

minuteTakers

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BEST PRACTICES

VIRTUAL MEETINGS

Meetings held Electronically may now be the New 'Best Practices' Standard.

By Scarlett Guy: Published Canadian Condominium Institute 'CondoVoice' Winter 2020

Attention all condominium directors: Your monthly Board meetings are not social events! Same goes for your annual owner meetings. These are business meetings that are held to make important decisions on behalf of your corporation.

In recent months, most condominium Boards have been holding their meetings virtually. Although the condominium community has been slow to embrace this technology, after some early resistance the COVID-19 pandemic initially made virtual meetings the only way for condominium Boards to continue conducting the business of their corporations. So now that you've become more familiar with the virtual format, does it really make sense from a best practice standpoint to return to in-person meetings?

In-Person Format

Over the past 30+ years of taking minutes at hundreds of thousands of condominium Board meetings, I have observed behaviours that simply do not occur at meetings of corporate and professional organizations. For instance, in many cases the Board members gather to eat their dinner together, with directors straggling in at various times and a lot of munching goes on after the meeting's call to order. From this casual social starting point, you can imagine how the rest of the meeting transpires: gossiping, directors asking the manager to help them catch up on material that should have been reviewed in advance, frequent segues to other topics, extended debate on items that clearly are in need of more information before a proper decision can be made, side conversations etc. resulting in a significant amount of wasted and unproductive time.

Likewise, meetings of owners are often 'railroaded' by one or two unruly people who refuse to observe proper decorum or respect, much to the chagrin of the hapless chair who is unable to maintain order. This often results in the need for security staff or police to defuse the situation or to escort the person out of the meeting, with much wasted time and emotions running high. In some cases, the meeting cannot proceed at all and is closed down by the chair, leading to additional costs to reschedule the meeting to conclude the unfinished business.

Finally, I've lost track of the number of times that I've sat in the proximity of someone suffering from a cold or other communicable ailment, resulting in a miserable week or so as I too need to recover from such exposure.

Virtual Format

The benefits of virtual meetings are numerous. To name a few:

- **Accessible**: Virtual meetings can be attended in many ways, from anywhere. For participants with a reasonable internet connection, it only takes one or two clicks to join a videoconference-style meeting with a laptop computer, desk computer with camera and microphone, tablet, or smartphone. For those without internet or technology devices, it is possible to connect with a telephone. Although telephone would not be able to view screen images, they can still fully participate with audio.

- Flexible: A virtual format allows for increased availability and enhanced flexibility in timing of meetings. For most participants, there is no longer the need to wait until returning from work or after dinner to hold the meeting, and foul weather, rush hour traffic or sneeze/sniffles no longer is a barrier. More meetings can be held during the day so that managers can get home to their families at a reasonable hour. From the minute-taking perspective, a recording secretary can possibly cover more meetings consecutively on busy days when multiple groups want to meet on the same day.
- Quorum: Virtual Board and Committee meetings nearly always achieve 100% attendance as geography, travel time and many other factors are no longer an issue. Non-resident owners are particularly grateful they can join in at their Annual General Meeting without physically traveling to the site.
- Productive: Participants review the meeting materials in advance and at the meeting, the focus is on the issue at hand without distraction. This facilitates a good decision.
- Efficient: Participants are obliged to speak one at a time, which allows the meeting to proceed in an orderly fashion. From our experience, most meetings are concluded much more quickly, which often eliminates overtime charges for many corporations.
- Screen Sharing: For meetings held via videoconference, draft budgets, last-minute quotes and other documents not available in advance can be shared so all can see. Alternatively, such documents can be quickly sent via email to audio-only attendees.
- Cost-effective: A virtual meeting often saves on expenses such as refreshments, paper/copier costs, and overtime charges.
- Health: There is no transmission of colds, flu and other communicable diseases.
- Safety: A virtual meeting reduces the potential for traffic accidents caused by inclement weather or other road conditions, or trip and falls on corporation property.
- Environmentally Friendly: Paper waste is nearly or completely eliminated; same goes for vehicle emissions arising from multiple people travelling to meetings.
- Protective: Residents may not be comfortable having a non-resident meeting guest or recording secretary admitted to the building and travelling through the common areas, using the elevator, etc. It should be kept in mind that a typical recording secretary could potentially attend 10 to 20 meetings per month. Do the math and you will quickly realize that the potential exposure for one recording secretary in one month's time is easily 100 people. A virtual format completely eliminates this issue.

Hybrid Format

A 'hybrid' format is essentially an in-person meeting, with some participants attending electronically. While this may appear to be a good compromise, experience has shown that it is actually the least desirable method. First of all, the health and safety of in-person attendees could potentially be compromised. Second, the meeting room needs to be equipped with a microphone, camera, screen, and internet access. Often there is audio feedback if multiple computers are used in the same room, and those who attend remotely often have difficulty hearing everything if a cell phone is set up in the middle of the table (and there's the conundrum as to who is willing to have their phone exposed in this manner?) Thirdly and most problematic are the audibility challenges associated with this format. Participants connected remotely often have trouble hearing the various speakers in the meeting room, with the added challenge of breaking in to add their comments, as the conversation tends to be concentrated among the people gathered together in the room. Further, those connected remotely experience added frustration when in-person participants talk over one another or engage in side conversations.

Tips for a Successful Virtual Meeting

Here are some tips to help meetings run smoothly via video or audio conference:

- Ideally, each participant should have stable internet access, and as far as possible, use a device that optimizes participation at the meeting. However, if all else fails, a clear telephone connection will be required.
- Prior to the meeting, the Manager should email the Board and minute-taking company a copy of the full meeting package, such as the Agenda, Management Report and attachments, and encourage participants to read through the material before the meeting. This will help all meeting participants follow the meeting.
- The Chair should take "attendance" at the beginning of the meeting, with each Member to state their name so the recording secretary can accurately capture who attended the meeting.
- The Recording Secretary will introduce him/herself at the beginning of the meeting and then mute their line to reduce background noise.
- The Chair should advise participants of the "rules" of the meeting:
 - Reduce distractions (children/pets).
 - Have a simple background if attending via videoconference.
 - Motioners/Seconders should each state their name. The Chair should clearly confirm whether the vote passed.
 - When an action item is given, state who is responsible to carry out the directive.
 - Be respectful of fellow attendees and allow them to speak in turn.
- The Chair can then invite the Manager to review their report one item at a time; pausing after each item to clarify any consent, decision or follow-up direction.

Best Practices

At the time of writing this article, I have seen a rush by some condominium sites to return to in-person meetings. This is very puzzling. Is such a risk worth taking? Is it socially responsible? In terms of the safety of your residents, directors, and other meeting participants such as property manager, recording secretary, and industry professionals that would ordinarily be travelling from various areas of the city, do you want them bringing whatever they may have been exposed to, into your condominium? Is the old way of doing things so much better than the new way of holding meetings?

In accordance with current workplace legislation, condominium Boards are responsible for ensuring that the property manager, minute-taker and other professionals attending their meetings can perform their tasks in a stress-free and safe environment. A virtual meeting allows 100% protection against the transmission of various infectious ailments. Further, as travelling to meetings is no longer necessary, traffic accidents and vehicle emissions are significantly reduced, resulting in a safer and healthier environment for the collective community.

Hopefully you will agree that the virtual meeting format is the 'best practice' standard for both the current period of our history, and into our long-term future as well!