

Virtual Brainstorming: A New Approach to Creative Thinking

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Innovation is the core of your business.

You've got a very short time to come up with some great new ideas to turn the business around. Fortunately, you have access to some of the most creative minds in your company from dozens of locations around the world. Unlike face-to-face brainstorming sessions where you've helped groups achieve some truly breakthrough thinking, this time there just isn't time or money to bring these people together physically. You know you must come up with an approach beyond simple teleconferencing that will enable innovative new ideas to flow freely across a distance. You are somewhat familiar with web collaboration tools, but have no idea how to begin planning your remote brainstorming session.

Many of the techniques you have used to facilitate face-to-face brainstorming will be useful in your remote session. However, virtual brainstorming offers some different challenges and opportunities that you need to prepare for. We've compiled some questions to help you plan the design, flow and the use of technology for successful virtual brainstorming sessions.

How well-understood is the problem to be solved?

Are people aware of any boundaries or constraints that must be kept in mind? If not, consider holding at least a couple of meetings, since virtual meetings must be kept under two hours for participants to remain focused. For example, you may have one session to agree on the problem scope, which is often the most time-consuming step. People can then be ready to jump in and begin brainstorming at the start of the next session.

How quickly do you need a solution?

Are your most talented thinkers really available and accessible? Many times people start to opt out when they realize how much time and work may be involved. (And with remote calls, you don't always know when someone has opted out!) Let each participant know what time and effort will be required and over what period of time; then make sure you have the necessary commitments. This way, you can develop a realistic schedule for calls and other needed interactions.

What brainstorming techniques will work remotely?

Think about ways you have helped groups generate innovative ideas in face-to-face sessions, and consider how these techniques might be used remotely. Make sure that your visual aids, whether images, cartoons, scenarios or provocative questions, are in front of participants to help trigger ideas. For example, send out materials in advance or use web conferencing tools to guide people through a short presentation.

How can we hear from all participants?

Web collaboration tools can really make a difference engaging the whole group and rapidly gathering and documenting all ideas. Familiarize yourself with the capabilities of available brainstorming technology, and consider how they can help you with each of your objectives. Mix up online brainstorming and conversation to keep people engaged and on track.

How many people need to participate simultaneously?

You may need to find alternate ways to solicit the ideas from those with scheduling conflicts or where time zone differences are great. For example, you might set up an asynchronous brainstorm before the meeting to get their input. Also, consider whether synchronous communication (simultaneous audio and web conferencing) is crucial, and if so, who must be involved at critical junctures. Web conferencing technologies greatly expand your options for offline and online participation.

How comfortable are participants in collaborating remotely?

If virtual teams are already part of the culture, you're more likely to have enthusiastic participation for remote brainstorming. Make sure participants feel confident and competent in their abilities to generate innovative ideas from afar. Be prepared to invest extra time with critical participants who may need some handholding, such as calling them and walking them through the agenda ahead of time.

To what extent will different cultures affect participation?

In some cases, the use of a computer keyboard to describe ideas is easier than making verbal contributions in a large-group setting. Know what cultures will be represented, familiarize yourself with cultural factors that may affect participation, and plan your sessions accordingly. For example, when working with a culture that emphasizes the importance of hierarchy, you may want to enable anonymous contributions.

How will you transition from brainstorming to idea selection?

Moving from divergent thinking (idea creation) to convergent thinking (synthesis and selection) requires a dramatic shift in thinking. It also demands a different kind of conversation, which may benefit from a separate session to allow participants to internalize ideas prior to final selection. Remote voting is made easier with new web collaboration technologies, which provides immediate tabulation of results. Voting may also take place asynchronously, allowing participants who missed the conference call to join the decision process.

Thanks to new web conferencing and decision-making tools, virtual brainstorming sessions can be every bit as effective as face-to-face sessions, with the added benefits of greater

convenience and lower costs. How you design and run your remote brainstorming sessions will depend on your responses to these questions, along with other factors such as your own familiarity with available technology and getting comfortable with facilitating without the usual visual cues. While every virtual brainstorming session may call for a somewhat different approach, the old 80/20 rule still applies: For the best results, expect to spend up to 80% of your time and energy in the design and planning of a meeting, and 20% in the delivery.

Communiqué, the online newsletter from Guided Insights, for managers, individuals and teams who need to deliver great results when time is tight.

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Nancy Settle-Murphy is the founder and president of Guided Insights. In her role as principal consultant, Nancy serves as a facilitator, workshop designer and instructor, cross-cultural trainer, communications strategist and organizational development consultant. Her passion and ability to help organizations have the in-depth conversations they need to achieve their goals leads her to become an invaluable strategic partner to her global clients.

Julia Young is Vice President and co-founder of Facilitate.com, a leading provider of web meeting software whose signature product, FacilitatePro, offers collaboration tools for innovative thinking and decision making. Julia has over 20 years of experience as a facilitator and process consultant, the last sixteen of which have been focused on the integration of collaboration technology into group processes for both face-to-face and virtual meetings.