

Better Online Meetings



Edition 2 - May 2020

Contents

Message of encouragement and hope from Dialogue Matters	3
Introduction	1
1 Guidance for Meeting Hosts	1
1.1 Before	1
1. Choosing your platform	1
2. Tech/equipment for participants	1
3. Familiarise yourself with the tech	1
4. Connecting.....	2
5. Guidance to give participants	2
6. Accessibility - Being inclusive.....	2
7. Plan and structure your meetings.....	2
8. Work out protocols for how people flag they want to speak	3
9. Team for delivery of bigger more interactive meetings.....	3
10. Consider consent for recording	4
1.2 During	4
1. Getting started	4
2. Giving talks/presentations.....	4
3. Work out the protocol for when people want to interject.....	4
4. Taking notes/minutes	5
5. Handling challenging meeting behaviour	5
6. Finishing the meeting	5
1.3 After	6
2. Keep learning	6
2 Guidance to send to participants for bigger meetings	7
2.1 Invitation.....	7
2.2 Before – guidance to help you prepare	7
2.3 During - guidance to help you take part.....	7
2.4 After - knowing what to expect.....	8
3 Online multi-stakeholder dialogue and consensus building	9
Annex 1 Conference Call Bingo.....	10
Annex 2 Hand Signals Conventions.....	11
Annex 3 On-screen body language – sending the right signals	12
1. When speaking.....	12
2. When listening	12
Annex 4 Suggested feedback form for bigger meetings.....	13
Before	13

1. The advance material was helpful.....	13
2. The purpose of the meeting and agenda were clear.....	13
During - comfort	13
1. The pace of the meeting was... ..	13
3. The number of breaks were.....	13
4. When it comes to the online meeting technology.....	13
During – content	14
1. The meeting was well structured	14
2. I felt my input was heard	14
3. I felt it was worthwhile and purposeful.....	14
Annex 5 Consent form	15
Meeting/Workshop Title.....	15
Annex 6 Handling Meeting Fatigue.....	16
Handling Meeting Fatigue	16

Message of encouragement and hope from Dialogue Matters

As a team and individually we are passionate about helping the environment sector maintain some momentum online. We hope this helps you catalyse the conversations and action that will result in a kinder, greener and fairer world the other side of all this. We have put together this guidance note at speed to help you do that.

There is, after all, a nature and climate emergency as well as a pandemic, and there is no time to waste. Our response has been to fast track Dialogue Matters Online – something we had bumbling along in the background before, but has now taken centre stage.

This is indeed a scary and tragic time. But from our work we know some of the greatest transformations are birthed in the most difficult situations. That's because times of disruption open up new ideas and new possibilities and shock us out of complacency or the idea that the way we do things is the only way that they can be done.

So if we put our minds and hearts to it, we can come out of this with surprising new ideas, a better way of living and a much brighter future for our precious world.

With thanks to Joel, Chloe, Ross, Lena, Kathryn and of course Jem. You have all been incredible in your determination, innovation and passion to help. Thank you. Diana

This content is from our combined experience and knowledge and is our shared IP (apart from the conference call bingo in Annex 1!) But this PDF is free to share with all and sundry.

Introduction

The focus of this guidance is the kind of meetings you normally run with your team or project partners.

There is plenty of guidance for running online meetings, but these are the pearls of wisdom of professional facilitators who factor in the human dynamic - so it includes some tips and thoughts you are unlikely to find anywhere else.

We have written this to be helpful whatever platform you use, but our main experience is with Zoom, which may have influenced our thinking.

We hope you find this useful. This is only Edition 2 - so please do send us suggestions for how we can add to and improve on it.

Complex multi-stakeholder workshops, collaboration and consensus building are beyond the scope of this short guidance note. Doing this online brings fresh challenges and opportunities. We know we are at the leading edge of innovating how so we have included a short section to inspire you that it's possible.

