

Meeting Format and Content

1. Allow enough lead time to plan the meeting.

Significant lead time is necessary to commission research of value and to plan a large conference. Nine months is the minimum time needed for good results.

Plan and enforce earlier deadlines for research papers than you think you need. Authors often miss submission deadlines for conference papers, leaving moderators and organizers no time to summarize or mail papers to attendees prior to the meeting. Remind authors that if they plan to distribute materials, they should bring disks of the materials in Word or text formats. They also should be prepared to deliver the materials in alternative formats such as large print, Braille and disks in various formats for attendees with disabilities who cannot use standard print formats.

Get permissions for any materials you intend to reproduce.

If discussion is the object of the meeting, send research papers to participants one to two weeks in advance so they have sufficient time to read them. Have plans in place to provide alternative formats upon request.

Produce and distribute a written conference product. A written conference product is essential to a good dissemination effort. If you need such a product to meet your meeting objectives, plan time for its production and distribution to take place immediately after the meeting. If you want a meeting summary, hire a writer to attend the meeting and work on deadline to produce one.

Make or be prepared to make conference materials available in alternative formats such as large print, Braille and disks in various formats.

2. Choose an effective meeting format.

When dealing with major issues, try to bring all the players into one room and emphasize interaction. Those who represent one point of view can interact with others who may have different perspectives. Allow sufficient discussion time for those identified as lead participants.

Determine the ratio of presentation time to discussion time. With a well-informed and sophisticated audience, minimal lecture and maximum discussion time works well. Allow equal time for presentations followed by discussion, particularly if papers can be circulated to attendees in advance. If more time is needed for discussion and socializing, limit presentations to short summaries of written papers.

Decide whether more time for informal small group discussions will be beneficial.

Vary the meeting format. As appropriate, use the whole audience, small groups, debates, panels, town-hall style, one-on-one consultations and skills practice.

Match the number of attendees to the objectives of the meeting.

For decision-making, a maximum of 15.

For think tanks, a maximum of 30, unless attendees are broken up into smaller groups.

For skill building, a maximum of 20.

3. Choose the right speakers and chairpersons.

Choose speakers carefully—big audiences require a bit of theater. Give clear guidance about what you want from the speaker and limit the time allowed (15- to 30-minute maximum for the main speaker). Rehearse or review the draft talk.

Limit speakers to six slides per 15 to 20 minutes. This forces the speaker to be succinct and write the presentation before the meeting.

For large meetings, give speakers examples of slides in the form of templates

Prepare speakers by providing guidelines for making their presentations accessible to everyone

To stay on schedule, time individual presentations. Make sure speakers know in advance that someone will time each presentation and signal them when their time runs out.

4. Put together a realistic agenda.

Don't overload the agenda. Meeting length should be geared to the activity. Draft an agenda. Then go back to the agenda; double the time for each session and cut back the items on the agenda.)

Experienced trainers indicate that the maximum amount of time people can focus is about five to six hours. List times on the final agenda and try to keep to them.

Allow enough time for questions. One rule of thumb is one minute of questions for each minute of presentation. Prepare discussion questions in case the group needs a kick-start.

Make breaks as long as possible—20 to 30 minutes. This is where important networking takes place. Longer breaks after small group sessions let people either follow up on discussions that arose during those sessions or check in with their offices.

Begin think tank meetings with an evening meal or a social event so introductions take place before meetings. Meeting time is gained the next day for the real work.

If facilitators are hired to answer questions or move discussions along, allow adequate time for them to organize breakout sessions and the information that is presented, in the smaller groups.

Avoid a large room lecture format for an entire day. Breakout sessions are very welcome, particularly in the afternoons. Assign the audience to breakout sessions in advance (posting assignments in conference handouts) to avoid confusion.

TIMING GUIDELINES

Brainstorming: one to two hours per topic.

Progress reports: 16 minutes per speaker.

Small group breakouts: 45 to 90 minutes, depending on tasks and numbers.

Breaks: 20 minutes for small groups, 30 minutes for large groups.

5. Keep the audience fresh.

Where appropriate, try different room setups each day, especially if the group is in the same room every day. Ensure that each new setup provides accessibility such as room, lighting and dark backdrop for interpreters to be seen, tables (if there are tables), ramps and aisles that meet the ADAAG.

To increase interaction, set up meetings in round or cluster shapes. Put 'reserved' signs on the back rows of seats to encourage attendees to sit up front.

Equipment can be used to enhance speakers' impact.

6. Evaluate the meeting.

Evaluation is especially helpful in planning future meetings. Ask for suggestions for future topics and speaker ideas. Also ask for suggestions regarding the meeting format and for feedback and recommendations related to accessibility issues of the conference.

Allow time to fill out the evaluation forms before the end of the meeting, otherwise people leave without completing them. If your meeting lasts for several days and/or has different components that you want to evaluate, use a separate evaluation form for each day or component. Make sure that these forms are available in alternative formats and provide options for participants who may have difficulty filling out a standard paper form, such as an electronic version and scribes.