



Mastering Virtual Meetings

How to Run Effective Remote Meetings and Agile Events

Face-to-face communication is the most efficient and effective method of conveying information. However, there are times in which teams do not have a choice but to work entirely from home or other remote locations, which eliminates direct, face-to-face interactions among team members.

This article provides tips and tricks on how to keep your Agile events and meetings effective, even with a completely virtual workforce.

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Introduction

Open and transparent communication is at the core of the Agile approach. One of the guiding principles of the Agile manifesto is “the most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation.”¹ Using technologies like web conferencing, group chats and email isn’t as effective as direct, face-to-face interactions.

However, there are times in which people do not have a choice, but to work from home. The ongoing COVID-19 (or commonly known as Coronavirus) situation is such an example, forcing people to stay at home. For anyone accustomed to in-person interactions, making the switch to remote work can be challenging or even frustrating at times.

So, what can Agile teams and individuals do to become more effective and to keep their projects running smoothly even when their (entire) work is done remotely? This article provides tips and tricks on how to keep your Agile teams going, even in a completely virtual way of working.

Tips on how to run great virtual meetings

The challenges of running online meetings are well known, they are not unique to the Agile way of working. Here are some great tips on how to make your virtual meetings successful:

1. Preparation is key. Namely:

a. Consider preparing agenda ahead of time. Well-planned virtual meetings can minimize presentation length, improve engagement of participants and lead to success.

b. Test the technology beforehand. Nothing kills momentum at the start of a meeting like a 10-minute delay because people need to download software packages, can’t get the video to work, etc. Prior to a virtual meeting, all participants should test the technology and make sure they know how to use it and are comfortable with the main features.

c. Plan a little extra time (usually 5-10 minutes) into your schedule to accommodate for any unforeseen technical issues, such as issues with screen sharing, audio or video.

2. Stick to meeting basics. Prior to the virtual meeting, send an agenda with the items to be discussed and with clear objectives. During the session, set meeting ground rules, use the agenda, take short breaks if a meeting is longer than 1 hour, and clearly outline next steps or action points at the end of the meeting.

3. Keep a close eye on the time and the agenda. Ensure a focused, timeboxed meeting to keep everyone’s attention and make it beneficial to all participants.

4. Have a dedicated meeting facilitator. Make sure that either the organizer or someone else in the call is ready to facilitate the meeting to avoid awkward silences and losing time. This person takes care of screen sharing and engages the group.

5. Use video. To make people feel like they are all in the “same room”, use video conferencing rather than traditional conference dial-ins with just audio. An exception to this can be virtual meetings with a very large number of people, for which using video results in poor connectivity.

6. Call on people (unless it is a meeting with a very large number of participants). Getting everyone to participate without talking over each other is one of the most challenging aspects of running a virtual meeting. To avoid this, calling on individuals to speak by virtually “going around the table” can be a good approach. Some software packages even allow attendees to “raise a hand” if they want to, which can help the facilitator to include an introverted participant’s views.

7. Use an icebreaker. Reinforcing interpersonal relationships is important when people are working from home and may feel isolated. Hence, some type of “check in” is in order to create a sense of human connection.

8. Create a recording of your meeting, if possible, to ensure that no one is left behind. This tip is especially useful when not all expected participants are present. Having a recording is also valuable to ensure peace of mind if someone experiences a technical issue, such as loss of connection or audio. Just make sure there are no privacy issues/unwillingness of some participants to record the meeting. Alternatively, a moderator/facilitator can take notes during the meeting, which can later be shared with the missing participants.

9. Remind and encourage team members to use chat tools throughout the day, such as Microsoft Teams, Skype, Slack or others. To promote this, make sure formal online calls during the day are limited.

10. Be mindful of all unique issues which might arise in virtual meetings. For example, to accommodate for sound delays, make sure you speak slowly and pause a little longer after asking questions to give participants enough time to answer. Furthermore, because distracting sounds can disrupt a meeting, it is a good practice for participants to be muted until they have something to say or until it is time for an open discussion (this can be set as a meeting ground rule, see point 2 above).

