

Working From Home

Tips for Remote Workers

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Advancing Organizational Excellence



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Organization is Key to Becoming a More Productive Remote Worker

The best way to set yourself up for success while working from home is to get organized. I recently attended a webinar that stressed the importance of organizational skills, especially when faced with the added distractions and challenges of working remotely. Organizational skills are among the most transferable professional skills, helping you to be successful as a remote worker, back in an office setting and in your personal life. Organizational skills can be defined as “the ability to stay focused on different tasks and use your time, energy and resources effectively.” This is especially helpful when working remotely, where added challenges include a lack of structure, procrastination, overworking, distractions and interruptions. Below are three tips that can get you on the right path to a more organized work day.



#1 Organize your workspace

Design your home office in a way that sets you up for productivity. Pick a spot that's quiet, ideally with a door that you can close for privacy. Keeping your desk clean and clutter-free is key; after all, a cluttered space leads to a cluttered mind. Arrange your work materials strategically in your home office based on how often you use them. Keep materials needed for current projects readily available on your desk, within arm's reach. Reference materials you may grab once or twice throughout the day can be placed on a nearby bookcase. Lastly, any archival materials that are not necessary for daily projects should be furthest from your desk, stored somewhere out of the way.



Organization: Continued

#2 Organize your technology

Technology is vital to getting our work done, but a haphazard technology system can be a hindrance to productivity. The first thing you can do is pare down your devices, making sure the only ones you have on your desk are those you use throughout your workday. Having a central charging station near your desk or somewhere within reach is a great way to maximize efficiency. Next, it might be helpful to store less frequently used technology in one, central location. Take the time to make this as organized as possible: store cables with their corresponding devices so you can easily grab exactly what you need and avoid frustration. Keep an inventory list of all your devices and cables, perhaps with a description or image of each for reference and easy access. Your organization system here should prioritize safety and efficiency; make sure not to overload outlets or use frayed cables, but find a system that works best for you.

#3 Organize your time

Perhaps the best thing you can do for your productivity is to organize your time. Set a start time and end time for your workday every day, and stick to this schedule. Schedule breaks for yourself throughout the day — these might be more frequent than if you were in the office, but breaking up your day will help you be more productive. Use timers to remind yourself to take these breaks. At the start of the day, make a to-do list with all the tasks you want to accomplish throughout the day and do the most difficult tasks first. Finally, create a “distraction battle plan” to combat the added interruptions you face at home. This might include closing your office door, putting on noise-canceling headphones or keeping your phone on silent. Discuss your expectations with family or roommates about interrupting you while in your office.

Putting these tactics in place will help you get organized in your home office and work more efficiently. The best thing you can do is create a plan for getting organized and follow through on it. Be proactive about impending distractions and have a plan of attack. Setting a healthy work-life balance is key: make sure you give yourself breaks and put your work stuff away at the same time every night. Once you get organized, you’ll be amazed at how your remote working productivity soars.



Time Management Strategies for Remote Workers

Time management has always been one of the most valuable skills in the professional world. But when working remotely, these skills are more important than ever. Working from home adds a whole host of new challenges that can cut into your productivity: interruptions from family members, roommates or pets; asynchronous communication with coworkers (causing projects to take longer); lack of structure and general lack of motivation. If you plan on getting anything done at home, time management is the key to success.

What is time management, exactly? It can be defined as the process of planning and allocating time for specific tasks in order to maximize efficiency. The foundation of time management is setting attainable goals and prioritizing tasks that help you achieve those goals. Like any skill, time management is learned: it requires consistent practice, patience and adjustment. Implement any of the strategies below, and you will feel that you have a better handle on your time and your work life.



Strategy #1: Set a dynamic daily schedule

When working from home, your day does not look like it did when you were in the office. Therefore, you can't expect to schedule your day the same way. Plan on starting at the same time every day, and begin by making a list of the tasks you need to complete that day — physically write it down, on paper, on your computer, on a white board, etc. Define your



Time Management: Continued

priorities (see strategy #2), and estimate how long it will take to complete each of the tasks. Plan your daily schedule around these time estimates, adding in some contingency time — or "buffer time" in case projects take longer than anticipated. Additionally, work in some discretionary time to your schedule — time dedicated to any miscellaneous tasks you need to work on. Schedule open time in your day as well as frequent breaks. You're prone to more frequent interruptions while at home, so preparing for these will help you stick to your schedule. Remember, since you aren't commuting to and from work, this extra time at your desk helps to offset these more frequent distractions. Lastly, include your family in your schedule. If you have small children who will need your help with schoolwork, factor that into your schedule. Set expectations about when you are and are not available. Build your schedule in a way that is individualized to your needs.

Strategy #2: Define and prioritize tasks

When it comes down to it, productivity is all about getting tasks checked off your list. The best way to do this is to start with a comprehensive list of tasks that you keep close by on your desk. When determining which tasks are priorities, use this helpful guide, designating each of the tasks on your list as one of the four Ds:

- **Do:** complete tasks now or in the immediate future (15 min to an hour).
- **Defer:** complete it later in the day or tomorrow.
- **Delegate:** assign tasks to someone else (a coworker, intern, etc).
- **Delete:** remove it from your list or morph it with another task that is related for maximum efficiency.

Keep referring to your list throughout the day as a reminder of your progress. Find a routine that works for you, whether it's creating a new list every day, every week, or something else.

