Accommodating Cognitive and Perceptual Disabilities During Virtual Meetings

Guide for Nebraska VR Staff

This guide is a companion to the VRIS Manual Chapter on Virtual Meetings: Hosting/Initiating a Virtual Meeting.

In scheduling and hosting meetings with our clients, coworkers and others, it is equally important to ensure cognitive accessibility in the virtual meeting “space” as it is to ensure our in-person meetings are conducted in barrier-free locations. This guide is designed to assist as you prepare for virtual meetings with clients or plan to host a meeting with several participants.

We have all likely experienced “Zoom Fatigue” after a day spent in lengthy meetings, staring at the computer screen. Virtual meetings present additional challenges for the individual with a cognitive or perceptual disability. Cognitive disabilities include (but are not limited to) autism, brain injury, developmental and intellectual disabilities, mental health and learning disabilities. Perceptual disabilities include those presented by visual and auditory processing disorders, such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dyspraxia, visual impairments, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and hearing impairments.

A virtual meeting is not fully accessible to the individual with a cognitive or perceptual disability if it results in any of the following challenges:

* being overwhelmed by too much information or too many faces on the screen
* difficulty hearing or seeing other participants
* problems with the size, volume or complexity of text presented on the screen
* being distracted from the conversation or presentation by extraneous sights or sounds
* having issues with log in and authentication on the virtual platform
* cognitive fatigue – a decrease in cognitive energy that occurs from focusing on sustained cognitive demands, not associated with sleepiness or physical fatigue

Not all virtual meeting platforms offer the same accessibility features in the same way. As a virtual meeting host, it is best practice for you to become familiar with the features of each platform available for your use. And more importantly, please understand that making your meetings accessible to participants with cognitive or perceptual disabilities requires more than just an accessible platform. Preparing well before your meeting, and using some time-tested strategies during your meeting will pay off in the end. Here are some suggestions:

Before the meeting:

* Ask yourself if a virtual meeting is really necessary, or if using a good, old-fashioned phone call instead might be appropriate and accomplish the same objectives.
* When scheduling, ask each participant if they require any accommodations to participate in the meeting, and if they have any problems using the virtual meeting platform or technology.
* For participants with hearing impairments, arrange for an interpreter or for captioning as requested if it is not a feature included within the virtual meeting platform you plan to use.
* If your meeting will involve reviewing written materials as a group, send them to the participants prior to the meeting, making sure the documents are 508 compliant and accessible to screen reader technology if any participants have disclosed visual impairments.
* Be mindful of the possibility of poor or inconsistent internet connections and provide phone numbers to join via the phone if needed.
* Keep your virtual meetings as small as possible, and as focused and as short as possible.
* Allow for extra time for participants to log in, and for any technical difficulties.
* Establish clear beginning and end times and stick to them.
* Arrange a calm, professional, clutter-free background behind you.
* Select workspace lighting that keeps your face and facial expressions visible to participants.
* Consider how your own body language and non-verbal cues can set the tone for the meeting. Practice a “welcoming” posture, and use your eye contact, facial expressions and hand gestures to create an atmosphere in which all participants feel their input is valued.

During the meeting:

* Cancel all audible alerts on your end so they don’t distract participants, and ask others to do so as well.
* For large group meetings, establish ground rules for introductions, handing off speaking rights to the next person, etc.
* For the benefit of those with visual impairments, instruct participants to briefly describe their appearance as they introduce themselves, and describe any documents or items displayed on the screen.
* Clearly signal when the topic of conversation changes.
* Ask for visual confirmation of agreement or understanding (nodding heads, thumbs up, notes in the chatbox, etc.)
* For the benefit of those with hearing impairments, be careful not to cover your mouth when speaking
* Check in and summarize decision points in the conversation often.
* Allow for more than one method of communication (use the questions pane or chat box, etc.).
* Give participants the option to avoid the gallery view if too many faces are overwhelming.
* Don’t ask participants to share their computer desktop unless they feel comfortable doing so.
* Summarize and repeat key points before moving on to the next topic.
* Allow time for at least one five-minute break for each hour of the meeting.
* Summarize and repeat key points at the end before closing.
* Offer to send a written summary and copy of the chat box to participants after the meeting.

Here are some additional tips to share with your virtual meeting participants to help them prepare to make the most of your meeting:

* + Use the largest screen available (avoid using smartphone screens that are too small).
  + Adjust the computer display to:
    - Increase font size
    - Enlarge the entire screen
    - Dim screen brightness
    - Try alternative screen colors
    - Contrast desktop screen from light to dark
  + Computer blue light blocking glasses may help reduce eye fatigue.
  + Reduce screen glare by sitting away from windows or bright lights.
  + Remember to look away from the screen periodically to give eyes a rest for a short time.
  + Reduce visual clutter in the room and on the surface the laptop or computer rests on.
  + For individuals with visual field neglect, provide cues to scan the entire screen.