



DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL ROOMS IN HYBRID WORK MEETINGS

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*"Enhance your hybrid work meetings through reflection.
Avoid the pitfalls of quick fixes!"*



Is this situation familiar? Could it happen?

Anna is a middle manager in a medium-size company. She is leading yet another hybrid work meeting. While greeting everyone welcome to the meeting, Anna thinks, 'I really like this room. The mic and camera always work well and we can see the others properly on this large screen'. Four participants are connecting from different locations: teleworking from home, sitting at a public library, connecting from a coworking space and a cafe. Anna is glad they have their camera on. Sometimes their microphones however pick up sounds from the surrounding soundscape. It is also unclear who else is listening. Anna therefore constantly reminds them of the

company's meeting guidelines.

It also happens that the participants on-site "forget" about the remote ones, especially if they are few. A colleague has introduced the requirement for all attendees to go digital, even when present in the main physical room. Anna is not convinced – then they would just look at their laptops and not each other. 'There are inevitably differences when it comes to the premises for dialogue and use of technology, and ultimately inclusion', Anna concludes. Still, hybrid work meetings have several advantages, including achieving the company's sustainability goals.

What are the **key** issues here? Read more on next page.

Key issues

Contemporary digital technologies have enabled new ways of working, allowing remote and collaborative work from new places, such as homes, coworking spaces, cafés, and even outdoor environments. Different concepts are used to describe different expressions of these new ways of working – for instance working from home (WFH), teleworking, or digital nomadism. Hybrid work meetings with co-located participants on-site and remote participants situated in different locations are central to many of these new work practices.

In hybrid meetings, although every participant is in a specific physical room (at the office or somewhere else), digital rooms are also created via collaboration and communication platforms, enabling participants to share video, audio, text, images, emojis, etcetera on large wall-mounted screens, laptops or mobile phones.

The situation described in the vignette presents different challenges that emerge

when physical and digital rooms coexist in a hybrid meeting. For instance, there may be differences in meeting experiences depending on whether participation is remote or on-site. This means that participants' sense of being included in the meeting could be affected by, for instance, where they are physically located and the technical facilities available. Thus, it may be difficult to secure participation on equal terms.

It may sound obvious, but it is worth pointing out that the physical and digital rooms matter for the experience and performance of hybrid meetings.

In this reflection guide we provide insight and encourage reflection on the physical and digital room by addressing some key issues:

- how to deal with the so-called dominance of the physical room that may lead to intentional or unintentional exclusion of remote participants in several ways
- how to choose the physical rooms and what to take into consideration

- how a deeper understanding of the concept of place may support in organizing these kinds of meetings
- how to understand the digital room in its multiplicity
- how to organize rooms with the hybrid meetings at the centre.

We recommend two picture-based and collaborative workshops to delve into the complexity of hybrid work meetings that are carried out in different locations, in a combination of digital and physical rooms. These are: “rich pictures in collaborative workshops” and “metaphorical thinking and photographs”.

Read the workshop guides on

<https://sites.mdu.se/inpro-hym/en/inpro-hym>

Before digging into the issues above, we would like to invite you to start reflecting on your ways of handling the physical and digital room by answering the following questions. If you also want to discuss and reflect with your colleagues or other interested people, you may try to perform one of the workshops we recommend.

Questions for reflection

As a meeting leader, ask yourself ...

- When I am in the main physical room, do I directly start the digital meeting application? If not, what do the remote participants lose?
- How are the cameras involved in my hybrid meetings positioned? What is made visible and what invisible, and for whom?

As a meeting participant, ask yourself

- How were the chairs, tables, screens, etc. positioned last time I participated in a hybrid meeting from the main physical room? Why and to what effect?
- Where am I usually when participating in a meeting in remote (home, outdoors, another office, etc.)? Can I actively choose those places? If yes, why do I choose them? What do they mean to me?

Addressing the dominance of the physical meeting room

Which room do you consider the main meeting room? The main physical room, that is, the room where those at the office sit, seems to be the common answer, to the point that the expression "dominance of the physical room" is used to express how we take for granted that this is the "real meeting room" in a hybrid meeting. This is not strange. The main physical room is the setting in which meetings have traditionally taken place – we have experienced meetings of this kind, seen them on TV, read about them in books, among other contexts.

We often have an implicit understanding of how to navigate a meeting in a physical room – from where and when to sit at the beginning of the meeting, to how to make sure to make a good impression, to when to speak and when to be silent.

