

7 virtual meeting challenges

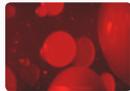
Instead of putting people in planes, trains and automobiles, companies are increasingly directing their employees to use the phone, web meetings and videoconferencing. Often, these tools create an experience that's a poor substitute for getting together in person—particularly when large numbers of participants are involved.

But, virtual meetings don't have to be a disappointment; in fact, they can actually be more engaging and productive than their face-to-face counterparts. However, creating an effective virtual experience takes a greater level of planning and facilitation than regular meetings.

Here are seven challenges you could face when planning a virtual meeting. Learn how to identify and overcome each one with a clear solution!

Challenge

Click on titles to learn more



Problem

The meeting doesn't accomplish anything—no progress is made—so after an hour, everyone's hungry for action.

The session has no structure, and oozes from topic to topic without a plan.

Participants that can't attend the meeting in person feel like they're in an alternate universe.

The presenter becomes possessed and drones on and on with little opportunity for others to participate.

Participants can sense a poorly planned web meeting and aren't engaged.

With no role in the meeting, participants become so bored they need to be brought back to life.

There is an elaborate structure of PowerPoint® presentations that are long, complicated and impossible to decode.

Solution

Develop 1–3 clear objectives.

Create an interactive agenda.

Give all participants the same experience.

Manage time wisely.

Know your web meeting tools.

Set expectations and provide opportunities to participate.

Use more visual slides.



Challenge 1: Jaws

Problem The meeting doesn't accomplish anything—no progress is made—so after an hour, everyone's hungry for action.

Solution Develop 1–3 clear objectives.

Decide on 1 to 3 outcomes for your meeting (no more). The worst virtual meetings contain a kitchen sink full of miscellaneous stuff, messy and without direction. It's the "and" trap: "As long as we're holding the meeting," organizers say, "we might as well cover this and that and the other thing, and something else." By contrast, the best are focused with a clear purpose.

The solution is to limit the agenda to one to three (and no more) topics that matter most, and spend quality time exploring each. To hone it down to those few objectives, ask yourself these questions:

- What do we need participants to **learn** during this meeting?
- What will they **know afterwards** that they didn't know before?
- What **decision** will be made?
- How will participants' viewpoints or **perspectives change**?
- How will their **beliefs** be affected?
- What will participants be prepared to **do** after the meeting?
- How will they take **action**?



Challenge 2: The Blob

Problem The session has no structure, and oozes from topic to topic without a plan.

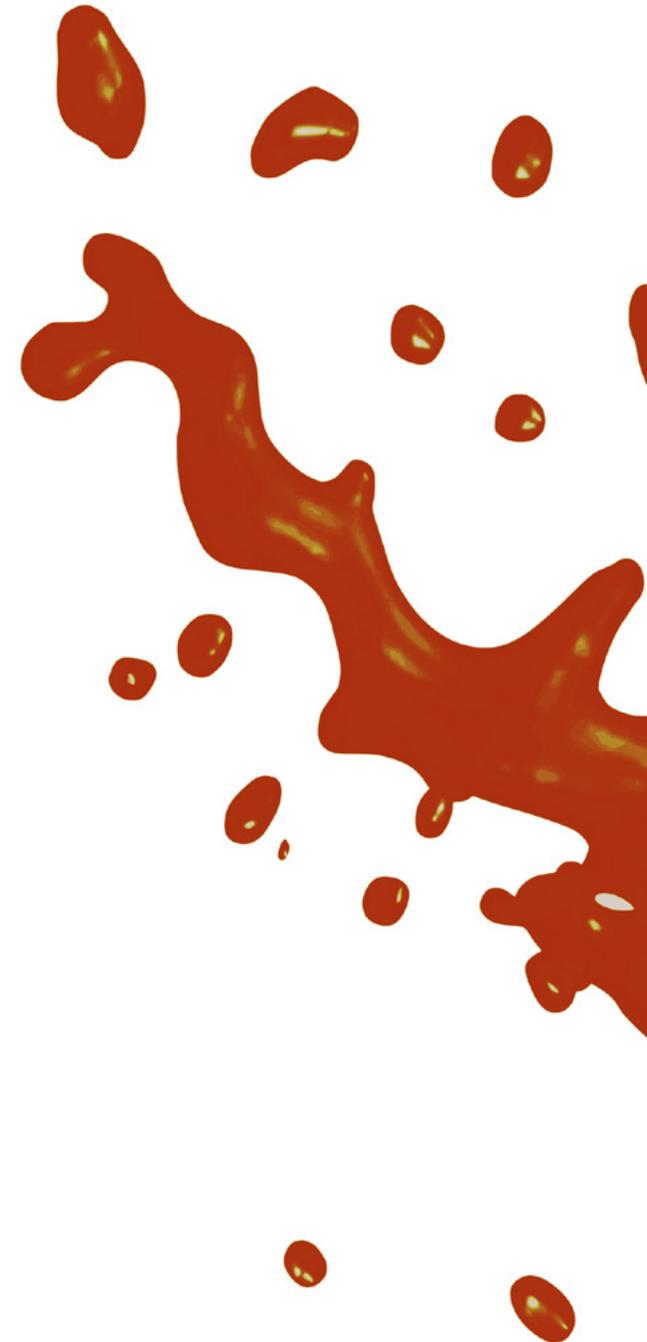
Solution Create an interactive agenda.

