Every Spring the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA)’s publications team is hard at work preparing for the world’s largest gathering of physicians and researchers in the field of gastroenterology, hepatology, endoscopy, and gastrointestinal surgery: Digestive Disease Week (DDW). This year, however, we were met with an unexpected challenge: COVID-19 led to the cancellation of DDW, as it has for many other conferences around the world. Instead of a face-to-face gathering with 14,000 GI professionals in Chicago, we found ourselves isolated in our homes but still tasked with one of our biggest yearly projects: running our annual Board of Editors and publications committee meetings in a virtual setting. This meant six meetings with groups as large as 40 participants from around the world (Figure 1).

Our team has never hosted anything of this size or importance online, and to say we were anxious would be an understatement. We called on one of our departmental core values—adaptability—and set out to make these meetings as successful as possible. Now that we’re on the other side of meetings that were lauded by editors and staff alike, we are sharing some tips on what helped us make it happen.

**Plan**

**Pick your platform**

Consult with your IT department to determine the best platform to host your meeting. Though AGA predominantly uses Microsoft Teams for our internal work, we decided to use Zoom for our DDW meetings thanks to its extra features. Make sure you’re clear on restrictions for whichever platform you decide on; for example, a free Zoom account limits the length of your meeting. If your organization has a paid account used by multiple people, make sure the meeting times don’t overlap—only one meeting can occur at a time. AGA has since added a Zoom account for each department to help prevent future meeting conflicts.

**Designate roles**

If you have multiple staff attending the meeting, designate one person to run the meeting and share their screen for presentations, another person to take notes for the meeting, and another to monitor the chat box. Speak to your editor to ensure he/she is aware of the plan ahead of time.

We also found it helpful to have one host for each meeting who would then designate the person running the slides as a co-host. Having two hosts helps admit participants swiftly, should you decide to use a waiting room feature (for security, we decided to use this feature and include a password for all meetings). It’s also a useful backup if one host loses internet connection in the middle of a meeting.

If you’re running the meeting, it’s incredibly helpful to have two monitors so you can present on one screen and have the other available for internal chats with your team, should they need to reach you.

**Use video**

We see you over there, afraid to turn on your camera! Don’t let that stop you—using video gets you as close as possible to an in-person conversation. Seeing facial expressions as you hear someone’s thoughts can help you read nuances you would otherwise miss.

To be fair to the group, make it clear ahead of time that the use of video is strongly encouraged. No one likes to be caught off guard by those requests! You can also remind attendees at the beginning of the meeting with a slide outlining ground rules (Figure 2). To avoid last minute technical difficulties and interruptions, we encouraged participants to call in a few minutes early.
Explore your options

A virtual meeting will never be the same as gathering in person, but exploring more advanced meeting features in your software can help keep your group engaged and interactive even in a virtual setting. Our team found Zoom’s polling functionality particularly helpful (and fun, too) for items like a voting exercise on name options for a new initiative and sharing results in real time during the meeting.

Practice

Learn your platform

By now most of us have attended a virtual meeting (or 20) and we may think we’re familiar with the platform’s functions, but you’d be surprised how many options are available for your use that you may not encounter on a regular basis. Taking time to review tutorials on the platform’s website and/or user tricks on YouTube can be extremely helpful in finding useful features appropriate for your meeting.

Test (and test again)!

Our team found so much value in creating test meetings ahead of time. If you need to give control to other participants so they can share their screen or present slides, test that with other staff members. Practice sharing your screen and presenting your slides—we found it useful to only share the program we were using instead of our entire screen. This prevents potential distractions like notifications popping up in the middle of your presentation.
Some ground rules before we begin

To ensure that these meetings are as productive as possible, please

- Close your email
- Mute your phone/microphone when you’re not speaking
- Silence your cell phone
- Turn on your video

Figure 2. Best practices slide we shared at the beginning of each meeting.

Make sure you know how to admit participants, how to mute and unmute them, and where you’ll see a virtual hand raised for questions. It’s also important to expand the chat window, so you can view conversations in real time and see how private messages display compared to chats sent to everyone. If you use advanced features like polls, try those out too and be sure to set responses to anonymous, if needed. You can even record your test meeting to see how the files are saved and if it would be useful to record your actual conference (we learned the hard way in Zoom that the chat is only saved if your meeting is recorded!). If you decide to record your meeting, disclose to the group that the meeting will be recorded before you start.

All in all, we found these virtual meetings to be a complete success. Not everything was perfect, but perfection was never our goal (and it shouldn’t be yours, either). At the start of each meeting we informed the group that this was our first time hosting these meetings in a virtual platform, and we were grateful for everyone’s patience and understanding. It was helpful to set the stage in that manner.

Despite the virtual venue not being ideal, we did find some positives: Several Board members who are typically unable to attend due to their geographic location were able to participate for the first time. It was also useful to have a chat function for participants that may be less willing to speak up during a large conversation. The chat box was used often and was helpful for them to weigh in with their thoughts.

We hope these tips are helpful as you embark on your virtual meeting adventures!