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ULTIMATE GUIDE:

How To Run Truly Productive Remote Board Meetings

Introduction

A few months ago, board meetings would be held in person and members would be allowed to join by teleconferencing only in rare circumstances such as personal illness or severe weather conditions. Today, many committees are facing an unprecedented challenge as people are advised to stay at home and work remotely.

But there is always some good news about the bad news. The good news, in this case, is that remote board meetings are not a novelty. Many organisations have already been through this and there is enough evidence to suggest that remote board meetings can be fruitful.

Earlier this year, a study concluded that, "Compared to face-to-face meetings, remote meetings are associated with better meeting attendance behaviour of directors, higher likelihood of director dissent on monitoring-related proposals, higher forced CEO turnover-performance sensitivity, and more effective investments."

A few weeks ago, ICANN, a global Internet governance authority, conducted a virtual board workshop, for the first time. More and more schools, town halls and other organisations have also been conducting their board meetings online. That's a lot of remote meetings…

If they can do it, you can do it, too!

Let us walk you through the essentials of a truly productive remote board meeting.

Paul Neefjes

Managing Director at iBabs Board Portal Software

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As you will probably notice, the majority of this guide is focused on meeting preparation. This is, by far, the most important element you need for a productive meeting that results in great ideas and informed business decisions (instead of everyone secretly responding to emails while staring out of the window).

Before you even begin, ask yourself:

- What is the goal of this remote team meeting?

- What is the key functionality we need to make it a success?

- What documents and reports must be prepared in advance?

BEFORE THE MEETING

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"If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail!"

— Benjamin Franklin

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STEP 1: CHOOSE THE RIGHT TOOLS

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Communication software

Here's our shortlist of the best team communication apps for remote board meetings:

- **Skype** - It s popular which means that most people know how to use it. There are two potential downsides. First, participants will need to have the software installed. Second, they must be logged into their account to join the call.

- **Microsoft Teams** - If you are already using Office 365, then you have access to Microsoft Teams. This is Microsoft's built-in group communication tool which, much like Skype, comes with video and audio conferencing, as well as screen sharing.

- **Zoom** - Zoom is another widely used tool that is mostly praised for its simplicity. It doesn't require an account and you can use it to reliably conduct large meetings (up to 1000 people!).

- **Roundee** - Convenient and simple, Roundee lives in your browser. This makes it easy to install and use but could cause some security issues along the way.

Productive Remote Meetings PRO TIP:

If someone is in a very noisy place or their microphone isn't very good, you can try Krisp — a tool designed to remove background noise.

krisp

Mute Background Noise During Calls with Krisp App
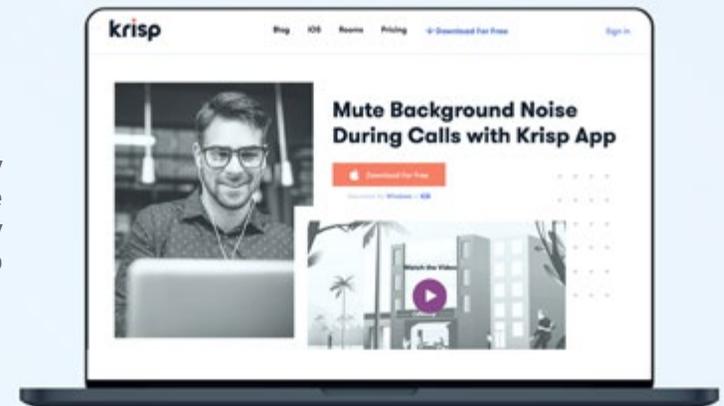
STEP 1: CHOOSE THE RIGHT TOOLS

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Scheduling software

If your committee is currently dispersed across time zones, you need to avoid scheduling the meeting too early in the morning or too late in the evening. It's easy to make mistakes when manually calculating the time at each participant's location. But if you just need to convert an hour to another time zone, you don't need fancy tools. You can use Google.

However, if you need to coordinate a meeting between several time zones, it's best to use a dedicated tool. Most such software will highlight the most convenient hours and allow you to compare times in several locations at once.

Here are some of the tools we recommend:

- **Every Time Zone** is a simple tool that allows you to see what time it is across time zones.
- **World Clock Meeting Planner** from timeanddate.com allows you to input your team members' different locations and then creates a table of suggested meeting times.
- **Worldtimebuddy** allows you to select meeting time and duration and then send a link, email or calendar invitation.

STEP 1: CHOOSE THE RIGHT TOOLS

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Collaboration space

Remote board meetings often make use of a dedicated board portal like iBabs. This type of solution could be for you if you want to keep everything in one place—from your agenda and minutes to reports and other related files.

Alternatively, you can use a combination of tools, depending on the purpose of your meeting. For example, if you're a sales leader and you're sharing a presentation detailing last quarter's revenue, you may want to use software like Google Drive or Google Slides. That being said, here are a few of our favourite online collaboration tools for board members:

- **Miro:** digital whiteboard where you can place virtual sticky notes.
- **Google Drive:** file-sharing + online office suite that has all the basic apps you need (from word processing to presentations).
- **Asana & Trello:** general project management apps.
- **Basecamp:** a project management solution with an emphasis on communication. It can be used to discuss and store notes, documents, important emails and other relevant content.
- **Gliffy:** flowchart software that can be used to visualise business processes.