Strategy #3: Find a time management technique that works for you

There are hundreds of time management strategies out there that professionals use to maximize efficiency. Here are two different techniques that you may want to test out in your workday, and adjust as necessary based on whatever works best for you.

- **Pomodoro Technique:** Break down your work periods into 25-minute intervals, which is often considered to be the length of time our minds can focus effectively. Set a timer on your phone or computer for 25 minutes, and when it goes off, take a five-minute break.



Time Management: Continued

Then, work again for another 25 minutes. After four intervals of work, take a longer, 30-minute break — for lunch, for a walk, to socialize with family, etc.

- **18 Minutes:** This technique is all about being mindful of your productivity. Before you start your workday, take five minutes to sit and think about what you need to accomplish today to make it successful (make a physical list, if possible). At the end of each hour of work, take one minute to stop, refocus and evaluate your productivity during the previous hour. At the very end of your workday, take five minutes to review the day. How did it go? What did you learn?

Remember that these are just two techniques, and there are countless others. Experiment with these and others, and find what works best for you and your schedule.

Strategy #4: Be flexible

Ultimately, the number one skill that will help you be productive while working from home is flexibility. Remote working brings about added challenges for everyone, so being patient with yourself and your coworkers is key. Projects may take longer and require extra attention, as it is more difficult to communicate with coworkers and clients remotely. To compensate for these communication lags, consider what other projects you can work on concurrently to stay busy. Get creative in finding ways to participate in non-work activities, even if you have to stay in your home. Figure out the best way for you to intentionally put your work away at the end of the day and spend time with family. Other challenges will surely come up throughout the day that upend your previously laid-out work schedule, but if you prepare for this with a flexible schedule and an open mind, you'll find yourself being productive even in these uncertain times.



Tips for Managing Remote Workers

A successful and productive remote team is reliant on a strong manager to lead them. It is challenging to coordinate all your team members from their off-site locations, but despite this, it is still possible to conduct a productive atmosphere among them. AOE knows this better than anyone: having run a virtual firm for 17 years with highly efficient and happy team members, we know what works and what doesn't.

AOE President Kimberly Kayler shares these tips for managing remote workers. These practices will not only lead to increased productivity, but better communication between team members and a more connected, collaborative team dynamic.



- **Check in with your team via phone, not just email.** Make up a reason (any reason) to make this happen.
- **Make sure you have a good feel for what your team members are doing.** Weekly goals are a great practice, and you may consider daily check-ins as well. For example, our team sets new goals each week and we update one another on our progress.
- **Get together with your whole team at least once a week – via video conference (preferred) or conference call.** Find a reason for a quick catch-up. For example, Kayler requires her team members to share what they learned in work-sponsored professional development workshops so that the whole team can benefit. The topic can be anything; as long as you get the team together for 30 minutes or so, the response will be positive for team morale.



Managing Remote Workers: Continued

- **Have a space for team members to share non-work stuff – family, hobbies, etc.** One way would be to use a private Facebook group to share events or information with one another. For example, we have done virtual baby and wedding showers, celebrated birthdays and even had a book club for a while!
- **Training can be done, in most cases, in a virtual environment.** All it takes is a little organization and creativity by the trainer. Use your network for help: find out how other companies are running their trainings.
- **Make sure the team knows the company goal, the department goal, etc.** Tie it into all your meetings, projects and trainings. Constantly connect these back to the overall strategy.

These tips will get you started, but the best thing you can do is keep the line of communication between you and your team open. Make yourself available to them as best you can. Get creative in finding ways to stay connected to your team – during the work day and outside of it. Be flexible as team members adjust to the circumstances and work with each member individually as needed. These tips are a great place to start, but working remotely is an adjustment for everyone. Be patient while figuring out what works best for your team.



Video Conferencing Etiquette: Best Practices

This spring, given the current public health crisis, many of us are trading conference room meetings for virtual ones. If you're new to video conferences, the idea of turning on your computer video camera and running a meeting through this medium can be daunting. Despite its challenges, the video conference is worth trying out for your group, as it is the closest you can come to simulating the in-person meeting experience. I recently attended a webinar that explored best practices for running a successful virtual conference. The following tips will get you started and help you avoid common pitfalls that can derail an otherwise well-prepared meeting.



#1 Setting the stage

Preparation is key to a successful virtual meeting. Make sure the image you present to your coworkers is professional. Pick a clean, uncluttered background for your video, and dress professionally as if attending the meeting in person. If you plan to share your screen during the meeting, make sure your desktop is clean and all unnecessary tabs are closed. Use two monitors, if possible, to best organize your tabs. When creating the presentation itself, think about how to best engage your audience. Explore the software features your video meeting application offers, such as chats, Q&A or polls. Prior to the meeting, email the agenda and/or handouts to participants. Right before the meeting, make sure to sign on early to get settled. Test audio and video right away, so you can troubleshoot if necessary. Make sure to have a checklist or agenda nearby, so you can stick to your meeting schedule and stay on task.



