



Choosing & using...

Your electronic toolkit

Tips & best practices for individual contributors & virtual teams

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Using technology effectively is one of the greatest challenges of managing virtual teams. We choose one technology over another, first of all because it is capable, rich and robust enough to perform the task we want to accomplish in our organization or to create the product we wish to deliver.

Virtual technologies however, must also fit the capabilities of our people, their cultural preferences and their need for appropriate social significance interaction. In a virtual workspace, they serve as team builders and even as status symbols.

We choose certain tools for their ability to provide us with a permanent and accessible record of what we do with them and others for their convenience and portability. It is the purpose of this paper to provide insight into this choice and tips and best practices for our use of these new tools.

The information in this document provides guidelines that may require adaptation to your particular circumstances and to new developments in technology.

Part I – Synchronous voice technologies

A. The telephone

The phone can stand in the way of virtual teaming. In many organizational cultures, executives, sales forces, and support groups resist using online technologies because the use of the phone is so close to the essence of their work. Remember it's the voice that carries emotion—empathy, influence, hints about understanding and commitment.

As we spend less time at our desks, missed phone calls increase; your cell phone (as it should be) is shut down when you are in meetings, working with a client, or at lunch. This stimulates the use of voicemail. And this makes the phone into an “asynchronous” tool.

Prefer the phone for

- Personal interactions and those with emotional overtones
- Rapid feedback and urgent situations
- Sustaining relationships and trust
- Interactions with high context individuals

Tips & best practices

1. Pay attention to time zones and customary working hours
2. Always leave a voicemail message.
3. Set aside periods of time when you do not answer the phone
4. When using a portable find privacy for yourself and do not interrupt or disturb others

B. Audio conferencing

Audio conferencing has tremendous potential for supporting a variety of virtual teaming activities. Except in the case of extreme time-zone differences, audio conferencing is an excellent choice whenever the situation calls for synchronous communication. Conferences are easy to set up, join, and use. However, if you move your traditional Monday morning status and information-sharing meeting to an audio conferencing format, you are likely to have poor results.

Audio conferences are not automated meetings. They are goal-oriented, disciplined processes for accomplishing specific work. They should be action oriented: not “Let’s talk about…” but, “We will reach a decision on…”

When to use audio conferencing

- When participants are in multiple locations.
- Reach decisions or take action on items previously developed
- Deliver and share learning
- Plan strategies
- Assess customer requirements
- As a lower cost alternative to dedicated videoconferencing
- To supplement groupware where performance is slow

When *not* to use audio conferencing

- Routine status & information sharing
- As open-ended, “sharing meetings”
- When large amounts of input and data are needed
- When language skills are low as non-verbal clues are missing

Tips & best practices

5. Use your organization’s contracted bridging service
6. Do not exceed 1.5 hours. Several shorter sessions are likely to work better than a very long one
7. Announce the start and finish
8. Manage the call as a meeting. It is not a phone chat. Focus on outcomes, not information sharing
9. Agree on turn-taking procedures and other protocol
10. Caucus and take breaks as needed
11. Create context by introducing participants or having them introduce themselves
12. Have physical or online pictures of teammates available at each site. Identify yourself and refer to others by name
13. Provide a visual map (rather than just a list) of the participants by location and time zone
14. Let participants know in advance what questions will be asked or discussed and what content they should bring or prepare
15. Distribute an agenda and as much information as possible beforehand
16. Map the participants. Establish an order for speaking and turn taking, particularly if there are more than 3 or 4 participants.
17. If there are more participants, establish a local facilitator or spokesperson at each site
18. Have a second phone line available for mid-stream faxes or have an online connection. If fax is used:
 - Fax new items and additions to the agenda to the facilitator before the call
 - Provide all fax numbers so documents can be exchanged during the call
19. Have documentation clearly marked or numbered according to topic or section (not page) for easy reference
20. Break agenda into shorter pieces and allot time slots

21. End on time. Leave time for summary, wrap up, conclusions and process
22. Follow up in appropriate media immediately or send a summary with more complete documentation to follow

Part II – Asynchronous voice technologies

C. Answering devices & voicemail

By carefully creating your voice mail announcement, you can plan to use voicemail for one-to-one and one-to-many messages. When you make any phone call, know what your brief message will be ahead of time—expect the phone won't be answered.

