Hosting Public Meetings on Virtual Platforms

Introduction

As part of its commitment to community stakeholders, the Department of the Navy (DON) facilitates public meetings during key milestones in the cleanup process at Environmental Restoration (ER) sites. A public meeting supports communication efforts when the level of interest is high or a large amount of information needs to be shared. Several formats can be used to conduct a public meeting. Recently, virtual or online meetings have become a common way to meet. A virtual meeting format does not necessarily mean that it is cheaper, easier, or even quicker than a face-to-face meeting. Many considerations go into selecting the right platform to host an online meeting and various approaches can be used for conducting successful meetings. This fact sheet provides considerations for the selection of outreach methods and best practices for implementing successful virtual meetings.

Technology Background

Meetings come in all shapes and sizes from focused team meetings to large-scale technical presentations. Similar to the importance of selecting the right venue for an in-person meeting, the selection of a virtual meeting platform can be just as challenging. As outlined in Table 1, virtual meetings can be conducted using several outreach approaches. Decisions must be made on how best to connect speakers and participants and to what extent the content will be pre-recorded or delivered as a live presentation. Another key consideration is how to engage with participants during the meeting to receive feedback. The type of virtual meeting platform to be selected will depend on the purpose of the meeting and the objectives of the outreach.

Outreach Method	Method Selection Considerations
Online Outreach	Upload and share information through a web site. The content may include poster information or pre-recorded videos and presentation slides.
Virtual Small Group Collaboration	Select a platform that promotes content sharing and brainstorming. Features may include live chat, breakout sessions, screensharing, and whiteboards.
Virtual Panel or Forum Discussions	Select a platform that will allow content sharing only for designated individuals on the panel with more enhanced features for controlling audio and moderated chat. The ability to poll the audience is a plus.
Virtual Technical Presentations or Large-Scale Meetings	Select a platform with a robust interface for pre-event registration and post-event surveys. May include a live or pre-recorded presentation. A moderated question and answer (Q&A) session may be held at the end to answer questions in real time. Content sharing, viewing pre-recorded videos, Q&A or polling the audience, and well controlled audio are essential features.
Hybrid Meetings (In-Person and Virtual Platform)	Consider a combined format that includes a combination of virtual and in-person participation through scheduled appointment times. Includes a combination of in-person and virtual participants with a moderated Q&A between online and in-person participants.

Table 1. Outreach Methods on Virtual Platforms

How Does It Work? | **How Can It Help?** | **Case Studies** | **Best Practices**

How Does It Work?

Virtual platforms allow individuals to connect and collaborate in real time via video and audio using an internet connection. At a minimum, you will need an internet connection and a device with audio and video capabilities, such as a smartphone, tablet, laptop, or desktop computer. Participants have the option to share presentation materials in real time, share live or pre-recorded video, and provide feedback via chat, Q&A, or other feedback tools such as hand-raising icons.

A successful virtual meeting requires multiple participants, each serving in a particular role. Several roles that support virtual meeting hosting are shown in Table 2. It is recommended to alternate roles within the team so that everyone can develop the needed skills and people on the team can provide backup support as needed. Using moderators is extremely helpful for the flow of the meeting. Chat and Q&A can appear rapidly, and it takes more than one person to effectively recognize, prioritize, and respond to the comments. The Q&A moderator role also helps to keep the meeting informational rather than a platform for complaints.

Role	Responsibilities or Actions
Host Role	• Schedule the meeting and provide technical support. • Start the meeting, start/stop recording of the meeting, power to mute/unmute participants, and assign participant roles during the meeting. • Assist with chat and Q&A moderation.
Moderator Role	• Timekeeper and meeting transition. Responsible for keeping the agenda on track. • Moderator for Q&A/chat. Prioritize and read comments/questions in a neutral tone.
Presenter or Panelist	• Responsible for sharing and annotating presentations, whiteboards, documents, and applications. • Responsible for answering the questions posed by the moderator or attendees.
Technical Support	• E-mail or phone support for those having issues joining the meeting.
Attendees	• Any person attending the meeting, listening to content, and providing feedback.

Table 2. Virtual Meeting Team Roles and Responsibilities

This fact sheet does not address specific software applications that are available for use in compliance with the Navy Marine Corps Intranet (NMCI) requirements and/or through Federal government contractors. However, it is an important step to ensure compliance and functionality of the selected virtual platform from within the NMCI environment for both speakers and participants. While contractor support may be used to host the meeting, it is still critical to ensure that the other participants will be able to successfully use the platform. It is recommended that a test run be conducted to ensure that the platform can be used in the NMCI environment as both a presenter and an attendee.

How Can It Help?

The use of a virtual platform may be beneficial for several reasons. Virtual platforms can provide an efficient way to share information with the public when an in-person meeting is not viable or to allow an option for some to attend in person while others attend virtually. Attendees can join via mobile phone, tablet, or computer from anywhere that has an internet connection. The need for travel is reduced, allowing for more participation. Meeting times can be adjusted to accommodate people in multiple time zones.

Other advantages to virtual meetings include readily capturing attendance, recording the presentation, and distributing the content in a timely manner. Finally, virtual platforms streamline the moderation of Q&A to focus on the issues at hand, while mitigating the occurrence of general statements that can be a distraction during in-person meetings.

Virtual meetings do have limitations; expect frustration as participants learn a new tool. Poor internet connectivity can cause a delay in viewing pre-recorded videos, the speaker's "live" video, or the presentation slides. As a potential solution, offer pre-meeting connectivity test sessions, as well as a job aid with instructions for joining the meeting. There might also be a disconnect in Q&A due to lack of verbal or context clues that are provided in an in-person meeting. Finally, virtual meetings can lose the opportunity for relationship building and are subject to distractions from multi-tasking by the audience. Keeping participants actively engaged is critical in any meeting, but especially in a virtual setting.

