

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. While in-person interactions hold undeniable value, incorporating a hybrid option provides flexibility, ensuring involvement from those unable to be physically present. 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 can impede decision-making abilities and may result in improper conduct of board business, such as voting by email. 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

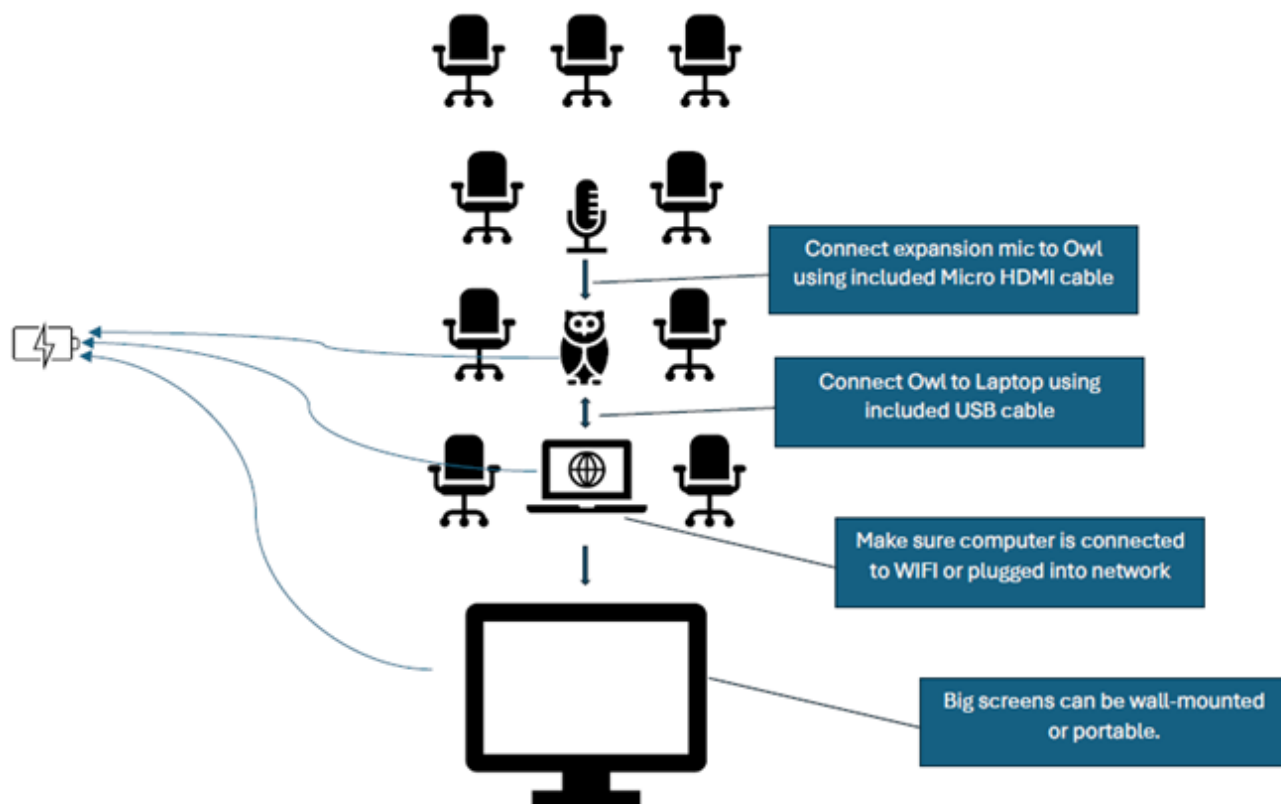
- Reliable, high-quality Audiovisual (AV) Technology – Investing in high-quality technology will make audio, video, and content sharing seamless. Technology to consider include video conferencing subscription (e.g. Zoom, Teams, Google Meet, Goto Meeting), video display screen, microphones, speakers, 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 (see last page for diagram of set-up). 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. For bigger meetings, you may also want to consider connecting two Owls together or pairing AV devices if you find that one is not sufficient.

BEST PRACTICES FOR A SUCCESSFUL HYBRID MEETING

- **Share materials in advance.** Ensure remote participants have access to meeting materials. In materials, highlight important points. Include links to your virtual meeting on the public notice.
- **Pre-meeting tech checks.** Prior to the meeting, test the audio-visual set up for in person and 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, ensure the microphone is from the Owl, not the laptop, for better audio. Within your meeting, you can click on the audio and video features to select what microphone and camera you would like to use. Devices such as an Owl can be programmed to automatically connect. If the device does not appear in the device options, restart your computer and check that your device is properly connected to your laptop. Also, make sure to register AV devices, if needed, and keep software updated for optimal performance. Owls require their own Wi-Fi connection to update software, but not to run a meeting.
- **Provide a remote moderator.** Designate one person to lead the discussion and maintain focus. A moderator should engage remote participants, ensure their voices are heard, and prevent interruptions or talking over each other. At times, they 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 assign a board supervisor to manage virtual participant interactions. This may require multiple computers in the room, with both laptops/computers logged into the meeting. Consider having "co-hosts", such as is available on Zoom, for smoother coordination.
- **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, ***CDs are not required by law to do so***. A CD can have a virtual meeting option without recording it. If a meeting is recorded, it must be made available to the public, unless the CD has a policy in place to delete recordings that are made simply for creation of the minutes. If a CD decides to record meetings, they should be consistent in doing so for all meetings.



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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.

Two Owls can also be connected together for enhanced video and audio. If not using an Owl, a stationary webcam and laptop microphone or other AV devices can be used.