1 Guidance for Meeting Hosts

1.1 Before

Just like any productive face to face meetings, doing meetings online takes a bit of preparation.

1. Choosing your platform

- When choosing your online meeting platform, it is worth checking and comparing what bandwidth each runs on. We find a benefit of Zoom is that it runs at a lower bandwidth than Skype. This matters if you are connecting with people who don't have good internet connections.
- Some platforms require all participants to download an app and set up a username to connect (e.g. Skype). For others, you can set up a one-off 'meeting room' online, and people join the meeting by clicking a link you send round (we know Zoom has this function). As the host, it is best you download the full app – accessing through online portals can mean you lose some of the platform's functionality.
- Some platforms offer more functionality than others in terms of break out options, white boards and other tools. Think about your face to face meetings and find a platform that provides for those needs.

2. Tech/equipment for participants

- If each participant is dialling in from a computer or laptop, everyone needs a microphone or headset and preferably a camera/web-cam capable of video.
- If dialling in from a mobile, most smartphones have the necessary tech build in – but on a small screen it is harder for people to stay engaged and focused for long and not have full functionality
- Try to keep technology requirements to a minimum – less is more when it comes to online meetings!

3. Familiarise yourself with the tech

- Familiarise yourself with the platform you are using for a short time in advance and if possible practice with a few colleagues.
- Make sure you have a good microphone and video recorder.

4. Connecting

- Run a tech session the day before the first meeting so people can connect up and sort out any glitches – there will undoubtedly be some! You don't want these kind of issues interrupting the meeting, so best to get them straightened out beforehand.
- Open meetings 10-15 minutes before your formal start. This gives people the opportunity to deal with any last minute tech glitches. This time is also for informal greetings, catch-ups, and chat - just as if it was face to face.
- Not everyone will have good internet connections so you may find some loose connection and 'drop out' of the meeting. Some platforms auto reconnect them, but it can be disruptive and the participant can miss parts of the meeting. The alternative is to ask the participant to turn off their video function, as it uses less internet data to just support sound, but then you do lose the face to face benefits.

5. Guidance to give participants

- Tell participants what platform you are using and how to make an account/join the meeting online.
- Send them a screenshot of the basic meeting screen, flagging where useful buttons are. It's true that most platforms are fairly intuitive but the 'techy-anxious' can get flustered, so help them in advance.
- Send out the meeting Agenda so participants are aware of meeting length, breaks, and discussion focus. This can help them prepare too - especially necessary when working from home.
- See section 2 **Error! Reference source not found.** in this document for some useful advice to send them in advance – we also have a word version so you can tailor it to your needs.

6. Accessibility - Being inclusive

- Consider if some of those you want to involve have particular needs: hearing, sight, the inability to sit for long periods of time, inability to spend a long time looking at a screen, or dyslexia.
- Ask! Make sure participants can contact you/have an opportunity to make you aware of any accessibility needs before the online meeting
- Use large, clear font on presentations, and avoid reds and greens
- Explore your video-conferencing software. For instance, below are some of the options that Zoom offers:
 - Closed captioning
<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/207279736-Closed-Captioning>
 - Audio transcript recording
<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115004794983-Automatically-Transcribe-Cloud-Recordings->
 - Compatible with screen readers
- You will also find a free audiobook on using Zoom as someone who is blind or visually impaired, here:
<https://mosen.org/zoom/>

7. Plan and structure your meetings

- Online meetings have to be faster and more focused – an hour is comfortable, and 3 hours the absolute max but needs shifts in pace, plenary and break out, and several breaks.
- Don't be ambitious with whiteboards, breakouts and other features to begin with. With practice these can be useful tools, but simple is better when you are starting out.
- Plan to keep any presentations or 'talking at people' sections as short as you can – it is much harder for the participants to concentrate online. Also plan what to say in advance to avoid rambling.