Design your meeting to achieve your objectives. The old-fashioned word for this is “agenda,” but you need to do more than create a bulleted list of content to cover. You should “design” your web meeting to have a flow that makes sense, opportunities for participants to . . . well, participate, and to manage time so that you get everything done. This is not a task you can dash off in 10 minutes; you need to think through how to cover your subject matter and engage participants.

To get started, think of your virtual meeting as a television talk show. You’ll need a dynamic host, interesting guests, supporting visuals, clips and stories, and opportunities for audience feedback.

In a virtual setting, you have to plan opportunities for collaboration and participation. Identify the tools you’ll use in your agenda so it’s clear what the speaker or facilitator should do. Here are three ways to build in interaction:

- **Provide verbal and visual cues.** For example, with a leader on a live video feed, they can say, “After I finish sharing this information, I will ask for your thoughts and ideas.”
- **Use “Chat.”** The instant messaging tool allows participants to write a question or a comment at any time, which is then posted for all to see, and which the facilitator can respond to when ready.
- **Go “around the table.”** Using the participant list, ask each person to provide his/her input in turn. Capture key points on the whiteboard.



Challenge 3: Twilight Zone

Problem Participants that can't attend the meeting in person feel like they're in an alternate universe.

Solution Give all participants the same experience.

Hosting a virtual meeting is a great way to involve employees from many locations. But you have to make sure that each attendee has equal opportunity to share, collaborate and participate. To ensure this, host the meeting completely virtual with each participant at his/her desk rather than half at a desk and half in a large meeting space.

If you must use the mixed approach for a large meeting, assign a facilitator to each location. Collect questions and feedback from each place, then provide employee comments to a central facilitator to manage interaction. Or, go global then local. Devote half the session to a virtual message from a top leader to all locations, then turn off the feed and hold "local" sessions led by a facilitator, who runs a discussion about "what we need to do" to support the overall effort.

Also, don't forget to get feedback at the end of your meeting. By finding out what's working and what isn't, you have an opportunity to continuously improve your web meetings.



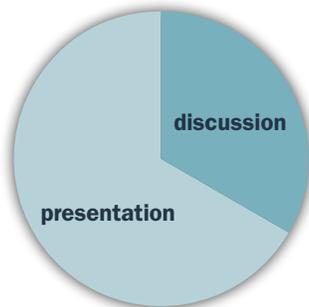
Challenge 4: The Exorcist

Problem The presenter becomes possessed and drones on and on with little opportunity for others to participate.

Solution Manage time wisely.

The ideal web meeting lasts from one hour to 1.5 hours—any shorter and you may not be able to accomplish your objectives; any longer and participants begin to tire. Because time is limited, the wise management of time is a critical success factor for web meetings. (Conversely, the most common pitfall of web meetings is a presentation that goes on too long, stealing time that could be spent discussing the issues, solving problems or developing ideas.)

Think about the ideal ratio for managing the time during your meeting:



When you have a lot of content to get through, you might want to allocate two-thirds of the meeting for presentation. But make sure to allow one-third for discussion and other participation.



For a meeting that's designed to solve problems and come up with action steps, consider a $\frac{1}{3}$ - $\frac{1}{3}$ - $\frac{1}{3}$ format.



Web meetings don't have to include presentations. Here's a format for a meeting where participants raise issues about a particular problem, then spend the rest of their time developing solutions.



Challenge 5: The Sixth Sense

Problem Participants can sense a poorly planned web meeting and aren't engaged.