The tips above are not exhaustive at all, but those are some practical ways on how to improve everyone’s experience in a virtual meeting format.

Tips on tools for conducting virtual meetings

At BlinkLane Consulting we are not affiliated with any specific tool provider and we don’t receive any benefits for recommending them. Based on our experience and what we have seen working great for clients, we would like to mention some of the tools that can be used in a remote working environment. Some of the nice features of these tools are highlighted to allow you to make a more informed decision on the best tool to use.

1. The recommended tools for video conferencing are Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, Zoom and Webex. If privacy and security are a point of concern for your organization, Microsoft Teams or Skype for Business are the tools to use. Bear in mind though that Skype for Business Online will retire in 2021 and is currently in process of being replaced by Microsoft Teams. Zoom, on the other hand, has a great breakout session capability which allows you to split your Zoom meeting in separate sessions/breakout rooms. This is great for larger groups to allow for a more personalized interaction. The Gallery View, which lets you see everyone in the meeting at once, and the opportunity to change your virtual background in Zoom are some other great features. Also, Zoom is much less resource hogging than Microsoft Teams.

2. Microsoft Teams, Skype, Slack and other messaging platforms are effective for organizing side discussions and chatting.

3. Use platforms for interactive discussions and team collaboration with online whiteboards including Microsoft Whiteboard, Miro and MURAL. Moreover, if you are not using issue tracking tools such as Jira, those could be great tools for teams to manage their Agile boards.

a. Microsoft Whiteboard is part of Office 365 and is secured (for companies concerned about storing sensitive data).

b. Miro is a collaborative whiteboard platform available on any device (iOS, Android, Mac, Windows) and through its Web interface. Miro is easy to use, has a video chat feature and has a nice voting feature which lets each user vote on designated objects.

c. MURAL is a great online whiteboard for remote, multi-member team meetings, but can only be used through its Web interface. MURAL gives great control to facilitators who could, for example, take the whole group to a specific part of the canvas (using the “Follow me” feature). Moreover, MURAL offers 90 days of its full capabilities for free to anyone signing up on the platform for the first time.

4. Jira and Microsoft Azure DevOps are great tools to be used for Agile project management and issue tracking. If you do not need the comprehensive features that these tools provide, you could opt for Trello or Microsoft Planner to have a customizable Kanban to manage your backlog and track status of your issues.

How to optimize the remote Agile events

While the tips above are applicable to all virtual meetings, some specific guidance can be shared on how to improve the Agile events when conducted remotely. The Agile events refer to the time-boxed, prescribed events in Scrum, used to create regularity and to minimize the need for meetings not defined in Scrum.² Many companies employing an Agile way of working call them “rituals”, “ceremonies” or simply Agile/Scrum meetings. The Agile events include the Sprint Planning, Daily Scrum (also called the Daily Stand-up), Sprint Review and

Sprint Retrospective. For the sake of completeness, the Product Backlog Refinement will be added to this list, even though it is not a Scrum ceremony, but an ongoing process during a Sprint.

Below you find specific tips per Agile event. Each of the Agile ceremonies is listed with its typical duration. However, bear in mind that the length of your specific Agile events may be different depending on how long your Sprints are and other factors. The duration mentioned below concerns Sprints of 2 weeks.

Sprint Planning: 60-120 minutes

The Sprint Planning can be especially difficult with team members working remotely, due to the detailed work that is involved and that needs to be documented. Below are some tips on how to improve your remote Sprint planning meetings:

1. Use agile project management tools such as Jira to do your planning. For Scrum teams, the moderator screenshares the backlog of the Scrum Board in Jira and opens each user story that is being discussed.
2. Document decisions and the outcome of the meeting:
 - a. If the planning is done directly in Jira (or a similar tool), the Sprint Backlog will contain the planned backlog items as well as the Sprint Goal.
 - b. If your company does not have any tooling available for the teams, it is important to make sure someone keeps track of the discussions and takes notes which can then be shared with the group.
 - c. It is a good idea to record the virtual meeting, especially if there are team members that cannot be present during the Sprint Planning.
3. If needed, use tools such as PlanningPoker.com for story estimations, but preferably this should happen earlier during the refinement sessions.