When to use voicemail

- Use voicemail boxes for one-way, non-sensitive messaging
- When you are not available or need not to be disturbed
- When you want a number of people to get the same voice message

Tips & best practices

23. Provide urgent access or alternative contact information for collaborators, key clients or team members as a first option if you have a long menu in place
24. Limit message to one or two topics
25. Identify self, date and time, topic, message, and callback number or requested action
26. Establish team guidelines for use of and responding to voicemail

Part III – Synchronous video & graphics technologies

D. Dedicated video conferencing

The concept of full-motion videoconferencing is seductive because it suggests that we can replicate the prized face-to-face meeting. However, videoconferencing, especially the “talking heads” variety, does not “put everyone in the same room”. In spite of the images, the medium is “cold”: existing relationships can be sustained, but new ones cannot be built. Conferences can be boring and participants easily distracted. The voice channel carries 90% of the message in videoconferences. Dedicated videoconferences require special technology and require participants to assemble in a special room or facility and thus have little portability. So, considering the high cost and effort, you may prefer alternate means.

Review the items on audio conferencing. Most apply to videoconferences as well.

When to use dedicated video

- To support team relationships when face-to-face meetings are not possible
- To further decision making and get greater buy-in than can be done in text media

Tips & best practices

27. If used for teambuilding, schedule them regularly to provide sense of continuity
28. Provide a troubleshooting checklist and tips for success poster for participants to identify problems as they occur and to manage the medium
29. A local facilitator or technician may be good to have on hand to manage the technology
30. Eliminate background noise, distractions, lighting problems

Dedicated video tips & best practices, cont.

31. Provide visuals of adequate size if they will be used. Make sure all participants can be seen
32. Do occasional process checks on the quality of the meeting and the technology
33. Define technical, team and project roles ahead of time.
34. Manage the agenda, as in the audio conference
35. Make eye contact with the camera when speaking. Imagine the camera is an important participant
36. Act and speak naturally despite being “on camera”
37. Some small talk is useful to provide context and comfort
38. Come early and make sure the people and agenda at your site are in order. This also helps to “warm up” for the meeting
39. Supplement with online threaded discussion to develop agenda and agree time and dates for the virtual meeting. File the minutes of such meeting in the news forum for general references
40. Use an “object camera” to review an object/brief document.
41. You can tape important meetings if legally and technically feasible. In fact, recordings are rarely of use later. Easy to make, they are hard to search and impractical to put on line. Audio recordings usually suffice for transcripts if needed

E. Desktop video conferencing

Desktop videoconferencing is steadily improving, but still is generally not close to the quality of dedicated videoconferencing. Lack of bandwidth causes uncomfortable delays and interrupted motion. It has the advantage of being able to provide more “ad hoc” visual contact and sharing among individuals and teams, because participants do not have to leave their workstations.

When to use desktop conferences

- To support, not create personal relationships
- Use for shorter, one-on-one or small group conferences

Tips & best practices

- In general, follow the rules for dedicated videoconferencing.
42. Stay focused on one or two outcomes.
 43. Caution participants against distracting mannerisms, movements.
 44. Assign minutes or take good notes (on both sides)

Part IV – Asynchronous text & graphics

Text and graphics are commonly integrated into and supported by a variety of applications, synchronous and asynchronous. In virtual teams some people are visual, while others are textually oriented. This difference suggests that to ensure that content is understood, both these modes must be incorporated for maximum communication.

F. Fax

It is now possible to send and receive faxes either in physical mode (the fax machine) or in computer mode (fax-modem, online fax mailbox). Use of the physical fax is declining significantly in many places.

When to use facsimile

- Security is required
- Faxes are accepted as legal document
- Faxes are best for speed, and for instant use in audio conferences.

