ISKO SINGAPORE – VIRTUAL MEETINGS AND REMOTE WORKING WITH NANCY DIXON, JAMES DELLOW, MATT MOORE

15 April 2020

Edited transcript of the chat channel that accompanied the presentations and discussions.

PART ONE: DESIGNING AND FACILITATING VIRTUAL MEETINGS

The chat starts with the Group breakout discussions - Best and Worst Things about Working From Home. It then moves on to a running commentary on Nancy’s presentation.

N: I miss exercise

J: Avoiding travel to work (long commutes). But dealing with children, info overload is challenging

M: Good thing: balancing the work with the rest of your life

S1: Q1: No need to commute. Spend time with family during breakfast.

S1: Q2: The need to seek your colleagues in-person

A: Best thing - spending time with family, not having to commute to work, sleep more

G: Less organic conversations in the office can result in more meetings now. Because we lack the opportunities to bounce ideas off. But the meetings are more focussed

M: Worst thing - spending time with family

A: Worst thing - multitasking with children is difficult, harder to stay connected with colleagues, some things are better discussed in person

G: Cooking at home = no more allergies.

W1: More home cooked meals.

R: Productive breaks that allow for doing some quick chores

W1: More meetings to compensate for the office chatter you get in the office

S1: I can LIE DOWN during breaks !!!

M: S - lying down - I hear you 100%

S1: Yes, M … sometimes we just need to think … and the best is to lie down.

R: Challenge is the lack of meeting rooms (spouse is constantly in video conferences)

M: R - Yes homes are not designed for 100% remote work
R: I agree M. If it was a permanent thing we would need to redesign the space at home

E: Hard to get attention of meeting attendees

S2: Change to remote working from normal working also not an easy transition

Nancy: When we hold remote meetings we tend to think they have to be at least an hour or two, whereas in the workplace we might just spend 10 or 15 minutes

S3: Nancy, I agree! We had a team meeting that would otherwise have taken an hour took us twice as long.

S3: I work with youths, and we have to also look at platforms to engage them! Enterprise platforms may not work for them.

Nancy: In the office we don’t think of meetings as times to connect - they are transactional - once we move to fully virtual, meetings are the only time we have to do the connecting work as well as the transactional work. Once we work virtually, we need to solve problems AND to maintain or build /maintain relationships. Virtual meetings have to do double duty.

Nancy: We need the visual cues and camera - but things get in the way, bandwidth issues, “bad hair” days etc.

Nancy: We should think of virtual meetings as sessions for discussion and connections - everything else can be done asynchronously.

M: Strongly agree with Nancy here

Nancy: The more complex the task then the more synchronous and/or face to face methods are needed

Nancy: “Flipped meetings” - send out the documents or a video presentation ahead of time, along with 2-3 focus questions, read or view ahead of time to be prepared, and then use the meeting focus on discussing the material. This requires discipline. In our meetings, we ask anybody who has not done the preparation to mute themselves so only those who are prepared are in the discussion.

J: Thinking out loud: When we say “face to face” and talk about using technology like videoconferencing as a substitute, are we really talking about the need for visual communication?

M: Amazon’s 6 page memo approach appeals to me greatly

V: As M mentioned, Amazon's 6 page memo. If I am not wrong they allocate time during the meeting for people to read the memo “Amazon’s flipped meetings....” by Tom Connor https://link.medium.com/gMIb275ZG5

M: I think you should book in 30 mins "reading time" prior to the meeting

J: Or document as you go (wiki style), rather than distribute?
M: J - create the collaborative documents beforehand!

Nancy: In virtual meetings we need to think about attention span. The first 15 mins of any meeting has the greatest attention span - our meetings should be 60-90 mins max!

J: Until we get really great AI assistants that can help facilitate, having helpers is a great tip

G: Helpers are a must. Our screen is already so busy. Plus the need to monitor chats from other (back) channels.

J: Smart watches are great for F2F meetings, as it's not so obvious you are checking messages :-)

E: Following this group chat reminds me of following Twitter feeds during eg a conference - can be distracting and hard to follow the main discussion

W2: Agree with E, I have to fight to listen, watch the shared screen and read the chat

W1: agree with E too

M: I love using the chat channel when I present - heckling is always preferable to apathy.

E: Be careful what you ask for, M :)

M: Bring it on, E

P: We need time allocated not just to prepare in advance, but also time to digest the materials afterwards

S3: A "meeting ice-breaker" is important!

R: I disagree with the suggestion to keeping mics open. Unfortunately the moment my mic pics something up and is being prioritized everyone else is being muted.

G: Yes, sometimes leaving mike open can lead to unnecessary background noises

Nancy: Don’t use the waiting room, where people are stuck without any means of interacting. If you let people enter and provide for some social interaction at the start, it is much more like a regular meeting where connections can be established or reinforced.

