

Hybrid Online/In-Person Meetings

Technology has been a nimble and amazing tool for AA, providing a way for meetings to continue virtually through times when we couldn't physically be together. Many groups have found that the Zoom platform (and other platforms) allow them to serve AA members who could not easily attend in-person meetings before, including parents caring for children at home, and those with physical and other challenges. There are also many members who will not feel safe to return to in-person meetings for the foreseeable future. As we move into the future, some groups will want to keep the best of both worlds by holding "hybrid" online/in-person meetings, in which some of the attendees meet in person and others join the meeting virtually (that is, with videoconferencing tools such as Zoom software).

We already know that, depending on the meeting size and budget, hybrid meetings can function with a setup consisting of as little as a single smartphone, to as much as a camera, microphone, speaker, laptop, screen projector, and a mobile wifi source. And a variety of options somewhere between the two! (Note: during the COVID-19 pandemic, holding a hybrid meeting with a single smartphone is not considered to be safe.)

The widespread custom of speakers "coming to the podium" to speak (or coming to the front of the room) in Santa Clara county is a definite advantage for holding hybrid meetings, because it can simplify how the camera and microphone at the in-person meeting are set up and used. The Virtual Solutions committee of Santa Clara county Intergroup has done some research and offers some ideas in this document to help autonomous AA groups to make autonomous decisions on how they might hold hybrid meetings. It includes points to consider on preserving anonymity, adapting meeting scripts, and modifying service positions, as well as basic information on necessary equipment for hybrid meetings.

NOTE: Intergroup Central Office does not have the resources to provide technical support for setting up and/or troubleshooting the hardware for hybrid meetings. Groups are encouraged to do research on the internet and share useful information with each other. Please contact the Virtual Solutions committee at aasjvsc@gmail.com if you'd like to share your group's experience with setting up equipment for hybrid meetings: we may be able to use it to help other groups!

Suggested Meeting Script and Other Changes

Meeting guidelines and scripts are likely to need adjustments to inform participants on how to interact safely and successfully.

- Anonymity: The person speaking “at the podium”, whether at the in-person meeting or virtually at the remote meeting--is participating simultaneously in both meetings and is the point of contact between the two different “rooms”. It is important to consider whether to allow all participants to preserve their anonymity if they prefer to remain unseen by those in other parts of the “room”. Participants in virtual-only (online) meetings can currently choose whether to show their face and/or real name. Potential participants in at-person meetings can travel far from home, and discreetly scan the room before entering an in-person meeting, to decide if they feel safe there. But the advent of hybrid meetings presents new challenges. Each group may wish to take a group conscience to decide whether to make appearing on video strictly optional. Giving participants the choice could reassure, for example, an anxious newcomer--in either “half” of a hybrid meeting--that our meetings do not automatically reveal their identity to an unknown audience. Preserving anonymity could include asking, on a speaker-by-speaker basis, if they are comfortable showing their face, and then turning off or blocking the camera at *either* the remote *or* in-person meeting. Alternatively, the meeting script might be adjusted to say:

“If you wish to preserve your anonymity by not broadcasting your image to people who you can’t see, you can turn off your camera or ask the Software Host to do it for you. People in the meeting room can say ‘Camera off, please’ to the Secretary or Software Host on their way to speak at the podium.”

- As described in the [Considerations for In-Person Meetings](#), several new service positions may be needed for the in-person portion of hybrid meetings. One in particular--the *Attendance Monitor*--can ensure that no more than the maximum permitted number of people attend the in-person meeting. The Attendance Monitor can redirect the “overflow” people to the virtual (remote) segment of the meeting. A group conscience on how to handle capacity limitations (and other public health measures) is recommended. The second set of questions in the [Group Inventory for the COVID-19 Era](#) can help establish the ground rules for each AA group.
- A new service position of *Hybrid Hardware Handler* may be needed. This person can be responsible for setting up and testing the hardware (and software) for the remote portion of the meeting, and for storing it securely after the end of the meeting. Depending on the storage offered at a meeting facility, for security reasons, it may be necessary to store the hybrid meeting equipment off-site.