Tips & best practices

45. Use faxes for short documents or those not requiring extensive editing
46. Fax original documents as much as possible to avoid degradation

G. E-mail

E-mail is the flagship of global connectivity. It is also the leading cause of information overload. It's a near-synchronous-to-asynchronous medium, which indicates that with e-mail you need to make clear when you expect a response. As a one-to-one or one-to-many tool it does not allow the level of interaction and dialogue needed by virtual teams. So, use e-mail, but use it judiciously.

When to use e-mail

Prefer email over the telephone to:

- Give names, addresses, dates, figures, lists, URLs
- Convey complex facts & structured info
- Ask or reply to simple questions
- Create a precise written record of a message
- Express yourself in writing if this is more comfortable for you
- End telephone tag (2 in 3 times you call, the person will be out)

Prefer email over fax when:

- There's a wide distribution list
- Recipients need to edit, store or forward your message
- You can attach graphics or pictures
- You want to save paper or reduce paper congestion
- Email is an accepted or legal document

When not to use E-mail

- Personal or emotional issues. If the recipient is the subject of the message, use a phone call or meet face-to-face
- Private issues
- Urgent messages. Other people may not check their email regularly or in time

Tips & best practices

47. Reflect and compose, then write and send
48. Make priority and content clear in subject line and first paragraph
49. Use separate messages for each topic
50. Be specific about the questions you want answered or action you want taken.
51. Create group conventions for subject lines, and for who gets mails and copies of mails and their responsibility to respond
52. Break text into small easy-to-read paragraphs. Keep messages short but not abrupt, a single screen if possible, otherwise consider sending an attachment
53. Manage your distribution lists. Use listservs for consistency of distribution and purge them to avoid useless mail. Avoid FYIs
54. Sarcasm, humor may not be understood
55. UPPERCASE looks like SHOUTING unless it has a specific purpose
56. Write nothing and forward nothing that you would not want printed and distributed publicly. You represent your team and your organization—do not embarrass them
57. Ask permission to forward others' mails
58. Install filters and prioritizing systems to manage the volume effectively
59. Try to handle incoming mail only once
60. When replying quote the relevant part of the original message or message thread. (Your system may quote the entire thread automatically but you may want to quote only parts in your new text)
61. Shift to threaded discussion if possible.

H. Multimedia e-mail

The growth of bandwidth and speed are enabling e-mail containing images, voice and other objects in addition to text file attachments. Explore these tools for their advantages and disadvantages in respect to other media that may do the same thing.

When to use multimedia attachments

- Use added dimensions of sound and imagery for social cohesion or to add a personal touch to text transmissions.
- To explain or illustrate in ways that pure text cannot

Tips & best practices

62. Check team preferences and capabilities for receiving such mail
63. Ease of transmission leads to volume. Ask, "Is this necessary?" before sending multimedia. Use sparingly to respect time and memory considerations

I. Online threaded discussion (forums, bulletin boards, conferences)

The terms *threaded discussions*, *online conferencing*, *computer conferencing*, *bulletin board*, and *newsgroup* or *news forum* all refer to much the same thing, an online area where team members can post messages and documents, then asynchronously discuss, revise, and make decisions about them. As in a face-to-face meeting, everyone else can hear everything that everyone says in the meeting. However, it differs in that people do not have to be in the same place at the same time and they write things rather than say them.

As in the face-to-face meeting, a tool (however sophisticated) cannot guarantee an effective meeting; it all depends on the meeting coordinator, participants and enabling protocols. Effective coordination, planning and shared protocols are required for conducting an effective meeting. Of all online tools, forums are most likely to fail from inadequate management and facilitation.