Daily Scrum: 15 minutes

Some tips for remote daily stand-ups include:

1. The Active Sprints view in Jira works well for a Daily Scrum. The facilitator screenshares Jira Active Sprints screen and moves the stories around at the request of the person who is speaking. Team members should be explicit about these actions. Unlike the physical Scrum board, the facilitator can “control” the online board in a virtual setting to avoid any syncing issues, especially considering everyone is working from home.
2. It is easy to violate 15-minute timebox of the meeting when people are dialing in. Make sure people join on time and park any kind of detailed content/technical discussions for “call after” between relevant team members.

Sprint Review: 60 minutes

The Sprint Review is one of the most challenging Agile ceremonies to do remotely because of the preparation required (team members to be ready to demo their completed work) and the larger number of participants (all important stakeholders are present in this meeting). Here are some handy tips:

1. Do not underestimate the importance of this meeting, especially when it is harder to do it remotely. A successful Sprint Review meeting builds confidence among stakeholders across the organization and boosts team morale.
2. Unlike the other virtual Scrum ceremonies, the Product Owner is better suited to moderate this meeting, but he should be supported by the Scrum Master and the team members.
3. The Product Owner opens the virtual meeting and tells the stakeholders what the team completed during the last Sprint (“done” items) and what has not been “Done”.
4. The development team demonstrates the “done” functionality during the demo. The Product Owner can also do the demo, but it is preferable that team members take ownership and communicate directly with stakeholders and get direct feedback from them.
5. To limit the probability of encountering technical issues during the meeting, it is recommended that the team perform one dry run beforehand (especially if it is about demoing software functionality).
6. Ensure someone (ideally, the Product Owner) is documenting any feedback or action items.
7. Preferably, the meeting should be recorded to have the opportunity to review it later if needed.

Sprint Retrospective: 30-60 minutes

Below are a few useful tips on how to conduct this meeting successfully in a remote way:

1. The Sprint Retrospective might be the first Scrum event team members would like to cancel in a virtual setting in order to reduce the number of meetings. Make sure this does not happen, otherwise the team can never improve.
2. Tooling plays a crucial role here. There is a wide variety of ways on how to conduct the Sprint Retrospective. Here are some simple suggestions:
 - a. Use tools such as IdeaBoardz or Microsoft Whiteboard to collect feedback and document ideas. IdeaBoardz is an awesome tool for retrospectives, it allows team members to write post-its on a virtual wall for what went well and what didn't go well during the last Sprint. In the end, the team can write

action items (again in the form of virtual post-its) about the most important items that didn't go well. Ideaboardz offers the participants the opportunity to vote on the cards/stickers present on the board.

b. Use interactive formats such as presentation tools (e.g. Mentimeter), whiteboards (e.g. MS Whiteboard or Miro) and breakout rooms (e.g. using Zoom).

c. Use "Start, Stop, Continue" method in Trello, Microsoft Planner (or other Kanban tools) or simply use Excel for a very simple action-oriented retrospective.

3. Make sure improvement actions items are captured in the agile project management tooling used by your company (e.g. Jira).

Product Backlog Refinement

Below are a few tips on how to do it properly in a remote environment.

1. Use online tools such as PlanningPoker.com or PlanITPoker.com for collaborative story estimations.

2. Make sure that at the end of the virtual meeting the scope of each discussed story is clear, including acceptance criteria. During the meeting the Scrum Master should capture all necessary information for each story in Jira or the agile project management tool used by your organization.

3. The meeting can sometimes be very long (more than 1 hour), so make sure you schedule enough breaks to ensure all participants are focused and productive during the video conference call.

Social contact

Working from home for an extended period of time, as it is now the case due to the COVID-19 outbreak, can make people feel isolated. We miss the social interactions we usually have with our colleagues: greeting everyone in the office, the small talk at the coffee corner, the lunches, the Friday's drinks. Working remotely does not mean there is nothing we can do to improve the feeling of social distancing. Here are some ideas on how to keep the morale high and keep in touch with your colleagues.