- Hand over to other people to host/lead discussion on particular topics
- Plan 5 minute breaks about every hour – even if you wouldn't break a 2 hour meeting face to face, you need to online. This can be just to stretch, get a glass of water, stare out the window at some greenery (proven to restore concentration - one of our associates did the first research that proved it!)
- A facilitation tactic you can use is to structure the discussion by questions (not topic). This encourages 'parallel thinking' (Ref. De Bono) and can increase efficiency by ten times. If you do sequence questions this way, allow a maximum of 10 minutes to respond to each question and invite short and focused responses (this stops any rambling, reduces dominance, and helps group collaboration). For example to consider a proposal ask:
 1. What are the positives of this?
 2. What are the challenges?
 3. Any new ideas/solutions to overcome challenges and enhance positives?
 4. Any different ways we could achieve the same outcome?
 5. How do we move this forward?
 6. Who is doing what and when to make that happen?
- If you want input on particular topics or questions, consider sending them in advance. The advantage is people come prepared. The disadvantage is they may have already closed their mind and adopted a particular position before hearing others perspectives.

8. Work out protocols for how people flag they want to speak

- As the host, if you want to put people on mute, you need to work out how they tell you they want to speak. For example in Zoom:
 - They can use the 'chat' function to send a typed message, either to the whole group, or just to the 'host'/facilitator.
 - They can click on 'Participants' in the action bar at the bottom of the Zoom window. A menu will open on the right hand side of the screen. At the bottom of this menu they will see the option to 'Raise your hand.' Tell them to click this, and it will alert you they have something to say.
 - If it is appropriate for participants to jump in and comment verbally, they can unmute themselves by clicking the 'unmute' button, or, at least in some packages, holding the space bar while they speak to temporarily switch their mic back on.
 - If participants are unmuted, you may want to ask 3-4 people at once if they have anything they'd like to contribute. This makes space in the dialogue for everyone to speak without singling anyone out.

9. Team for delivery of bigger more interactive meetings

- We suggest you have a team to deliver bigger workshops:
 - The main host/chair/facilitator
 - A support person who can help you and participants i.e. by paying attention to the main host's sound and video quality, timing the sessions, checking the chat box for questions and helping participants who are experiencing technical difficulties
 - A note taker with microphone on mute

10. Consider consent for recording

- Some video-conferencing software (e.g. Zoom) offer a function that allows a call to be recorded (both sound and video).
- If you're intending to record the session, you will need to ask participants for their permission.
- Best practice consenting guidance is to obtain both written and verbal consent, therefore before the meeting you may want to send out a consent form to be completed (see Annex 5).

1.2 During

1. Getting started

- If you're recording the presentation, remind participants that's the case. Ask for them to verbally consent to you using the video (this should be in addition to a form they have completed and returned), or ask them to switch off their camera if they're more comfortable.
- With introductions do what you would do in face to face meetings depending on group size:
 - Small group: do a quick icebreaker activity and/or ask each participant to do a quick introduction. In face to face meetings you might be used to saying "let's go around the table to introduce ourselves", but online, the meeting host needs to invite each person by name to say who they are.
 - Big meetings: simply introduce yourself and perhaps outline what teams are involved in the meeting. With people's permission you can agree to share emails after the session if necessary.
- Outline the agenda, break times and end time.
- Put everyone at ease saying we are all novices and learning fast and so let's not worry when we get hiccups. It can be a little awkward and clunky to begin with, but encourage everyone to embrace it as a challenge! To keep it really light you could use online meeting bingo! See Annex 1.
- While working as a large group in a single zoom call, it is best that all participants are muted to avoid too much background noise. Ask participants to do so in your introduction. Alternatively, some platforms allow the host to mute all participants. (For example in Zoom, you can find the option under 'Manage all participants' button.)

2. Giving talks/presentations

- Ask everyone to check they are on mute.
- Keep these short and friendly.
- Speak slowly and clearly in case your sound is lagging slightly or anyone is hard of hearing and is lip-reading.
- Try to look directly at the camera, rather than people's faces on-screen when you are talking – this way you'll be making virtual eye contact rather than looking down at a screen where you feel you are making eye contact but aren't. This takes some practice.
- Ask participants to write questions or comments in the chat box or bar – this also helps them stay engaged.