- The roles of *Software Host* (and *Co-Host[s]*) at the virtual portion of the meeting (for example, Zoom Hosts and Co-Hosts) may need to change a little to reflect the fact that the meeting has two distinct parts. The Software Host can help the in-person meeting Secretary “referee” who is permitted to speak at both the in-person and remote portions of the meeting, and control whose voice and image are being presented on screen to the participants at the in-person portion of the meeting, in addition to the “usual” hosting duties of monitoring the waiting room, ejecting “Zoom-bombers”, muting remote participants, etc. Together with the Secretary, the Software Host can ensure a successful meeting experience for all participants.
 - The computer-type device connected to the camera and microphone “at the podium” can be signed into the virtual (remote) portion of the meeting. (A “computer-type device” is defined here as one of the following: a desktop computer, laptop computer, tablet [such as an iPad], or smartphone.) Although the Secretary will definitely do some speaking at the podium and may also log into the remote portion of the meeting on a computer-type device, the Secretary is not required to be the meeting’s Software Host.
 - When the speaker “at the podium” is someone other than the Secretary, the Secretary can assist the speaker with turning the microphone or camera *on* before they speak, if necessary. The camera and microphone “at the podium” can be turned *on* only at the podium (by the computer-type device that they are connected to) but can be turned *off* either at the podium or by the Software Host.

NOTE: It is a safety feature of videoconferencing software that, if the camera or microphone are currently turned off, a participant is then required to explicitly choose to turn them on, so that a person’s voice or image is not broadcast without their explicit agreement. The Software Host cannot remotely turn on a camera or microphone for a participant in the meeting, they can only request that a participant do so.

- The meeting’s Software Host can have responsibility for managing which image and voice is broadcast into both the remote and in-person meeting. For example, the Software Host can “spotlight” a page of text (such as the 12 Traditions, a 7th tradition information page, etc.).

NOTE: It may be desirable to name the “identity” that is associated with the camera and microphone as “Podium Speaker/Software Host” or “Secretary/Podium Speaker”, depending on how the roles of managing the meeting are decided, and to use an image of a podium as the “profile picture” to be displayed when the camera is turned off (for example, if the speaker at the podium does not wish to be seen on video).

- Although it is possible for the Software Host to manage the meeting from a remote location, it is not easy, and it is not described here. There are distinct advantages to having the Software Host present at the in-person portion of the meeting. These advantages include the following:
 - At the in-person meeting, the Hybrid Hardware Handler role might logically be combined with that of the Software Host.
 - If an in-person meeting participant wishes to remain anonymous by broadcasting only their voice and not their image, they can signal the Software Host to turn the video signal off for them as they are walking from their seat to the podium.
 - The Software Host can inform the Secretary of requests to speak and other communications from remote participants, allowing the Secretary to focus on the in-person portion of the meeting, and not on managing interactions in the video conferencing software.
- Depending on the Secretary's level of comfort with using videoconferencing software and running a hybrid meeting, the Secretary may choose to act as the Software Host (and Hybrid Hardware Handler). But these roles can be separate, provided that the Software Host works together with the Secretary to meet the needs of both the in-person and remote participants of the meeting.

Equipment

A hybrid meeting will generally need the following equipment at the in-person portion of the meeting. These items and the pros and cons of a few alternatives are described below in more detail:

1. Internet access.
2. A computer-type device that allows the meeting's Software Host to run the video conferencing software. A "computer-type device" is defined here as one of the following: a desktop computer, laptop computer, tablet (such as an iPad), or a smartphone. A desktop or laptop computer is preferred.
3. A camera and microphone, to allow remote meeting participants to see and hear speakers at the in-person location.
4. A screen or projected image, to allow in-person meeting participants to see remote meeting participants.
5. A loudspeaker, to allow in-person meeting participants to hear remote meeting participants.