The lunch

If you miss the social interaction with your colleagues, set up an open video conference call for your colleagues to join. You can have a chat while having your lunch at the kitchen table at home. There are many tools that can be used for that purpose – Microsoft Teams, Skype, Zoom are just a few examples.

The drinks

Yes, it is true that drinks in person are always better. But having a video channel to “drink” a beer or a glass of wine with team members or colleagues is better than nothing. At BlinkLane we have virtual drinks or virtual pub quizzes (the latter is a good alternative to the physical beer ping pong) on Fridays at 17:00 and it is a lot of fun.

Coffee roulette

You miss meeting people at the coffee corner? No problem! At BlinkLane, we have introduced the concept of a coffee roulette. We schedule a video channel twice a week in a virtual kitchen. Colleagues can simply dial in and come together to have a chat with each other. If you hate being in a call with hundreds of people talking at the same time, that is also not a problem! Simply use the breakout functionality of Zoom, which allows you to have a small breakout coffee room with only a few colleagues.

Remote live workout

Difficult to find the work-life balance while working at home? Not possible to go to the sport center because all gyms are closed due to the COVID-19 outbreak? At BlinkLane we have introduced BlinkFit. It is basically a live remote workout session with one person leading the exercises. It allows all participants to exercise while watching each other using the Gallery View in Zoom and stay fit!

Conclusion

Working remotely is currently inevitable due to the COVID-19 crisis. It is true that face-to-face communication is always more efficient than a remote way of working. Productivity may take a hit in a virtual way of working, but it does not have to hurt. Following the tips above could result in successful virtual meetings and remote Agile ceremonies, which can keep remote teams functioning effectively and making them more resilient for the future. Moreover, be alert on how processes change when all team members work entirely from home. Make sure that you focus not only on work-related processes, but pay attention to the social aspect of these changes as well.

Final tips and support

Best practices for running a remote PI Planning

If you are in a scaled environment and especially if you are using the SAFe framework as part of your way of working, you should definitely check out the article my colleagues Anneleen Doornebal and Fayette Bosch wrote about best practices for running remote PI Planning events: <https://www.blinklane.com/insights/distributed-pi-planning-events/> .

Need Additional Agile/SAFe Training?

Is your company entrenched in legacy processes and outdated organizational hierarchies that impede its ability to rapidly detect and respond to changes in the marketplace? Do you want to improve productivity and quality, reduce time to market and raise employee engagement? For remote teams and individuals, getting a good Agile training can be challenging, especially if the shift to being remote has been recent or too abrupt.

[Gladwell Academy](#) trains professionals at the intersection of management, IT and innovation. It is largest provider of (Scaled) Agile trainings in Europe and is currently offering excellent completely remote training courses.

Need support for your Agile/SAFe transformation?

If you are planning a big change in your organization or if you are undergoing a large-scale Agile/SAFe transformation and need support, [BlinkLane Consulting](#) is here to help. We have extensive experience in providing advice in organizational transformation and executing big change initiatives for large organizations.

Sources:

¹ Beck, K., et al. (2001). Principles behind the agile manifesto. Agile Manifesto. Available: <https://agilemanifesto.org/principles.html>

² Schwaber, K., & Sutherland, J. (2017). The Scrum Guide: The Definitive Guide to Scrum: The Rules of the Game. Available: [scrum.org](https://www.scrum.org)

ABOUT BLINKLANE CONSULTING

BlinkLane Consulting is an advisory firm founded in 2007. In our 12-year lifespan, we have evolved together with our clients. We continuously innovate our services to keep delivering the value our clients need in order to deal with today's challenges. We help our clients increase business value from IT investments, achieve higher enterprise agility, be innovative, and transform their organizations for the future. We are currently focusing on the following themes:

- Scaling Agile
- Strategic Flow
- Continuous Innovation
- Reinventing HR

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