The optimal condition for a meeting is to have the participants in one room, where body language and confirmation of understanding and intent are relatively simple. People have set aside the time for this activity and are likely to be focused on the issues at hand. But what if some event makes getting together impossible? What are the primary considerations in making a decision to cancel, reschedule, or hold the meeting by remote?

Frequently one of the answers is found in state law, which might describe the conditions under which a meeting can be legally held. A variation of the phrase “under similar conditions where participants can hear and speak to one another in real time” is the key that a meeting under other conditions could be legal. Check with an attorney who practices in the state of incorporation to confirm the necessary requirements. Whatever the technology used, simultaneous communication is only possible with a voice component – telephone or VOIP – to allow for discussion and points of order.

Once the legal concerns have been put to rest, the next concern is the technology platform for the meeting. Two critical factors affecting this choice are the size of the assembly and the complexity of the platform. Obviously, communications concerns are exacerbated as the number of participants increases. For in-person meetings, more structure (designated microphones and formal rules) can alleviate this condition. Yet a remote meeting is done without the basic structure of four walls, creating even greater logistical decision-making challenges. Members walking into a ballroom have been screened, and only those with a right to participate are seated. How will the platform restrict entrance into the meeting to those who have a right to attend? Will the platform be able to handle the number of connections required? What happens if connections are dropped? When a microphone isn’t working in a physical meeting room, it’s fairly simple to swap out the equipment.

The platform must be simple enough for use by novices with little experience. There should be several opportunities for tests and “dry runs” to ensure that kinks are worked out in advance of the meeting. Quality tech support during the meeting is absolutely imperative to minimize the length and severity of glitches. Members must have confidence in the technology being used.

A common misconception about virtual meetings is that they are low cost but, just as a physical space is rented for a meeting, the virtual space must be obtained. If the group is accustomed to looking for free physical space and willing to settle for whatever is available, then looking for free virtual meeting space might work just fine. Those accustomed to renting physical space often have those costs offset peripheral costs borne paid by the attendees, such as lodging, food, and beverage. Such support is not available for a virtual meeting, so logic dictates that the actual virtual meeting cost might exceed the cost for a physical meeting.

Rules must be customized to the conditions of a meeting by remote. One fact of life is that members who participate from separate locations will be far more challenged to remain attentive. The agenda must be very focused and business that is not absolutely necessary should be left for another time. Managing debate will require accommodation; the chair should be sure that members are recognized (possibly by a virtual raising of hands) so that people don’t talk over one another. Although all members must be able to participate simultaneously, the chair can request that people mute themselves voluntarily to minimize background noise. A common problem is feedback when computer sound is used instead of a dialup connection.

Most platforms are well suited to one-way delivery: education and information delivery. The added requirements of deliberation such as equality of participation and the right to raise points of order and questions of privilege, make such conditions incompatible with most platforms unless there is careful planning and modification of the rules where necessary.