Video Conferencing Etiquette: Continued

#2 Delivering the meeting

It's time to start the meeting! Try to stick to your start and end times as much as possible. Let your participants know if you plan to record the meeting, and make sure you begin the recording right away. Before you dive into your message, this is also a good time to set some ground rules. Ask your participants to keep their microphone on mute if they are not speaking to avoid interruptions; ask them to use the "raise hand" feature (if your software has it) when they want to contribute, or use the chat feature for questions or comments. When communicating over video, it's important to focus on your delivery. Look directly into the camera, speak clearly and at a measured pace. Continually check your audio and video to ensure everyone is receiving your message properly. If your meeting is over an hour in length, schedule a break to allow everyone to refocus.

Have a game plan for handling questions and discussion during your meeting. If your group is large, consider assigning a moderator to guide the conversation. When answering questions, make sure to repeat the question before answering it to ensure everyone understands. Use the chat to share files and links with the group. The best measure of a good virtual meeting is how well you engage your audience, so make sure this is a priority. Choose a format that allows everyone the chance to contribute, whether via speaker or through the chat. Ask your participants both abstract questions — with the intent of expanding the conversation — and specific questions — with the intent of getting everyone involved.

One of the greatest fears with delivering a virtual meeting is technical difficulties. If this happens, don't panic! Create a backup plan ahead of time in case certain features don't work as planned. Have options ready for participants that have technical difficulties on their end — send out the recorded presentation after the meeting, have a call-in option, etc. If possible, have an IT person on the call to troubleshoot problems. Whatever the case, remember to be flexible and keep your participants in the loop about the situation. If it comes to it, reschedule the meeting for a later date.

#3 Concluding a meeting/next steps

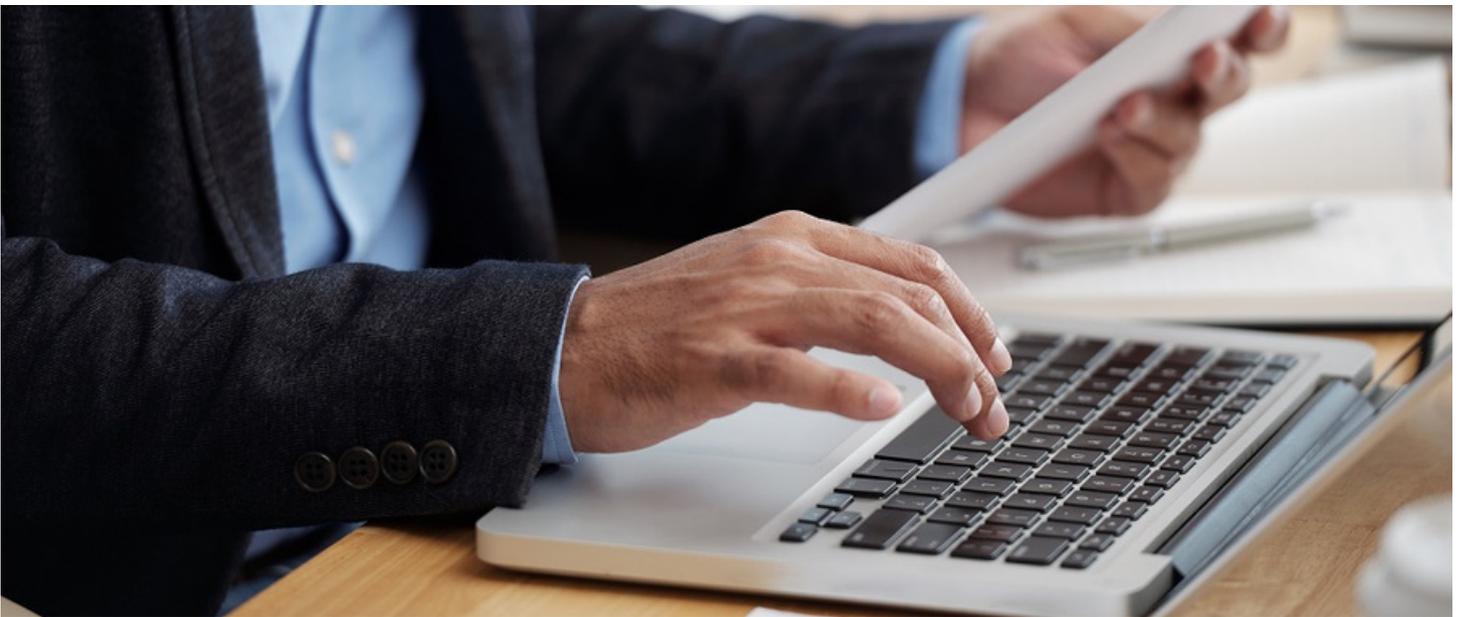
When it comes time to conclude your meeting, quickly review your agenda or checklist to make sure you completed everything you set out to accomplish. Take final questions and pause the recording before signing off. Follow up with your participants with any additional information, relevant resources/documents and details on any upcoming meetings. Lastly, take the time to review how the meeting went. Check the recording, and consider how well participants were engaged. Make a list of what went well and what could be improved, and refer to that list when preparing for your next meeting.



Executive Presence on Video Conferences

Part 1: Video Conferencing Pro Tips

Video conferencing is a great way to coordinate remote workers to present trainings, deliver important information and engage in productive team discussions. However, virtual correspondence between several parties is not without its challenges, especially for the executive or leader in charge of the meeting. In this first article of a three-article series, we will highlight several pro tips for running a well-organized, stand-out presentation and demonstrating leadership before, during and after the call.