3. Work out the protocol for when people want to interject

- To indicate people want to talk they can:
 - Use a tool on the platform to notify you when they would like to interject (e.g. 'Raise your hand' function on Zoom)
 - Use the conventions for hand signals - see the Annex 2

4. Taking notes/minutes

- Typing notes can be too noisy! We suggest the note taker is on mutes throughout the meeting.
- Live and visible notes can be helpful. The two most straightforward options are:
 - Screen share using a word doc, but screen share dominates the screen and limits people's ability to see each other.
 - A google doc visible alongside the video.

5. Handling challenging meeting behaviour

- Agree some guidelines for online working with the group at the start of the meeting. You can either create a list beforehand, or suggest that other participants put ideas forward. E.g:
 - Only speak one at a time (Online this is a technical issue, as well as good meeting protocol. That's because most platforms will try to cancel competing noises so no one hears anything!)
 - Do your best to engage
 - Return promptly from breaks
 - Don't do other work at the same time
 - Keep on topic – and “Park things” that are taking us off track to come back to later
 - Mobiles off (other than the tech support who needs theirs on vibrate ready to respond if people have technical issues)
- If participants are not keeping to these guidelines in politely remind them of their agreement.
- If a few people are dominating the discussion say, “let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken so far” or, “Are there any other perspectives?”.
- If people get heated, rude or aggressive use your interpersonal skill to calm the situation by feeding back their concerns, noting the concerns down and calming the situation. (We hope this wouldn't ever be necessary, but meeting hosts can mute people, or even remove them from the meeting, at the press of a button! Certainly options you don't have face to face!)

6. Finishing the meeting

- Unlike face to face, online meetings end abruptly which can be quite disconcerting. In face to face people chat informally as they leave the room and make their way back to office or cars. We suggest online needs to end more kindly:
 - Thank people for taking part and concentrating
 - Say something friendly like “I hope you can all get a quite break outdoors/ a chance to stretch your legs/ enjoy the sunshine”
 - Warn them I am going to close the meeting in 1 minute.
 - I look forward to meeting up with you all again soon
 - Close

1.3 After

1. Good post meeting practice

- Do all the usual things like circulating notes, implementing action.

2. Keep learning

- For larger more formal meetings get feedback on how people experienced the meeting. For informal smaller meetings just ask. This will maximise what you all learn about working online and speed up skills learning. Suggested feedback form is the Annex 4.
- Smaller meetings are the place to learn. But in the current context novice video conference hosts are having to speak to whole organisations and do big gatherings online. If it is well-received congratulations! If it doesn't run smoothly do as many smaller meetings as you can before the next big one. The best way to be at ease is practice! We're all in, or been in, the same boat so no one should worry if they're hesitant at first. For a bit of fun you can always put up a learner sign!
- Once you have mastered the essentials, you can make meetings more participatory and experiment with tools like white boards and break out rooms.
- Depending on the platform you use, there should be online advisors who can help talk you through any major technical glitches.

2 Guidance to send to participants for bigger meetings

2.1 Invitation

Please dial in at the day before the meeting at [TIME] for an opportunity to test your kit and receive guidance if you need it. Also feel free to email [NAME] if you have any concerns or questions.

There will be a 15 min 'reception' before the meeting, as people dial in and get sorted.

