

Virtual Meetings

A Guide for the Livery

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The advent of the Covid 19 global pandemic has changed many aspects of our personal and professional lives - home working has become the norm for many professionals in knowledge worker professions, and the use of virtual meeting tools has enabled us to keep in contact with friends, family and colleagues. Many Livery Companies have been quick to adopt virtual meetings as a means of continuing to meet, whether that be for Court business or social activities.

This guide records some of the questions I have been asked by Livery Companies regarding virtual meet tools. It may prove helpful to Livery Companies, Guilds, Ward Clubs and other civic and social institutions operating in the Square Mile.

What is a Virtual Meeting?

A virtual meeting is in almost all respects like a face-to-face meeting except that it takes place with the use of a virtual meeting tool. A virtual meeting tool is a software programme that allows participants to join and interact using a computer connected to the internet. Virtual meeting tools are equally well suited to formal meetings (eg., a meeting of Court) and social events (eg., a Pub quiz).

Why use Virtual Meeting tools?

Until such time as social distancing ends and there is an effective vaccine for Covid-19 our lives will not return to full normality. Even when we can return to normality many of us will have decided to work from home more often, to use virtual meeting tools to keep in touch with friends and family, and much of the UK economy will have accelerated the transformation to digital enablement that was already well under way in certain sectors.

Virtual meeting tools bring distinct benefits that will still be attractive post Covid-19, to wit:

- There is no need to travel into London
- There is no travel expense
- Members who are beyond reasonable commute distance to London can participate
- Meetings can be recorded
- There's no practical capacity limit on how many people may attend
- Participants can step away, go on mute, or turn off their camera and rejoin the meeting without interrupting others (eg., if a courier arrives at the front door)

A virtual meeting may be combined with a face-to-face meeting thereby allowing participants who are too far from London, or perhaps advised to continue isolating for health reasons, to join with those who are able to travel even when social distancing restrictions are lifted.

Anecdotal evidence from various sources across the Livery indicates that attendance, engagement and participation in Livery Company meetings has increased as a result of moving to virtual meetings; sadly they will never replace a good banquet in the company of friends, but for many routine meetings they are at least as good as a face-to-face event and in many ways superior.

Which Virtual Meeting tool is best?

Several virtual meeting tools have come into the public consciousness since March 2020. Perhaps the most well known of these is Zoom. Others include Skype for Business, Microsoft Teams, CISCO Webex, GoToMeeting, Google Hangouts, and so on.

Each of these tools has its strengths and weaknesses, quirks and foibles. None is markedly superior to the others, and user preference plays the most significant roles in which tool is chosen. All of these tools have the same core functionality of video, audio, screen sharing, a built in text chat with options for recording, participant management and myriad other features.

There are plenty of independent comparison sites, blog articles, user reviews and evaluations on the web if you want to explore further

What does it cost to use a Virtual Meeting tool?

Most of the virtual meeting tools operate a freemium business model whereby a basic user account with limited functionality is available free of charge. All the tools are sold as 'software as a service' with various levels of functionality unlocked for an incremental monthly license fee. At the top end of the spectrum of monthly fees you should expect to pay circa £18 a month for an all-singing, all-dancing license that unlocks features and functionality that will go far beyond the needs of most Livery Companies, Guilds and Ward Clubs.

What about the Security and Privacy of Virtual Meeting tools?

There have been a significant number of security incidents reported in the news media in recent months. Most of those security incidents can be traced back to the behaviour of the licensee in not taking basic precautions to reduce the risk of unwanted persons joining their meeting. Unfortunately in several cases some rather unsavoury characters have joined online meetings and the consequences have been rather unpleasant for the legitimate participants.

All the virtual meeting tools provide the option of securing the meeting with a password, and some have a facility for a virtual lobby wherein participants gather before being admitted by the host of the meeting.

For almost all Livery Company, Guild or Ward Club business a virtual meeting tool can provide sufficient security if some straightforward steps are taken (see hints and tips).

What Data Privacy issues arise with Virtual Meetings?

