

Law and Practice of E-meetings during Covid-19 in Companies in Rivers State

Nweke Emmanuel Onyekachi (PhD, Fcai, Acia. Acipm.Mni), Okezie Nwalelele PhD and Kinika Clifford

Department of Office Technology and Management, Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic Rumuola, Port Harcourt, Rivers State. Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Rivers State. Department of General Studies, Department of Office Technology and Management, Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic, Rumuola, Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

Corresponding author: emmanuel.nweke@portharcourtpoly.edu.ng

Abstract

The paper examined law and practice of e-meetings during Covid-19 in companies in Rivers State. The paper deployed desk-study approach in which academic materials were sourced from newspapers, internet, textbooks and other text to explain the need for e-meetings during Covid-19 pandemic in companies operating in Rivers State. The paper examined the concepts of e-meeting to mean electronic meeting carried out using audio-teleconference devices. The paper reviewed the pros and cons of virtual or e-meeting which intends to alert stake-holders on the need to step up facilities and resources required for e-meetings. It compared the face-to-meeting with that of e-meetings. The need to make adjoining facilities required for e-meetings, need for the training and retraining of staff were advocated. The paper outlined laws or rules allowed during e-meetings in the pandemic. The paper concluded that e-meeting otherwise put, electronic meeting is essential to keep business running during Covid-19 and suggested among others that management of companies operating in Rivers State, should provide electronic meeting facilities in order to avoid business obstructions during Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: E-meetings, Law and practice of meetings, Covid-19, Companies, Rivers State.

Introduction

E-meeting or electronic meeting has become crucial in the Covid-19 era. Electronic meetings cuts of physical or terrestrial barrier. Any staff are able to communicate from any part of the globe. Electronic Meetings provides the software platform to facilitate e-meetings, enabling greater participation from workers who may be far-flung geographically or reticent to participate in a traditional company meeting.

Electronic meeting systems (EMS) require web or video conferencing meeting systems, though both have some features in common and complement each other in the modern workplace. An EMS offers many advantages to organizations and users, such as a reduction in travel costs, increased participation, due to the anonymity the system offers, fewer disruptions compared to meeting in a busy office, and better participant availability.

Law and practice of meetings relates to guidelines for the conduct of Union meetings. Other committees may use these as an example of good practice though they are encouraged to create and approve a set of standing orders that fit their purpose, subject to

requirements about transparency set out in other By-laws. Law refers to rules guiding a particular meeting. Meetings are to hold within rules (Nweke, 2017)

The paper hinges on the need for office workers to understand or learn the skill involved in engaging in electronic meeting. Most organizations have been shut down as a result of communication hitches. The paper therefore advocates the need to acquire electronic meeting facilities, train office staff in the companies to have a hitch-free business operation irrespective of Covid-19 pandemic.