Solution Know your web meeting tools.

Get to know the tools in your (web meeting) toolbox. Many meeting organizers are not comfortable with the meeting system, so they only use the few tools they know—usually presenting PowerPoint slides. But good web systems offer a wide array of tools to make meetings more dynamic. To find out what's available on your web meeting service, watch a demo on the service's website or take the available training (usually free)—then begin to experiment with how you can use these features to enhance your meeting.

Here's what's available on Adobe Connect:
Most web meeting systems offer similar tools.



Streaming video
Let's you see the facilitator or presenter

Participant list/status
See the participants who are attending and allow them to raise their hand and express agreement

Annotation
Emphasizes a point or makes a presentation more dynamic by underlining, connecting the dots, circling important content or "drawing" simple diagrams

Screen sharing
Goes beyond PowerPoint to share documents, websites, spreadsheets or any content

Whiteboard
Gets participants involved to brainstorm or solve problems

Polling
Solicits feedback from participants as the session is in progress or at the end

Chat
Allows participants to ask questions or have an instant-messaging style conversation during the meeting

Challenge 6: Night of the Living Dead

Problem With no role in the meeting, participants become so bored they need to be brought back to life.

Solution Set expectations and provide opportunities to participate.

Employees are used to one-way web meetings, where they do other work while pretending to pay attention. But you're about to change the game, to make the web meeting a much more interactive experience. So it's important to manage participants' expectations, so everyone understands when and how to participate.

To set expectations, at the beginning of every meeting let participants know:

- What we'll accomplish in this session (objectives/outcomes)
- What we'll cover, including order and timing (agenda)
- What everyone in the meeting will do (roles)
- How we'll conduct the meeting (rules)

But, just setting expectations doesn't guarantee people will participate. When you're sitting alone at your computer, it's hard to be creative right off the bat. Help attendees out by facilitating discussion and participation. Here's how:

- **Prime the pump.** Boost idea-generation by introducing some concepts at the beginning of your session.
- **Ask a question and invite a messy flow of answers.** The "chat" tool is great for this because participants can all contribute at the same time.
- **Write ideas on the whiteboard.** From the chat stream, pull concepts that have potential and post them on a whiteboard.
- **Vote on concepts to pursue.** Create a poll where you ask participants to rate the top five ideas based on certain criteria: whether it has the potential to have a significant impact, for instance, or whether it's easy to implement.

6



Challenge 7: The Labyrinth

Problem There is an elaborate structure of PowerPoint presentations that are long, complicated and impossible to decode.

Solution Use more visual slides.

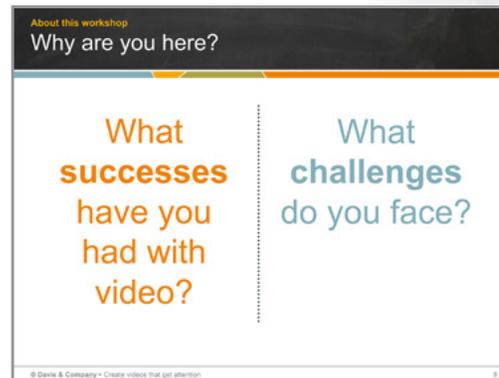
Web meetings have a wonderful attribute: the ability to use visuals to make the session more compelling. That's why it's a shame when a presenter clicks to a slide and stays there and stays there, as the minutes tick (slowly) by. Since it doesn't cost you more to add slides, use a lot of them—and keep them moving. But you need to change the construction of your slides: one point or topic per slide using less words and more visuals.

The best slides . . .