- **Diligently prepare for your video conference.** If you are new to virtual meetings, prepare for the challenges in communication: awkward pauses, people speaking over one another, etc. Also prepare the visual presentation. Never underestimate the value of a high-quality PowerPoint presentation, as this will be the main visual aid that your audience will see. Finally, prepare a meeting agenda beforehand so you stay on track and your audience knows what's to come. Use a printed version if possible to limit the number of tabs you need to juggle on your computer screen.
- **Introduce yourself early and speak up.** The best way to assert your presence and demonstrate leadership is to introduce yourself when first speaking on a video call. This sets a precedent for others to follow, allowing everyone to better engage with the call participants. If you know the names of the participants, it is also a good practice to address others on the call by their names when engaging in conversation, as this shows a commitment to getting to know workers personally.



Executive Presence Part 1: Continued

- **Keep the presentation engaging.** You may need to be extra conscientious of the level of engagement by your audience, as it can be easier for a participant to feel disconnected over video versus in a conference room. Continually check the facial expressions of your participants to see if they are engaged or disengaged during specific parts of a presentation. Prepare to steer the conversation in the right direction during discussion or questions, as it can easily fall off topic. Establish hand signals early, so that if the discussion is lively, you can direct their attention back to you to continue on. Utilizing Q&A is a great way to prompt discussion, transition topics or to allow participants a chance to clarify things they did not understand at the end of the presentation.
- **Use visuals to support your content.** Sharing your screen is a great feature that allows you to reference a PowerPoint presentation, relevant websites or documents. If you do plan to share your screen, however, make sure your desktop is organized and you only have relevant tabs open. You can also utilize your webcam to share visuals: for example, if you are speaking about a specific product, you can hold the physical product up to the camera for participants to see.
- **Avoid distractions to enhance the conversation.** Distractions such as technology or unwanted noises that get picked up by your microphone can inhibit productive discussion in a video conference. Do your part to limit these interruptions: silence your cell phone, keep email turned off for the duration of the meeting, find a quiet room to take the call and mute your microphone when you are not speaking (and encourage others on the call to do the same).
- **Record your meeting.** One way to keep a record of your meeting would be to assign a notetaker prior to beginning the presentation. These notes can be compiled and sent out to participants after the meeting so that they can reference the parts they missed or be reminded of the most important information. Another way to do this would be to record the video and audio of the presentation, if your video conferencing platform has this feature. This allows you to send the full presentation out to participants afterward, or upload the video somewhere for those who could not attend. If choosing this option, remember to let all participants know that you will be recording before beginning the presentation.



Executive Presence on Video Conferences

Part 2: Master Video Body Language

Video conferencing is a great way to coordinate remote workers to present trainings, deliver important information and engage in productive team discussions. However, virtual correspondence between several parties is not without its challenges, especially for the executive or leader in charge of the meeting. In this second article of a three-article series, we will discuss how to effectively engage your audience using body language and by cultivating a professional image virtually.

- **Perfect the art of eye contact.** Knowing the appropriate way to use eye contact on a video call will drastically improve your online presence. For informal meetings, perhaps with your immediate team in a conversation-based setting, it is okay to look at your screen where your team members' faces are when speaking. However, in a formal setting in which you are delivering a presentation to the group, practice looking directly into the camera lens while speaking, so it appears to your listeners that you are looking directly at them.
- **Learn how to use hand gestures on video.** You might expect that your hands will not be seen by your audience, but oftentimes, hand gestures are easily picked up by your webcam when set up at an appropriate distance (capturing your upper torso and head). Hand gestures can add value to your delivery, so it is best to prepare as if the audience will see your gesturing. As with most types of communication, there are good and bad ways to use hand gestures. They can best be used to emphasize certain points, to emphasize size or quantity (“big” or “small”) and to visualize numbers (using fingers). Be wary of hand gestures that can deter from your professionalism: pointing at the camera, waving hands frantically and crossing your arms are all examples of what not to do.
- **Use confident body posture.** This can be achieved through a number of strategies. First, keep a good distance between you and the camera, positioning your whole head and upper torso in the frame. When presenting, sitting on the front part of your chair helps you keep upright posture and feel more alert and engaged. Remind yourself to keep a straight back, shoulders down and relaxed, and lean in slightly to stay engaged. If you are only a spectator in the conference, it is okay to keep a more relaxed posture, though you never want to be slouched down in your chair.



Executive Presence Part 2: Continued

- **Consider your wardrobe choices.** Some colors and patterns show up differently on camera than in person. Solid jewel-tone colors appear best on camera, versus neon or extremely dark colors. Floral patterns, stripes and shiny fabrics do not translate well on camera. Simple cuts without too many frills — elaborate collars, buttons, etc. — appear most professional. Remember, you only need to be professional from the waist-up, but if you choose to stay casual on the bottom, ensure that your camera does not extend that far down.



Executive Presence on Video Conferences

Part 3: Preparing your Studio

Video conferencing is a great way to coordinate remote workers to present trainings, deliver important information and engage in productive team discussions. However, virtual correspondence between several parties is not without its challenges, especially for the executive or leader in charge of the meeting. In this third article of a three-article series, we will discuss the technicals of setting up your studio, focusing on how to best leverage your audio and video components.

