Online committees:

A platform for teamwork from remote sites

by

Marius Meyer

Over the past six weeks, South African management and staff teams have made use of online platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom to continue with meetings and committee work during the new working from home arrangements during the lockdown.   While global teams operating in different countries and regions all over the world have been doing this for years, for most of us this has been a new way of exploring the use of technology in making meetings and work sessions continue while working from remote sites. The transition to online meetings did not go without glitches and many of us have struggled to make this transition.   In fact, human error is more visible in online meetings, thus forgetting about the mute button has been an embarrassment and lesson for most of us. However, we should not allow the few technological glitches to derail these efforts of online collaboration, teamwork, problem-solving and decision-making. Ultimately, we need to get work done despite the despair and increased levels of stress and anxiety during these difficult times of uncertainty, confusion and turmoil in business and society caused by die coronavirus pandemic.

Although some committee work has been postponed if it was not considered essential, the reality is that decisions still need to be made. Also, it is now clear that the lockdown will take much longer than expected, hence the need to continue with important committee work from remote locations.   It is now also a reality that we have new committees, such as disaster management committees, special Covid-19 committees, and safety committees. The work of emergency committees or task forces in dealing with the epidemic is prioritised. Given the high level of risk involved, it is essential that good committee work is done in all these forums.   In the past the work of some committees regressed into the continuous repeat of the same agenda items, long discussions without getting to a point or actions, a lack of progress and in many cases, little follow-through on actions. To make online committees work, requires a basic grasp of the technological platform, but it comes with practice. Perhaps the real source of the problem is the transfer of ineffective face-to-face committees to virtual committees, in other words the perpetuation of ineffective committee work. Hence, the need to revisit the purpose and functioning of effective committees, whether the committee is face-to-face or online.

Someone once said: "An effective committee consists of three people of whom two are absent". In other words, if you want to ensure a task is executed successfully, rather give it to an individual. A similar cynical view is that if you want to fail in executing a task, give it to a committee! While there may be some truth in these negative perceptions about the role and impact of committees, the reality is that there is indeed good value in committees if we can use them effectively. Moreover, some committees like safety committees have a risk, governance and legal role, and their effectiveness in the Covid-19 crisis period is a matter of life and death.

Committees solve difficult problems that cannot be solved by an individual such as a specialist or expert, and leveraging contributions from different people, often representing different departments,

stakeholders and interest groups. Positive outcomes from effective committees are rich, diverse, consultative and have impact, also in online communities.

Online committees encourage learning. When you are part of an online committee and you are actively engaged, you always learn, you will research and find out more about your area of impact and you will also learn from the other committee members. In most cases senior committee members have gained solid experience over many years, these skills should also be transferred to younger members who can grow and develop as employees. The reality is that we all started our careers without any experience, but we managed to learn and grow from the inputs, support and guidance from other people.

Your communication skills and teamwork improve when you are part of a committee. In essence, committee work is about generating and consolidating ideas needed to culminate in effective projects. Additionally, an effective online committee can play an important role in ensuring good governance, joint decision-making, growth and sustainability. Most online platforms make it possible to share documents and slides.

Online committee success also depends on listening skills. Members must listen to one another and the stakeholders they are serving. Motivational speaker Siphiwe Moyo warns against the current practice of a new generation simply discarding the values, wisdom and achievements of the previous generation. He reminds us of the importance of building on past successes and retaining institutional memory. While new ideas and innovation are always welcome in an online committee, the reality is that you go backwards if you discard or undo the good work of your predecessors.

When meeting with Lynda Smith from the Refirement Network a few years ago, I also realised how important it is to tap into the wisdom and insights of our older generation. Imagine the collective wisdom of the 50 plus members of our society. All of them have more than three decades of solid work experience and they therefore possess a rich skills base that can be transferred to the younger generation as our future leaders and professionals climbing the corporate ladder and entrepreneurial businesses. On the other hand, the youth brings such a fresh and dynamic perspective into online meetings, and chairpersons should be more mindful of encouraging the youth to participate actively during these meetings. And they can help us to make these meetings effective given the fact that they are so tech savvy.