When to use threaded discussion

Use a forum rather than e-mail when:

- Your group is going to communicate with each other over a longer period
- Your team needs to discuss the same subject matter a great quite a bit
- You need to discuss and deliberate, solve problems, or brainstorm, and not just exchange information
- You want to increase person-to-person contact & a sense of community

Advantages of threaded discussion:

- Allows time for reading, reflection, and response.
- Is easily launched and closed by anyone on the team.
- Does away with distribution lists
- Reduces information overload
- Allows shorter individual messages
- Collects messages in a common index, where they never get lost or misfiled and are easier to find, being accessible by subject, not chronology
- The history of the group's messages is preserved for newcomers or later use

Tips & best practices

64. Have a well defined and shared purpose for a virtual meeting using online threaded discussion
65. Attend to the comfort level. The more comfortable everyone is in communicating with each other, the more they will collaborate. Tackle issues of collaboration and "groupness" head on
66. Guarantee privacy. Make sure people know who is in the group. Institute a strong, clear boundary between who is in and who is out. Add new members (ideally) within the defined boundary or with agreement of the existing members. People should know that nothing that they write would be communicated outside the group without their expressed permission
67. Promote a culture that encourages open, comfortable communication in the group:
 - Information is the group's, and not the personal possession of individuals
 - Information and opinions are never "right" until tested amongst one's colleagues
 - People take responsibility for what they communicate with others, and it is their responsibility to judge the value of what they receive from others
 - People explicitly value the contributions made by others
 - Trust is needed for open communication and collaboration within a news forum
68. Integrate virtual work into normal business processes: people devoting their time to virtual meeting need to know that their participation is legitimate and seen as normal business by management
69. Provide not just technical support but supportive environment virtual workers. It comprises new policies, roles and artifacts of the online virtual environment

70. It is easy to "lose one's place" in the virtual meeting. Deadlines, milestones, work plans and timetables must be clear at the outset, and the coordinator of a news forum needs to restate the targets and track progress
71. As in the face-to-face meeting, the virtual meeting "room" has to be designed to meet various need of the team. A project manager should think about not just one forum, but a suite of forums. Perhaps a main coordination forum and separate forums for each task group
72. A news forum does not accommodate papers. Ensure that materials and work products stay electronic until last possible moment
73. Train entire team in discussion process, expectations, and application use.
74. Moderate every discussion
75. Establish logic for topics/folders (e.g., sub-teams, product components, project phases)
76. Link to online documents, graphics and other artifacts; don't include them in messages
77. Use brief discussion points; don't lecture.
78. Be inventive... don't be boxed in by User Guides

J. Document filing & digital publishing

This is where we find key differences between physical project files and virtual ones. Virtual team members must file documents in a format that is readable by all. Such format should have been discussed and agreed upon by team members. HTML-based documents are often preferred because they can be read on any platform using a Web browser. File electronic documents under relevant subjects either in the team web, KM system or attached to a forum.

Digital publishing occurs mostly on websites, but also in attachments to e-mail, as links in forums, etc. Though many kinds of data files and applications can be transmitted via these media, digital publishing is frequently used to replace paper or "hard copy" documents.

When to publish digitally

- For wide distribution of standard forms or documents, especially those that must be downloaded and read offline or printed
- When formats of documents must be set and preserved, e.g., for later scanning.

Tips & best practices

79. Print format & screen format may differ. Research your end users' needs and offer both if required .pdf files are becoming the standard for most documents
80. For on screen documents, use one column for easy viewing and avoiding the need for side-to-side navigation
81. Provide ample white space to reduce eye strain
82. Use colors for headlines and highlights but remember that some users may have to print in black and white or grayscale

K. Intranet/extranet website & knowledge management systems

Intranets and extranets can support a team website that provides electronic workspace or virtual project office for the distributed or remote team. The website is the container for all online project work. Websites may also have their own knowledge management system or provide access to a stand-alone system. Access to applications, documents, and external information are all “virtually” contained within its boundaries.

Specific projects or organizational priorities may require integration into the organizations established system, or a tool such as Lotus Notes. While web-based project management tool are beginning to appear, a solution using online threaded discussion may be sufficient for simpler projects or those of short duration.

