



Three Questions and Answers on Virtual Meetings

1. How is meeting in a virtual world better than meeting in the real world?

When it's not possible, for any number of reasons, to come together at the same time and place, a virtual meeting is the next best option. If there is no better way to get the work done, then a virtual meeting can be very effective. Of course you still can't beat a face-to-face meeting in the real world to get good results. If travel time and cost is not a problem, or if participants are near to one another, a real world meeting is the way to go. Walk down the hall or across town to the conference room.

Convenience, Right People, Costs

Virtual meeting participants can simply take a break from their current tasks and connect with their colleagues no matter where they are and what they are doing. This convenience not only saves a lot of money, it encourages the right people to come to the meeting. In a virtual meeting it's often easier to get all the essential people involved at the same time. A road warrior can connect from a hotel room, an executive can login at the office, and a working mom can put the kids to bed and join the meeting from home if needed. ([as portrayed in our video](#))

Process, Structure

A common problem with any meeting is a lack of structure, discipline and process. We all hear about meeting agendas not being followed or nonexistent, and of long-winded presentations. Meeting participants often complain of decisions not made, or follow-up that never happens. Although these complaints are not exclusive to the real world, they are less of a problem in the virtual world because virtual meetings typically require some degree of facilitation or stewarding. This assures the likelihood that some degree of structure will be built into the virtual meeting.

Mental Presence

Virtual-world meeting participants may be absent physically, but are more likely to be present mentally, while real-world meeting participants can be present physically but absent mentally. When someone joins a virtual-world meeting they have to stay engaged to know what's happening. So unlike the real world where a participant can remain silent with something else on their mind, it's difficult to do that in the virtual world, providing the right tools and processes are employed.

Active Engagement

Meeting facilitators in both worlds try to keep participants fully engaged in the meeting process. By taking advantage of the 3D characteristics of the virtual world the degree of engagement and the feeling of co-presence can be enhanced to levels at least equal to real-world experiences. The more participants can be immersed in the virtual meeting the more actively engaged they will be. The goal is to keep everyone actively involved and engaged in the process by exploiting the beneficial characteristics of the virtual platform. At the Alpine Executive Center we call this "Active Spatial Immersion", keeping everyone actively engaged by using spatial meeting tools that require an avatar's interaction.

Do the Impossible

In the virtual world you can do things you can't do in the real world. Avatars can interact with each other and with objects, and objects can interact with avatars and other objects. Imagine in the real world having an idea that you can identify on a physical object, then pass that object with your idea around for others to see and hold. In the virtual world you can sort those ideas physically into a collection of categories arranged so participants can walk around, move, sort, edit and comment on them. You can't do that in the real world.



Try to visualize a real world meeting where you express your opinion on issues and see the results of your opinion and those of your colleagues graphically displayed spatially right in front of you, being dynamically updated as discussions continue. This sort of dynamic two-way interaction with a whiteboard or a flipchart is not possible in the real-world, but in the virtual world this two-way interaction with objects is possible and actually very efficient. In the 3D virtual world you can do things you can't imagine doing in the real world.

2. What are the drawbacks? – and remedies!

Inconvenience – Asynchronous Meetings

It's not always convenient for everyone to login at the same time for a virtual meeting. In addition to personal work schedules, time-zone differences must be taken into account. Synchronous, same-time, meetings are the norm when meeting virtually in any medium. However, with the right meeting support tools some meetings can be structured to run asynchronously, where participants login at different times, make their contributions, record their votes, etc. and leave. Planning and running asynchronous meetings takes careful preparation and guidance together with well-designed text-capturing tools and a linked database with report producing capabilities.

More Time – Travel Offsets

Accomplishing tasks in a virtual-world meeting takes longer than a real-world meeting. This is because participants have to simultaneously manage many tasks that are not required in the real world. To keep up with proceedings in a virtual meeting, participants have to: make their own contributions, read the contributions of others, listen to public and private conversations, read public and private text messages, and manage their own voice and camera view. However, it's worth noting that time differentials are appreciably offset when you consider the amount of travel time that is eliminated from everyone's schedule.