Many of us are new to this so please don't feel under any stress – we are all learners

2.2 Before – guidance to help you prepare

- Dress appropriately from head to toe! You don't want to make the classic mistake of getting up at break time and everyone seeing you're not!
- Check what your camera will see behind you. You are inviting your colleagues into your house so work out if you are comfortable with what they will see. Mistakes can be silly posters, unmade beds, dubious books, mess and clutter!
- Think about light on your face – is it too bright or too dark? If the main light source is behind you, turn off lights or close curtains to stop being a silhouette.
- In advance please alert the people you live with that you are having a professional meeting. Remind them on the day and we suggest you put a sign on the door so they know to keep the door closed and noise down.
- Depending on internet connection speed, please advise the people you live with that you need the internet connection so high demand streaming of TV or online games will not be possible.
- Check the temperature of your room (home offices are often less used rooms, or garden offices, and may get too cold for longer periods).
- Get comfortable: have water, snacks, notebook and pen, cushion, and extra layers to hand.
- You should have already received the meeting Agenda. We suggest those with smaller screens print it out so you can easily follow the structure. Flipping back and forth from the agenda to the online meeting on your screen breaks focus on the group – and risks technical glitches.
- Be prompt and arrive on time – as you would for a face to face meeting. If anything, try to sign in early and ensure all your technology is working correctly.
- Your name will auto appear so make sure it's yours and not someone else who uses the computer. If it's not automatically yours, try editing your display name (e.g. in Zoom, you can do this by clicking the 3 dots in the corner of your video). This will allow the host or other participants to refer to you directly by name when they want to.

2.3 During - guidance to help you take part

- This is a big meeting so the host will ask you to mute your audio during any presentations. This is to keep background sound to a minimum. They will explain how to do this.
- If the host puts you on mute, but you want to interject, we will tell you how to indicate this. If it is appropriate for participants to jump in and comment verbally, you can unmute yourself by clicking the 'unmute' button.

- When speaking in online meetings, particularly medium-large ones, it is best to say your name before making your point. Otherwise it can be difficult for the other participants to distinguish who is saying what on a screen of small faces.
- Always be patient and try to speak one-at-a-time. It is likely that people will start talking over each other at some point, particularly as sometimes there can be a delay, but it's important to be respectful and ensure everyone has opportunity to have their say.
- If you're struggling with getting to grips with being in an online meeting – don't worry! Try to engage with the meeting the best you can, and contact your meeting host after the event to help talk you through any worries or difficulties you faced in the session.
- At the end please fill in the feedback form/survey sent to you so we can learn and improve

2.4 After - knowing what to expect

The follow up to an online meeting should be fairly similar to normal.

- Your meeting host should share any notes/minutes from the meeting with you and all other participants.
- Please disseminate key info/share action points with your wider team.
- Please note any agreed action to help you achieve necessary action before the next meeting.

3 Online multi-stakeholder dialogue and consensus building

Successful environmental projects need great quality stakeholder participation and collaboration to result in systems thinking and well supported outcomes.

Right now too much is on pause. The nature and climate crisis really can't wait. So don't put everything on hold. We've fast tracked Dialogue Matters Online and can now offer our award winning dialogue design, facilitation and training that way.

Projects have rung us dejected and left the call excited. Get in touch and let's talk!

To give you a flavour of what is possible, we are now delivering dialogue, collaboration and momentum for:

- A partnership team reimagining their greener community project
- Online consensus building to agree a strategy for natural areas
- International dialogue and innovation in climate change research
- Researcher's collaborating and innovating across disciplines
- Training researchers to ensure their science has real world impact on policy or practice
- Getting our tool called the "Better Meetings Box" online. It includes a suite of meeting patterns and guidance. We are now working out how to make it affordable and available online.

Doing all this online introduces a whole host of new opportunities and challenges. Alongside everything you need to know for face to face Stakeholder Dialogue, online processes require the integration and use of several online platforms, bespoke templates and fluency with the tools. Sooner or later we will create a new course for how do to all that too! For now please help us help you to maintain some momentum!