Many people feel that it is easier to align to how a particular meeting is run when all participants are in the same room – just because we may have more experiences to

draw on. The physical room may therefore feel "safer" and thus preferred when discussing delicate issues, negotiating, or making important decisions.

"We avoid hybrid meetings and online digital meetings with sensitive topics."

This has not always been the case, however. Before industrialization, it was not unusual to perform work from home. Once home and work became separated, designated workplaces were built in specific locations to guarantee efficiency of operations. With a hybrid work model, the workplace changes again, and is now extended and prolonged; it becomes digitized, virtual, and sometimes even nomadic. However, the designated and built workplace still tends to be the norm and in hybrid work meetings the remote participants are not always equally involved.

”Sometimes [I] forget the ones that are not in the room, since they are a minority.”

The main physical room also offers other kinds of advantage. One is the possibility to see and hear. In a physical meeting room, most elements of a meeting are visually available to all participants, although in different ways and from different angles. Facial expressions, body language, voice tonality, notes on a whiteboard, and papers circulated are potentially accessible to all participants (disabilities may prevent part of this accessibility, however). In a hybrid meeting, these elements need to be mediated and made present to participants, that is reproduced in video and audio through displays, screens, and loudspeakers.

The positioning of cameras and microphones, as well as the use of collaborative tools for sharing text, post-its, and the like needs consideration. If something of importance is going on in the physical meeting room, it may be worthwhile for the meeting leader to summarize what has been happened for everyone, so the online participants do not miss it. Still, it will be impossible to convey all the small things going on in the room.

Another advantage of the main physical room is related to speed in performing tasks. For instance, in a physical meeting room when beehive discussions need to be documented, notebooks and sheets of paper can already be on the table, whereas online participants may need to find the digital whiteboard or create a shared document (to mention some common practices), before starting to document the discussion. This may result in poor

documentation of online discussions compared to those going on in the physical meeting room. To prevent this from happening, there is a need to organize meetings so that every participant can complete the tasks assigned, independently of from where s/he is connecting.

Given the advantages of participating in a meeting from the main physical room, should we then recommend avoiding hybrid meetings? Not really. But since we don't have the same extensive experience and know-how regarding hybrid work meetings as we have with physical meetings, expectations and practices for compensating the dominance of the main physical room may need articulation in order to be made explicit to all participants.

Questions for reflection

- Which practices specific to hybrid meetings and to compensating the dominance of the main physical room have I experienced? What can I learn from them?

Choosing physical meeting rooms

Many organizations have dedicated rooms for work meetings. Some of them feel fresh, are well-ventilated and bright, whereas others are too small for the furniture and/or number of participants, are located in noisy parts of the office or have non-functional lighting – to mention some recurrent commentaries on meeting rooms. Moreover, whereas rooms built recently may have the latest technologies in place, older rooms show traces of different waves of meeting devices being implemented according to what was deemed functional at different points in time.

While it is not always possible to choose the room one would have wished for, it is nevertheless worth spending some time considering which room to book when preparing a meeting if there are several available.

🤔 Questions for reflection

As a meeting leader, ask yourself ...

- When I organize meetings, which room/s do I usually choose/book? Why? How do my colleagues choose rooms for their meetings?
- Which room do I think provides opportunities for an inclusive and productive meeting at my organization? How come?

A room is not just a container. Objects can be re-arranged, and they may be used in different ways, intended and unintended. Participants also bring with them objects that contribute to making a room into a meeting room. It may be pencils, post-its, and other materials we associate with work meetings. Some objects may also disturb the meeting, such as mobile phones lying on the table, vibrating now and then.

IT IS IN THE DOING OF THE MEETING THAT THE MEETING ROOM IS CONSTRUCTED. THERE ARE MANY ELEMENTS THAT THE MEETING LEADER MAY NEED TO CONSIDER IN ORDER TO CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR A "GOOD" MEETING ROOM

You may have thought of how the choice of room multiplies in hybrid work meetings. We not only choose between the meeting rooms on-site at the office. We can choose to connect in remote from specific rooms, which become part of the meeting. Such choices have different motivations:

- Sometimes individual needs – working-life balance or an agenda already filled up by meetings may be two possible reasons for having a meeting from home.
- Sometimes what is considered most beneficial for the meeting.
- A room at home could provide a relaxing and inspiring atmosphere that helps the participant to be positive and constructive during the meeting.
- At other times presence at the office may be needed to strengthen the sense of community in the group.

