

Getting the best out of virtual HR casework meetings

When the Government's lockdown suddenly fell upon us, we all scrambled to find new ways of working. One of our HR consultant tells us his experience of holding virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic and how to get the best out of them.

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Paul Miner, a consultant in Browne Jacobson's in-house HR Services team, reflects on his experience of holding virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic and how to get the best out of them.

When the Government's lockdown suddenly fell upon us towards the end of March 2020, we all scrambled to find new ways of working. For us in Browne Jacobson's HR consultancy team, one of the key challenges was how we could continue with those essential employment meetings that managers need to have with their staff from time to time, such as disciplinary and grievance hearings, performance management and capability discussions etc., without physically being able to engage with each other in an office or meeting room. We met with some resistance initially, but postponing hearings until normal working life could be resumed was unlikely to be a realistic or workable solution, even if social distancing restrictions were only to last three weeks. As it happens, we are now a further six-months-and-counting down the road, and social distancing still dictates that physical meetings should be avoided if possible and certainly minimised. The solution was, and remains, conducting such meetings by video call. To be fair, most people have now accepted this and initial opposition to attending virtual meetings has melted away – although even in the early days of the lockdown, if you held your ground and showed firm intent to hold such a meeting (with or without union attendance), I found employees would invariably back down and agree to attend.

I must confess, I had never heard of Zoom or Microsoft Teams (and all the other variations of the same thing) until March 2020, but they are now a normal feature of HR working life, none more so than as a means of conducting those employment meetings we had always previously assumed had to take place in person. The transition from the physical to the virtual disciplinary, grievance, capability etc. meeting/hearing has been bumpy at times and below I share my experiences and tips about how both the practical and human 'bumps in the road' have been flattened.

As I had never used Zoom or Microsoft Teams before the lockdown, it was important to remember that the employee we were meeting with probably hadn't either. Even in the education sector, there are many employees who don't use IT much (if at all) in their job. The subject matter of the meeting would already be stressful for the individual, so undertaking the meeting virtually added another layer of stress and it was important to minimise this as much as possible. With a physical meeting, other than the stress of the subject matter, all the employee needs to know is where and when the meeting is taking place and then turn up on time, usually with their trade union representative for company – what can go wrong with that? With a virtual meeting there is a lot more to it and more that can go wrong in joining the meeting, e.g. reliability of Wi-Fi at home, reliability and suitability of the device they will be using, finding a quiet room free from disturbance etc. – and having to do it all in isolation without their accompanying representative sitting alongside.

It seems obvious, but we reasoned that sending the employee a simple and clearly written guide on what to expect in a virtual meeting - how to join it, how to prepare for it, how to conduct themselves at it, how they could take adjournments to consult with their representative etc. – would reduce anxiety. We prepared this comprehensive guide and gave it to our clients so they could enclose it with the meeting invitation letter as a matter of routine. In particular, I found employees appreciated the opportunity to join a practice meeting a day or two before the actual meeting so they could familiarise themselves with the set-up and features of Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

In the early days of the lockdown, employees may have been juggling working from home with home schooling and looking after children. Inevitably, the thought of closeting themselves away at home (if they had the space to be able to) without disturbance from their children (and dogs and cats!) could be a challenge. As mentioned above, employees were also concerned about the unreliability of their domestic Wi-Fi and generally whether they would be able to complete a meeting that may take one or two hours or more. We were able to mitigate these problems by getting the employer to consider making a Covid-secure room available on-site for the employee's use, with a reliable Wi-Fi connection and laptop. Even better, to offer a room sufficiently large enough for the employee and their representative to share in a socially distanced way, thus avoiding the isolation of a meeting at home, disturbances from other household members, and the fear of technical issues.

My experience has been that virtual meetings are far more intense than physical meetings and require a much greater degree of concentration. It is important that this is recognised, and I would recommend that breaks are programmed into the meetings, say every 45 minutes, to allow participants a regular five- or 10-minutes' downtime. Because of the inherent 'sociability' of a physical meeting involving a group of people, there was always scope to find 'space' at appropriate times during the meeting to defuse the inevitable tension, maybe with a friendly or good-humoured comment about something unconnected to the subject matter of the meeting. Such comments can be made much more easily in a physical meeting, but I would recommend that, wherever possible, you also try to do this in a virtual meeting in order to dial down the intensity. HR professionals are usually naturally sociable people and can make their contribution here. A good personal example of this is where I'd had something of an intemperate battle with a trade union representative to get a disciplinary hearing off the ground and when we actually commenced the meeting I noticed on the wall behind him a framed album cover of David Bowie's 'The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars' – one of my all-time favourite records. I took the opportunity to mention this in the introductions and it sparked a mutual appreciation that, although we may have professional disagreements, we also shared a connection. I am convinced the meeting went better than it may have done otherwise. Received wisdom is that in a virtual meeting you should consider 'blurring' your background and this may be the appropriate thing to do, but it can have its disadvantages!

It will be interesting to see when we eventually get past the pandemic whether physical meetings will come surging back. I am sure they will to an extent, but there is no doubt in my mind that properly prepared and conducted virtual meetings are here to stay, so we had better get used to them!

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