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NOTE 2: It is strongly recommended to have at least one trial run to ensure that the internet service and the meeting "hardware" works well before relying on it for holding a meeting. Prior preparation can help iron out any wrinkles in the process.

Internet Access

The meeting space must have a reliable internet connection with adequate capacity (i.e., bandwidth).

NOTE: If a meeting is conducted with wireless (wifi) internet, it is not recommended to share the wifi password with in-person meeting participants. If there are multiple internet users competing for bandwidth, the wifi signal may be patchy and unreliable. As much of the available bandwidth as possible should be reserved for running the remote portion of the meeting.

Access Provided by the Meeting Facility

Some meeting facilities may offer internet access as part of the space rental or for an additional fee. This could be wireless ("wifi" with router) or wired (via an ethernet cable directly plugged into a computer or tablet). If the wifi signal is poor due to distance from the router, a wifi range extender may help to boost the signal.

NOTE: Most hardwired internet services and modem/router equipment can allow a subscriber (such as a meeting facility) to set up a separate "guest" account, which they can manage separately from their main account. This feature can enable the host facility to control which guests have access to their internet service, and to limit the hours of guest access, so that it does not interfere with their other activities. Your AA group may wish to assist the host facility to set up a guest account if it does not already have one.

Access Via a Mobile Hotspot

If your facility does not provide internet access, or the wifi signal is poor due to competing internet users, a meeting is likely to need to use its own wifi "hotspot". Many smartphones (iPhone, Android) can use cellular data to create a hotspot. You can then connect a computer or tablet to this mobile hotspot to access the internet.

NOTE: Check with the mobile service provider on how to use a hotspot effectively, including the best type of data plan (an unlimited data plan may be advisable). Make sure that the coverage is strong at the meeting location, because every service provider has “dead zones”.

Computer-Type Device

A computer-type device is needed to run the videoconferencing software (for example, Zoom software) that hosts the virtual (remote) part of a hybrid meeting. A “computer-type device” consists of one of the following: a desktop computer, laptop computer, tablet (such as an iPad), or a smartphone.

A Software Host and optional Co-Host[s]) are also needed to manage operation of the videoconferencing software, as well as the camera, microphone, monitor/projected image, and loudspeaker used to bring the remote meeting “into” the in-person meeting. The Software Host will need to ensure that the currently speaking meeting participant--whether at the in-person meeting or remote--can be seen and heard by all, and “direct traffic” by monitoring the remote meeting participants for raised hands, admitting people from the virtual waiting room, watching out for “zoom-bombers”, etc.

- An ideal setup uses a laptop computer (for portability), but if there is secure storage at a meeting facility, a desktop computer also works.

An ideal setup simplifies meeting logistics by using a camera, microphone, monitor/image projector, and loudspeaker(s) that are separate from (that is, not built into) the computer-type device used to host the meeting.

- A laptop computer used to run the meeting software *might* be adequate as the only hardware needed to run a *small* meeting. However, there are drawbacks to this approach:
 - If the Software Host sits facing the in-person participants at the meeting, the Host will need to do the following:
 - Rotate their laptop around by 180 degrees to face the in-person participants so they can see and hear a remote participant who is speaking.
 - Before rotating the laptop, turn off or obscure the camera on the laptop so that it doesn't broadcast an image of the in-person meeting participants when the laptop camera is facing them, unless the group's steering/business committee has agreed to modify the meeting script to warn participants that they might be shown on camera this way.

- Rotate the laptop 180 degrees back to manage all other meeting functions.
 - Because it is desirable to monitor some meeting functions at all times, such as watching for “zoom-bombers”, admitting participants from the virtual waiting room, and monitoring the chat window for requests to speak, the Host may need to have a Co-Host to provide coverage for those functions while the Host is not facing their laptop.
- The built-in loudspeaker on a laptop will most likely not be loud enough for larger meetings.
- The screen size on a laptop may be too small to see remote participants.
- A meeting can also be hosted from a tablet or smartphone. However, the same drawbacks apply to tablets and smartphones as to laptops. In addition, the videoconferencing software on tablets and smartphones is an “app” (for example, this is true of Zoom software). This “app” does not have all of the capabilities of the full-featured “desktop client” that is installed on a laptop or desktop computer. Hosting a meeting from a tablet or smartphone might make it impossible to change important meeting settings while the meeting is running. (Check the videoconferencing software documentation to find the differences between the desktop client, mobile app, and web client.)

