Supporting Virtual Meeting Accessibility

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NCAPPS

National Center on Advancing Person-Centered Practices and Systems

Recognizing issues of access

As we work together to stop the spread of COVID-19, more and more of our meetings, conferences, and community events are moving to online, virtual formats. But it is important for meeting organizers to keep in mind that access to technology is not equal. The digital world can pose extra challenges for people with disabilities.

People who were struggling before the pandemic because of things like low wages, high housing costs, and health or mental health challenges or disabilities may not have access to technology that makes these meetings possible. As we all have seen, the effects of the pandemic have been more intense for people dealing with these challenges and for people of color who have been left out of our social safety net.

Many of them may be dealing with even more disruptions and access issues than usual. By being creative, we can weather this storm and figure out how to be more inclusive in our new ways of working and socializing.

Addressing the digital divide

It is very important for meeting organizers to consider the access needs of their audience. Poverty and disability are interconnected. We must operate with the mindset that a large percentage of the audience may not have equal access to computers, tablets, iPhones and so forth. This crisis is a good time for disability and

human service organizations to do a **technology access assessment**. This can help you address the gaps in access in your state or region. Then, you can work on ways to get funding to give out technology devices to all people with disabilities who might not be able to afford such devices. This would go a long way toward closing the digital divide.

While they might not be equally easy for all people to use, devices are still critical for keeping people connected socially and for ensuring people can participate in the new mostly virtual work world.

Considerations for accessibility

Any online meeting platform we use—whether Zoom, Google Hangouts, GoToMeeting, GoToWebinar, or Web-Ex—must have call-in numbers. This is so that anyone without a laptop or tablet can easily participate. In the case of people who are blind or visually impaired, a **call-in number is often more accessible than an online platform** like Zoom, especially if they have limited staff support.

Other tips to support Virtual Meeting Accessibility

1. Send out materials like the agenda and any other materials ahead of time if it applies. 1-2 weeks in advance of a meeting.
2. All content should be large print: 14+ font. 1.5-Double spaced.
3. Use plain language. Content should be between 4th-8th grade reading level. The lower the better.
4. Use pictures as much as possible.
5. Use short sentences.
6. During sessions, plan for breaks to go around the "room" to ensure everyone gets a chance to give input, including those who may be quiet or have not yet stepped up to add their thoughts.
7. *Do not* speak too fast. Slow down. Present one idea at a time.
8. It is always good to have a chat feature available so that people can get their thoughts and ideas off their chest without having to worry about interrupting the conversation. On the other hand, some folks find chat to be distracting, so it is good to let folks know how to turn "Chat" on & off when needed.
9. Record discussions with captioning if it applies.
10. If requested, mail handouts for selected presentations to self-advocates who need hard copies.

11. Be sure to say if the meeting is being recorded. Say that by participating, you are giving permission to record this meeting. Let everyone know what will happen with the recording after. Make everyone aware of the risks and benefits of meeting recording. Lastly, explain that this recording will be posted on XYZ website.

Things to avoid

1. Meetings without agendas. This especially applies to high-stakes policy meetings where people are discussing highly academic material or seeking input on major decisions.

2. Anything that could intensify sensory overload, including background noise, bad audio, large groups, brightness, or messy backgrounds. In some ways, online platforms take more effort for concentration and more self-discipline; this can be draining. It is

something that many of us with ADHD or ASD experience.

3. Disrespectful, outdated, or ableist language. For more on this, check out Ableism from the National Conference for Community and Justice, and People First Language and More, from Disability is Natural.

4. Half-hearted attempts to include people with disabilities at the table in a meaningful way.

5. Jargon, alphabet soup, and insider language and abbreviations.

6. Talking too fast!

Helping communities reach their full potential

This crisis is a perfect time for us as a nation to come together and address the gaps and disparities faced by people with disabilities and others who live in poverty. With collective action, we can weather this storm and do more to develop communities that help everyone reach their full potential.

Inclusion and meaningful participation in work, meetings, virtual events, and policymaking is a part of this. Many people

with intellectual and developmental disabilities only work part time, and low wages and low income, along with health and other challenges, can make it hard for people to participate in events that require high-end devices and reliable high-speed internet.

By thinking through access issues, planning, and using some simple strategies, workplaces and event organizers can make virtual meetings and events more inclusive and accessible. And gain the valuable input of people who otherwise might be left out.

In closing, I dream of a world free of tokenism. We must remember that "Nothing About Us Without Us" should be at the heart of everything we do, even in tough times!

More resources

We're all learning as we go right now. Some advocacy and inclusion organizations have created lists of tips and resources as they work to make their own online meetings more inclusive. Here are a few:

- Tips for Facilitating Online Peer Support Groups, from the Academy of Peer Services
- How to Make Your Virtual Meetings and Events Accessible to the Disability Community, from Rooted in Rights
- Mutual Support in an Age of Social Distancing, from Mad in America
- Learn-to-Zoom tips, resources, and short videos from the Nisonger Center.