Conceptual Clarification

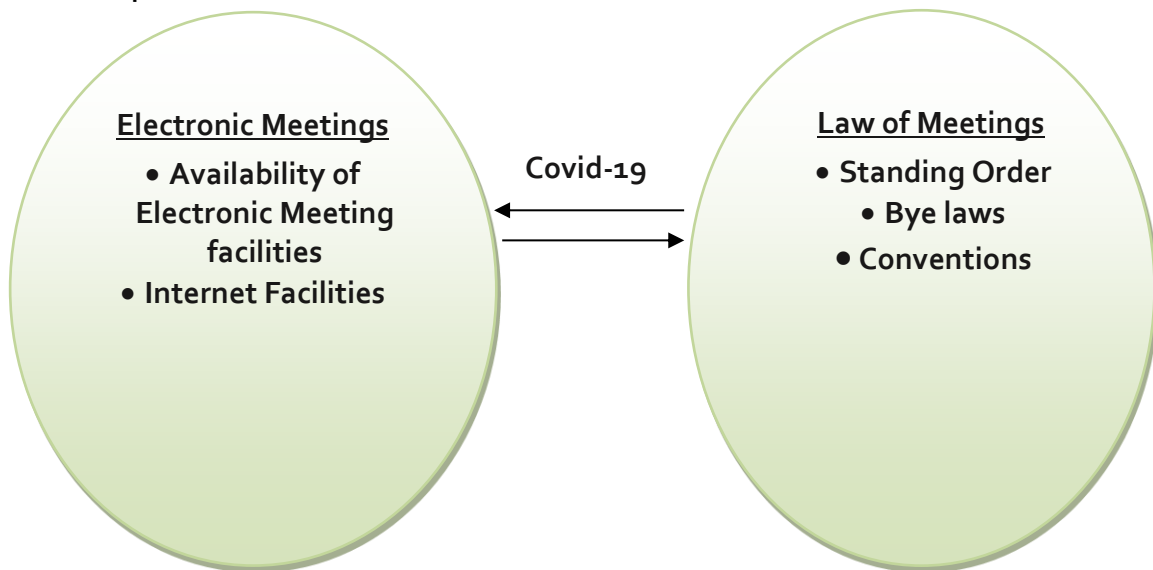


Fig. 1: Researchers' Guide, 2022

Electronic Meetings

Nweke, (2017) defined an electronic meeting system (EMS) is software intended to provoke problem-solving and decision-making within a group. Standard features of electronic meeting systems include electronic brainstorming (generally in an anonymous format), parallel processing, discussion tools, and voting. An e-meeting is any meeting that takes place online. Electronic meeting systems (EMS) can provide the software platform to facilitate e-meetings, enabling greater participation from workers who may be far-flung geographically or reticent to participate in a traditional company meeting. An e-meeting is any meeting that takes place online. Electronic meeting systems (EMS) can provide the software platform to facilitate e-meetings, enabling greater participation from workers who may be far-flung geographically or reticent to participate in a traditional company meeting. The unique features of an EMS overcome the limitations of traditional face-to-face meetings such as lack of participation, criticism, and domination of the proceedings by only a few members. Berline (2019) explained that the business world hold meetings via teleconferences. Teleconferencing is a method of conducting meetings via telephone lines

and/or satellites connecting participants' terminals at two or more locations, with one or more participants per location. There are three types of teleconferences:

1. *Computer conferencing*—Terminals that are connected to a mainframe computer are used by all the participants. Comments or questions can be keyed in on their screens, which are arranged on an inter-connected network. Messages are displayed on the participants' screens.
2. *Audio conferencing*—Participants make comments over the phone. They cannot see each other, and they are not able to read body language. Audio conferences are connected by telephone and/or speaker-phone.
3. *Videoconferencing*—A CEO in Los Angeles could have a sales conference or interview with a person in Washington, D.C. Both individuals are shown simultaneously or alternately on the screen. The advantage of videoconferencing over audio conferencing is that individuals can see as well as hear each other.

With the advent of voice recognition, a day may come when human translators are no longer needed. The future of videoconferencing is not only multilingual, but 100 percent real-time with no delays. Voice recognition software allows humans to talk to a computer. Computers understand the voice. It is an electronic process in which information is printed from voice input, thereby bypassing the keyboarding operations.

At one time, videoconferencing used large, expensive pieces of equipment that provided "room"-based video-conferencing. Participants gathered at a central site in a specially equipped conference room, looking at monitors displaying similar rooms at remote sites (Berlin, 2019).

Computer-based e-meeting is a new paradigm for online meeting. Participants sit at their desk or in a videoconferencing room calling up other participants similar to making a telephone call. It is a form of communication that uses bandwidth. Bandwidth is interpreted as the speed at which information flows, and communication is the transfer of information from one place to another. The connection between these two remote sites is called communication channels.

Availability of Electronic Meeting Resources

Sander (2003) pointed out that information has attributes of a physical resource, such resources as manpower, money and materials. He highlighted the following characteristics of information:

1. Information has value, like money, raw materials or manpower.
2. Information is measurable in terms of use, life and effects on other resources.
3. Information can be valued in terms of collecting, storing and retrieving.
4. Information can be budgeted and controlled.
5. Information can be related in terms of cost and use value to manage objectives.

