



Leading a Virtual Peer Advisory Council: Concerns & Opportunities

No discussion about creating a PaC (peer advisory council) is complete without discussing the legitimate concerns and opportunities virtual peer group meetings present.

To Zoom or Not to Zoom

Before the COVID-19-19 pandemic, plenty of professional development, training, and PaC groups were held virtually. But PaCs usually were in person for several reasons:

1. [Zoom](#), Microsoft Teams, and Google Meets simply weren't as prevalent; they weren't on the radar of many business owners. This can have a generational angle, as several generations didn't grow up with virtual-meeting platforms or work in companies that used them. In other words, it's not something everyone had been exposed to before 2020.
2. Peer advisory council meetings aren't like the one-hour-ish masterminds you probably get invited to weekly. They're hours long and involve deep discussion and reflection. Traditionally, that's not an easy thing to do virtually, and most business PaC members aren't likely to choose virtual as a first choice unless they're comfortable with it. Part of what makes a meeting in person special are the side-bar conversations, the confidential environment, and the change of scenery from their office. Furthermore, for some, the commute to the meeting is used to prepare mentally for the meeting and becomes a ritual that members enjoy.
3. When you're in person, you feel the other humans in the room. You feel their nervous systems and sense what's going on with them. This is because we're social mammals and have evolved for connection. How you sit, gestures and body energy seem to have been far easier to sense when you're in the room with someone. And virtual typically only allows you to see others from the chest or neck up versus the whole body. And with the advent of virtual backgrounds, who knows where someone is calling in from?



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4. Virtual-meeting platforms have a major built-in distraction. Because they're accessed via computer, it's far too tempting to [check email](#), answer notifications, surf the web, or scroll social media.
5. Confidentiality and trust have to be assumed when virtual. You can't see who else is in the room, and you don't know who else might be listening.
6. PaCs in person have been around for a long time, and virtual hasn't. As a result, there's a mindset that the only way to do a PaC is in person, and it's too risky to try virtually. Another old mindset says virtual can't be better because members can't bond, pay attention, or embody the necessary elements of culture that a high-functioning council strives for. *But time and the pandemic showed that virtual has a place.*

The Pros of Virtual PaC Meetings:

There are plenty of reasons virtual is preferable.

1. It delivered a surprise benefit of supporting mental health. Once COVID-19 hit, everyone suddenly could do everything virtually, which was wonderful. And something more important happened in my councils: we went from meeting monthly to weekly to daily. *Why?* Because members needed support. They were extremely shaky due to the uncertainty the pandemic highlighted. They weren't certain that their biggest asset—their business—would survive. So many unknowns and so many moving parts rapidly changing. I had no idea how important meetings would become for my members' mental health or how critical they would be for their businesses health. Their PaCs became a safe space for them to be vulnerable, to talk through the enormous amount of information coming at them with PPP (i.e., the paycheck protection program) and restrictions, and to check their thinking on the vast number of quick decisions they were all having to make. They had already developed trust and watching them lean on each other and look forward to their daily calls, even just to check in, was extraordinary. As a result, the business grew 27% in the following few months! We could pivot into the virtual world and meet our client's needs where they required us to be.
2. People who live in and near high-traffic, congested cities love virtual because they get burned out going back and forth in traffic or see it as a waste of time. Arriving on time to meetings has become unpredictable and frustrating. We found members love the option of virtual meetings interspersed with in-person meetings (more on this *hybrid* model in a bit).



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3. Moderators who want the flexibility of not being tied to one specific location for monthly meetings find virtual a convenient, easy option.
4. Someone has tested positive for COVID-19, is recovering from surgery, or caring for a family member. They don't want to infect others or aren't mobile, and they can still participate fully and not have to miss their meeting.
5. Business owners who are also busy moms or dads on tight schedules or who have little ones at home without a sitter or daycare love the virtual option. Single-parent business owners, for a variety of reasons, also benefit from virtual meetings.
6. CEOs who travel a lot, whether temporarily or consistently. Virtual opens up the opportunity for them to participate in a PaC in-person with attendance expectations. For example, a member working on an acquisition that requires them to travel for a few months missing meetings would miss in-person meetings, and you might lose them as a member or even a prospect because of that. But they could attend the in-person meeting virtually while in a different location. One of our License Partners had this happen recently with a member making an acquisition in a different country. He participated successfully for six months with his group virtually with a new technology called [The Owl](#). The ability for those remotely to view the room 360 degrees and the eye of The Owl moves to focus in on whoever is talking. Just as though you were in the room too. It was a win-win for everyone. No turnover for the PaC, a retained member for the moderator, and consistent participation from an engaged member benefiting all the members. And no re-entry challenges when he returned to the group six months later, even if he returned because he may have felt too disconnected to do so.
7. The cadence of the meetings is less likely to get disrupted when they're virtual. So, if there's a snowstorm coming and the meetings are in person, some or all members might not attend for fear of getting stranded. If the meetings were virtual, this would be less of an issue. Similarly, if the moderator gets stranded or cannot get to an in-person meeting, pivoting to virtual participation takes no time to set up.

More Considerations About PaC Meetings

Although COVID-19 opened up a new world of acceptance for virtual meetings, and they are beneficial and desirable in many instances, several years of virtual-only meetings have had some detrimental side effects, such as Zoom fatigue. [Zoom fatigue](#) has been called “a perplexing sense of being drained while having accomplished nothing” and can be decreased by turning off the camera; however, the camera provides necessary information and feedback, turning it off



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isn't optional. In addition, there can be generational differences, with more mature people less enthusiastic about spending a lot of time online. If you were remote before COVID-19—and the majority of the workforce was *not*—it wasn't nearly as disruptive as getting dressed, driving to the office, and being in person with your team for years (or decades!), and then one day... not. For two years.

Furthermore, if you've ever been in the franchise business, you know that some franchises wouldn't allow virtual meetings because it implied you might violate your territory restrictions.

But again, once COVID-19 hit, just like for the rest of the world, adaptation to virtual became necessary.


Hybrid Meetings and Groups

Now that things have calmed down for most people, the lessons (and preferences) learned during COVID-19 have shown that there is another way to run meetings: the hybrid model. As mentioned above, this is a mix of in-person and virtual meetings. They can be scheduled to switch between the two, or, if we're not all required to be remote again, all meetings can be in-person, and members who can't make it in person that month can still participate with the help of technology.

Which Delivery Model is Right for You?

You might not be a fan of virtual. Not before COVID-19, not during, and not now. And that's just fine! If you have to drag yourself on screen and muster up all of your energy to moderate an online meeting, and then you're exhausted after that, by all means, don't have virtual meetings.

At the same time, if you've chosen a global association of climate engineers for your PaC, you might want to rethink whether virtual isn't for you. In other words, your decision process could involve several factors and be a bit complex. Not complicated, but complex and in need of contemplation of your options and what they mean for you as a moderator and your PaC members. **Thinking long-term about your lifestyle and business evolution is also important because when you put your councils together correctly, they will last for years to come.**

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