Promoting Equal Opportunities in Online Meetings

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Foreword/Preamble

Studies demonstrate that in a professional setting, statements by women receive less recognition than those of their male colleagues. This phenomenon also affects other socially disadvantaged groups such as people with migration experience, people with disabilities or those in lower hierarchical positions. These structural inequalities can lead to valuable contributions being overlooked. Moreover, those affected might feel less encouraged to actively participate in meetings.

With the shift of professional meetings to digital tools and platforms, new ways of communication emerge that need to be analysed with regards to potentially discriminatory practices. While work-related online meetings can help counteract power imbalances – for example by reducing spatial hierarchies or raising awareness of interruptions – they also carry the risk of reinforcing inequalities – for example by focusing on visual appearance or by limiting the possibility of informal exchange.

These guidelines are intended to support organisations and employees in counteracting hierarchies and power dynamics which promote inequalities. It aims to facilitate active participation in virtual meetings.

Foreword/Preamble

The information provided is based on

Findings of the study HearMeOut, which was funded by the AK Digifonds and carried out between June 2023 and December 2024 at the Institute for Advanced Studies by Dr. Laura Wiesböck and Julia Radlherr, MSc

Input from a Scientific Advisory Board consisting of

ao. Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Eva Flicker, Associate Professor at the University of Vienna, with a focus on applied organisational sociology and group dynamics,

Dr. Marita Haas, consultant for the promotion of fair working conditions and the development of strategies for equal rights

Scientific literature, which is listed in the appendix of the guide

Foreword/Preamble

The approach presented consists of measures that can be implemented:

1.   generally,
2.   before and
3.   during online meetings

in order to run virtual meetings in a way that enables equal participation.

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General Measures

Building Relationships and Trust
Sensitive Topics
Support Channel

General Measures

Building Relationships and Trust

Before meetings are held digitally, participants should be offered the possibility to get to know each other personally, e.g. in a face-to-face meeting. This allows them to build relationships and trust and enables informal dialogue between colleagues and cooperation partners. It also makes it possible to get familiar with the body language of others, which is less apparent in a virtual setting. Particularly for young professionals and newcomers it can be helpful for the first meetings and the onboarding process to take place in person. This allows for easier and more direct clarification of arising questions.

Sensitive Topics

Sensitive topics, such as resolving a conflict, performance evaluations or salary negotiations, should be discussed in person. This ensures greater confidentiality and allows for better interpretation of non-verbal signals (e.g. posture, facial expressions, gestures).

General Measures

Support Channel

An internal 'support or feedback channel', which people can turn to if they feel unsafe or discriminated against during an online meeting, can help socially disadvantaged groups to voice their concerns. For example, a designated e-mail address or a chat for (anonymous) feedback could be installed. In some organisations, an internal or external reporting facility might already exist as part of a compliance management system.

Before the Online Meeting

Clear Agenda
Technical Equipment
Minutes and Recordings
Time of Meetings
Accessibility

Before the Online Meeting

Clear Agenda

A clear agenda and structure helps participants orient themselves in the online meeting. Ideally, the agenda should be sent out to everyone several days in advance, at the latest one day before the meeting. It should be possible for participants to suggest additional adequate topics. One option is to create an 'open document' in advance, in which suggestions are collected so that the agenda is developed in a participatory manner.

Sending out the agenda in advance creates the basis for the personal preparation for the meeting and supports those who prefer to formulate ideas beforehand rather than making spontaneous contributions. Particularly in male-dominated industries, this enables women and other disadvantaged groups to formally bring their perspectives and concerns to the meeting.

Before the Online Meeting

Technical Equipment

In order to ensure equal conditions for participating in a virtual meeting, the required technical equipment (e.g. laptop, webcam, headset) must be available. People who have little or no experience with virtual conferencing tools should receive training beforehand. In addition, technical support should be set up and all participants should be informed about where to turn in case of technical difficulties before, during or after the meeting. In this way, inequalities in digital skills ('digital literacy') can be counteracted.

Minutes and Recordings

To ensure that those who are unable to attend a meeting are equally informed about the content discussed, it is highly recommended that minutes are made available. The person responsible for drafting the minutes should be nominated before the meeting. This role should rotate regularly among the participants. It can also be helpful to provide video recordings of the online meeting. However, this requires all participants to give their consent first.

Before the Online Meeting

Time of Meetings

Meeting times should be set in close consultation with the participants. In particular, the scheduling needs of people with care responsibilities should be taken into consideration in order to prevent diary conflicts. In addition, meetings should not be scheduled too tight in succession. In contrast to face-to-face meetings there is no need to travel and change locations, nevertheless, breaks should also be planned between virtual meetings to avoid screen-related overload ('technostress').

Accessibility

Before the start of an online meeting, participants should be contacted and asked whether there are any special needs (e.g. insufficient language skills, visual or hearing impairments) that require the provision of support tools (e.g. compatibility of the video conferencing software with screen readers, real-time transcription and generation of subtitles, automatic translation of the transcription). By providing such tools barriers can be diminished.

During the Online Meeting

Check-In
Camera & Video
Use of Interactive Tools
     Hand-Raising Feature
     Chat-Function
     Breakout-Rooms
     Anonymous Polls
Moderation
     Actively Including Participants
     Avoiding Interruptions
     Rendering Participants' Input Visible
     Rotating Moderation
Breaks
Ending a Meeting

During the Online Meeting

Check-In

At the start of an online meeting, introductory small talk, a question about how everyone is feeling or – in case not all participants know each other – a round of short introductions can help to build relationships and thus to improve the dynamics of the conversation. Participants can, for example, be invited to introduce themselves with their pronouns to counteract misgendering during the meeting. Especially for new participants and those who find it difficult to actively participate in meetings, a brief ice breaker at the beginning can help to make it easier to take the floor as the meeting progresses.