E-meeting which is an aspect of information technology is defined in the Oxford Dictionary of Business (2002), as "The use of computers and other electronic means to meet

irrespective of location.” It went further to say that “Information can be transferred between computers using cables, satellite links or telephone lines.” Information and Communication Technology (ICT), having defined information, communication and technology, ICT should be easily defined and understood. Wikipedia states that ICT is an umbrella term that includes all technologies for the communication of information. ICT refers to the technology which helps to generate, process, edit, store, disseminate or communicate information.

E-meetings can be used for limited or specific purposes such as training, management meetings, staff meetings, sales presentations. An example of potential use for an electronic meeting would be when a company plans to launch a new product and wants to test the potential appeal among employees who have the background and knowledge to be objective about the proposed offering. Using an electronic meeting system, participants can share opinions and criticism free of potential conflicts and groupthink that might otherwise affect responses (Nwosu, 2011).

Concept of Covid-19

The epidemiology of COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria occurred on July 19, 2020, About 14.6 million confirmed cases have been reported worldwide, with recoveries exceeding 8.7 million, according to figures compiled by WHO and US-based Johns Hopkins University. The coronavirus pandemic has claimed over 608,435 lives across the world since origined from Wuhan in China last December. As at 19th July 2020, the number of corona virus confirmed cases in Africa has exceeded 700,000 while the death rate on the continent is about 15,000. The first case of the corona virus in Africa came from exposure to international contacts travel, trade, tourism or business. COVID-19 appears to thrive in cities where it can be transmitted quickly at close range through movement and frequent contact between people. African countries with the highest level of international contact such as Egypt, South Africa, Nigeria and Morocco are among the hardest hit in the early stages of the corona virus crisis (African Center for Strategic studies, 2020).

African urban areas created conditions where viruses can spread quickly in crowded informal settlements. African countries with the largest urban populations all have megacities; Lagos, Cairo, Addis Ababa, Kinshasa, and Johannesburg (African Center for Strategic studies, 2020). Nigeria had its first two confirmed cases of the COVID-19 on 12th March, 2020 with two people believed to have returned from Turkey and Norway. As at 17th July, 2020 the total confirmed cases in Nigeria stood at 27,667 with 4,270 active cases, 23,249 recoveries and 148 deaths (Ghana Health Service, 2020).

Law and Practice of E-Meetings

This By-law sets out a set of guidelines for the conduct of e- meetings. Other committees may use these as an example of good practice though they are encouraged to create and

approve a set of standing orders that fit their purpose, subject to requirements about transparency set out in other By-laws.

Scope of regulations

1. Meetings within the Union should be conducted in ways that are open, accessible and participative.
2. It is the responsibility of the designated chair of a meeting to direct its business in line with these principles and to ensure that all members have an opportunity to participate.
3. Meetings of Union bodies will be most productive if the members present are aware of and empowered by standing orders setting out how they can influence the course of the meeting.
4. Chairs of Union meetings, including Campaign Networks and Coordination Committees are encouraged to set out the principles of how they shall conduct their meeting to members present, which may be more or less formal.
5. This By-law sets out good practice for the regulation of meetings.

Agenda for e- meetings shall be determined are sent online and determined by the Chair but items of business shall normally be taken in the following order:

Introduction and outline of the meeting;

Agreeing the accuracy of the Minutes of the previous meeting; Update on progress of outstanding Action Points from previous meetings; Verbal reports from Officers, as required; Discussion of Ideas submitted by Members or other Union committees (voting, if required).

Discussion of Ideas: In large e-meetings where many members wish to speak on an idea under discussion it may be necessary to formalise the process of debate. 8. In such situations, the chair shall take contributions in the following way: The proposer of the Idea, if present, shall be entitled to speak first in its favour; It shall then be open for discussion and may be withdrawn only with the consent of the meeting; The chair shall invite and take speeches both for and against the changes, which may be limited in duration to allow the most number of members to have their say. The chair shall conclude discussion with any 'open contributions' that members wish to make that are not made directly for or against the Idea. The proposer of the Idea shall have the right to sum up on the Idea immediately before the vote is taken (Azuka, 2015)

Procedural motions (Matters relating to the conduct of the e-meeting).

