



Landcare
North East
Victoria

Digital Meetings for Landcare & Community Groups

Many community groups find that it is frequently difficult to get enough people to attend regular committee meetings. There are many reasons people cannot attend meetings, including time commitments and members who live outside the area. Groups want to involve younger people, who frequently have young families which prevent or limit their ability to go to meetings at night.

The [Kiewa Catchment Landcare Groups](#) in North East Victoria found this an increasing issue, so decided to try digital meetings for some of their regular committee meetings. The first trial relied on email only discussion and agenda, which worked reasonably well. The second trial utilised an online and editable agenda shared to the committee.

This latter option worked more effectively, with committee members identifying that this was the preferred digital option. A number of committee members noted that they could contribute to this online meeting, where they normally could not attend the meetings due to other commitments.

So, how did they do this, and can other groups do the same? Does it require high technical skills, and does it meet committee requirements?

There are now a variety of free, effective, online document management systems available which suit this kind of use. In fact there are a very large number, so this information will cover one option used.

Awesome! No swerving around deer at night this week!

How was this online meeting run?

Setting the Agenda

This meeting utilised an Agenda which was a Google Doc, through the [Google Drive](#) system. See the [How To for the detailed instructions on using Google Docs](#).

The Agenda used was the normal Agenda, with attendance, apologies, previous minutes, key reports, general business, etc. The format was modified a little to include the rules of operation for

the meeting, with sections for committee members to enter their name in the Moved/Seconded fields.

This Agenda was then shared with all committee members, set so that all members could edit the document, with the link emailed to members at the opening of the meeting.

The meeting was declared open when the link was shared, and closed when all business was concluded, but set for midnight 3 days later. The time is up to the committee, but a recent review by the committee identified a week would be best for this group.

The key item of difference included the rules of the meeting emailed and included in the Agenda.

During the Meeting

Committee Members were able to join the meeting by opening the Agenda at any time during the period the meeting was open, when they had time available.

To do this, they just had to follow the link to the document, which opened in a browser, and was editable.

Members added their name to the attendance list, typed or copied and pasted their reports, typed any comments, moved or seconded any motions by adding their name into the appropriate field.

At the End of the Meeting

Once the meeting time was completed, the Chair or Secretary went back into the Agenda, saved this as Minutes, and closed the access to editing the document. This effectively closed the meeting.

The Minutes remain in the folder on Drive as the record, and could then be converted to pdf and published for group members to be able to read, as per normal process.

How Successful Was the Online Meeting?

A quick survey was undertaken of committee members to see how they found this online meeting. The online Agenda was the preferred option out of Regular (Face to Face), Email based or Online.

The results were generally positive, with some improvements in process still to be worked out with more experience.

What Worked?

Increased attendance

A number of committee members who are frequently unable to attend the regular meetings due to other commitments, or health issues, were able to attend and participate. This effectively increased the participation numbers of committee members.

The key benefit identified was the flexibility of being able to participate at a time which suited them during the meeting period.



No need to travel, Go on and off throughout the three days, contribute to document simultaneously

When group is in quiet time much easier to keep up to date with proposals and forward planning.

Reduced Time & Travel Commitment

A number of committee members identified that this reduced the meeting time commitment - particularly for travel, where some members have to travel 30-50 minutes to attend a meeting.

Time poor and have a young family that needs attention. This process really allows you at your time and convenience to attend to the meeting notes.

Instead of lack of time it gave me more time to do other things at home.

I have been unable to attend (these) Landcare meetings for some time for a range of reasons.. .it would be fair to say that digital meetings have got me back into Landcare, and allow me to contribute without the cost of fuel and travel

Does Not Require High Speed Internet

Many members are in rural areas with limited internet capacity. A number of committee members identified that they have only moderate internet access (not high speed), but this did not limit or impact on their ability to use the system and edit the document.

High Technical Skills Not Required

Even committee members who consider themselves to have low computer skills were able to participate and add their reports, using this system.

Disadvantages

While this option provided clear benefits to most committee members, and still allowed the meeting requirements to be met, a number identified one disadvantage with the process. Most identified that the face to face meeting options are obviously still important for some meetings.

Limited Discussions

The major disadvantage identified was the inability to enable open discussion with committee members on certain topics. This is often one of the key areas of committee meetings to enable the collaboration and relationships required to work effectively. This may be addressed with more experience in using this process.



Technical Issues

It was discovered during the development and meeting stage that the Google Doc is fully editable using a PC or laptop, without requiring additional software or accounts, but those using mobile or tablet are generally required to install the required applications to enable editing on mobile devices. This is a once off requirement, but should be considered and communicated beforehand.

However, a particular issue is that if members do not have internet access, they cannot participate in the meeting. Those areas where some members do not have internet access will need to find alternatives such as using public access points.

Recommendations

The initial process used to test this online option meant that the Agenda was open for anyone with the link to be able to edit. For a trial, this normally would be suitable, but for regular use is probably not the best practice, due to the risk of these emails forwarded would include the live link.

For ongoing use of the online model, the best option would mean all committee members have a Google account, with the documents or folder shared specifically with these accounts only with edit access.

While this online meeting option was considered a very effective and useful technique for a committee meeting and most recommend this, this will not eliminate the need for face to face meetings at times.

The general consensus and recommendation is that committee meetings should include a mix of face to face meetings, interspersed with online meetings. The group is considering alternating meetings between digital and face to face, but this may change.

This would allow those normally unable to attend meetings the ability to participate, but also allow for the social and discussion opportunities of face to face meetings.

*A very smart way of engaging new and existing members of Landcare.
I would recommend though that every second or third meeting is face to face.*

How To Use This Option.

For an explanation of the process and systems used, there is a How To guide this option was based on.

To find the information, please refer to the Instructions on [Using Google Drive for Online Meetings](#).



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