

# GOING VIRTUAL – Hybridizing Meetings

## WHAT IS A HYBRID MEETING AND WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

A hybrid meeting combines in-person and virtual participation, allowing attendees to join from anywhere with an Internet connection. While no one can deny the power of in-person interactions, having a hybrid option offers flexibility, ensuring participation from those unable to attend physically. In the case of poor weather and road conditions, meetings may lack a quorum. This can discourage engaged board members, leading to disengagement and attendance down the road. Low board meeting attendance makes it hard for the CDs to get things done and may also lead to CD business being conducted improperly, such as voting via e-mail. Hybridizing your meetings may also encourage more public participation, which can make your board meeting more engaging and keep board members informed. Furthermore, hybridization can help build stronger partnerships as many partner agencies and organizations are unable to attend CD meetings in-person consistently due to locations and/or time of many board meetings. Once you are able to set-up your hybrid meetings, be sure to invite partners to attend virtually.

## WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- **Reliable, high-quality Audiovisual (AV) Technology** – Investing in high-quality technology will make audio, video, and content sharing seamless. Technology to consider include video conferencing subscription (e.g. Zoom, Teams, Google Meet, Goto Meeting), video display screen, microphones, speakers, webcams, projectors, etc. Owls, and similar devices, can be a great tool; however, audio can be lacking so consider pairing a webcam device like an Owl with an enhancing microphone to better pick up sound around the room. Having audio issues can be a greater detriment to virtual meetings than visual issues.
- **Sufficient internet connectivity** – Test connections thoroughly and have wired backup options ready. USDA computers should be able to connect to the USDA network in your meeting location if it is in a USDA building. These computers also should have Microsoft Teams, which can be used for meetings, just like a Zoom subscription. If you are unable to connect to the USDA network or other networks, you will have to get your own WIFI and/or hotspot.
- **Thoughtful room layout** – Carefully arrange seating and cameras to keep remote participants from feeling sidelined. Make sure microphones pick up audio from around the room, not just near speakers.

## BEST PRACTICES FOR A SUCCESSFUL HYBRID MEETING

**Share materials in advance.** Give remote participants access to documents and visuals beforehand so everyone can follow along. Briefly recap important points. Links to your virtual meeting should be provided on the public notice.

**Pre-meeting tech checks.** Prior to the meeting, test the audio-visual set up – both in-room and for the remote attendees. Schedule a 10–15-minute one-on-one dry run to get remote participants comfortable with what they will see and hear during the meeting, as well as to review any software features they'll likely use (i.e. hand raise, muting, etc.). If using an Owl, make sure that you are using the microphone in the Owl and not in your laptop, since the audio can be better from the Owl. In addition, make sure that your Owl software is up-to-date, since that can impact audio as well.

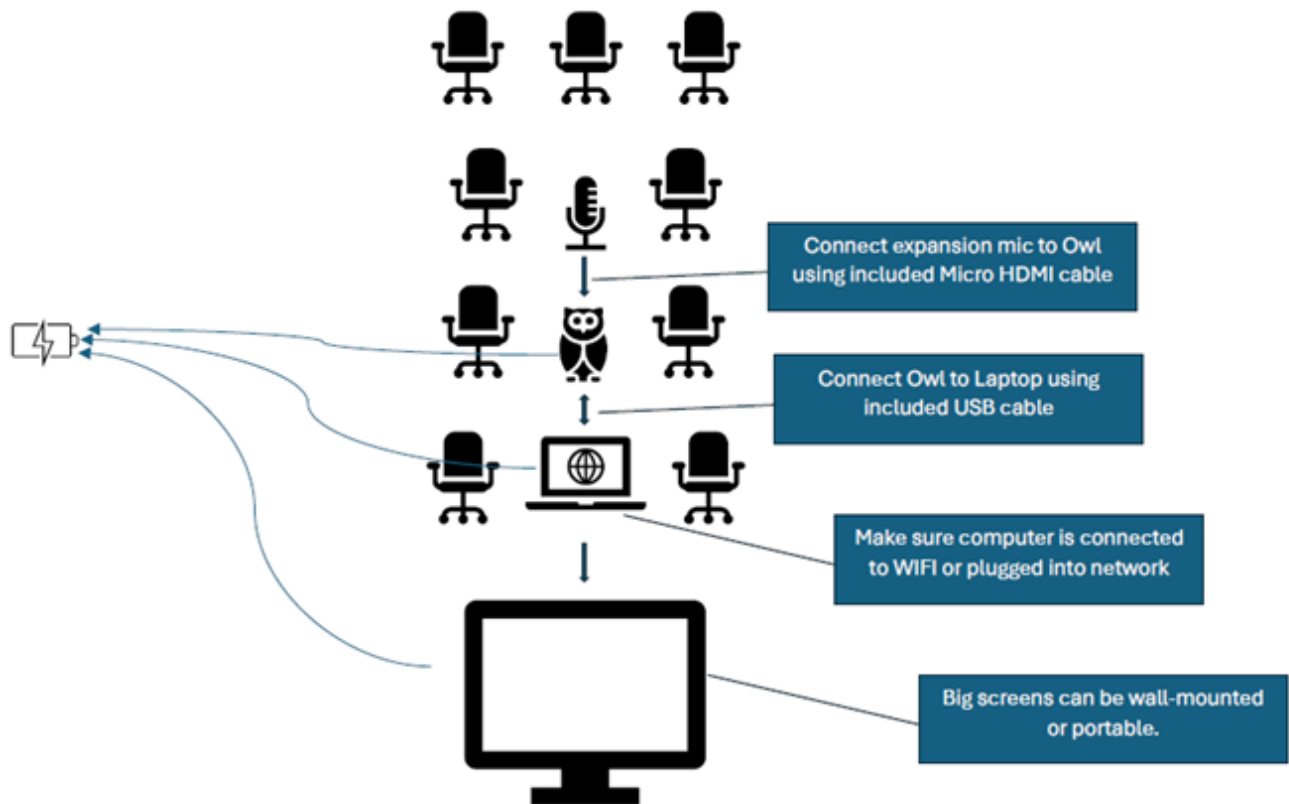
**Provide a strong facilitator.** One person should be assigned to guide the conversation and keep it on track. A facilitator should draw the remote participants in, keep them engaged and ensure their voices are heard, not interrupted, or talked over. At times, the facilitator may need to call on in-room or remote participants to ensure that all voices heard. If you are unable to monitor the chat and reactions because you are taking minutes, let participants know that they will have to speak up as though they are there in-person. Alternatively, you can request that one board supervisor monitor the chat and reactions of virtual participants. This part could require multiple computers in the room, just FYI, with both laptops/computers logged into the meeting. Having “co-hosts”, such as is available on Zoom, can make this easier.

**Manage side conversations.** Remind in-person attendees to speak one at a time and repeat questions so remote participants can follow along.

**Recording meetings.** Although other local government entities are now required to record their meetings, Montana CDs still are not required to do so. As a result, you can have a virtual meeting option **without** recording it. If meetings are recorded electronically, each meeting must be handled in the same way every time and must be made available to the public.



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For more information on setting up an expansion microphone with your Owl, see

[https://support.owllabs.com/s/?language=en\\_US](https://support.owllabs.com/s/?language=en_US).

Also, a stationary webcam can be used in place of an Owl.