A procedural motion may be proposed at any time by gaining the permission of the Chair, except when a member is speaking or during a vote, unless it relates to the way the vote is being conducted. Procedural motions allow a member to propose a change to the conduct

of the meeting, which is followed by a brief debate and a vote on the change in which a simple majority is required. Procedural motions include: No confidence in the Chair (the chair must be passed to a full-time officer during the debate and vote): if passed the no-confidence appointee must not retake the Chair during the meeting; Overturn a ruling by the Chair (the chair must be passed to a full-time officer during the debate and vote): if passed the relevant ruling shall be overturned and immediately reversed;

Discussion moved straight to a vote: if passed, the debate on a motion should be balanced and a vote taken if required; Re-order the agenda (the proposer must explain how): if passed, the items on the agenda shall be addressed in the order outlined by the proposer (Akpemi, 2012).

Discussion to be dealt with by another body: if passed, the discussion shall be suspended and no vote on it held, it shall instead be referred to the Officer Group, the Trustees, or another committee or Assembly specified by the proposer and voted upon in the meeting.

Amendments, Delete part: a section of the Idea under discussion may be removed, though parts that remain must still makes sense. Edit/add part: a line or section of the Idea may be edited or added. If this is deemed to take too long, then members may refer discussion to another body using the procedural motion above, which must be voted upon. Exclude non-members: if passed, anyone who is not a full member of the Union shall be asked to leave the meeting room for the duration of the agenda item. Move to a secret ballot (prior to or during voting): if passed, the vote on the matter in hand will be conducted in secret using paper ballots and counted before the end of the meeting.

Pros of E-Meetings vs Face-to-Face Meetings

Some of the main benefits of virtual meetings are quite obvious, but there are also several other advantages that you may not have considered, as revealed by (Sander, 2013).

1. Lower Expenses

The most compelling benefit for business owners is that virtual meetings often cost less. There's no need to pay workers to travel from another location and perhaps incur expenses for accommodation and catering.

2. Everyone Can Be Involved

For a face-to-face meeting, it's often difficult to pick a time and place that suits everyone. It's much easier for virtual meetings, as everyone can connect from wherever they are in the world. If some people have limited time, they may still be able to check in for at least a few minutes.

3. Reduce Your Carbon Footprint

Whether you're personally committed to reducing your environmental impact or a core value of your company is being green, traveling to fewer meetings will be beneficial.

4. Shorter Sessions

When you meet in person, there's often the sense that you need to have a long meeting to make it worthwhile, especially if someone has traveled far. With a virtual meeting, it's reasonable to end the session as soon as you've discussed everything. Your team will appreciate that you're not dragging out the meeting and they can get back to work as soon as possible (Nweke, 2017).

5. More Frequent Meetings

You can also hold meetings more often when they're virtual. Short check-ins with your team can last just 10 minutes. These are ideal for resolving doubts and making sure everyone is on the same page.

6. The Chance to Record Meetings

Whereas it's possible to take minutes during a meeting, a recording is much more useful. Employees can quickly find the place in the recording they need. If you had a presentation at the meeting, they can also view the slides. Employees may like to save screenshots of key information to use later. This is helpful for checking details and avoiding mistakes in their work.

7. Minimal Scheduling Needs

With a virtual meeting, the only scheduling you need to do is figuring out the best time for the meeting and choosing what software you'll use. This is far less complicated than choosing a place, setting up a conference room, and managing travel arrangements. Plus, even choosing what time to have your meeting is easier. Given advance notice, most of your team will be able to attend — they just need to block out a slot in their schedule. No one needs to worry about going somewhere and there's no disruption to the flow of the workday.

8. Better for Health

Virtual meetings are better for both your physical and mental health. People who travel for work frequently suffer from stress, poor-quality sleep, and a lack of exercise. They may also be unable to eat a healthy diet. Virtual meetings come with none of these side effects.

9. Collaborate in Real Time

Attendees can work during a virtual meeting. Sharing screens and documents allows you to make changes in the moment. In fact, multiple participants can collaborate on the same project while talking to each other. This means there's no need to remember information and apply it once the meeting is over, then wait for other people to contribute their part.

Cons of Virtual Meetings vs Face-to-Face Meetings

Unfortunately, there are a number of disadvantages to virtual meetings. It's for these reasons that companies haven't adopted the practice on a large scale until now.