When to use a team web

- When an online workspace, library or basic knowledge management system is desirable
- When the team project is complex and of considerable duration
- To increase team spirit, identity and visibility

Tips & best practices

83. Identify the team's web-zealots. Let them drive the create and evolve the team site
84. Use skilled visual designers, going outside if necessary, but carefully monitor the work
85. Use the site for teambuilding. Create a team logo. Provide space for individual team members to have a home page.
86. Use as portal for all teamwork, your project work interface
87. Set clear access and security levels
88. Establish standards for documents posted or linked to on the site.
89. File electronic documents under relevant subjects, e.g., the project's baseline plan, progress reports, contracts, meeting agendas and minutes of offline local meetings, random correspondence
90. Keep links up to date
91. Create a team diary in the form of a web-based news forum in place of the physical diary traditionally kept in the team room for co-located teams. The virtual team diary must reside in the cyberspace and be accessible to members wherever they are

Part V – Synchronous text

L. Online Chat

Chat includes both chat rooms and online one-on-one connections, e.g., “buddy lists.” Chat is touted as a many-to-many communications tool, but in business its performance in multipoint has been dismal. Chat is ineffective for many-point or subjects of team-wide interest.

When to use

- For chance social interaction
- For informal, side comments and enhancing some social contexts
- To clarify a need for information
- For side conversations in online meetings and e-learning programs

Tips & best practices

92. Use “buddy lists” carefully to avoid interruptions
93. Direct comments to people by name when there are multiple participants
94. Provide confirmation or information about online discussions by e-mail

M. Supporting face-to-face meetings with text & other technology

Face-to-face meetings provide the highest “bandwidth” for communication, but are expensive and difficult to schedule for virtual teams. When you do hold face-to-face meetings, use the same kind of discipline that you use in audio conferencing and your meetings will be much more productive.

“Soft-side” face-to-face virtual team meetings are occasionally necessary. The cost of not having such a meeting may outweigh the cost of bringing everyone together on a quarterly basis, for example. New working relationships need face-to-face meetings more than established ones.

When to use face-to-face meetings

- For team building at the start of a new team or when new members are added
- Team renewal and cohesion, enhancing trust and revisiting the mission and purposes of the team
- Strategy development and planning
- Celebrating team accomplishments

Tips & best practices

95. Include everyone on the team, either by audio conferencing tie-in, or at least with full accounts of deliberations and decisions
96. Share background information and data electronically before the meeting
97. Create and distribute agenda beforehand.
98. Use meeting discipline (see audio conferencing)
99. Distribute minutes by e-mail—focus on outcomes when reporting
100. Ensure that insights and decisions resulting from informal or chance meetings are electronically shared with team
101. Do not overlook the social opportunities that face-to-face meetings bring to virtual workers. Informal photos on the team web may contribute to teambuilding

Part VI – Groupware

N. Electronic meeting & polling systems (EMS)

These may be synchronous or asynchronous, they may have participants meeting in the same place or distributed. They have the disadvantage of requiring special technology and often highly trained facilitation and IT support.

When to use EMS

- For brainstorming, opinion gathering, and voting on ideas, especially where excessive discussion might otherwise be likely
- Where both participation and anonymity are required to let ideas flow freely
- For sorting out, categorizing and organizing ideas

Tips & best practices

102. Prepare the meeting well, creating questions in advance where possible, and setting up inquiries that generate relevant and strong responses. The clearer the question is, the more reliable the responses will be

O. Multimedia meeting software

Groupware abounds, from the simple NetMeeting software bundled with PC's to highly sophisticated customized systems for special applications. It includes multimedia configurations of chat, whiteboard, shared documents and applications, video, voice, etc. Increasing bandwidth will make this form of working accessible and useful for more and more virtual teams. Expect it to become a normal way of conducting online meetings.