Limited Topics – One Subject

It's more difficult to accomplish everything you might like in one virtual meeting as compared to a real-world meeting. In the real-world it's somewhat easier manage several issues at once or change the topic. In a virtual meeting it's better to stick with just one subject for a meeting so remote participants know exactly what is expected of them without issuing additional instructions during the meeting.

Managing Process – Design Scenarios

Process flow in a virtual-world meeting can be tricky to manage when compared to a real-world meeting. Drilling down to a decision may involve for example: surfacing issues, identifying causes, proposing solutions, prioritizing solutions, and assigning actions. To deal with drill-down scenarios like this in a virtual meeting requires careful planning and execution so activities occur in manageable chunks. This is where well-designed meeting support tools and good facilitation play a big part in the success of virtual meetings.

Lost Importance – Point of Reference

One unfortunate drawback of virtual business meetings is that these meetings frequently lose their degree of importance and their impact becomes insignificant. Virtual meetings frequently take on a persona of a temporary or ad hoc event and eventually get lost in a hazy repository of routine business activities. So it's important to promote the virtual meeting as an "event remembered", along with the "venue of choice", a unique place in one's mind. When remote participants travel to the Alpine Executive Center, even though it's just a few mouse-clicks away, we want them to feel like they are going someplace special. If we succeed, the virtual meeting can become a point of reference for decisions and for future meetings in the virtual or real world.



3. Does business networking and socializing really work in Second Life?

In the real world networking and socializing are frequently an important aspect of meetings where participants get to know each other, share information and build trust. Real-world meeting planners regularly allocate specific times for networking, and participants consider these times useful as well as enjoyable.

Special Occasion

Applying similar networking activities to the virtual world can work if the participants consider the virtual meeting to be somewhat of a significant occasion. Otherwise virtual networking and socializing is reduced to activities comparable to instant messaging or online group chat, something they can do anytime they want using numerous Internet tools.

Special Place

Creating a “context” for networking in the virtual world is key to making these activities interesting and useful. Taken together with the perception of a “memorable event” and a “unique place”, networking takes on more relevance and importance. The Alpine Executive Center is a venue that appeals to guests for business meetings and recreation because considerable attention is given to details that contribute to a unique ski-resort atmosphere. If virtual-meeting participants sense they are going someplace special, their meeting can also be seen as something special.

Frame of Reference

Teambuilding activities such as skiing and ice skating competitions provide an opportunity for business teams to have experiences that, however abstract it may seem at the time, create a common frame of reference that makes networking and socializing worthwhile. I know of a corporate real-world meeting where the CEO rode into a hotel on a horse. Everyone there remembers that meeting. In the virtual world we can do that too, and without the smell and cleanup.

Co-Presence

The co-presence felt by participants in the virtual world contributes to the effectiveness of networking and socializing. There is mounting evidence of the effectiveness and benefits of virtual-world meetings. [Current research studies](#) reporting on business and educational aspects of Second Life that people generally enjoy the virtual world more than other meeting platforms, including web-based shared workspaces and video conferencing for business meetings.

The Alpine Executive Center is designed to make the remote virtual meeting an event remembered by creating an experience and sense of co-presence for geographically dispersed participants. Meeting participants benefit from the combination of: thorough preparation, expert facilitation, appropriate tools and creative meeting processes. The Alpine Executive Center embodies all that is necessary to actively engage remote participants in a truly collaborative experience by providing a place where real work is done efficiently and affordably.

Conclusion:

Meetings in the virtual world have the potential to be almost as effective as real world meetings. Drawbacks to virtual meetings can be overcome with the right process, facilitation, tools and environment. Networking and socializing in the virtual world can work just the same as it can in the real world.

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