If any of this is of interest contact admin@dialoguematters.co.uk

Annex 1 Conference Call Bingo

Have fun whilst you learn to work online - play conference call bingo! There are even online versions <https://www.lifesize.com/en/video-conferencing-blog/beat-the-phone-meeting-blues>

Hi, who just joined?	Can you e-mail that to everyone?	X? Are you there?	Uh, X, you're still sharing!	Guys, I have to jump to another call.
(Sound of someone typing... ...possibly with a hammer)	(Loud painful echo)	(Child noises)	Hi, can you hear me?	No, it's still loading.
Next slide please.	Can everyone go on mute, please?	Sorry, I was talking on mute.	Sorry, go ahead...	Sorry, my dog is really excited about this call.
So (fades out) I can (cuts out) by (unintelligible) ok?	Sorry, I am double booked.	X, your screen just greyed out.	Sorry, you cut out there.	Can we take this offline?
I'll have to get back to you on that.	Can everyone see my screen?	Sorry, I was having connection issues.	Sorry, I think there's a lag.	Sorry, the other call ran over.

Annex 2 Hand Signals Conventions

These hand signal conventions have developed from big organisations and international networks who meet online as a matter of routine.

Hand signals (in order of importance):

Thumb up - yes, agree, like (depending on the question)

Thumb down - no, disagree, like (depending on the question)

Hand up (one hand held up and held steady close to face) - I want to speak, or I can, do, etc., in response to a "Who can ..." question.

Crossed arms (forearms crossed before face) - I object (simply if crossed close to wrists with open hands; violently if crossed at the middle with hands clenched) in response to, e.g., "If no one objects, then ..."

Nod (a SLOW head nod) or Vee (a hand held up with the two-finger "victory" signal) - I really like this (what is being said, the idea suggested, ...).

Crossed fingers (crossed index fingers held before the face) - impossible (or prohibited)

Jazz hands / sparkle hands (hands open either side of face and gentle shaking) - me too

Forefinger role (circle forefingers of both hands) in front of face - wrap it up

Annex 3 On-screen body language – sending the right signals

We all communicate with words, body language and micro expressions. We read each other's gestures, posture, tone and face before a single word is spoken. As much as 95% of all communication happens nonverbally. But we have all evolved to do this face to face so learning what works online is an art. Here are some suggestions.

1. When speaking

- Aim to look at the camera. Looking at the people on the screen feels the natural thing to do to make eye contact. But they won't experience it that way - you will appear to be averting your eyes which comes over as shifty!
- Be animated when you are speaking. Being too still will make you look disengaged
- Sit tall. It gives the impression of confidence and actually helps breathing and vocal expressions.
- Your upper body is visible to everyone –so energise your spine and show that you are paying attention and not falling off to sleep. Lean forward slightly to show your interest and keep your shoulders back.

2. When listening

- If you are listening to an answer to a question you asked try to look at the camera so the speaker experiences you as being attentive
- Keep your hands and body fairly still:
 - Fidgeting with things on the desk is a temptation but makes you look distracted.
 - Rocking in your chair makes you both irritating and impatient – and may risk your chair falling over
 - Gesturing wildly to someone out of shot to bring you coffee or paper will draw all eyes – we are programmed to look at rapid movement
- If you want to help the main speaker, mirror their body language (within reason) as that makes the other person feel relaxed.
- Your upper body is visible to everyone so aim for good posture - it conveys you are paying attention and not falling off to sleep. Leaning forward slightly shows interest ... but keep your shoulders back so it doesn't look like you are slumping over the camera.
- Remember everyone can see your face so wear a friendly expression and be careful with facial expressions. Sometimes it is easy to forget – so an exasperated expression, you would never reveal face to face, could be your undoing!.
- Beware of yawning – you can trigger an epidemic of yawning!

Annex 5 Consent form

Meeting/Workshop Title Consent form for recording online meetings/workshops

Please could you read this, sign it and send it back to: email

Taking Part

I understand that the purpose of this meeting/workshop is to...

I agree to take part in the meeting/workshop.

I agree for my voice, questions (typed in chat bar) and video to be part of the recording.

I agree to what I say being noted in writing.

I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from using video, sound, or the entire meeting/workshop at any time. I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part.

