

Best Practices for Virtual Meetings

Virtual meetings present distinct accessibility challenges and opportunities, necessitating careful platform selection, thorough content preparation, and strategic facilitation.

A. Accessible Platform Selection and Configuration

When choosing a virtual meeting platform, prioritizing those that offer robust accessibility features is paramount. Key requirements include an interface that is fully usable with keyboard navigation (for individuals who cannot use a mouse), compatibility with screen readers, the ability to auto-generate captions or integrate live human-generated captions (Communication Access Realtime Translation - CART), and the functionality for users or the host to "spotlight" or "pin" sign language interpreters' video feeds.

Common platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams offer various features that can be optimized for accessibility:

- **Zoom:** It is recommended to enable the "Closed Captions" feature for all meetings, utilizing both automatic (AI-generated) and professional (CART) options based on accommodation requests. The host should be familiar with how to assign a participant to type captions or enable auto-transcription. "Spotlighting" ASL interpreters' videos is crucial, especially when recording, to ensure their visibility in the recording. When using breakout rooms with interpreters, manually create them to ensure the interpreter is placed in the same room as the person they are assisting. Enabling "Always Show Meeting Controls" for all participants improves user experience by keeping controls visible. "Mute Participants Upon Entry" is a recommended setting to reduce initial disruptions. Communicating Zoom keyboard shortcuts to participants in advance is beneficial. Turning off HD video can improve the user experience for those with bandwidth limitations. When using polling, read questions and answers aloud, and provide alternative participation methods for phone-only attendees.
- **Google Meet:** This platform offers built-in live captions, meeting transcripts, screen reader and magnifier compatibility, and extensive keyboard shortcuts. The "Pair tiles" feature is particularly useful for pairing a participant with their sign language interpreter. Users can also prevent their own video feed from being cropped and uncrop other users' tiles to ensure full visibility of gestures. A "push-to-talk" feature (spacebar) can assist with microphone control.
- **Microsoft Teams:** Microsoft Teams provides comprehensive accessibility tools, including closed captioning (live and CART), keyboard shortcuts, screen reader support, and customizable display options (e.g., dark/light theme, magnifier, zoom). Meeting organizers and presenters can "spotlight" up to seven individuals (e.g., ASL interpreters) for all attendees, and individual attendees can pin specific videos for their own view. Noise suppression features help reduce background distractions. Accessible chat and channel messages are supported through descriptive subject lines, structured headings, alt text for images, and careful use of emojis. Using large, high-contrast fonts (e.g., "Large" font size in Teams messages) and avoiding all capital letters or excessive italics/underlines is advised.

Table 3: Digital Platform Accessibility Features Comparison This table provides a direct, side-by-side comparison of key accessibility features across common virtual meeting platforms, aiding in informed selection and optimal configuration.

Feature	Zoom	Google Meet	Microsoft Teams
Live Captions/Transcription	Auto-transcription available; supports CART; host can enable/assign.	Live captions, transcripts; can embed captions in recordings.	Live captions (auto/CART), transcripts; can save.
ASL Interpreter Support/Spotlighting	Host can "Spotlight" interpreter video for all, especially for recordings; manual breakout room assignment.	"Pair tiles" feature for participant and interpreter; users can prevent own/others' cropping.	Organizer/Presenter can "Spotlight" up to 7 videos; individual pinning.
Screen Reader Compatibility	Compatible; send keyboard shortcuts in advance.	Built-in screen reader support; keyboard shortcuts.	Screen reader support; keyboard shortcuts.
Keyboard Navigation	Yes; communicate shortcuts.	Yes; keyboard shortcuts for camera/mic/features.	Yes; keyboard shortcuts.
Mute/Noise Suppression	"Mute Participants Upon Entry"; users mute when not speaking.	"Push to talk" (spacebar); turn off noise cancellation if using electrolarynx.	"Mute Participants Upon Entry"; noise suppression levels.
Accessible Chat/Messaging	Repeat chat questions/comments aloud for captions/access.	Chat messages not voiced over by screen reader by default; open panel to hear.	Add descriptive subjects, accessible headings, alt text for images, inclusive emojis.
Polling Accessibility	Accessible to assistive tech users; read questions/answers aloud; alternative for phone users.	Not explicitly detailed, but interactive features generally accessible.	Polling tools with keyboard navigation.
Video Optimization	Turn off HD video for bandwidth; frame shot; external webcam; turn off video when not	Remove video distractions (hide specific feeds); prevent own/others' cropping.	Minimize requiring video; simple virtual backgrounds; "Spotlight" speakers.

Feature	Zoom	Google Meet	Microsoft Teams
	speaking in large meetings.		