E: We used the waiting room feature for this session for security reasons - to verify identity of participants before letting people in.

V: Contracting and giving instructions on how the chat function will be used for any session is important at the start

S3: Agree with E on use of waiting room for security reasons.
One alternative to the waiting room and providing some opportunity for interaction is to provide a whiteboard with a question for people to doodle while waiting for the meeting to start.

Nancy: Using breakout rooms is great to get people to think through and discuss their reactions in smaller share spaces before sharing in the group. It gives them confidence to share. Otherwise people might remain quiet even if they disagree.

S3: Happens to my boss ALL the time...and he takes it as all agree whenever he asks questions, and nobody reacts.

P: S3: because there isn’t a chance to discuss in small groups first?

S3: P, sometimes it is nearly a monologue where boss asks each person for their feedback. But it's almost the same in person. So we are used to it. :) I think we underestimate virtually the "thinking" time required for response.

J: We need to keep reminding ourselves that f2f meetings aren’t perfect either.

P: SY that does seem to reinforce the need for advance preparation for virtual meetings

R: It seems that good practices for virtual meetings are pretty much applicable to real life meetings as well

S3: Yes, agree. We already have weak in-person staff meetings where we go through laundry lists rather than objectives-based discussions. So now most people are disengaged in virtual meetings unless you are in the essential part of the business.

D: Any tips or tools on how to quickly capture the proceedings of the meeting?

P: D that’s why we are making notes and contributions here in the chat channel

D: Great!

PART TWO: ORGANISATIONAL PREPAREDNESS AND SUPPORT FOR REMOTE WORKING

James Dellow: We should be thinking about a series of horizons about preparedness (immediate response, then what we need to do next, then 6+ months). There is a learning curve - we know what good practices look like, they are not new; but they require behaviour change - it’s not just about providing access to the tools.

James Dellow: How do we go from just reacting, to coping, adapting, and performing?

James Dellow: This COVID-19 crisis has created a shift from remote working (where the remote workers are the “problem” and have to be accommodated) to distributed working (where everyone is distributed).

James Dellow: It won’t be the case that everyone goes back at once, it’s going to be phased - the new normal will be that we are effectively distributed.
The meeting platform has changed...but the way we are conducting meetings generally is the same...

Extroverts are probably more affected by remote working than introverts


REATIONS TO THE MICROMANAGING REMOTE WORKING POLICIES SHOWN BY NANCY:

James Dellow: Just wow!

Matt Moore: They might as well fit ankle monitors to their staff

Patrick Lambe: Some organisations in the US are monitoring their employees’ screen and PC activity

James Dellow: Related to our discussions here, there are some links here that may be of interest https://tinyletter.com/digitalworkplace/letters/zoom-is-not-the-problem-our-meeting-centric-workflow-is-micromanagement-doesn-t-work-in-the-office-so-why-inflict-it-on-people-working-from-home-and-the-future-of-intercompany-collaboration

James Dellow: It takes a very good leader or a lot of practice to overcome the fears of loss of productivity

R: It depends on what the focus of managers is. If it is on managing staff's time spent onsite, yes then remote working may be an issue. Then it should move towards achieving outcomes, which is more difficult to manage.

P: Yes R, so when you are managing to KPIs that look like activities, it’s hard to transition - if you can shift to managing for outcomes, it’s easier

M2: Tedtalk by the Stanford Professor on the Ctrip Study mentioned by Nancy! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olUyyZPIHyY

S3: There is a range of expectations on work deliverables from different parts of my organisation. The usage of project management tools (e.g. Slack) helps to keep everyone feel secure and updated. But it is dependent on everyone’s adoption of these technology tools. We go back to a point made early in this meeting. The home office setup requires some reorganising for more remote/distributed work.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

P: Preparation beforehand and discipline in being prepared is crucial

P: Visual cues are lost in virtual meetings

R: To change up the activities every couple of minutes is a key take-away
P: Virtual meetings are easier for the participants than for the session leader

S: Using the chat also encourages participation and prevents interruption to the presentation

M: We are using the same facilitation skills we’ve always had, but we have to use them differently, and compensate/develop ways of dealing with lack of visual cues. This requires practice, time, and feedback from people you trust

G: Because of the need to have a chat facilitator, a lot of engagement is done between the participants and the facilitator. The speaker/host may lose out on the opportunity to connect at a more personal level.

E: Apart from the importance of approaches and technology, I think culture change is crucial too, especially for the leaders.

S3: Key takeaways: facilitation of virtual meeting to increase engagement in terms of structure and organising of a meeting; having assistants to look into other areas (polls, tech), set up expectations (say hi); using breakout groups.