

CIO View on Online Meetings

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Since lockdown we have moved to online meetings with products such as MS Teams, Zoom, Fuze and Meet to name just a few. Some interesting phenomenon have arisen which are worth reflecting on.

Brand Loyalty

Despite all the products we use being ubiquitous, the same prejudices are surfacing in how people talk about the tool of choice. Always there are several people in all our organisations who are “Anything but Microsoft”, which can be frustrating when you are trying to reduce the urban sprawl of technology. The question that I am always asking is ‘do I care?’.

Fundamentally I do. If it is costing your organisation money to have a variety of tools when money’s too tight to mention, then we have to work super hard to make the case for picking one and sticking to it. At LSE we have ended up with two. We made the decision early to say “yes” to this because it was essential for teaching to have Zoom, even though we are, and will remain, a Microsoft customer who already had Teams.

At the time of lockdown Zoom had breakout rooms, many more screens visible and raise hands. Also it was already integrated in our organisation (unbeknownst to me) with Moodle as a trial. So our Teaching and Learning experts were pretty sold on it.

But we have created a monster. Zoom is seen as cuter, less formal and less stuffy than MS Teams and, as our culture in LSE is one of high devolvement and autonomy, our staff don’t like to be corralled into just one thing, even though overall it may be detrimental to the organisation.

There is no doubt that Zoom was more fun. It sounds more fun! Our meeting with the account manager though was not fun, as he was clearly newly recruited, had zero empathy and was unlikely to cut a sensible deal – such is the problem of an organisation that has grown exponentially.

What can we do about this? To be honest not that much, but we have to try so:-

1. Be super clear about the cost and the problem but avoid catastrophising and using emotive language.
2. Set review points and have the reviews!
3. Make sure when you do review that you include stakeholders and make sure their voice is given time and space and noted. You don’t have to accept everything they say, but you do have to let them say it, acknowledge it and then respond with an objective reason why you will or will not take that forward.

As a final thought I do wonder if there is a degree of power play with the choice of tool. For example people setting meetings not in the standard tool to make a point, negative comments as people try to log in ... that sort of thing.

Style of Meetings

Talking about cute... When we first started with online meetings, we not only saw a window into people's lives – their cats and children as well as their taste in art, we also saw some quite strange behaviours. It started with people wearing silly hats and using the Zoom backgrounds (bizarrely this was one of the reasons people preferred Zoom to Teams), and then we started to see SnapCamera (the unicorn horn was my favourite). These weren't just for social gatherings - they were appearing in work meetings. It certainly lightened the mood and at the time we needed it. Laughter was a tonic. But I have noticed this has started to wane. If people use backgrounds they are sensible representations of their organisations with the exception of the BBC TV ones.

Whilst this is odd to see it go, it does seem to indicate that perhaps people are settling into older work behaviours. I personally, think that is quite sad and as long as it doesn't go too far or become negative, the odd bit of humour is not only a good thing but can help people become more interested and confident in these forms of technology. I am of course waiting for the policy on acceptable backgrounds.

Meeting Etiquette

Now here is where we are seeing some amazing improvements in meetings and behaviours. I would say that meetings are both more enjoyable and more efficient now we are online than ever before. We know each other far better than we ever did on campus. This may be just me but I think there are a number of reasons for this:-

1. We have more frequent briefing sessions across the organisation – in some cases weekly in others monthly but we are coming together and 'seeing each other' far more.
2. Meetings are more frequent, but they are also much shorter. Primarily because we know where everyone is and we have got into the habit of having certain meetings at certain times.
3. If something is urgent, or a problem or even bad news – we are now much more willing and confident to bring it to one of those meetings. Many of my colleagues have become very good at briefing. This was probably more to do with emergency planning on the way into lockdown but it is a good skill.
4. Behaviours are better. We do still see a bit of "whataboutary" but it is getting less and what is more important is it is more obvious and being called out.
5. Flipped Meetings – we are now starting to pre-record the presentation before a meeting, give people time to watch it and then follow up with a meeting. Saves time, means the person presenting gets right through their thinking without being interrupted, and makes the content more accessible to people who need to view it.
6. People are getting good at raising their hand, that being acknowledged and using chat for questions.

All of this is remarkable and makes a huge difference. I hope as we return to campus and 'normal' we retain this. I hope eventually we won't need to have anywhere near as many meeting rooms or need to get together in a room. But maybe I am just weird.

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