- **Position your camera strategically.** The camera angle is most flattering at eye level, so you may want to elevate your computer to achieve this angle. This is not only the most flattering, but it also helps you to maintain upright posture. You'll want to check your video before joining the conference to ensure the video is hitting you just right. Make sure there is not too much space between the top of your head and the top of the screen. You'll want the video to include the top of your torso as well, not just your head.
- **Lighting is key.** Make sure your face is well-lit so your audience can see you. Natural lighting is the best, so facing a window can offer optimal lighting. If you aren't able to access natural light, a lamp is a great option. Some lighting pitfalls include having lighting sources directly behind you, casting a shadow, and bright sun rays coming through the window, blinding you. Experiment with positioning prior to your meeting to find the best lighting spot. Be flexible: your go-to video conferencing spot may differ from where you get the majority of your work done.
- **Aim for crisp and clear audio.** This may require the most amount of preparation and trial-and-error. A great way to test the audio before your conference would be to call a friend or co-worker beforehand using the same audio mechanism as you will in your meeting. This gives you time to troubleshoot problems — poor connection, spotty sound, lags — without having to interrupt your meeting. One of the greatest impediments to clear audio is background noise. Do your part by turning off music, closing windows, silencing your phone and using headphones with a microphone built-in to minimize unwanted sounds from getting picked up. Make sure participants mute themselves whenever they aren't speaking so that sound only comes from one source at a time.
- **Be mindful of your backdrops and backgrounds.** Make sure the backdrop you present to your audience is organized and professional. Does your camera pick up on kids toys



Executive Presence Part 3: Continued

or laundry in the background? Test this out beforehand to ensure your audience only sees what you want them to see. If you anticipate presenting video conferences regularly, you might consider investing in a plain backdrop to hang behind you so you don't have to worry about what your home office looks like on camera.



Expand Work from Home Check-Ins to Awareness of Loneliness Signs

While employers everywhere are reading blogs on the best ways to transform their teams with the new virtual environment, many tips are being shared on how to keep folks connected via video platforms, chatrooms and the like. AOE has even written some of those blogs, offering tips on video meeting etiquette and staying connected with your team. While these tips are needed as so many of us have quickly shifted to a work from home environment, the suggestions usually address productivity, not true human connection. Interestingly enough, many of us are feeling more disconnected despite these tools. Also interesting is the fact that studies have shown a huge connection between loneliness in the American work environment and productivity.

In an article in Forbes, Dr. Doug Nemecek, the chief medical officer for Behavioral Health at Cigna, stated that modern technology is helpful for workplace flexibility, but it may be contributing to loneliness. And, he continued, people who are lonely are less engaged and feel less productive at work. The ability to work from home, or from anywhere other than a collegial office, Nemecek added, can lead to isolation and ultimately a feeling of loneliness.

In another Forbes article, it was noted that loneliness actually poses a greater threat to health than obesity, and its life-shortening effects are comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Furthermore, it is rampant in today's workplace. The source of this information? Vivek H. Murthy, former Surgeon General of the United States. Due to the significant time we spend at work, he says, it is incumbent on business leaders to be proactive in tackling the problem of loneliness as it impairs performance, creativity and decision making.

The list of studies goes on and on, earning loneliness the label of a modern epidemic despite there being more ways than ever before to connect with friends, family and co-workers. Experts note that, though it seems counter-intuitive, those that feel lonely are less likely to reach out and build connections as they give into the feeling that they are alone. It becomes an unfortunate self-fulfilling prophecy. And this lack of connection didn't just start with our current pandemic, but rather our society's dependency on technology as well as folks working and even eating at their desk before scrambling out the door for family and other activities. There is simply less and less connection in the workforce.



So, how do we address this phenomenon? While our instinct may be more video chats and check-ins, many of these scenarios aren't creating a real connection. What about the corporate happy hour? The mandatory fun activity? Researchers note mixed results with these activities as they typically result only in building relationships with your existing work team and fail to create deep connections with those outside your immediate circle. Experts suggest that what is needed is a return to basics, to include making time for small talk at the beginning of a call, asking personal questions about family and hobbies, and not being in the habit of simply planning, reporting and doing the business of your work. Make sure all interactions are authentic and transparent, and actually build time into your day for interaction. Stop by someone's desk (or make up an excuse to call someone just to say hello in today's virtual world), show up to the meeting early (even if virtual) so you are forced to make small talk and go out of your way to get in front of those outside your typical work circle.

What ideas do you have for creating true connections with your team? How do you beat the lonely blues?



Conquering Zoom fatigue: Mastering the art of virtual meetings

Whether you use Zoom, Google Meet, GoToMeeting or any of the many virtual meeting platforms, fatigue is a very real issue many of us are experiencing in our businesses' "new normal." Leaders are challenged with how to fight the fatigue, increase participation and keep the spirit of in-person meetings alive.