When to use meeting software

- To support multiple individuals working simultaneously on a plan, project, document or application
- For brainstorming, organizing and refining ideas and projects
- For more frequent collaboration than is allowed by teleconferencing
- For more detailed work on a project than is allowed by teleconferencing

Tips & best practices

103. Prepare and facilitate as if it were a face-to-face meeting, taking into account the participants needs, frequency of their meeting and their familiarity with each other on the social level, as well as addressing the agenda or task
104. Take advantage of the software's ability to save, or take "snapshots" of work done online
105. Use audio conferencing among the participants if the meeting is slowed by shortage of bandwidth
106. Follow the rules pertaining to the component parts of the software, e.g., chat, conferencing, etc.
107. Withhold final decisions on major issues until participants have had a chance to review the work or minutes of the meeting

Part VII – Other virtual team technologies

The transition from industrial to the information age reveals some of the weaknesses of the conventional project management tools. For example, the kind of planning tool used in showing time line and resource assignments for various activities may not be suitable for virtual teams. Dispersed team members from different organizations (that may be using different planning tools) need to share electronic project plans and monitor their implementations. While web-based project management tool are beginning to appear, a solution using online threaded discussion may suffice.

There are lots of applications that promise personal and team productivity. However, each of these—mail, scheduling, decision support, or other applications—carries with it an implicit process for performing the tasks supported. These processes may not align with the way your team wants to work. Further, users find it irritating to have to switch between applications to do their work. It is far better to work in one system, one paradigm, with functions tailored to meet needs.

Work closely with your IT group to provide and support technology. In general, there is some kind of Common Operating Environment in place for your organization with which you must align. That said, you might consider the following kinds of technologies.

P. Mapping, modeling, simulation

You can map, or model, and if possible simulate the way processes work. You can model using anything from freeform drawings, to flowcharts, to modeling applications that help you collaboratively visualize the tasks involved.

When to use simulation

- When setting up complex team processes or evaluating their potential outcomes

Tips & best practices

108. Use simulations to do “sensitivity analysis”

Q. Workflow

Workflow functions are normally built into document, e-mail, or decision support systems. They enable you to plot the sequence and flow of information, documents, or messages through the team.

When to use a workflow program

- When a request needs to be authorized by several people, e.g., if one is on vacation or not checking the in-box, the message is automatically sent to the next in line
- For document sharing, e.g., when a new version of a team document is posted in the shared area, team members who need to know about it are notified automatically by e-mail

Tips & best practices

109. Build timing into these applications, so that if a message gets stuck somewhere, it is automatically re-routed to an alternative or the next recipient

110. Program so that certain events can trigger a message

R. Team calendars, scheduling & accountability

Concurrent, collaborative work can be too complex to be managed with traditional scheduling tools. Technologies exist that are suited to any complexity level you need. It's very important that your technology has the “requisite complexity” to manage your processes.

When to use schedulers

- When complexity of process exceeds current standard software solutions

Tips & best practices

111. Prefer existing functions, e.g., your document or mail system, to the odd special application, unless it can be tightly integrated with the Internet or common messaging and document systems, e.g., *uSoft Project*, or *Teamflow*

S. Decision support

A project manager usually pulls all team members' contributions in a face-to-face meeting in order to take a decision. When there is a need to vote on a subject, an open ballot is usually employed. In the virtual team environment, a subject for discussion is often placed in an online threaded discussion where team members are expected to post their replies. A user may decide to hide his or her identity whilst replying on a subject. As in the face-to-face meeting, a meeting coordinator will pull all the replies together to take a decision.

When decisions are consistently more complex, they require great care in choosing support technologies. The decision can be the least difficult stage of the process. What is tough are the data-gathering, assumptions, process, and trade-offs. No technology except communications support can do these things for you. In many cases, existing infrastructure can provide the support. For example, audio conferencing, voicemail, threaded discussions, and videoconferencing all have voting capabilities.

When to use decision support

- When complex decisions depend on the input of many team members
- When such decision-making processes are a regular part of an ongoing team's activity
- When the current infrastructure tools are inadequate

Tips & best practices

112. Decide first the policies and processes to use for types of decisions and their complexity, their impact on the organization, the decision makers involved, timing and level of research and discussion required
113. Before investing in a *new* technology, model and define the processes you need to use to meet your team's requirements

T. Real time reporting tools

While "report generators" abound, the real issue is continuously informing management, rather than teams generating neat reports. Giving management a "window" into the team's work via access to their website, online discussion base, or other teamwork interface enables management to have a real-time look into what's going on rather than waiting for a report. This is crucial to effecting concurrent work with other departments, suppliers, etc. and even team members themselves.

