

Value Proposition for In-Person Attendance at Standards Development Meetings

Introduction

The traditional model of face-to-face only physical meetings for standards development is now one of several options for consensus bodies to conduct their work. Technology and, in particular, web-based meeting platforms have enabled new modes of virtual participation for standards development activity and collectively provide multiple ways for members to engage in the work.

Virtual meetings can be efficient from a time and cost perspective if the work is discrete and can be achieved in an online environment in less than 3 hours. If the work will take much longer to complete, a physical meeting will be more efficient overall. For example, a three-day physical meeting (24 hours of meeting time) will generally accomplish much more than a series of eight (8) virtual meetings lasting three (3) hours each. Further, many of the benefits realized from physical meetings are not well replicated or do not achieve the same level of effectiveness in virtual meetings.

Factors that justify this approach include:

1. **Efficiency.** A physical meeting's administrative formalities at the start and end of the meeting will occur once for a 3-day meeting; a virtual meeting would have start and end formalities for each 3-hour session, possibly taking 30 minutes out of each session (and 4 hours over the series).
2. **Engagement.** It is burdensome on meeting leaders and meeting attendees to prepare in advance for each meeting; there is a risk that there is not the same enthusiasm for preparation prior to each virtual meeting in a series versus a single physical meeting. This can result in lower net engagement and output from the meeting.
3. **Communication.** Communication between an individual and other meeting participants is enhanced by non-verbal communication such as body language and facial expression; the use of humor and other 'soft skills' greatly facilitate effective communication, especially during intense technical or contentious issues. These cues are lost with virtual meetings.
4. **Participation.** Physical meetings can have a greater level of participation as the participant's focus is more likely to be the meeting discussions rather than other distractions. Virtual meetings encourage participants to multi-task with other matters during the meeting, resulting in less engagement in meeting discussions.
5. **Team building.** Coffee and lunch breaks during a physical meeting, as well as networking receptions and group dinners, provide opportunities for networking i.e., personal/business interactions with fellow participants. This can create a bond that lasts for years or decades and helps advance meeting progress through shared understanding and connection. Coffee and lunch breaks in virtual meetings are typically lone affairs with no interaction between attendees.
6. **Retention.** Many long-term participants have known fellow attendees for many years, or even many decades. These relationships help meetings achieve their goals much quicker. Virtual meetings do not allow the same level of interaction, making it more difficult to recruit and retain new participants in standards development.
7. **Inclusivity.** Physical meeting participants originating from regions with different time zones expect to be working in the time zone of the meeting; virtual participants do not feel as eager to join meetings outside of their normal working day.
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9. **Complexity.** Hybrid meetings, i.e., comprising of both physical and virtual participants, present unique challenges for meeting management and facilitating engagement, adding multiple layers of complexity to effective collaboration. However, it is recognized that physical travel is not always feasible due to budgetary constraints, home-based commitments and/or travel restrictions.

Recommendation

Standards development meetings that have an agenda that is expected to require a day or more of meeting time should preferably be held as a physical meeting. An interim meeting with a limited agenda that is expected to be completed within 3 hours should be held as a virtual meeting.

Hybrid meetings should be the least-favorable option, but virtual attendance at a physical meeting should be permitted where meeting arrangements and technology will allow. In these cases, it should be emphasized that it is primarily a physical meeting.

Approved by Committee on Standards Strategy (CSS) of the Association for the Advancement of Medical Instrumentation (AAMI) – December 4, 2023.