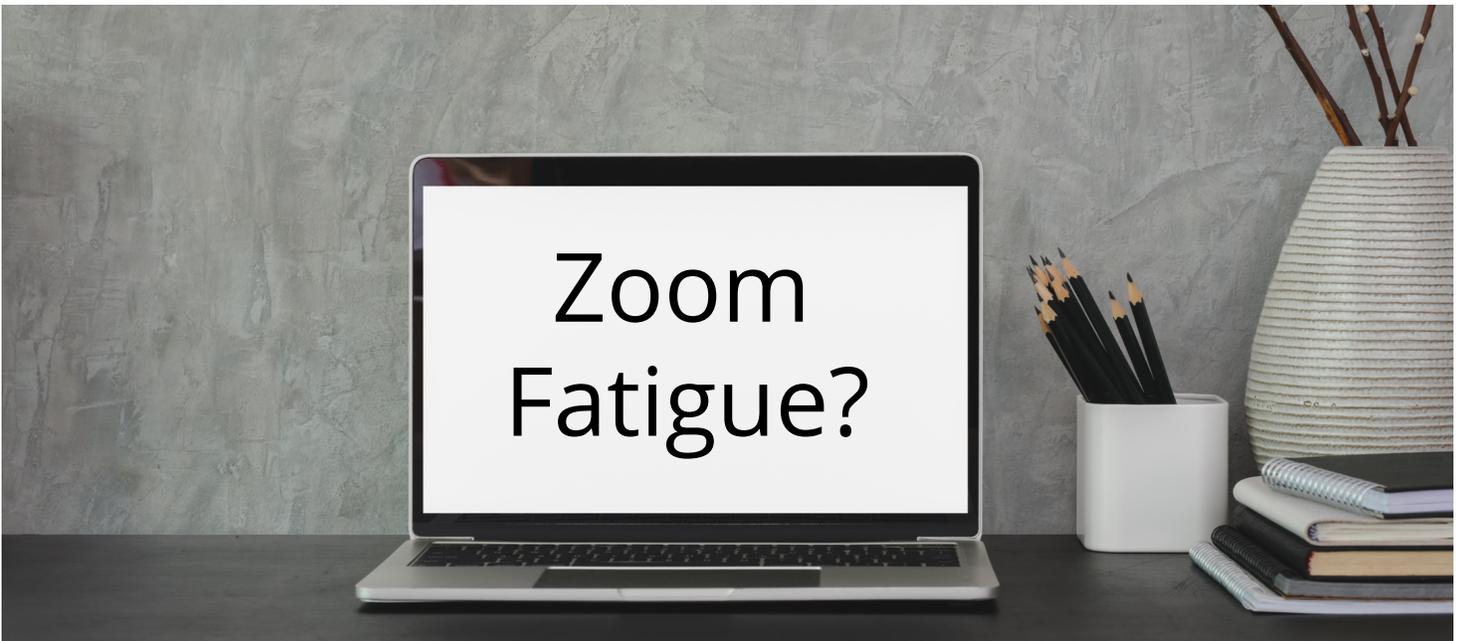
Thankfully, there are some simple steps you can take to master the art of virtual meetings, ranging from the planning to the post-meeting stage. According to [Andrea Driessen](#), Chief Boredom Buster at No More Boring Meetings, there are four questions we should ask ourselves when planning a virtual meeting. These include:

- How will we engage attendees in ways that can only be experienced online? Your meeting should be unique (participants won't experience it anywhere else) and deliver immediate value.
- What do we want the audience to think, feel, do or believe following the meeting? Do you have a call to action? Do you want them to share their experience with others? You should have clear goals for every meeting.
- If we could invite anyone to the meeting, dead or alive, who would we choose and why? This question may seem odd, but the answer can help shape your goals and expectations.
- What comments is the bus driver overhearing? In other words, be prepared to monitor what people are posting in the chat section of the meeting. All questions should be answered if not during, then after the meeting. Comments can provide powerful insight as you plan your next virtual meeting.



Meeting length and frequency should also be considered when planning. Anything more than an hour can result in reduced attention, participants leaving the “room” and, for those who attend multiple virtual meetings a week, compounded fatigue. In addition, consider how often you really need to meet. For example, does your team need to meet virtually every day, or will once a week meet your business needs?

Lastly, when planning your virtual meeting, incorporate experiences that will make it more relevant and fun for your participants. These could include inviting a special guest speaker, break-out sessions and fun activities like a virtual escape room, trivia game or live building tour.



Conquering Zoom fatigue: Turning passivity into activity

In our last blog we [introduced our series](#) on conquering Zoom fatigue by sharing questions we should ask ourselves when planning our virtual meetings. While technology has been embraced as a great business tool during these challenging times, the initial enthusiasm for virtual meetings has worn off. How do we fight the fatigue and turn our meeting participants from passive to active?

You have asked yourself the questions, considered meeting length and frequency, and included relevant and fun experiences in your planning. Now it's time to put your planning into action. Today, we focus on engaging participants through interaction.

[Andrea Driessen](#), Chief Boredom Buster at No More Boring Meetings, has some great tips to turn passivity into activity—in essence, delivering a ROAR (Return On Attendee Relevance) versus a BORE experience. These include:

- Incorporate break-out sessions where participants can join a smaller group discussion on the topic that most interests them. When choosing the topics, avoid the one-size-fits-all approach. Session subject matter should be selected based on your participants' interests and should be tailored for each audience.
- Offer live building or site tours. If, for example, you recently upgraded your facilities or have some interesting site updates, grab your laptop or phone, take a walk with your meeting guests and do a show-and-tell.
- Invite a surprise guest speaker to make a cameo appearance. They don't have to be a celebrity to generate excitement. It could be a popular speaker from a previous conference your participants attended. Consider "unmuting" your participants when the speaker appears so everyone can hear the cheers and applause.
- Add some F.U.N. to your meeting with some unusual experiences like an online escape room, trivia games, a lip-syncing contest or a cocktail hour. Award prizes and giveaways based on a range of criteria like best trivia answer, worst singing, most original cocktail or best interruption by a child or pet.