When to use

- Managers or team members don't want the onus of looking for information put on them; they would rather have it pre-digested and prepared
- Periodic reporting is not adequate or fast enough for decision making, supply or concurrent engineering
- In cultures where decision making is widely distributed and many people must access report information

Tips & best practices

114. Address these issues before the team is launched, balancing business goals against personal preferences, making sure that such an approach is indeed a team decision
115. As with decision-making support, before investing in a *new* technology, model and define the processes you need and see if current technology will do the job
116. Attend to cultural challenges, e.g., teams don't want to feel that management is always looking over their shoulders

Part VIII – Virtual Project Management

Project management in virtual teams is most likely to fail because of human involvement or lack of it, not matter how robust and appropriate the technology. It is easy to overlook the basics in online work, though it is often more critical in asynchronous events than in face-to-face meetings. Online projects that fail, particularly those using online threaded discussion, because one of the following elements is missing or badly managed:

1. **Coordinator:** there must a coordinator who will “chair” the virtual meeting. Managing an asynchronous discussion offers many opportunities for diversion, second thoughts, changes of subject and direction, and even mischief.
2. **Meeting dates and duration:** the coordinator must announce dates (when online discussion of various topics will begin and be closed) of virtual project meeting in advance.
3. **Agenda:** the coordinator, in consultation with team members, should specify topics that will be discussed in a virtual meeting.
4. **Explicitness:** participants should be explicit in their contributions and their relevance to the topic. Ambiguous contributions can easily be misinterpreted and may sway the discussions into unrelated subject(s). Where cultural norms of directness and indirectness are in conflict, teams need to work through standards for communication.
5. **Posting Questions:** If a participant posts a question he or she may indicate a primary participant who will provide an answer. An answer is expected from the primary participant within the duration of the virtual meeting.
6. **Subject/topic attributes:** An initiator of a discussion subject should indicate what is expected from participants, why the discussion is necessary and who are the primary participants.
7. **Primary participants:** If a person is nominated as one of the primary participants in a discussion, then he or she is expected to contribute to the discussion topic. As in the face-to-face meeting, if such a person is unable to contribute within the duration of the meeting, then he or she should say so.
8. **Chairperson's responsibility** is to coordinate meeting discussions. Periodically the coordinator, as in face-to-face meetings, must keep participants focused by restating objectives (what is expected from participants) of the discussion.
9. **Decision-Making:** As in the face-to-face meeting, the coordinator will pull all contributions together in order to draw a conclusion on the subject under discussion. Once a discussion is closed, the coordinator is expected to post his or her decision within a day, in form of minutes that should be filed in the threaded discussion. It will be useful if the coordinator summarizes the contributions that influenced his or her decision. This will ensure that participants jointly own the decision. Decision making process is an important aspect of the online threaded discussion. Objective decision will enhance its usage while subjective one will put a serious question mark on it. It is the responsibility of the coordinator to ensure that objective decisions are always taken.
10. **Action Points:** Actions arising from jointly owned decision will only be implemented and not subjected to further debates. Each participant should be encouraged to make his or her contributions within the timeframe specified. This ensures that a quality decision is taken.
11. **Next Meeting:** As in the face-to-face meeting virtual project meeting needs to conclude its meeting with firm agreement on when the next meeting will be held and who will be its coordinator. Successful projects should be celebrated when completed.
12. **Tracking a virtual project:** In order to have an up-to-date project status, the stakeholders and virtual project team members, in particular, must have access to timely information about the progress of the project deliverables. This information is typically not readily available but must be gathered, compiled and then distributed among project participants so that they may track the progress of a project on an ongoing basis. A simple web page can often accomplish this.
13. **Project Management guidelines** form another particular problem when team are formed from members of different organizations. In such situations best practices from the various companies involved should be used to develop team project management framework.