Having worked as part of committees for a very long time, and also being dependent on the contributions and outputs of committees in most aspects of my work, it is important to work closely with people from other departments, other companies, government institutions and other professional bodies. I reflected on the successes and failures of committees. The key question is why some committees are more effective than others, and essentially three key factors emerged: Leadership, talent and teamwork. Great committees achieving great work have great leaders. They tap into the talent of the committee members and the vast pool of talent outside the committee. Ultimately, they ensure good teamwork among committee members when they plan the way forward with projects after key decisions have been taken. This should be the case whether meetings are online or face-to-face.

Building on these critical success factors for effective committees, in reality the best online committees are really active, in other words they are able to make decisions from their online discussions and drive clear actions in making a difference in their area of impact. Sadly, though, there are too many examples available about ineffective, passive and dormant committees that have so little impact that they might as well close down.

I formed the word *ACTIVE* as an acronym illustrating what good online committees are all about:

A = *Action*: Good online committees are not talk-shops, but active forums delivering outputs based on clear actions agreed upon during the online meeting.

C = *Connectivity*: All committee members are connected and committed to contributing to the committee and achieving the desired results.

T = *Teamwork*: Good committees achieve success by means of good teamwork in which most members work together in attaining the goals of the committee.

I = *Innovation*: While committees are often required to play a risk, compliance or governance role, the best committees are by their very nature innovative in the sense that they are able to convert good ideas generated online into tangible actions and improvements.

V = *Value*: Effective committees should focus on their purpose and ensure that they deliver value in accordance with their remit and key functions. The most important question to be answered by committee members is: What difference are we making to the organisation and our key stakeholders?

E = *Excellence*: Lastly, good online committees achieve excellence. When a committee develops a track-record of good progress based on clear and tangible outputs, people will not question the existence and impact of the online committee.

The reality is that business, government and non-profit organisations function to a great extent using the inputs and outputs of online committees. At the top of the organisation, boards have sub-committees such as Remuneration Committees and Audit Committees. Many of them have successfully managed to migrate their meetings to online platforms, despite some security issues with a few of these platforms. Then there are several management committees in organisations, or committees dealing with specific projects or issues. Whether you are a member of a committee, or a committee chairperson, using the six *Active* elements of good online committees can help you to ensure the success of the committee, while simultaneously dealing with challenges or problems. Online meetings have its own unique problems such as background noise, internet connectivity, interruptions and distractions at home, and a multitude of other issues typically not prevalent during face-to-face meetings. For instance, it is also more difficult or even impossible to read body language or know how people really feel if they don't share their views. Thus, chairing an online meeting requires even more concentration, focus and planning by the chairperson to ensure that he or she is managing the unique dynamics of an online meeting.

In conclusion, online committees is a valuable platform for teamwork and good governance from remote sites during this period of lockdown. Effective online committees are active teams of committed people driving clear outputs. The role of the chairperson as leader is key in steering the online committee in the right direction and to focus discussions on adding value to the organisation and its stakeholders. However, having the right talent at the table is a key factor in driving sustainable outcomes. Ultimately, effective online committee work is about good teamwork, albeit remotely, but it is the role of the chairperson to foster a climate of openness, focused discussion and good teamwork in achieving the goals of the committee. Managing an effective online meeting, and then steering the committee towards agreed actions is a unique skill that all good committee chairpersons have mastered. Moreover, staying in touch between meetings to keep the committee members engaged and focused is key in ensuring momentum and follow-through on decisions taken, in particular regarding the execution of key actions and in preparation of the next online meeting. The success of effective online committees is all about good leadership, talent and teamwork.

Best wishes in driving and enabling productive online committee work. We will all be better professionals as online committee members long after the lockdown has been lifted.

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). For more information about the coronavirus and Covid-19 visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za

This article was first published by SABPP on 4 May 2020, see www.sabpp.co.za