NOTE: A smartphone or tablet can still be very useful for a hybrid meeting: it can be used as the camera and microphone if the Software Host (or a Co-Host) uses a laptop or desktop computer to manage the videoconferencing software. See “Camera & Microphone”, below.

Camera & Microphone

For a hybrid meeting, it is important for both remote and in-person meeting participants to *hear* the current speaker at an in-person meeting, and vice versa. And it is desirable--if the speaker is comfortable being seen--to also see them. The widespread custom of speakers “coming to the podium” (or the front of the room) to speak in Santa Clara county can help simplify achieving both of these goals at the in-person portion of the meeting. A camera and microphone can be mounted in a fixed location, at or near the podium, and oriented to show the area where the speaker stands and to pick up their voice. The camera and microphone can be provided in different ways:

- A separate camera (webcam) and microphone connected to the Software Host's computer (desktop or laptop) or a tablet. The connection can be wired or wireless. Some webcams also have built-in microphones. The Software Host can be logged into the meeting as "Podium Speaker/Software Host". (The Secretary can optionally log into the virtual meeting on a separate computer-type device.)
- The built-in camera and microphone in a smartphone. If this option is used, the smartphone should log into the meeting as a separate user from the Software Host. This smartphone can be logged into the meeting as "Podium Speaker" or "Secretary/Podium Speaker", to signal its function to the remote meeting participants.

NOTE: A smartphone used in this way can be an "old" phone that is no longer used as a telephone, but still functions, provided that its operating system is able to run the videoconferencing software. For example, as of April 2021, an iPhone 6 can run the Zoom software.

- The built-in camera and microphone in a laptop or tablet can also be used in the same way that is described for a smartphone.

Screen or Projected Image to Show Remote Participants

It is desirable for in-person meeting participants to see the face of a remote participant who is speaking at the virtual "podium", and vice versa. A screen or projected image showing the remote participant(s) can be placed alongside the podium at the in-person meeting. The image can be displayed via one of the following devices:

1. A small, portable projector which can project an image onto a wall or similar surface. These projectors can be connected to a computer-type device either via a physical cable or with a wireless adapter. This type of device is most likely the most compact hardware, and also potentially offers the largest "screen" option. However, care may be needed to ensure that the ambient light in the room does not "wash out" the projected image. A trial run at the same time of day as the meeting is highly desirable.
2. A computer monitor, such as the type used with a desktop computer. A monitor can be connected to the computer-type device running the meeting software in two ways:

- (Wired) An “adapter cable” can physically connect the computer-type device to the monitor. For example:
 - A “lightning digital A/V adapter”. This adapter connects an Apple product (for example, MacBook, iPad, iPhone) to the HDMI input on a monitor.
 - A USB-C-to-HDMI adapter that connects the USB-C port on an Android device (such as an Android phone or Chromebook) to the HDMI input on a monitor.
 - (Wireless) A compatible wireless video adapter kit can allow the monitor to wirelessly “screen-mirror” the video signal from the computer-type device.
3. A “smart” television that can receive a “screen-mirror” video signal from a computer-type device such as a tablet or smartphone. Some laptops can also receive a “screen-mirror” signal from another computer-type device.
 4. A laptop, tablet, or smartphone screen. Although these devices are portable, their screens may not be suitable for larger meetings if the screen size is not adequate for the in-person meeting participants to comfortably see the remote participant(s).

Loudspeaker(s)

If the computer, tablet, or smartphone that runs the meeting software does not have a loudspeaker sufficient for in-person meeting participants to hear the remote participants, external speaker(s) will be needed. Both wired and wireless speakers are available.