Turning Passivity into Activity: Continued

- Track the questions and comments throughout and respond accordingly, whether during or after the meeting. Consider using a Q & A and polling platform which can help you gain critical insights by capturing the unfiltered thoughts of your audience.

Additional ideas to deliver a ROAR experience include delivering a goodie bag or lunch to each participant, and switching content styles (i.e. mix things up with guest speakers, break-out sessions, “Ask an Expert,” quizzes throughout, etc.)

Most will agree that face-to-face meetings are more energizing than virtual. But, when meeting in person is not an option, delivering a virtual experience that will bust your participants’ fatigue will keep them coming back for more.



Conquering Zoom fatigue: Post-event opportunities

The first two posts in our blog series on conquering Zoom fatigue included [tips for mastering your virtual meetings](#) and [how to turn participants from passive to active](#). Now that your virtual meeting is over and, using the tips and techniques provided, you conquered Zoom fatigue for attendees, right?

While your virtual meeting hopefully energized your participants, what happens once it's over? For many, it is on to the next Zoom call and the one after that. While you are not responsible for their meeting experiences with others, you can magnify the positive experience of your meeting, build and strengthen your relationships, and become the bright spot in their day by leveraging your virtual meeting's success to create post-event opportunities.

Much of your post-event opportunities will depend on actions taken during the meeting planning process. Ideally, you will have taken the steps to track attendance (particularly valuable for webinars, breakout sessions and large events). Are you seeing a drop or increase in participation? Are previous participants coming back for more? Are you expanding your reach by engaging new participants? Tracking attendance can help you identify opportunities to maximize what works and improve upon what doesn't—ensuring that you deliver valuable content and an experience that participants will appreciate and share with others.

Tracking questions, comments and opinions collected during your virtual meeting provides critical insights into your audience's unfiltered thoughts. This can be accomplished by activating the in-meeting chat feature and incorporating [polling or a Q & A](#) into your agenda. Learning what interests and excites participants, when they are most engaged and whether they found value in your content will guide your virtual meeting strategy moving forward. In addition, responding to their questions and comments and sharing polling results with the group once the meeting has concluded provide additional opportunities to engage with participants and let them know that you value their input.



Post-event opportunities: Continued

Once you have established a winning formula for your virtual meetings, it's time to create additional opportunities that, as part of your overall strategy, will strengthen your relationships, expand your reach and establish your organization as a valued resource. Consider creating a year-round community where people can connect with you, network and consume the most valuable content. This could include follow-up meetings with smaller groups and continued learning sessions. Another great option is to create an online central repository where all your content (including recordings of your virtual meetings) and additional resources can be accessed, and participants can network with one another.

While Zoom fatigue, in general, is not likely to disappear, creating a virtual experience that engages, educates and delivers value will help ensure that your audience will feel the excitement.



Mitigating Isolation Among a Dispersed Workforce

No one is an island—addressing the real threat of isolation when working from home.

Working remotely is not something most of us imagined we would be doing at the start of 2020. COVID-19 has forced many of us to shift from the workplace to the home office and, while we may not have embraced the concept in the beginning, both employees and employers are seeing the benefits. Beyond the obvious reduction of risk for COVID exposure, work-from-home (WFH) employees are also celebrating the elimination of long commutes, more time with their families and greater flexibility. Employers are also seeing the upside with productivity going up and costs to the business going down. Yet with these benefits come risks including a sense of isolation.

However, we are also experiencing at least some degree of isolation due to COVID-related restrictions. Our inability to do the things we used to take for granted like seeing friends and loved ones, traveling or enjoying a live concert is, at some level, affecting our mental health. People who are working from home are also missing those interactions with coworkers, clients and others.

While we understand the whys behind the shift to WFH, we tend to overlook the resulting impact on the workforce. On top of the common concerns like catching COVID, cabin fever and uncertainty about the future, dispersed employees must also manage their new workday realities. Adapting to new routines and technologies, managing family needs like childcare and remote learning, concerns about job security and fears around returning to the office all contribute to a greater sense of isolation and add additional stress to our already stressful lives.

Isolation affects each of us differently and some more than others. However, there are some common health-related effects that those working from home may experience.

- These include:
- Loss of sleep
- Fatigue
- Increased anxiety or depression
- Decreased concentration
- Fear
- Weight gain
- Substance abuse



Mitigating Isolation: Continued

In addition, dispersed workers may be more distracted, feel more frustrated, perform at a lower level than normal, feel burned out or disengaged. Employees experiencing any of these effects can impact the entire team. Managers have a responsibility to act when they see an employee in distress. This is important, not only for this individual's wellbeing, but for the entire team and the business as well. Things managers should do:

- Know each employees' situation. Do they have children at home? Have they or someone in their family suffered any health issues (COVID or other)? Have they been impacted financially (e.g. their spouse has lost his or her job)?
- Demonstrate empathy and sympathy. Start conversations by asking, "How are you," followed, if necessary, by, "No, how are you really?"
- Know what support resources are available like your organization's employee assistance program, occupational health and counseling services, and share this information with your team.
- Be supportive during conversations with employees who feel isolated. Prioritize their mental health by shifting from discussions about performance concerns to conversations about how you can help them.
- Consider scheduling some off-site meetings where co-workers can meet face-to-face safely for some needed human interaction.
- Set a policy for work/life balance. Encourage your team to take breaks, exercise, separate their workspace from their family space, and shut off their computer at the end of the workday.
- Take care of yourself first. You cannot help your team if you are also tired, disengaged, anxious or depressed.

