

Tips for Running Virtual Groups

How might we design and deliver virtual group activities that are engaging, inclusive and best reflect face-to-face interactions?

Getting set up

Creating a “safe space”

- Encourage participants to choose a quiet space, if possible, where they feel comfortable.
- For example, consider: Will they get interrupted? Who else is home? Who can hear?
- Encourage participants to use headphones so that others in the same room can only hear their side of the conversation.
- Consider camera angles and backgrounds – what can other people see in your background? Lighting can also be important to make sure that participants can clearly see each other’s faces and their expressions.

Test your tech

- Consider what the experience will be like for participants – put yourself in the participants’ shoes and consider how they might use and engage with the technology.
- Make sure you test your technology beforehand so you know how it works and feel confident using it. Running a practice session with a team member can help to iron out any problems. Do you need to share documents or swap presenters? Practice doing this beforehand.
- Make sure your participants are set up and know how to use the chosen technology. Consider giving them a test run to make sure they know how to troubleshoot any issues.

Group sizes and dynamics

- Consider the best size for your group based on the objectives of your session.
- Larger groups can be more challenging to facilitate in a way that allows interaction. They may require more structure.
- Larger groups can be great if you are delivering information and don’t expect as much interaction.
- If you want a group to include more informal interaction or discussion, consider keeping the numbers smaller.
- Take some time to think about the dynamics of your group. Do you have some participants who are usually not comfortable speaking up? Consider how to make

everyone feel comfortable and welcome. For example you could call people individually first to allow them the time to ask questions about how the session will work.

Setting expectations

- Consider setting some 'ground rules' – these can sometimes be called 'etiquette'. For example:
 - Everyone turns their cameras on when they are speaking (if they feel comfortable to do so)
 - Mute your microphone when you are not speaking
 - Say your name before speaking (especially if you are on audio-only conferences)
 - Close your email and other distractions.
- Set an agenda or consider providing structure or presenting slides for people to follow along so they don't get lost.
- Consider what material you want to send out beforehand and if you would like participants to do any pre-work or pre-reading (this can be helpful to orientate people to a session and to get the most out of the time together).

Designing your session...

- Consider how to deliver your session. Keep one-way presentations of information short and simple. Consider how you will engage and interact with participants by posing questions or asking participants to complete an activity and feed back to the group.
- Consider sending out resources, activities or pre-recorded videos before-hand, and using the group time for deeper, interactive discussion on the material.
- You may need to use a more structured approach for virtual groups.
- Think about when you want to present information or use slides. Visuals or short summaries of information on slides can help to engage participants.

Facilitating the group...

Getting started

- Make sure you can see the main presenter's face clearly.
- Make sure everyone knows who is on the call/line. (This may not always be possible in large groups.)

Facilitating interaction

- Start your session by **acknowledging the Traditional Owners** of the land on which you are running the session, and invite others to acknowledge their lands at this point.

- Consider using an ice breaker or introduction to get everyone talking and feeling more comfortable.
- If asking questions, consider when you might give everyone a few minutes to note down their own thoughts first. Then go around the group in a structured way to ask everyone to share their answers.
- Regularly go around the whole group to ensure everyone has had a chance to contribute.
- Set time limits for activities or discussion.
- Consider having physical signs for specific things, such as putting your hand up when you have something to say, or having a card that you hold up when you particularly agree with a point.

Using the chat function

- Use the chat function at the side of the screen for people to ask questions or make comments relevant to the discussion. This can be really useful for people if they don't feel comfortable speaking up and/or if you have a big group.
- If you can, have a moderator or co-facilitator whose role is to monitor and reply to the chat function or ensure the comments are added to discussion. Perhaps nominate one of the group members to monitor the chat function.
- Ask people to answer an easy question in the chat early on (such as 'Where you are calling in from?') to get everyone used to contributing.

Finishing up and following up...

- Wrap up discussions so they don't go off topic and ensure you keep your meeting to the designated time. 1-1.5 hours is usually maximum time for people to be able to focus on a virtual session.
- Consider staying on the line after the main call to chat informally with those who want to ask further questions.
- Follow up with participants individually afterwards. Ask what worked well for them and what didn't work well. Document the learnings so you can adapt your session next time.
- Follow up those who were reluctant to participate to check that they were engaged and how you might improve for next time.
- Send a copy of any materials used if people would like them.

The Mission Australia IT team has developed some guidance for setting up virtual meetings using Microsoft Teams and Skype for Business. This can be accessed on the Intranet on the IT Services Page in the IT Tech Tips section [here](#).

Contact servicedesign@missionaustralia.com.au for further information.