When choosing physical rooms for hybrid work meetings, you may reflect on how the room affects the meeting and what the meeting becomes.

Rooms are not neutral. They directly affect the meeting, for instance by enabling someone to be seen and heard at the meeting. They also affect the meeting indirectly. If a room comes with a creative atmosphere, for instance, it may be easier to feel creative. The sections below offer some conceptual tools for making sense of how rooms matter.

Place matters for the experience of hybrid meetings

Place is a concept worth attention. The introductory vignette describes challenges typical of hybrid meetings related to place, given that the main physical meeting room at the office is intertwined with other places where the remote participants are located.

”Place' is often defined as a meaningful location.”

Place is not just "a location", but rather it is a location imbued with meaning. We give names to places, such as a shop or a bedroom, which are related to expected experiences, behaviours, and functions among other aspects. A place means something to us and "does" something with us. If you enter a museum, for instance, you will most probably walk carefully and talk quietly. Place is not to be confused with space (which we address in the next session).

The appearance of the place, its character, its coherence, and our previous experiences and memories of similar places influence our behaviors, activities, and interactions.

There are different categories of places that are relevant for a hybrid work model. As urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg explains in his book "The Great Good Place" from 1989, besides homes that are private first places and designated workplaces that are common public second places, there are also the so-called third places, which are (semi)public places such as cafes or train cabins. All these places represent and materialize different functions, atmospheres, cultures, norms, expectations, amongst other things. Hence, whereas there may be a desire to create one meeting experience for all participants in a hybrid work meeting, it is important to understand that different places are part of the meeting.

As a hybrid work meeting organizer you do not know much about the "other" places where the remote participants are situated.

In other words, when organizing a hybrid work meeting it may be important to reflect on which places the meeting attendees are participating from and how those places may affect their participation and the work meeting overall.

🤔 Questions for reflection

As a meeting participant, ask yourself ...

- Thinking of the last hybrid meeting I participated in, how did previous meeting situations and the place where I was affect my experience of the meeting?
- Do I know how others were affected by previous meeting situations and the place where they were?
- As a remote participant, what are the benefits and limitations of the physical place where I am situated during the meeting?

The digital room – a shared space?

In hybrid work meetings, the space for working also includes the digital space. Whether this digital space, created through online collaboration and communication platforms such as Cisco WebEx, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom, is a “real” space or not is a debated question. Human geographer Doreen Massey wrote in her book “For space” that if we consider time as the dimension of change, then space is the dimension of the social, that is, of relations and interactions.

Participants in a hybrid work meeting and their corporeal bodies interact with a screen on which digital representations of other participants’ bodies and places are projected. While participants interact and talk through technology, they are affected by each other and by objects mobilized in the meeting. In other words, relationships

are made and remade in the digital room. The digital room could be understood as a sphere in which social relations are created while the meeting is ongoing – which means as a digital space.

Another feature of digital rooms is that their user interfaces are, on the one hand, rather similar (small squares with faces, backgrounds, sometimes the picture of many people around a table, sometimes participants’ photos and/or initials). On the other hand, the interfaces are never the same, not even during the same meeting, since, for instance, participants are re-shuffled depending on who raises his/her hand, may turn off and on their cameras, may change their background or move from one place to another.

Additionally, the digital room easily becomes many different rooms, something

not possible with the same speed and flexibility for physical rooms. Digital applications offer, for instance, "breakout rooms" where parallel meetings may take place. In addition to these rooms for synchronous communication, there are also rooms for asynchronous text-based communication such as chats, discussion forums, and the like. It may be difficult for the meeting organizers to keep track of interactions both in the physical meeting room and in the multiple digital spaces. As one of the participants in our study claimed:

”And sometimes people may start chatting in parallel and they get worked up... [...] but this is something that is usually avoided when you are in the same [physical] place, and you deal with it on the spot and it doesn't continue.”

Questions for reflection

As a meeting participant, ask yourself ...

- How am I affected by the digital space in hybrid meetings? Does it matter that participants squares on the screen are rearranged when they speak or turn off their camera? Does it matter how I am placed in and out of breakout rooms?