Particular consideration should be given to Data Privacy where virtual meetings are concerned, particularly if the meeting is recorded. Virtual meetings are just as subject to GDPR as any other system that captures a user's personal information (PI). PI includes: the user's name, email address and image. Depending on the way the tool is used it may also include the user's location, telephone number, address, etc.

Conducting a virtual meeting does not create new GDPR requirements above, but how you use a virtual meeting tool may create an explicit requirement to obtain permission from participants to use their personal information in new ways. For example:

- If a recording of a meeting contains information such as the the name, email address, title or image or voice of a participants the permission of every participant so identified must be obtained before the recording is shared with a wider audience.
- The same applies If screenshots of the meeting are captured and shared with a wider audience, eg., via Social Media.

The golden rule is: If you intend to share a digital recording of the meeting with anyone outside the meeting, whether you share video, audio, text chats or photo... obtain permission from all the participants first.

That said, do not hide behind GDPR. Nothing in GDPR says you cannot host a virtual meeting, and nothing in the Royal Charter, ordinances or working practices of a Livery Company prevents meetings being held online.

What are the limits on how many people may attend a Virtual Meeting?

Most of the virtual meeting tools will allow 100 participants to join even with a basic (free) user account. At the higher end of the scale the number of concurrent participants will run to at least 1,000 - far beyond the needs of most Livery Companies, Guilds and Ward Clubs.

What sort of IT equipment do I need to host or join a Virtual Meeting?

Any reasonably modern laptop or desktop computer running Windows, Linux or Mac OS will be sufficient to join a virtual meeting. A tablet computer such as an iPad will also be capable of joining a meeting.

As a minimum the host, any presenters and participants should have a computer with a microphone, speakers and a video camera. An internet connection with greater than 10 mega-bits per second of data down speed will be ample for live video and audio transmission.

There are many free tools on the web that allow the user to test his or her network connection speed.

What hints and tips do you have for a successful Virtual Meeting?

Just about everything you would do for a face-to-face event applies to a virtual meeting:

1. Send out an invitation with clear joining instructions well in advance. The joining instructions should give the title, purpose, date and time of the meeting and may include the web link for the virtual meeting (see the next hint). If you want to be really clever you can send an electronic calendar invite out to all participants - most desktop calendar tools for Windows and Mac OS include a feature to send an invite which, if accepted, will add to the participants' computer calendar.
2. It's good practice to secure your meeting with a password and send the password separate to the web link for the meeting. This should ideally be done by posting the details on the 'members' side of your website rather than by sending the link and password out in email.

3. Share any agenda, previous minutes or papers well in advance, perhaps use a Cloud based document sharing tool like DropBox to facilitate this - email is rarely a good choice for distributing lots of documents, and it's a very poor choice if you are going to update and resend them, or send them in batches. As with the web link to the meeting, any link to the DropBox where the agenda, minutes and papers are held should be on the members side of your website.
4. Send a reminder the day beforehand!
5. Arrive early (15 minutes is ample), test your audio, video and if you are presenting make sure you have any presentation loaded and that screen sharing works.
6. If you are going to record the meeting, make sure everyone who is participating is aware before you start the recording.
7. Make more of a conscious effort to pause, to invite questions, pose questions to the audience, invite participation and make time for a scheduled break if the meeting is going to last much more than an hour.
8. Put yourself on mute unless you are speaking.
9. Think carefully about the degree of formality you ask of participants, especially if they are joining from a domestic setting. Strict dress codes may not be appropriate for online meetings when participants are joining from home.
10. Ensure you are in a quiet environment, turn your mobile phone to silent, close the door and if you are working at home inform other members of the family that you will be attending a virtual meeting.
11. Practice, practice, practice. If you are presenting, hosting, or even if you are an attendee... practice your participation. Test the web-link in advance, make sure your audio and video works, download the agenda, minutes and any papers - have them to hand. If you are presenting make sure your presentation is loaded and displays correctly from end to end.
12. Don't worry if the experience is a little bumpy to start. For many participants the world of virtual meetings may be new, and perhaps a little daunting, but just like learning to ride a bicycle - once you've overcome the initial wobbles, and perhaps the odd scrape, you'll soon be off and never look back.