The list goes on and on but these are the essentials you may want to consider when managing a remote team.

STEP 2: WRITE AND DISTRIBUTE THE AGENDA

Board meetings can be expensive in terms of time and opportunity cost, so they must be as productive as possible.

To ensure you're making the best use of your board members' time, prepare and send a detailed agenda as early as possible. Send it as early as possible—with the meeting invite or at least a week in advance. This enables everyone to review the agenda items, suggest new discussion points and come well prepared.

The most productive discussions happen when you make your agenda focused on one or two crucial items (most often strategy questions). Try to avoid implementation details and tactical issues.

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"If you don't give them one or two areas to focus on, they will go off on tangents and your meeting will not be effective. Include the board meeting package, which should be no more than 35 pages with attachments so they can do their homework in advance of the meeting."

—Betsy Atkins, Corporate Governance Expert

To make sure participants can collaborate, share the agenda in a document where they can add comments.

Here's what a typical meeting agenda contains:

- **Meeting goal(s).** Specify the purpose of the meeting and the outcome or decision you are hoping to reach at the end. This helps you stay on topic.

- **Discussion topics.** Enable meeting participants to comment on the topics and suggest changes.

- **Meeting structure.** To make the best use of everyone's time, describe when and for how long you plan to discuss each topic.

- **Relevant information.** Add links to documents, files, research and other information that will help participants get on the same page.

- **Action points.** Describe what has been done since the last meeting and leave space for new decisions and to-dos.

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This might be the most important preparation step. To reap the full benefits of a remote board meeting, it's best to invite everyone to think about the content and share their ideas during a short call. This helps align the participants, even when they are kilometres away from each other.

If this is your first time organising a remote online meeting, it's best to seek some feedback. Ask participants whether they'd like to add items to the board agenda or whether they think these topics are the right ones. These "pre-calls" enable attendees to spend some time thinking about the talking points and come to the meeting with original ideas, solutions and suggestions.

STEP 3: DISCUSS THE AGENDA BEFORE THE MEETING TAKES PLACE

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"I think in the best run-boards, the CEO has 30-45 minute calls with each non-exec board member before the actual board meeting to walk through the financials one-on-one and walk through the strategy information and the agenda."

— Mark Suster, Managing Partner, Upfront Ventures

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ORGANISING A REMOTE BOARD MEETING TAKES TIME. A LOT OF IT.

Inviting attendees? Send an email. Distributing the agenda? Email again. Following up? Lots of emails.

It's easy to get tangled up in email threads while you're trying to set up a remote board meeting. The information is often spread out in various shared documents and people often miss updates. This prevents board members from being well prepared for the meeting and hinders your overall productivity.

If you want to organise remote board meetings more effectively, iBabs can help. iBabs is a shared online space where you can communicate, collaborate and schedule virtual board meetings. A space that ensures everyone receives the updates in real time—on their phone, computer or tablet. Best of all, iBabs helps you keep track of the outcomes and action points from past meetings, so you can make better decisions with confidence.

STEP 4: TEST YOUR SETUP

A week before the meeting...

The secretary should contact all members that will be making presentations and inform them of the time limitations.

Three days before the meeting...

The board secretary should make sure that all participants have any login details and passwords beforehand and ask them to test their software. This prevents potential technical issues that might stop board members from attending. It also gives you enough time to resolve any difficulties that may arise.

15 minutes before the meeting...

It's best for the board chair and secretary to "arrive" a bit earlier at the virtual meeting to ensure that everything is up and running.

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Remote board meetings are prone to technical glitches. That's why it may be difficult for one person to chair the meeting while managing the technical aspects of video conferencing.

So, it may be a good idea to have one person responsible for chairing and facilitating the meeting and another person responsible for the technical aspects of the meeting. The technical coordinator can, for example, manage virtual hand-raising and forward questions or comments to the chair.