1. Interactions Between Participants Are Difficult

It's more challenging for all attendees to take an active role when the meeting is virtual, particularly when groups are large. In person, it's possible to talk over each other to some extent, creating a back and forth conversation. In virtual meetings, it's difficult to hear if more than one person is speaking. This can lead to an artificial feel from interactions.

2. Visual and Audio Only

It's impossible to fully experience some products by just watching them on a screen. Depending on your industry, it may be beneficial to touch samples or try out a prototype for yourself.

3. Less Dynamic

The need for structure in virtual meetings can dilute the energy. There will always be just one person talking to the entire group and it's difficult to divide into smaller groups to discuss topics. There's also less spontaneity, which may mean you miss out on some of the most innovative ideas.

4. Internet Connections Can Fail

To hold a video conference, all team members need a decent internet connection. Poor signal can lead to several things going wrong. For instance, the participant may miss parts of the meeting (from being kicked out by the software or from freezes), the person's movements may appear jerky to other attendees, or the participant may lose either the video or the sound.

Even worse, the entire conferencing software could fail and no one will be able to attend the meeting. Although this is certainly rare, it has happened in the past.

5. Team Members May Be in Different Time Zones

If your team is spread out across the globe, you may need to hold meetings at what are outside business hours for some people. Having meetings at the same time each week could be an annoyance for these team members. You may need to consider moving the time of the meeting each week to keep things fair for everyone.

6. Participants May Not Know Each Other

When you only ever have virtual meetings, it's difficult for participants to get to know each other. The pressure is on you to lighten the atmosphere and encourage everyone to interact.

How to Improve E-Meetings

The good news is you can overcome many of the downsides of virtual meetings. The key is knowing how to make virtual meetings more engaging.

Schedule Only Meetings You Need

Just because it's easier to schedule multiple meetings throughout the week doesn't mean you should. Too many meetings is exhausting, a waste of time, and demotivating for everyone involved. Plus, it means a reduction in productivity.

Scheduling just the meetings you need will mean participants are more likely to be enthusiastic about attending. They'll be more interested in checking in with coworkers, sharing ideas, and talking about their progress.

Avoid All Work and No Play

When everyone is in the same office building, you spend some time socializing. Bring this to your virtual team by holding some meetings that are more casual — for instance, a happy hour for your team to talk about personal things. This is great for creating a sense of belonging.

Teach Your Team to Communicate

You can gain more from your meetings if you teach employees communication skills. The best thing about communication exercises is that they can be fun — which ties into the point above.

Have a Purpose

Instead of holding a meeting just because you always do on Tuesday mornings, think about why you need the meeting. It may be unnecessary to create a detailed agenda, but you should at least have a reason for the meeting. If you're unable to name a purpose, consider canceling the meeting that week.

For most business needs, the pros of virtual meetings outweigh the cons. Right now, virtual meetings may be a necessity, but the good news is that this gives you the chance to practice improving them and make them more engaging. In fact, it's possible that many businesses will continue with almost exclusively virtual meetings even when face-to-face meetings become possible again.

A big problem with remote meetings is you may end up with too many on your schedule. Check out our guide to surviving back-to-back meetings to avoid losing your mind when this happens to you (Ezoem, 2017).

Conclusion

The paper reached that e-meeting otherwise put; electronic meeting is essential to keep business running during Covid-19. The paper is of the stance that companies opening in

Rivers State would have their profits still running if they embark on e-meetings, in which all stake holders, including customers, staff, sales reps, may be contacted when need be with the aid of e-meeting facilities. Meting rules as it applies to face-face are to be put into force to avoid misconduct of any sort during e-meeting of companies during covid-19 pandemic.

Suggestions

Based on the position of the paper, the following suggestions have been made:

1. The management of companies operating in Rivers State, should provide electronic meeting facilities in order to avoid business obstructions during Covid-19 pandemic
2. The management of the stated companies should train and retrain staff on the need to use e-meeting facilities.
3. Laws guiding e-meetings should be adhered to by members of staff and management of companies operating in Rivers State.

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