

Research and Innovation Podcast
Episode 49 – How to make hybrid meetings effective
Speakers: Emma Gritt and Babak Tizkar

[00:00:06] **Emma:** Hi and welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast from Leeds University Business School. I'm Dr Emma Gritt and today I'm joined again by Babak Tizkar from Atkins. Welcome back Babak.

[00:00:19] **Babak:** Hello.

[00:00:20] **Emma:** It's great to have you here again with us. So this is our second episode where we're talking about the use of technology in hybrid working. And today we're going to focus more specifically around hybrid meetings and the way that they've been conducted and what that might look like going forward as well. Babak is going to talk a little bit about his experiences of hybrid meetings, which I think is something that is becoming quite an important topic.

I mean, we're finding that in our research and both in our snapshot survey and our interviews, that hybrid meetings are becoming quite a challenge for many employees and organizations. And just in case anyone's not sure about what a hybrid meeting is, this essentially means that some attendees are located in the physical office space, whereas others are joining remotely.

In our previous podcast, we started to touch upon some of these topics around hybrid and essentially what kind of technologies can be used for this. So I thought Babak could you maybe start off by telling us a little bit about your experience with hybrid meetings, how they've played a role in your job?

[00:01:27] **Babak:** Absolutely. I mean hybrid meeting has become the norm since everyone transitioned to working from home to being in a hybrid environment where they're in the office or sort of site offices and working from home and we are continuously finding that the hybrid method of engagement is here to stay.

And it's here to stay because it provides an agility and flexibility, not just to the people we work with, but also it introduces a different aspect to how we engage and how we record or take problem solving forward. And it introduces both possibilities and challenges. So if I look at my own team, I lead a team of about 30 people. We've got a vast array of different responsibilities across building design. And as a team, we are very task-based and very focused around what we need to do. We support not singular projects, but the full spectrum of different projects at the same time. So the self-reliance and the responsibility each individual needs to bring to their role is greater in the hybrid environment, because there's no one there physically to either remind you or to engage with you as a form of getting actions done.

And that self-reliance obviously, and the responsibility that that carries with it, is brought into the hybrid meeting as well. What we've found is, hybrid meetings, particularly virtual meetings, are a really good way of keeping in touch with individuals on a daily basis, whether that's in the form of chats, team chats or sending emails, but also setting up virtual meetings with cameras to be able to see and engage with people.

But what we've also seen is the hybrid working format has introduced perhaps a longer lead time to some of the problems we're looking to solve and we're very conscious of the way we set up the hybrid meetings, we're very conscious of the format where we sometimes have to force ourselves into, perhaps making ourselves available physically in a workshop and in an office environment to be able to accelerate the problem-solving.

So that conscious effort of deciding has become a really critical part of the way we set up meetings.

[00:03:53] **Emma:** So, so in that sense then, for some things, a hybrid meeting works quite well, but other, in other instances, it's maybe some problems that can't be solved in that way. And you maybe have to come, you all maybe need to be present in the office.

[00:04:10] **Babak:** Absolutely. I mean, most problems can be solved, I think virtually, but it's about ensuring that the time you spend sorting a problem versus the priority of the problem, all align and sometimes delaying a conversation or delaying a topic for next week to get together might accelerate the problem solving, and it allows more people to engage with the challenge they have as well.

[00:04:36] **Emma:** And so in terms of the technologies that you use, I know you alluded to this in the previous podcast a little bit, but can you just maybe tell us a bit about some of the technologies that you use? I mean, I imagine that collaboration and working together must be quite a key part of what you do.

[00:04:51] **Babak:** Absolutely. So we use primarily we use Microsoft Teams for the collaboration side of it - the day-to-day engagement, the messaging, the connectivity with colleagues. And often when we set up meetings, there's always a Teams invite in there for people that perhaps can't join. We often try to promote the use of cameras in their sessions to enable people to be able to participate and be more present. And I think that lack of engagement sometimes can be contributed back to not being on camera, to be able to engage.

Beyond Teams we then have a vast array of different tools that we use for different purposes. So obviously Outlook forms part of our emailing and that sort of exchange and setting up meetings.

And then depending on whether we're looking at design tools, we've got various document management systems and various servers that we use to store, access and then obviously develop our designs in. And beyond that, looking externally, depending on the client or the stakeholder we're engaging with, we then have different solutions that we use beyond Microsoft Teams, bearing in mind some clients sit in different time zones. Some clients are more tech-savvy than others. Different security aspects also dictate what solutions we use. So we, fortunately as a large organization, we've got access to a range of different ways of engaging. I think the bedrock of everything behind the scenes is obviously making sure we record the conversations, to ensure that obviously actions that are taken and recorded.

And then again, we've got different tools that we use for different purposes. If it's design-related, common data environments often have an aspect of being able to record actions and being able to then task them based on project roles or individuals. We use Mural quite frequently as ways of collaborating and creating a sort of a blank canvas way of taking down notes or brainstorming.

And that's really accelerated over our, sort of COVID, work-from-home transition into hybrid. And the fortunate thing with the Mural usage as well in contrast of using whiteboards is it's digitally saved. So you can create multiple different aspects and use the breakout functionality within Microsoft Teams to have multiple people in the smaller groups engaging, and then in coming back together to present what they've done.

