

Organizing a Hybrid A.A. Meeting

A hybrid A.A. meeting is one in which some of the attendees are in-person and other attendees join using video conferencing such as Zoom (a virtual meeting.) A hybrid meeting allows anyone with a desire to stop drinking to conveniently attend your meeting. During the Covid pandemic, online meetings kept us all connected and many alcoholics got sober online. Hybrid meetings provide the highest level of accessibility for anyone interested in attending your meeting. Members can attend in person or online, which allows easier involvement for anyone in remote locations, for seniors, and for anyone with transportation difficulties, with childcare needs, with immunity concerns, with schedule conflicts, and with any other accessibility barriers. To better accommodate the deaf and hard of hearing, consider adding closed captioning to your meetings as well. Let's take advantage of the introduction of technology to AA to help make our meetings as inclusive and diverse as possible! Many members of AA today got sober during the pandemic and were grateful that AA shifted to Online meetings during these challenging times. We have learned that holding a hybrid meeting allows for more members to join our meeting from nearby and from far away.

Group Conscience

It is suggested that Groups discuss this meeting format change at their Business Meetings and vote to determine Group Conscience. We have found many embrace the hybrid format and yet some members have opposition to this format. This should be thoroughly discussed and voted on as our Traditions suggest. Many of us have found that holding hybrid meetings allow AA to be more inclusive and accessible. This is a Group decision.

Planning and the Ideal Set Up

Ideally the meeting would have both a chairperson and a separate virtual meeting host or Co-Chair who would monitor the Online room, admitting members, and allowing participation where possible. Consider creating new positions in your group for this purpose. An on-line greeter is a position some groups have adopted.

It does take some planning, some practice, and a lot of trial and error to run a smooth hybrid meeting.

There will be tech problems, especially early on, so be patient, and remember the larger accessibility and group unity goals. Very quickly the meetings will go smoothly and most likely your group will receive gratification from the online members that your Group is more accessible to them.

Equipment Checklist

The virtual host should verify the Internet connection and equipment are functioning prior to the start of the meeting. The checklist should include:

- A stable connection to the Internet. Ideally using wi-fi. (A mobile hotspot using a phone could also work, should have an unlimited data plan.)

- A dependable virtual conferencing account (Zoom charges around \$20/month, their free

accounts are limited to only 40 minutes.) Other video conferencing options exist.

Using a laptop with the accessories below would provide a better experience for the virtual attendees, although a hand-held phone or tablet will get the job done.

Omnidirectional microphone - \$30-\$90 (higher end models may include speakers)

Speaker(s)- \$20 - \$50 (if not included with microphone)

Swivel USB Camera - \$45 - \$100

TV monitor. This would allow the in-person attendees to see the virtual attendees. A Smart TV is ideal for ease of connectivity. Older TVs are fine but will require additional cables to connect the components.

You will need an extension cord, and likely a HDMI cable.

We have found that members have equipment they can donate to their Groups to minimize costs. This too should be discussed to obtain Group Conscience.

The Meeting

Adapt the meeting format to include both in-person and virtual sharing. Involving the zoomers if possible often improves your meeting, attendance, and makes it more fun and interactive.

There have been occasions where “bombers” come into our online rooms to utter profanity and other disturbances. One of the roles of the co-host is to screen the entering member best they can in the virtual waiting room to avoid letting in bombers. A protocol should be established by your group on how best to do that.

Consider how to collect 7th Tradition for virtual attendees. Many Groups offer an etransfer option that their Treasurer coordinates. (Each group is autonomous).

Update your group in the Area 83 Meeting Guide and your local Intergroup Meeting Guide listings to reflect that you now have Hybrid meetings.

When your meeting is over, encourage the zoomers to stick around for Fellowship. This is one aspect of our meetings that we should not forget about.

Helpful tips and topics:

- The custom of speakers “coming to the podium” to speak (or coming to the front of the room) 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.
- Its best to position the camera straight toward the podium
- Pod speakers placed in the middle of the audience works well.
- 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 Virtual Meeting Host to do it for you. People in the meeting room can say 'Camera off, please' to the Virtual Meeting Host on their way to speak at the podium."

- Several new service positions may be needed for the in-person portion of hybrid meetings. A new service position of Hybrid Meeting Host is suggested. 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 the Chairperson may need to change a little to reflect the fact that the meeting has two distinct parts. The Virtual Meeting 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 Virtual Meeting Host can ensure a successful meeting experience for all participants.
- 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 Virtual Meeting 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 Virtual Meeting Host can have responsibility for managing which image and voice is broadcast into both the remote and in-person meeting. For example, the Virtual Meeting Host can "spotlight" or Screenshot 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/Virtual Meeting 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).

- 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.
- The meeting space must have a reliable internet connection with adequate capacity (i.e., bandwidth). NOTE: If a meeting is conducted with wireless (Wi-Fi) internet, it is not recommended to share the Wi-Fi password with in-person meeting participants. If there are multiple internet users competing for bandwidth, the Wi-Fi 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.
- Some meeting facilities may offer internet access as part of the space rental or for an additional fee. This could be wireless (“Wi-Fi” with router) or wired (via an ethernet cable directly plugged into a computer or tablet). If the Wi-Fi signal is poor due to distance from the router, a Wi-Fi 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”.
- 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 fullfeatured “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.
- 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. 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:

- It is suggested to have 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.)
- You could use 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.
- 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.
- Having a screen or projected image to show remote participants 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: It might be useful to have a "lightning digital A/V adapter". This adapter connects an Apple product (for example, MacBook, iPad, iPhone) to the HDMI input on a monitor, or 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).
- It's suggested you have a 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

Traditions to consider

5th: Features such as “Only allow individuals with a given email domain to join” may be too restrictive for inclusivity.

6th: When using personal equipment, the group will want to be sure it’s not violating the 6th tradition and setting themselves up for problems of money or property.

7th: How will you collect 7th Tradition for virtual attendees. You can set up virtual baskets by using your group treasurer’s recommended email or phone number for e-transfers.

11 & 12: Cameras in A.A. Meeting Rooms will raise lots of tradition concerns. Specifically, our 11th and 12th Traditions of Anonymity. For meetings with publicly listed log in information (such as on an area meeting list website), non-members can easily access our meetings. In general, we want security low enough that anyone seeking recovery can find us. However, when we lower the security, we also increase the chance of our “safe space” being violated. The group should come to a group conscience on their “security tolerance.”