Camera & Video

In general, it is recommended that all cameras are switched on during the meeting. This makes it easier to keep attention and promotes the feeling that participants are actually present. It also ensures that all participants are visually represented and perceived equally, which is important especially for socially disadvantaged groups.

During the Online Meeting

At the same time, participants should be able to decide on the camera settings individually and switch the camera off if necessary. Video conferencing can be particularly stressful for people socialised as females, as they are increasingly confronted with their own appearance ('mirror anxiety'), and can get the feeling of being permanently observed ('hyper gaze').

Switching off the camera can also relieve people with caring responsibilities, for example, if children are present in the household during an online meeting and no separate workspace is available. Nevertheless, the presence and visibility of children during meetings from home should generally be accepted and not regarded as a lack of professionalism, given existing inequalities with regards to caring and living situations.

During the Online Meeting

Use of Interactive Tools

The use of interactive tools can help to ensure that all participants are equally involved in discussions and decision-making during a meeting. Integrated hand-raising features, chat functions, breakout rooms and anonymous polls can facilitate the communication for those who feel uncomfortable speaking up in a plenary session.

Hand-Raising Feature

Using the hand-raising function prevents that participants are overlooked or ignored during a meeting. Some video conferencing tools even indicate the order in which the participants raised their hands, which ensures that the order of the speakers is clearly recognisable for all participants. This reduces the risk of people being interrupted or overlooked. In addition, the hand-raising function actively signals to people who have claimed a lot of speaking time already that others should be given the possibility to take the floor as well.

During the Online Meeting

Chat-Function

The chat can be used to add small comments to the conversation without interrupting the flow. Furthermore, it can also be useful for making oneself heard and visible if this is not possible in any other way.

Breakout-Rooms

Breakout rooms offer the opportunity to first discuss ideas and views in a smaller group and afterwords present them as a group in the plenum. This can reduce barriers that often occur in larger, hierarchically organised groups, and hence promote an equal exchange.

Anonymous Polls

With the use of anonymous surveys during an online meeting it is possible to obtain the positions of all participants and respectively take them into account. Particularly in the case of sensitive and controversial decisions, anonymous polls can help people in lower hierarchical positions to find the confidence to share their opinions.

During the Online Meeting

Moderation

The moderation of an online meeting is crucial for creating an appreciative and participatory culture of dialogue. The following points in particular need to be considered:

Actively Including Participants

The moderator should actively include participants and invite them to present their perspectives and points of view on the respective topic. In particular people who have not had a chance to speak during the meeting should be explicitly asked if they would like to contribute anything to the discussion (e.g. 'Would anyone who has not had a chance to speak so far like to add something to this topic?'). In addition, actively asking about potential objections or contradictions can make it easier to express criticism without taking an explicit opposing position (e.g. 'What difficulties and disadvantages could be associated with the proposal?')

During the Online Meeting

Avoiding Interruptions

In order to give all participants the opportunity to share their ideas, it is essential to create an atmosphere in which thoughts can be elaborated and people can finish speaking before colleagues comment on them or move on to another topic. The hand-raising function can support this by regulating the order of speakers.

Nevertheless, if interruptions occur among participants, the moderator should make this interruption visible and give the floor back to the interrupted person (e.g. 'XY wanted to elaborate on the point a little further – XY, please continue!'). At the same time, the moderator should keep an eye on the distribution of speaking time and, if necessary, interrupt people who are taking up a lot of space (e.g. 'Thank you for your input – I would now like to pass the floor to XY.').

During the Online Meeting

Rendering Participants' Input Visible

Studies suggest that comments from socially disadvantaged persons (e.g. people with a low level of formal education, people of colour, queer people) generally receive less attention than those from people belonging to privileged groups. Such unequal treatment can arise due to implicit prejudices or structural power relations that still prevail in many working environments. In order to promote equal opportunities in online meetings, it is recommended to specifically emphasise comments from people who are structurally disadvantaged in terms of their visibility (e.g. 'XY's idea sounds promising and should be discussed further.'). This promotes a participatory exchange in which all participants experience recognition for their ideas, regardless of their status or identity.

Rotating Moderation

In regularly occurring meetings, the moderating role should not always be taken by the same person. Instead, it should rotate among the participants. This creates visibility for all people involved, encourages

During the Online Meeting

active participation in meetings and improves moderation skills. Moreover, a rotating moderation role can help to mitigate existing power hierarchies in conversations and discussions.

Breaks

In virtual meetings, the concentration span is often lower than in face-to-face meetings. Working in front of a screen leads to symptoms of fatigue more quickly ('zoom fatigue'). Accordingly, it is important to plan sufficient breaks during longer meetings or in-between meetings. This can not only help to avoid concentration problems, but also allows participants to pursue other necessary activities, such as comfort breaks, getting coffee or tea, physical exercise or answering important messages.

Ending a Meeting

Before an online meeting ends, it should be clarified whether there are any open questions and whether the content discussed was comprehensible to all participants. In

During the Online Meeting

a virtual setting, it is more difficult to clarify things after a meeting compared to face-to-face settings, as there are usually no informal discussions after a virtual meeting. For this reason, at the end of an online meeting, participants should be reminded whom they can contact in case any further questions or ideas arise.

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HearMeOut

Disclaimer

This guideline provides a general overview of promoting equity in online meetings without claiming to be exhaustive. The information presented serves as a guide and can be adapted depending on the context and the respective needs. We take no liability for the topicality, accuracy or completeness of the content presented.

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