The anteroom of the hybrid work meeting

You may recognize the situation in which participants on-site, just before starting a hybrid work meeting, are engaged in small talk, sometimes having coffee, maybe right outside the main meeting room, or in the kitchen next door, or perhaps in an adjacent hallway. This kind of informal communication and spontaneous activities are important for organizing processes, may even be said to hold the organization together. It is in these moments that we sometimes quickly solve problems, exchange ideas, and reflect on challenges, or exchange experiences and knowledge.

According to architectural theories, the room we encounter before entering another room is an anteroom – a place where expectations are set for what will come next, which in this case is the meeting. In hybrid work meetings, the main anteroom rarely includes the remote participants.

In hybrid meetings, the anteroom most often differs for different participants. Spontaneous dialogue and small talk may take place between remote participants online, if the digital room is open before the formal start of the meeting. But the remote participants are also located somewhere before the meeting starts, which could be considered as different anterooms. When working remotely from home, for instance, you could have been in the laundry room, and if you work in a café, you could have gone for a walk in the city first. The remote participants thus enter the meeting in different ways, probably with different expectations, than the participants in the main physical meeting room.

There are also digital waiting rooms. These rooms could be compared with a digital anteroom; however, their design

is often neglected. While there is often no shared anteroom in a hybrid meeting, the digital waiting room could be made more inclusive. Have you, for instance, thought of the possibility of having music playing when people enter the meeting?

🤔 Questions for reflection

As a meeting leader, ask yourself ...

- How can I create an anteroom involving both remote and on-site participants, encouraging informal communication and spontaneous encounters?

Room design centred on the hybrid meeting experience

As discussed above, the available technology for both co-located and remote meeting participants, as well as the interiors of first places (homes), second places (designated workplaces) and third places matter for what kind of experience the meeting results in. In the main physical meeting room at the office, the placement of tables and chairs, screens/monitors, microphones, cameras, etcetera are all important factors to consider.

In this kind of mixed reality with both digital and physical rooms, designing rooms that guarantee equal user experience is a challenge, if not an impossibility. For instance, first and third places are out of the control of the meeting organizer and the organization one works for. However, physical meeting rooms at the designated workplace may be adapted to a hybrid meeting

situation. Furniture appearance and functionality may be considered, as well as technology functionality and usability.

Another aspect to pay attention to is how to create so-called “touch points”¹.

Touch points are points where digital and physical spaces are linked. Rather than treating a hybrid meeting as a physical meeting with a digital extension, or as a digital meeting with a physical extension (depending on how you participate), one could embrace the notion of “hybrid”. Hybrid means that the meeting is both physical and digital at the same time.

When the participants on the remote are forgotten, it is because the physical room has become disconnected from the digital one. It is here that the notion of “touch point” may help.

¹ Benyon, D., Mival, O., & Ayan, S. (2012, September). Designing blended spaces. In The 26th BCS Conference on Human Computer Interaction. BCS Learning & Development.

How can you organize the meeting so that digital and physical rooms are linked and experienced at the same time by meeting participants? For instance, if you have a table that is a half-circle with a straight side close to a wall with one or more large screens showing remote participants, you will see both IRL and remote participants all the time, at the same time. This is quite a different set-up from when the screen and camera are behind certain participants in the physical room. Or when the meeting leader is sitting on the short one side of a rectangular table, and the screen is over the other short side. In this case, IRL participants will look at the meeting leader and not see the remote participants on the screen.

Also, when participating in remote, you could spend some time considering how to create touch points. If, for instance, you are participating from home since this provides you with an inspiring and calm atmosphere, you would need to place yourself in such a way that you can see the meeting participants on your screen, or listen to them through your headset, but also at the same time enjoy the inspiring and calm atmosphere. That is, rather than staring at a screen for a few hours, which is exhausting, you could combine experiencing your own physical room, with its atmosphere, and being online, connected to the other participants

Questions for reflection

- What features of the physical meeting rooms that you usually use may be “low hanging fruits” in terms of easy modification that have a large impact on the hybrid meeting experience?
- When you participate to a hybrid meeting from first and third places do you enjoy the atmosphere of these places? If not, why? Are there obstacles that could be easily removed?

This guide is the result of research we have done in the 2-years long project InPro-Hym (INclusive and PROductive HYbrid Meetings), and also draws on our work in the research projects MnC (Meetings and Community in the postdigital era) and MeetWell (Leadership and Employee Well-Being in Virtual and Hybrid Meetings). The InPro-Hym project has been performed in collaboration between Mälardalen University, the University of Gothenburg, Hitachi Energy and the municipality of Västerås. The project has been funded by Vinnova.

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