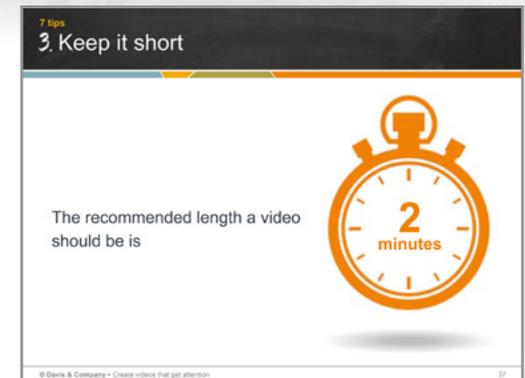
Let visuals tell the story



Use large, clear type



Cover only one point



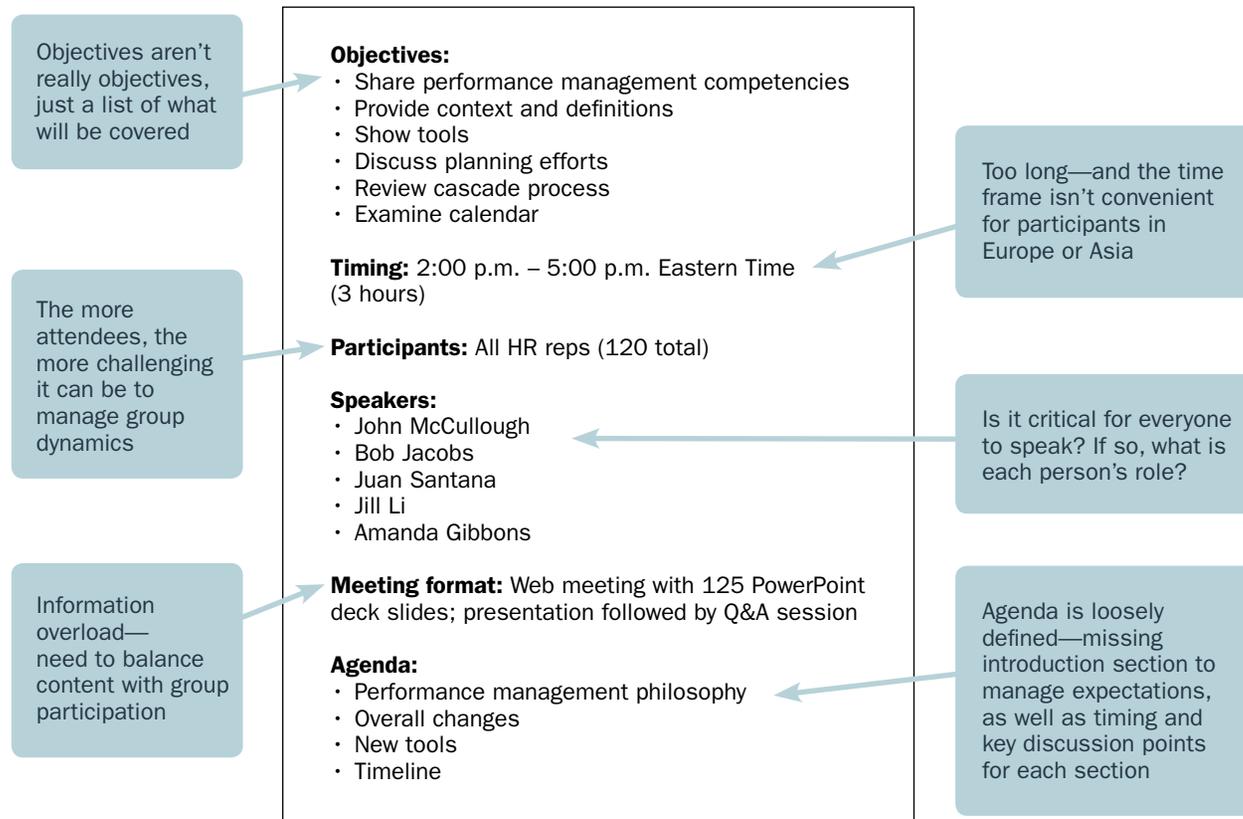
Virtual meeting makeover!



Situation

The Human Resources (HR) department of a global healthcare company was about to make significant changes to its performance management system, which would affect how employees were managed around the world. To prepare local Human Resources representatives for the change, HR management decided to conduct a web meeting for all 120 reps. But the organizers weren't very skilled at web meetings, so the session was a mess. Participants felt the meeting was too long, lacked interaction and left them feeling overwhelmed.