Like it or not, working from home is here to stay, at least well into 2021 for many. It is important, as we continue to navigate this strange new world, to recognize that we are all susceptible to feelings of isolation at least one time or another. Managers who prioritize their employees' wellbeing, provide support and remind them that they are not alone will build a stronger, more resilient team who will not only get through this but thrive.



What to Avoid When Sending an Email

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many operations to work in heightened virtual environments, thus increasing email communication. While email is certainly nothing new to our society, with it serving as a replacement to many in-person meetings, there has been a reported loss of proper etiquette. A refresher on basic digital decorum is a great idea.

One of the most common mistakes when sending emails is sloppiness. Not proofreading an email that contains improper grammar or punctuation and spelling mistakes will show that the sender has a careless or lazy attitude towards the email. These errors can change the tone of an email entirely and make it seem like the sender felt rushed. On the other hand, rambling on and on in an email, instead of getting right to the point, wastes the readers time. Another inconsiderate, time-consuming mistake is to hit “reply all” in an email chain when unnecessary.

It is also important to remember that your work email is owned by your company and what you send or say about your colleagues is not private. Gossiping, criticizing, or making negative comments about your colleagues is both unprofessional and rude and could be seen by an unintended recipient.

Although an emoji or more casual language can often build relationships and create a deeper connection through email, it is important to ensure that the use of slang, gifs, swear words, or emojis are only used in an appropriate manner. Crossing these boundaries can also include improperly addressing your recipient. The way you address someone in an email carries weight that can misconstrue your message. Starting off an email with a demanding request or without an appropriate greeting is disrespectful and can lead to miscommunication.

Putting effort and thought into an email can greatly impact how a recipient receives a message. It is always important to remember email etiquette and make sure that the recipient is being treated respectfully and communicating successfully.



Communicating Better in a Virtual World

“Communication is at the very core of our society. That’s what makes us human.” – Jan Koum

Communication makes us human and, as humans, we need to communicate. In the past year, our ability to interact with others has been challenged. Many of us have turned to technology to connect with loved ones, coworkers and clients. Yet, after participating in multiple Zoom meetings and FaceTime calls, we can still feel disconnected.

In fact, according to the Twin Cities Chapter of the Society for Marketing Professional Services ([SMPS-TC](#)), the average amount of time many of us are spending in virtual meetings is 6.5 hours a day. With all that time invested in these meetings, it is disappointing to learn that 78 percent of us are dissatisfied with the timing, content and value.

SMPS-TC recently hosted a virtual event titled “Effective Virtual Business Development & Communications.” Presented by Meg Winch, President at [Communications Resource Northwest](#), the meeting focused on how to become better communicators in a virtual world. Meg offered tips for getting started. These include:

Be present and mindful

When we are checking our phones or reading emails during a meeting, we are telling those on the other end that they are not important. Turn off whatever else you’re working on. Look into the lens, particularly when speaking, and remind yourself that this is the most important thing you are doing in the moment. If everyone in the meeting is fully engaged, you will feel like you are in the same room.

Cheat sheets

Write key points you want to cover and reminders (e.g., to look into the lens and smile) on sticky notes. Place these notes above the camera lens on your laptop to keep your eyes looking in the direction of the camera.

Improve the video experience

Turn off other programs like Outlook to improve the experience by reducing latency (how much time it takes to send data from one computer to another). High latency can result in choppy audio and frozen screens.



Communicating in a Virtual World: Continued

Can you hear me?

Practice with your device microphone to be sure the volume is at the right level and to gauge how you come across. Be intentional in HOW you speak. Are you speaking too slowly or too fast? Are you enunciating your words and adding warmth and emotion to your voice?

Don't wing it!

Plan, prepare and practice. We have a lot on our plates which makes it difficult to invest the time and effort into planning and preparing your meetings. However, when you wing it, your attendees are more likely to feel disengaged and leave the meeting questioning its value. Test your technology beforehand, define and practice transitions between speakers, develop your visuals from the perspective of your virtual audience and have a “plan B” in place.

The more complex the meeting, the greater your time spent preparing should be. In fact, planning and prep time should be doubled when you have multiple speakers or facilitators on the agenda.

Brainstorming in a virtual world

Brainstorming has always been an effective way to generate ideas and solve problems and it can be equally effective on a virtual level. Online collaborative whiteboard platforms are available not only for brainstorming but for planning and managing workflows as well. Some of the more popular tools employ digital sticky notes that are added to the whiteboard as people submit their ideas via the chat tool.

The bottom line

Virtual communications have changed the way we do business. But imagine how we would have managed over the past year without the technology tools that we are using today. With a bit of effort, we can use these tools to be even better communicators.

By leveraging your technology tools and by looking at every aspect of your meeting—from planning to executing—through the eyes of your audience, you will increase their satisfaction, add value to their experience and encourage them to come back for more.



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CONTACT:

Kimberly Kayler, AOE President
Kimberly.kayler@aoeteam.com
www.aoeteam.com

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