[00:07:24] **Emma:** I think that that's the key, isn't it really, having those kinds of range of tools that are available for the... and that are fit for purpose as well as what it is that you're trying to do. And that can maybe try and mimic as much as we can do what it's like in real life to interact.

[00:07:43] **Babak:** Absolutely. I mean, we haven't necessarily introduced new pieces of technology that we haven't used before, but one of the fundamental changes in our approach and in our learning has been around the use of data. Being able to data-mine activities, tasks, or outputs in order to drive a greater sense of transparency between what projects are doing, what's happening operationally. Being able to put those two things together to understand patterns, whether that's around training or skills or whether that's around processes or protocols that we need to introduce. So data-driven approach to operations and data-driven approach to design and using tools has been a fundamental key steppingstone.

[00:08:29] **Emma:** Absolutely. And I know you touched upon, and you just mentioned about training there and I think that's something that's, that's quite key actually. Particularly because we've... in some of our research, we found that not a lot of people are trained in how to kind of use some of these hybrid meeting tools. And so do you have any kind of experience and training or support for the use of some of these technologies in hybrid meetings?

[00:08:53] **Babak:** Absolutely. And we've enhanced our training and the commitment to training, to get people... to get the right support to individuals as they go through this journey of digitization. And one of the fundamental changes we've done is we've moved away from our default form of training, which has always been classroom training into a more task-based, virtual training, where we put more responsibility on each individual across the full spectrum of everyone we hire between sort of graduates and apprentices all the way up to directors to take more responsibility in finding and putting effort in finding the right training, they need to then undertake and then doing it at their own pace.

So what we've done is itemized every single training module that we have, give access to every individual, all of that content and formed specific training plans around each individual's job persona to get them to have a foundation of skill level that allows them to not just use one particular software, but to use a range of different softwares that then work together to be able to accelerate delivery and design.

[00:10:07] **Emma:** I think there's some really, really important points there in terms of the approach that you've taken in utilizing the technology for delivering some of that. And so if we're thinking about hybrid meetings going forward, is there anything that you think would make them more effective?

[00:10:30] **Babak:** Lessons learned has been greatly on the conversations to be a lot more focused and be more task-based and allow people to prepare ahead of time. So it becomes a more efficient use of time. Sometimes you have different types of engagements where you just get together and brainstorm, and that might take 30 minutes, an hour or two hours, depending on the scale and size

of the subject matter and that's absolutely fine. But for the vast majority of hybrid meetings we have, we try to be as focused and as lean as possible so we don't oversaturate people's diaries with one meeting after the other, where sometimes you feel you're not progressing as much as you would like. So that's been absolutely the critical thing we were trying to add into our meeting schedules that we don't try to add by default half an hour or an hour of meeting. We allow time in between meetings as well. And we tried to keep the conversation more focused.

[00:11:42] **Emma:** And are there any further technology advancements or solutions that you think would help hybrid meetings more generally?

[00:11:49] **Babak:** That's an interesting one. I think the question around fit for purposeness is a critical one. We have to make sure as much as technology has taken centre stage, technology is still a tool. We need to evaluate what that tool does and whether that tool fits what we're trying to do at that given time.

I think having... so one of the challenges we also have with hybrid working is around engagement and engagement, particularly in larger meetings, it relies on the host of the meeting session or the one chairing to ensure everyone is given the opportunity or everyone has been engaged with in the session to obviously maximize the collaboration.

Having tools that allow different users to be able to engage with a different format is a really interesting one. When you have a hybrid working environment where you have perhaps a meeting room with X amount of people sitting in it, and they're looking at a screen with various faces, sort of projected, it creates a very different dynamic to the conversation because you're being a lot more conscious about who's talking and who's engaging and you just go through the motions of getting people to engage.

But one of the problems with people dialling in is they're equally looking at a room of people. And then sometimes it's very hard to know who's talking and the order in which you then go through and people overlap and there's delays on the system. So I don't know what the solution looks like. I think having technology that allows you to probably engage more collaboratively in a virtual presence is probably where we need to go next.

Having Microsoft Teams as an example, being more embedded in our design tools would be fundamental. So instead of you going to another piece of software to then call somebody up, having to do it within the, within the solutions is probably a really good step forward as well, because it just cuts away that delay that we have.

And all of this is underlined obviously with network and broadband and all of that connectivity issues that a lot of people have. So I think geographically, we got people sitting all over the UK and all over the world, actually, in certain regions, there is a significant lag in their connectivity to the internet and network speeds, and that causes problems for them to engage. So I think that being able to address that is a fundamental part.

[00:14:25] **Emma:** Yeah, absolutely. I think you're right. That infrastructure as well is going to be key going forward. So, yeah thank you for that.

So thank you so much again for chatting with me about the use of hybrid meetings and specifically about your experiences and how that's worked. I think there's been some really insightful things that have come out of that conversation. So thank you so much.

[00:14:49] **Babak:** Thank you for having me.

[00:14:52] **Emma:** You're very welcome. If you're interested in finding out more about the Adapting Offices research project, the information should be in the show notes and a link to click through. Thank you so much for listening. Goodbye.