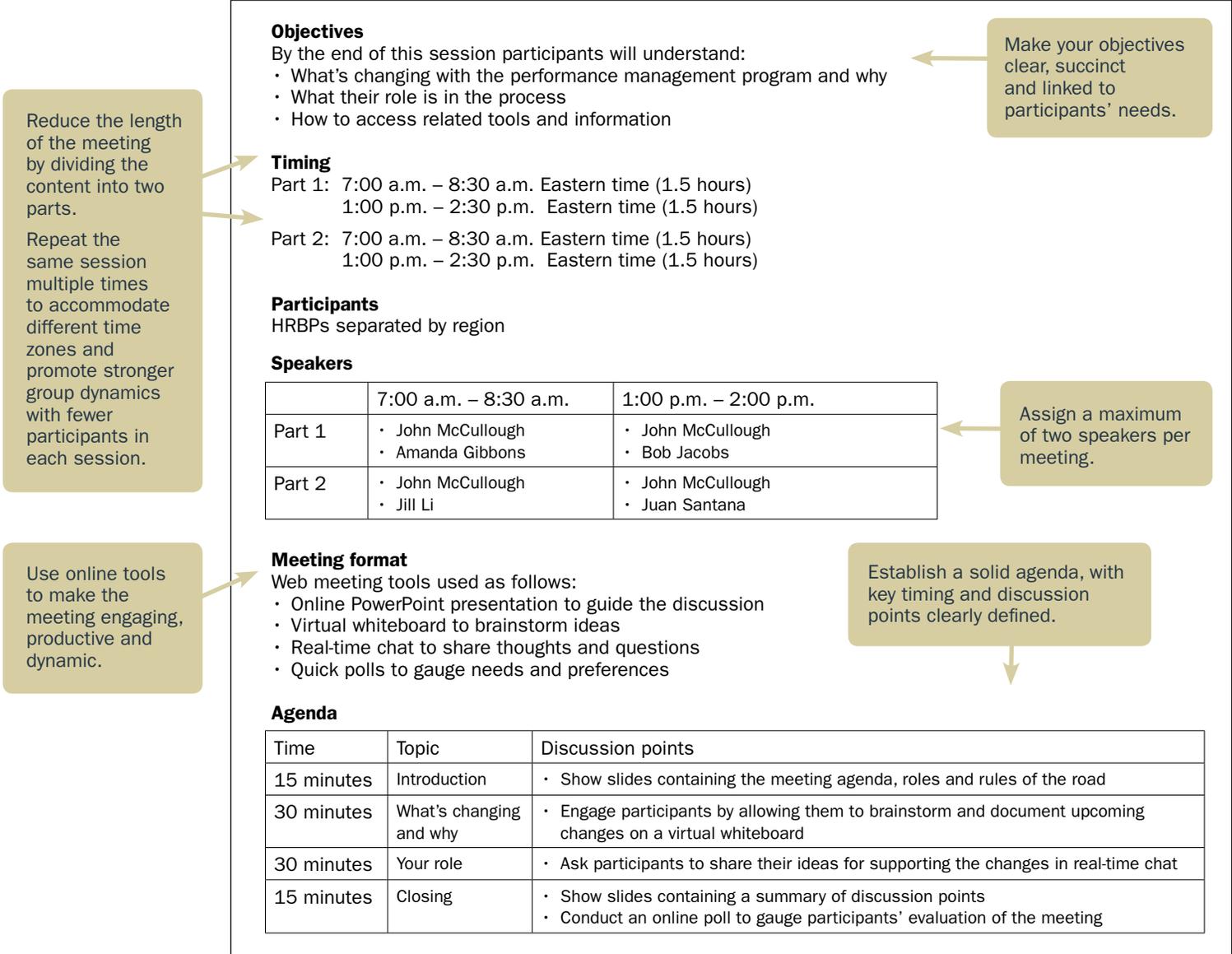
Here's the framework used for this meeting with **key problem areas highlighted**:



Virtual meeting makeover!



Here's how the meeting should have been held, applying the principles of effective web meetings described in this smart guide:



Reduce the length of the meeting by dividing the content into two parts.
Repeat the same session multiple times to accommodate different time zones and promote stronger group dynamics with fewer participants in each session.

Use online tools to make the meeting engaging, productive and dynamic.

Make your objectives clear, succinct and linked to participants' needs.

Assign a maximum of two speakers per meeting.

Establish a solid agenda, with key timing and discussion points clearly defined.





11 Harristown Road
Glen Rock, NJ 07452
201.445.5100

Smart guide

About Davis & Company

Davis & Company is an award-winning firm that helps companies reach, engage and motivate their employees.

Founded in 1984, Davis & Company develops innovative solutions and programs that improve the success of employee communication for leading companies such as Nestlé, PepsiCo and Pfizer. The company also offers web-based workshops, industry reports, how-to books and newsletters for communication professionals on important topics pertaining to employee communication. The firm is based in Glen Rock, N.J. For more information, visit www.davisandco.com.



To schedule a consultation,
just call us at 1-877-399-5100
or email Alison Davis at
alison.davis@davisandco.com.