While automated captioning features are available on many platforms, it is important to recognize that these are often not a substitute for true professional captions or disability accommodations for communication access. Professional CART services are specifically highlighted as providing "greater accuracy". This distinction is crucial: automated captions can enhance general access for many, such as those in noisy environments or non-native speakers, but they may not meet the stringent ADA standards for "effective communication," particularly for individuals who rely heavily on captions due to profound hearing impairments or specific cognitive needs. Towns must understand this difference and be prepared to budget for and provide professional CART or ASL interpretation services when requested, as these are frequently necessary to ensure full legal compliance and truly effective communication for specific accommodation needs. This implies a tiered approach to digital accessibility, where baseline automated features are always enabled, but dedicated resources are allocated for professional services when requested, to bridge the gap between general convenience and legal mandate.

B. Digital Content and Communication Accessibility

All presentation documents, such as PowerPoint, Word, and PDF files, must be designed for accessibility and distributed to attendees well in advance of the meeting. This practice allows participants to pre-read, navigate, and reference materials at their own pace using assistive technologies. Best practices include utilizing accessible templates with proper heading structures, providing "alt text" for all images and graphics, ensuring sufficient color contrast, and avoiding small print. It is advisable to use built-in accessibility checkers (e.g., in Microsoft Office) before sharing any content.

For any audio components within the meeting, such as videos or spoken presentations, a text version must be provided through open or closed captioning. For visual information, including images, graphics, charts, animations, and videos, comprehensive audio descriptions should be provided for blind and low-vision users. Real-time captioning services (CART) and American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation are vital auxiliary aids for effective communication. When ASL interpreters are used, they must be clearly visible on screen, well-lit, and positioned against a dark, solid background. Brief pauses should be provided when interpreters switch responsibilities.

All interactive elements within the virtual meeting platform, such as chat functions, polling, Q&A features, and "raise hand" options, must be designed to be fully navigable via keyboard or alternative input devices. They must also be readable by screen readers and usable by individuals with vision disabilities (e.g., through high color contrast and resizable text). It is crucial to avoid using interactive elements that are not accessible to all participants. When conducting polls, verbally announce the questions and options, and read out the results to ensure accessibility for all, especially phone participants.

While virtual meetings offer increased reach and convenience, simply providing a digital meeting does not guarantee equitable access for everyone. For example, phone participants may be unable

to use polling features, screen reader users may struggle with URLs posted only in chat, and participants with limited bandwidth may experience poor video quality. This highlights that a "digital divide" exists not just between those with and without internet access, but also *within* the digitally connected population, based on device capabilities, internet quality, and reliance on assistive technologies. This necessitates providing redundant communication channels, such as emailing all resource links posted in chat, verbally describing all visual information, and offering telephone dial-in options. Low-bandwidth optimizations, like turning off HD video, should also be considered. The broader implication is that accessibility planning for virtual meetings must consider the *full spectrum* of digital access and potential barriers, not just the ideal scenario, to ensure no one is inadvertently excluded from participation.

C. Facilitating Remote Participation

Optimizing audio and video for all participants is crucial. All participants, especially remote ones, should be encouraged to use high-quality microphones and headsets to ensure clear audio for everyone and to prevent echoing. Participants should be advised to use only one audio connection method (e.g., computer or phone, not both). A policy for participants to mute their microphones when not speaking should be implemented to minimize background noise and distractions. For video, participants should be encouraged to frame their shots appropriately, and consider using external webcams for better quality. In larger meetings, participants may consider turning off their video when not speaking to conserve bandwidth. Simple virtual backgrounds are encouraged to minimize visual distractions.

Managing the virtual communication flow requires clear guidelines. Establish and communicate clear meeting rules and ground rules for participation at the outset of each meeting. Ask participants to use the "raise hand" feature (virtual or physical) and to state their names before speaking to help everyone follow along. Proactively and frequently invite input from quieter participants, and be prepared to wait longer for responses than in an all-in-person setting. Repeat questions or comments from the chat for the benefit of all attendees and to improve the quality of captions/transcripts. Periodically summarize key points and decisions to help all participants refocus and ensure comprehension.

Pre-meeting technical checks and support are vital. Conduct thorough dry runs or practice meetings, especially for complex setups or new platforms. This allows hosts, moderators, and presenters to familiarize themselves with platform controls, interactive features, and how to manage accommodations (e.g., captioning, ASL interpretation). Provide clear technical support contacts for attendees who may encounter issues before or during the meeting.

Digital tools and virtual meetings are often lauded for their convenience and ability to increase reach. However, this convenience can inadvertently introduce new and complex accessibility challenges that were less prominent in physical meetings. These include ensuring all video and audio content is accessible, managing diverse internet speeds and device capabilities, and ensuring interactive elements function with all assistive technologies. The perceived ease of setting up a virtual meeting can lead to overlooking critical accessibility considerations, potentially resulting in unintended exclusion and non-compliance. This highlights that convenience for organizers should never come at the expense of accessibility for participants. Towns must adopt a mindset where virtual meeting planning is as rigorous as, if not more rigorous than, in-person

planning, requiring dedicated pre-meeting technical checks, comprehensive accessibility feature utilization, and ongoing vigilance to address the unique barriers presented by digital environments.