Use of the meeting/workshop video

I understand that the video may be used in project publications, reports, posted on web pages, and other research outputs.

I understand my personal details such as my full name and email address will not be revealed to people outside the project team.

I understand this record will be used by your organisation to revisit discussions in order to gain a deep insight into...

Name of participant [capitals]

Signature

Date

Project lead [capitals]

Signature

Date

Annex 6 Handling Meeting Fatigue

Handling Meeting Fatigue

Hangout fatigue? All Zoom gloom? Webexed out? Here's some reasons why...

By Bryony Pound

Scientists investigating attention (how we use it, how we lose it, and how we get it back again) have found two main types: 'focused attention', and 'soft fascination'¹.

When we're working on something interesting, we may find ourselves in 'flow' and not notice the hours pass. But when we direct our attention to things, such as long hours at a computer, we can exert too much of our brain's capacity for attention. This leads to attention fatigue, indecisiveness, difficulty forming and articulating thoughts, and increased stress levels. And if you are like us, after we've been online for 8 hours facilitating or training, we get a bit irritable!

The good news is that you can restore from attention fatigue through relaxation: in a comfortable home space, with an activity that doesn't require focused attention, or best of all in a relaxing nature space.

Time in nature (walking, socialising, sitting and letting our mind wander) prompts restorative 'soft fascination'. Once restored, we can use directed and focused attention again. As little as 10 minutes of natural space can affect mood, cognition and information processing capacity!

So why is video calling particularly challenging? A normal conversation has non-verbal cues like speed of breath intake, shifting of body weight or moving the head or hands, but these are less obvious in video calls. We can't even make proper eye contact and to add to the challenge, people who can see themselves on video, tend to mute their facial expression, tone and body language. We all then need to make much more effort to focus on what is said, how it is said and what is meant. It takes more effort than a normal conversation or face to face meeting.

Many of us also feel 'on show' knowing that we're always in shot, so can't look away to think as often, or relax our attention for a moment looking out the window. We can usually see ourselves too, which is distracting because it is direct feedback on how you look when you say things or pull expressions.

We have also invited our work colleagues into our home, so it's only natural to be concerned about what your work colleagues can see behind you in your new "office". Many of us have new work colleagues: children, partners, pets, and parents, so we have to focus harder to ignore distractions.

Video calls require more directed attention and can be more stressful, because, brilliant as video calling is, it isn't how we have evolved to communicate as a species. It comes to us less naturally, so takes more exerted directed attention to do.

For many of us now too, our work has invaded our safe relaxation spaces like our home sanctuaries. The brain is prompted into habits by visual cues, different environments and sensory information, but now our workspace is in our home space. We've overlapped our work prompts for directed attention, and our sanctuary and relaxation prompts for soft fascination. It's unsurprising it's harder to detach from work at the end of the day.

So, what can you do?

1. Take breaks and plan them into calls – an average unrefreshed human brain's attention span is 30-40 minutes, at which point our brains need a mini-restore/refresh. Have a 5-minute stretch or take a moment outside. Have a moment away from screens.
2. Go for walks at lunch to restore your attention and refresh.

¹ Kaplan and Kaplan

3. Make sure you are happy with your background before joining a call, so you feel more comfortable and relaxed.
4. Turn off self-view wherever possible to feel less on show, relax more, and have more attention for the conversation at hand.
5. If possible, have a different space for work and relaxation so that you can keep different spatial cues and maintain a "sanctuary" work-free zone
6. If you can't do 5, then remove work cues at the end of the day (put the laptop away!) and go for a walk to recuperate from the day.
7. If you can't get out of those lengthy meetings or take regular breaks, then organise break days from video calling to give yourself webcam free time and more agency to go soak up some nature.
8. Finally, get to your local nature rich space as much as possible – the more diverse the better - it has been shown to lower stress hormone levels, improve physical health, increase self-esteem, catalyse relaxation, and restore your attention.