

4 Lessons Learned From a Year of Virtual Work

“New Normals” for Getting Content to Your Clients

Like everyone else, financial professionals are ready for things to go back to normal after the year of “virtual everything.” But we think this is a moment to reflect. While virtual work was uncomfortable at times, many of our clients and folks in our network discovered that reporting and other communications came together more efficiently in a virtual setting.

This is hardly surprising to us at PurcellCom. We’ve been purely virtual for more than 15 years, and some of the lessons of 2020 reinforce our view that communications work, in particular, can often be done better when it’s done virtually. Clearly, some benefits to the remote office should be kept.

1. RETHINK THE PURPOSE OF MEETINGS



THE CONCERN BEFORE

In the pre-2020 world, and particularly for processes that stretched across teams, in-person meetings were seen as essential for communicating important information and getting contributors to focus on the task at hand.



THE EXPERIENCE DURING

Many clients drastically reduced the number of long meetings or those intended to accomplish steps in their processes. Short video calls — on Zoom, Teams, or any other platform — proved to be as effective as lengthy in-person meetings at engaging members of your process, and usually in much shorter time frames.

Video calls also proved to be an effective tool for informal office conversations — the equivalent of the office pop-in. The proliferation of online “water cooler chats” highlighted that personal connection is important in-office or out. But it’s more efficient to have personal catch-ups be separate from work activity.



THE LESSON FOR AFTER

Clients reported that the key to reducing meeting time was video calls. Visual contact prompts engagement and response more effectively than phone calls. And because people take those calls at their desks, they are in a better position to quickly handle your request.

“I now have more catch-up meetings to touch base with coworkers. No more than 15-30 minutes.”

– Ashlee Lazzari, Marketing Manager, NEPC

“One advantage with virtual work is that we can bring in more individuals to a group meeting. The technology has been around for a while; we’ll no doubt utilize it more going forward.”

– Dave Macaulay, Strategic Account Manager at G2 Integrated Solutions

2. TRUST THE (VIRTUAL) PROCESS

◀ THE CONCERN BEFORE

While many clients had virtual technologies prior to 2020, they didn't always use them. Defining the right messages and versioning them successfully to your various stakeholders in various settings demands rigor. The fact that a colleague was just down the hall was seen as a necessary fail-safe.

○ THE EXPERIENCE DURING

When given clear requirements and focused process management, remote workers got the job done in 2020 — often surprisingly efficiently. Internet-based communication, document sharing, and process management tools were absolutely up to the challenge, for those who knew how to use them. And it turned out it can be easier to meet deadlines when you are less caught up in office distractions.

▶ THE LESSON FOR AFTER

2020 was the ultimate stress test for replacing in-person activity with virtual technology tools, and they passed with flying colors. But most clients reported that the key to success was still human project management. Having a dedicated process manager to plan activity, coordinate communication, and follow up on deadlines was critical to virtual success.

"All of our reporting is currently being done remotely, which is a 100% increase over a year ago. The processes work the same. There are fewer office distractions, allowing the team to focus and be more productive."

– Lisa Miller,
Marketing
Coordinator at
Thrivent

3. SEPARATE THE SME

◀ THE CONCERN BEFORE

Before 2020, it was assumed that subject matter experts (SMEs) needed to be integrally involved with all aspects of content they contribute to, regardless of whether they are available or even interested. Their name and intellectual capital are on the line.

○ THE EXPERIENCE DURING

2020 forced content creation teams to gather SME contributions (their messages, insights into the audience, and approvals) in a more structured way. No hallway comments or end-of-meeting asides — everything was documented and shared into separate content creation processes. This had the effect of clarifying the SME's role and keeping them from being sucked into process management activity.

▶ THE LESSON FOR AFTER

The more you can define the SME role and separate it from day-to-day process activity, the more efficient it is for them and for you. Ideally, these processes should be able to function even when the SME is not available. The good news is, a lot of SMEs saw exactly how to provide input without giving up too much of their bandwidth, and are ready for more.

"The best thing I ever did was to separate the SME from our process. The amount of time it saves is incredible, as there's too much key-man risk in having SMEs heavily involved. When things shut down in 2020, I knew Harbor would be fine."

– Deb Well, former Director of
e-Business, Harbor

"We found that too much of the 'normal' process was about serving the needs of the internal inputs: PMs, Sales, Data, Metrics. It took us away from focusing on the needs of the audience. Virtual work opened the door to creative reporting solutions for the client."

– Linsey Owens, Financial
Marketing Consultant, former
Director of Marketing for Jensen
Investment Management

4. ENHANCE YOUR INTERNAL COMMS

◀ THE CONCERN BEFORE

Prior to 2020, internal communication systems were seen as tedious to maintain and likely to be ignored by staff.

○ THE EXPERIENCE DURING

2020 forced our clients to use internal communication systems in lieu of in-person conferences or personal pop-ins. Some got very good at creating structured internal communication plans that put useful information at their associates' fingertips right when they needed it. Many plans involved work activity updates facilitated by process management tools; others circulated management insights that helped internal teams speak more knowledgeably to clients and prospects.

▶ THE LESSON FOR AFTER

People pay attention to internal comms when they provide information that is useful to accomplishing their job successfully. Intentional, well packaged content, and some detailed instructions on how best to use it, can get that job done.

We created a regular piece to capture the types of insights our managers provided our team. They've been successful at getting internal ACI employees engaged, helping salespeople to use the stories with clients."

*– Marcela Holder,
Director of Investment
Communications,
American Century
Investments*

"Turn on the content taps. We knew our clients would be anxious by world events, and that we needed to step up. Our teams, especially our sales teams, needed resources to keep the conversation going in a world where they couldn't get out and travel."

– Laura Tillman, Investment Communications Manager, Homestead Funds

It's been our experience with clients that well-planned and executed virtual processes can reduce overall project activity by between 20% and 40%, as measured in man-hours. (That's why we normally bill hourly — to create an easy and meaningful measurement of how effective any process is.) But the most important learning is that, with a bit of planning, companies can communicate effectively with their clients without having a large, complex operational process in their building.

**We're happy to discuss these learnings with you.
Contact us at info@purcellcom.com for more information.**