Best Practices for Hybrid Meetings

Hybrid meetings, which combine in-person and remote participants, demand specific strategies to ensure equitable participation and seamless technological integration.

A. Fostering Equitable Participation

A hybrid meeting inherently involves two distinct groups of participants: those gathered physically and those joining remotely. The paramount goal is to ensure that both groups can contribute equally and feel equally engaged. To achieve this, towns should designate multiple moderators with specific roles: a primary facilitator to lead the agenda, a note-taker to capture key takeaways, a dedicated "virtual participant facilitator" to monitor the online space (chat, raised hands, Q&A), and a technical contact. For larger remote audiences, the virtual facilitator role may be split further. It is important to proactively and frequently solicit input from remote participants, addressing them by name to keep them connected and engaged. Considering a remote person to co-facilitate the meeting can help ensure online participation is consistently tracked and prioritized.

To foster a sense of shared presence, it is important to acknowledge and manage background noise from remote participants, setting an upfront expectation that it is acceptable to unmute for contributions even with some household sounds. Periodically summarizing key points and reiterating decisions, then pausing specifically to invite questions and concerns from remote participants, helps maintain engagement. All participants, both in-person and remote, should be encouraged to state their name before speaking so everyone knows who is talking. Meeting facilitators should be prepared to wait longer for responses than they would in an all-in-person meeting to allow for processing and technical delays.

Before the meeting, clear guidelines for meeting etiquette and expectations should be created and shared with all participants. These guidelines should outline how and when to speak, how to signal intentions to contribute (e.g., using virtual "raise hand" features), and the proper use of mute functions. While remote participants should be encouraged to use video to increase their presence, it should be explicitly stated that video is not mandatory, respecting privacy and individual comfort. Regular reminders of these guidelines can help embed inclusive practices into the team's routine.

Hybrid meetings, by their very nature, create two distinct groups of participants: those physically present and those joining remotely. A significant challenge highlighted is that remote participants often struggle to feel as engaged and included as their in-person counterparts, potentially leading to a "two-tiered" participation experience. Without deliberate and robust strategies, the inherent dual nature of hybrid meetings can lead to unequal participation, where in-person attendees dominate discussions and remote participants become passive observers. This risk necessitates a proactive and strong facilitation approach, including dedicated roles (like a virtual participant facilitator), explicit etiquette guidelines, and intentional practices to bridge the physical-virtual divide. The broader implication is that hybrid meetings require a conscious effort to merge the experiences of both groups and ensure equitable voice, transforming a potential barrier into an opportunity for broader inclusion.

B. Integrated Technology and Room Setup

Investing in high-quality audio and video equipment is paramount for successful hybrid meetings. This includes high-quality cameras that can capture all in-person participants clearly, such as wide field-of-view cameras (e.g., the Coolpo AI Huddle Series with 110-360° FOV), and smart microphones with good sound pick-up range and noise/echo cancellation features. This ensures that remote participants can clearly see and hear everyone in the physical room, and vice versa.

To foster a more connected experience, the physical meeting room setup should actively integrate remote participants. This means configuring the room camera so that all in-person participants are visible to those joining remotely. Crucially, remote participants should be displayed prominently on a large projector screen in the physical room, making them easily seen by all in-person attendees. If using platforms like Zoom Rooms, the gallery view can be rearranged to prioritize the videos of remote participants.

Utilizing collaborative tools and platforms (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Zoom) that offer real-time sharing and interactive features is essential. Towns should consider using digital whiteboards (e.g., Zoom's classic whiteboard) in place of physical ones to ensure remote participants can equally contribute and view shared content. Collaborative documents with accessibility features and polling/feedback tools with keyboard navigation are also essential to facilitate equitable interaction for both in-person and remote attendees.

The success and inclusivity of hybrid meetings are heavily reliant on the quality and integration of technology. Common frustrations like poor video quality, audio disruptions, and unstable internet connections highlight technological shortcomings as significant barriers. Conversely, advanced audio-visual solutions like AI-assisted cameras, wide field-of-view lenses, and noise/echo cancellation are presented as key enablers. Insufficient or poorly managed technological infrastructure creates substantial barriers, leading to remote participants feeling disconnected, unheard, or unable to contribute effectively. Conversely, strategic investment in high-quality, integrated audio-visual equipment and accessible collaborative tools can actively bridge the physical-virtual divide, ensuring all participants are seen, heard, and can interact seamlessly and equitably. This highlights a direct connection between the robustness and thoughtful implementation of audio-visual technology and the overall success and inclusivity of hybrid public meetings.