



Questions to help ramp up informal virtual connection

1. How well is formal virtual connection working for you (e.g. formal meetings)?
2. What aspects of technology and business practice contribute to positive virtual meeting outcomes? What aspects are less helpful?
3. Thinking of pre-COVID times, what were the various opportunities in your own context for informal connection? Describe each, including how often they occurred and the kind of outcomes they delivered.
4. With formal and informal connection in mind, are there ways you could make some time for informal connection as part of regular meetings? [For example, many teams now do a short 5-10 min 'connecting' ice-breaker activity before getting into the formal part of the meeting.]
5. How could you use existing technology to promote more informal connections in your own context, as described in Question 3? [For example, could the team encourage one-on-one informal video connection, say between 10am and 12pm, even a couple of times a week. Colleagues would welcome an informal video drop in for a watercooler like conversation.]

COVID-19 WHY INFORMAL CONNECTION IS VITAL FOR WORKING VIRTUALLY

People who can be working at home in large numbers

UGM's recent COVID-related research into 'Working from Home' confirmed that many who can work from home are doing so. Additionally, numerous businesses are insisting their people work from home as much as possible. Some of that has to do with minimising the chance of people becoming ill – not good for the individuals concerned or for business continuity. Additionally, some organisations are concerned about legal risks from people falling ill, having been compelled to attend where work could be done remotely.

Regardless of the reason, no one in the UGM study attends work for more than 50% of their time, and many work almost completely from home. This is significantly different from pre-COVID, where a sizeable portion never worked from home (36%) and another large group (24%) only did so infrequently.

One of the consequences is that people are rather inexperienced working remotely. This mode of work is quite different from being at the official workplace. Furthermore, they're interfacing with colleagues who are in the same situation and therefore also ill-equipped to be able to offer experienced counsel.

Personal connection an overwhelming concern

Unsurprisingly, almost all respondents (94%) mentioned concerns about connecting personally. While there seems to be no shortage of virtual meetings, people note that these are usually formal. What they're missing most is the opportunity to connect informally with others. For example, there isn't a chance to arrive early at a meeting and have a word with someone on the side.

Colleagues who may have walked together, to or from their meeting, cannot do that virtually. In fact, one of the critical COVID-context errors is loading up schedules with too many back-to-back meetings. No time for reflection or mental preparation for the new meeting. There is, therefore, also a case for fewer formal meetings, especially where the number of people involved inhibits informality.

Another core piece of UGM's research portfolio is the Contributing-Belonging model, which underscores that people go to work to derive a sense of belonging (including connection). They do this by having their contributions valued by colleagues. Of course, businesses benefit when this occurs because contributions (outputs) increase. Virtuous contributing-belonging cycles are good for everyone!

Also, a wide range of productivity, innovation and resilience studies show that informal connection, exemplified by the classic 'water-cooler conversation', yields dividends for organisations.

Vitality, these exchanges are informal, rather than formal. They often happen unintentionally and the outcome is changed thinking. Trying to formalise such events misses out on the essential ingredient, the 'spark' from spontaneity.

Technique and technology can bridge the gap

Most organisations have succeeded in quickly ramping up their formal meeting platforms, largely because there was already some technology in place, even if it focused more on the physically collocated. There has been a remarkably quick pivot from accommodating small groups in different office locations to connecting individuals from many locations, often their home. In fact, with Zoom technology, UGM has been successfully running strategy and development workshops for clients located in home offices around the country and even overseas.

Now, people and organisations need to find ways of using available technologies to increase the amount of informal connection. While newer technology is sure to develop, the changes needed right now are perhaps harder – people will need to change the way they're used to working.

This fear of the unknown undoubtedly plagued many senior managers in pre-COVID times – a lack of experience managing virtually was daunting, even terrifying, so they fought it tooth and nail. Yet, even with the massive shift to virtual, to keep businesses going in COVID times, the business sky did not fall in. Sure, there were, and still are, some bumps along the way. But, on the flip side, there are many, many more positive outcomes from this big, unforeseen working virtually experiment. So, why discard it?

Switching to virtual isn't actually that difficult to change, since it's a lot more about adjusting old skills than replacing them with completely new ones. Since dramatic change has already occurred under challenging COVID conditions, it will surely be a lot easier to cement the positive outcomes by adapting work technique and technology just a little more to ensure that where you do your work doesn't matter. Everyone, not just managers, will need to make changes appropriate for their context.

Ramping up informal connection

UGM recommends you work with colleagues to find new ways to connect informally. To start, you'll probably need to create a formal time for this to happen, but don't try and engineer the interpersonal connections that occur. For example, get random groups of people from across the business together virtually, in small groups, to discuss a particular topic. Have the focus on building informal connection rather than on the topic of discussion, which is simply the vehicle for meeting others.