

Manage meeting time and attendance thoughtfully. Who needs to be in this meeting and why? The answer to that question is different from who needs to be informed about what happens in the meeting. Be selective and deliberate about who attends. And think about the metaphor of interval training for meeting times: your meetings should be short and intense — they should get your heart rates up! They should be followed by breaks. Avoid death by meeting.

Normalize digital meeting tools. Technology is an essential part of hybrid meetings, but it shouldn't be looked at as something for the remote employees only. Instead, normalize the use of digital meeting tools for everyone. Yes, this includes adding video

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conferencing links to invites, but it goes well beyond that. Instead of using whiteboards and post-its for brainstorming, use virtual tools such as MIRO or Mural by default. This allows thoughts and ideas to be recorded and accessed after the meeting. Instead of taking physical meeting notes, take them in a collaborative Google doc. That way everyone can see them immediately and add notes or questions for others to share.

Virtual/physical teams. When assigning working groups or teams, ensure they are made up of people who are in-person workers as well as those who work remotely. Make hybrid collaboration the norm rather than the exception.

As we transition out of this difficult time, we encourage you not to try to “go back” to the way things were. Instead, embrace the changes that have emerged. The world, technology, and the office environment never “go back” to anything; they always go forward. Start thinking now about your new office environment and how it has already been transformed during your absence. The rapid scale-up and improvement of work-from-home technology is not going away; in fact, it will continue to change and evolve long past the current lockdown. This should be thought of as exciting, not daunting. Therefore, use this time remaining in the pandemic to think through strategies that support hybrid configurations and the various ways in which this type of working can make your organization stronger, more diverse, more efficient and ultimately, more successful.

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