NAVFAC Webinars Help to Inform Practitioners of the Latest Remediation Innovations and Strategies
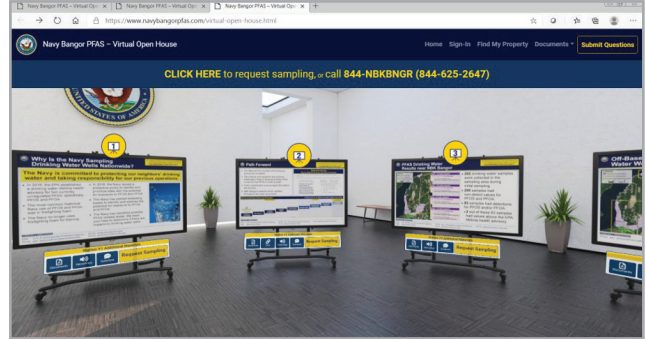
Case Studies

Case Study 1:
Virtual Open House at Bangor, WA

Project Objective: This meeting was held through a web site to provide for an open house experience. The site provided pre-recorded videos, poster stations, fact sheets, and an opportunity to submit questions.

Site Background: The residents near Bangor had reliable internet available and had routinely used the internet.

Results: With reliable internet access, the residents had a positive experience. The pre-recorded videos played smoothly and provided more information than reading a report. The lack of direct face-to face interaction with the public was one limitation. However, this format can be adjusted to provide for a longer period for collecting and responding to public questions.

Case Study 2:
Hybrid Open House at Cutler, ME

Project Objective: This team chose to create a hybrid meeting approach that relied upon a mixture of smaller group in-person meetings, virtual town-hall meetings, and a virtual PFAS web site with additional information and points of contact.

Site Background: The primary reason for utilizing the hybrid meeting format was ongoing COVID-19 pandemic precautions. Navy travel restrictions were in place and local meeting mandates limited the team to providing one local consultant and one local Navy representative who could preside over the in-person meetings. The consultant provided video and audio resources from their office.

Results: The hybrid meeting format allowed the meeting to move forward while adhering to local requirements.

Best Practices for Virtual Meetings

To ensure that messaging is successfully conveyed, it is important that DON representatives are well versed in the following best practices for conducting public meetings on virtual platforms (see Table 3).

Best Practice	Description
Team Approach	• Assign roles to the virtual meeting team (see Table 1). Have contingency plans for backup roles as needed. • Create a run of show (e.g., a summary of the sequence of events that will occur during the meeting) and public agenda to keep the meeting running smoothly.
Know Your Audience	• Be cognizant of location and time zone. • Can consist of general public, regulatory stakeholders, and government personnel. • Assess general comfort level with technology and reliability of internet access.
Practice! Practice! Practice!	• Host pre-meeting connectivity test sessions with all presenters. • Conduct a dry run at least one week in advance.
Be Prepared	• Check for operational hardware including headsets, web cams, and mobile devices. • Headsets and web cams may need permission or time to load. • Understand how the platforms work with different operating systems including mobile phones. • Download virtual platform apps prior to the meeting. • Test functionality of all virtual platforms on the specific device you plan to use. • Understand that apps and web browsers act differently. For example, presenters may need to be in the app instead of the web browser version for full functionality to share presentations or video. • Keep a hard copy of the presentation and supporting documents. Send out the final presentation to speakers and participants in advance as a backup if only audio is available.
Join Early and Stay Timely	• Create a job aid for the presenters on how to join the meeting and run their presentation. • Presenters join 20 minutes early to conduct microphone and video check. • Create a job aid for the attendees on how to join the meeting. • Suggest attendees join 10 minutes early. • Timing is crucial as you are on the clock once the meeting has started.

Table 3. Best Practices for Conducting Virtual Meetings, Continued on Next Page

Best Practices for Virtual Meetings

Virtual Meeting Etiquette	• Prepare an opening slide to view as attendees join the meeting. • Provide a brief live instruction session with an overview on using the virtual platform features. • Music is a great ice breaker as attendees are joining the meeting. • Have contingency plans in place in case of technical difficulties with the virtual platform.
Presenters	• Video provides a level of engagement for the audience; be passionate about your topic. • Turn off camera and mute when not speaking. • Requesting feedback makes for a great interactive experience.
Schedule Breaks	Suggested break times include: • For a 1 hour meeting, no breaks are suggested; • For a 2-3 hour meeting duration, hold one 5 to 10 minute break; • For a 3-4 hour meeting duration, hold two 10 minute breaks; and • For 5+ hour meeting duration, hold two 10 minute breaks plus a 30 to 45 minute break for lunch.
Attention Grabber	• Include an attention grabber every 20 to 30 minutes. • Use a poll, questions to be answered in chat, and other interactive elements.
Moderated Q&A	• Moderated chat should be the preferred approach to ensure the Q&A stays on track. • Allow questions to be submitted prior to the meeting. • Establish ground rules for live questions. • Establish a time limit for spoken statements or live questions.

Table 3. Best Practices for Conducting Virtual Meetings

Disclaimer

References

NAVFAC ERB Community Involvement Web Page
https://www.navfac.navy.mil/navfac_worldwide/specialty_centers/exwc/products_and_services/ev/go_erb/overview/cercla-process/community-involvement.html

Navy Marine Corps Public Health Center Risk Communication Web Page
https://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcphc/environmental-programs/Pages/risk-communication.aspx

Navy Marine Corps Public Health Center Guide to Effective Public Meetings
https://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcphc/Documents/environmental-programs/risk-communication/Appendix-G-Guide-to-Public-Meetings.pdf