STEP 5: APPOINT A TECHNICAL COORDINATOR

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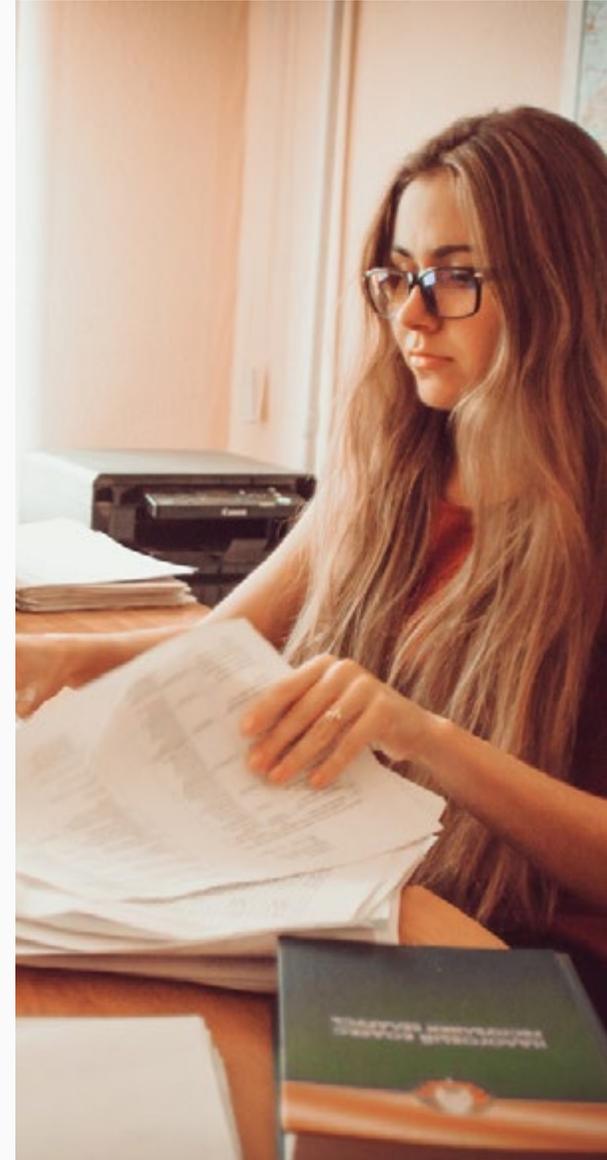
PART 2: DURING THE MEETING

Housekeeping

At the start of the meeting, take a few minutes to introduce everyone who is present at the meeting. Participants will be more likely to engage when they know who else is in your virtual boardroom. Make short housekeeping announcements to get everyone on the same page. This is the best time to share your meeting protocol: Should participants mute their microphones to prevent distracting sounds? How do they "raise" their hands?

Be sure to disable all notifications and sounds on the meeting host's computer so they don't distract participants from the meeting.

Meeting etiquette

Just like face-to-face meetings, online meetings need a set of ground rules to ensure mutual respect and better outcomes. The main risk with online meetings lies in the fact that body language is practically absent and participants can't gauge each other's emotions.

For example, it's easy to interrupt someone unintentionally when you can't see their expression and you can't decide if they have finished talking or not. So, before organising a remote board meeting, try setting meeting etiquette.

Here are a few simple suggestions you might want to introduce:

- **Test all technology (including camera/ video, Wi-Fi, and screen sharing) before the meeting.**

- **Read the agenda, discuss it and come prepared.**

- **Don't stare at your phone while other people are presenting.**

- **Don't try to multitask during the virtual meeting.**

- **This includes checking email.**

- **Turn off all notifications, put your cell phone on silent and place it out of reach.**

- **Don't dress too casual. Keep a professional appearance.**

- **Be aware that others can hear and see what you say and do, including unintentional utterances.**

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PART 2: DURING THE MEETING

Lay out the meeting goal(s)

Starting with a short presentation from the CEO sets the tone for a productive discussion. It's like a "primer" for the board that helps them understand the key topics that will be discussed and the reason why the meeting was called.

For example, this can be a good time to share key metrics and financial figures and to explain the main topic in a sentence like, "Our current product only has a 30 percent gross margin."

Give the floor to each participant

One of the best practices with remote board meetings is to ensure that each attendee gets the opportunity to speak. Some board members will inevitably be more eloquent or more eager to contribute. Others will prefer to let others go first while they absorb and contemplate the conversation. Try to engage the latter and ask for their input. This helps you gain precious insights from each board member, instead of just letting the most outgoing personalities to lead the discussion.

To mute or not to mute?

Some organisations choose the etiquette of being on mute and turning it off as a sign the attendee wants to talk. On one hand, this prevents distracting background noises and helps avoid interruptions. On the other hand, it can lead to people multitasking while they are on the call and not participating in any way. Whichever option you choose for your remote board meeting protocol, you have to inform and get everyone to use it.

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Send out
meeting minutes

The value of good minutes goes far beyond just reminding people of what occurred in the last meeting. They can provide very important legal protections for the organisation and its directors. For example, a minutes document can help you avoid the loss of significant exit value in the course of an acquisition due diligence process.

What to include in your meeting minutes?

- **Names of participants**
- **Agenda items covered**
- **Decisions made**
- **Follow-up actions and who is responsible**
- **Due dates for the action items**
- **Any other notes which may be useful in the future**

PART 3: AFTER THE MEETING

Send a meeting
recording (optional)

Recording your virtual board meeting is good practice in many cases. For example, if someone can't attend, has trouble with their internet connection, has faulty headphones or any other issue, a recording allows them to catch up on the discussion as well as understand the outcomes and the action items from the meeting.

Keep in mind, however, that not all video conferencing tools allow recording. If this feature is important to you, make sure to check the software specifications. Also, research any potential privacy considerations. When recording a meeting, you must notify all participants.

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YOUR NEXT BOARD REMOTE MEETING

We hope this guide will help you prepare a productive remote board meeting even if this is the first time you have to do it. Speaking of productivity, one way to increase yours is to keep all documents and notes related to a meeting in one shared space like iBabs.

iBabs is a board meeting platform that enables you to get meetings organised faster, collaborate on notes and agendas and keep track of decisions and action items from previous meetings.

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