5 ways to make online meetings more engaging

Most virtual meetings aren't stimulating enough to keep people alert - overall people reported tiredness levels 28% higher in virtual meetings compared to face-to-face meetings.

Image source: Diva Plavalaguna from Pexels

But there are strategies to create more productive calls and keep cognition healthy and high.

"If you have ever fought off yawns during a video call, don't be too hard on yourself," said Linda Trim, director at Giant Leap, one of SA's largest workplace design consultancies.

"In a 2023 American Psychological Association study of hundreds of virtual and in-person meetings at two global corporations, it was found that lots of people doze off — or find their minds wandering — in online meetings, because the meetings don't do enough to keep them involved. So, people sink into drowsiness before long and get much less productive."

Here are five ways to make virtual meetings more engaging and cut down on fatigue:

1. Give crucial information in advance

In many workplaces, remote meetings have become a way to share information, instead of a place for making decisions or hashing out ideas. The result is tedium: "Passive participation in a meeting makes people sleepy and leads to a 21% reduction in cognitive performance after the meeting, hurting their efficiency," said Trim.

One way to avoid boring information dumps is to share the meeting materials beforehand - that helps focus the meeting on interactive discussions rather than time-consuming slideshows and lectures.

2. Shorten meetings and take breaks

It's critical to manage the length and structure of remote meetings to keep them effective. People generally start getting sleepy within 10 minutes, our research shows, and drowsiness increases significantly after 30 minutes.

"To keep people engaged, meetings should be brief and dynamic, and involve discussions, so people have a reason to get involved instead of listening passively. Lengthy monologues or reading directly from slides can frustrate people and make their attention drift, making them sleepy."

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3. Warn people about multitasking

If people feel like the meeting isn't relevant to them, they might start checking their email or doing other things, especially if their camera is turned off. When participants in our study felt disengaged—that the meeting content didn't require their effort—they were 43% more likely to multitask. When participants saw their manager multitasking, they boosted their own multitasking behavior by 30%.

The simplest way to avoid this is just ask people not to multitask. Also try giving meetings interactive elements like a chat or breakout-room discussions to encourage active participation.

4. Make it easy to give nonverbal cues

Facial expressions and other nonverbal cues play a vital role in delivering feedback during in-person conversations. Without those cues, people feel isolated and lose the sense of a shared experience.

"Virtual meetings can be a disaster if people are facing a screen full of black boxes with initials. Our analysis indicates that engagement and alertness levels in meetings decrease by 23% when participants' cameras are turned off, as opposed to meetings conducted with cameras on," said Trim.

The best way to counter the problem is to keep their cameras on during virtual meetings, so the speaker can get nonverbal feedback. Likewise, reaction emojis can quickly and non-verbally express a feeling. The "raise hand" feature can also be used as a cue.

5. Hide your picture from yourself but not from others

Staring at your own image is distracting and heightens self-consciousness. People become more aware of, and concerned with, their own appearance and actions, leading to increased anxiety and distraction.

"One solution: Have people hide their own image from themselves—something most virtual-meeting tools allow you to do—so they remain visible to others but don't get distracted or anxious because of their appearance," Trim concluded.

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