2005 Report on E-Meetings
National Association of Parliamentarians® Education Committee

The 2003 biennial convention of the National Association of Parliamentarians, recognizing NAP’s leadership in education related to parliamentary procedure and effective meeting practices, directed its education committee to consider the development of a sample set of rules for electronic meetings. The committee produced the following report, including guidelines that members may use when establishing rules for electronic meetings. The 2005 NAP biennial convention adopted the resolution and recommended guidelines as presented in this report.

REPORT TO THE 2005 NAP CONVENTION

The Education Committee submits the following report:

At the 2003 biennial convention, the content of the following resolution was referred to the Education Committee to report to the board or convention no later than the next convention:

Whereas, Many businesses and associations utilize electronic communication technology;

Whereas, The practice of conducting meetings and voting in a “virtual” setting is now commonplace;

Whereas, The 10th Edition of Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised does not adequately address the issues of procedures for electronic meetings and voting via email or facsimile;

Whereas, Modern parliamentary practice must keep pace with new technologies or risk being labeled as irrelevant and antiquated;

Whereas, The National Association of Parliamentarians is the leading organization for the professional practice of parliamentary procedure;

Whereas, NAP requires a pro-active role in the development of modern parliamentary procedure;

Whereas, The members of NAP expect a sample set of basic rules of procedure for electronic meetings and voting; and

Whereas, NAP should serve the needs of its members and their clients; therefore be it

Resolved, That the NAP President shall appoint a special committee on electronic meeting procedures consisting of not less than five registered or professional registered parliamentarians; and be it further

Resolved, That this committee shall create a sample set of basic rules of procedure for electronic meetings, suitable for adoption by organizations and that this committee shall report to the next NAP biennial convention.

Determination regarding Preamble

The committee reviewed each of the clauses in the preamble and determined the following:

1. It is true that many businesses and associations use electronic communication technology.

2. The practice of conducting meetings and voting in a virtual setting is currently not commonplace, but it is becoming so in the business world.

3. In the preface to the current edition of RONR, it states:

“The coming of the Internet and the widespread use of e-mail and the fax machine have stirred interest in the concept of an ‘electronic meeting.’ This edition notes that the opportunity for simultaneous aural communication among all participants is central to the deliberative character of a meeting. It recognizes, therefore, that meetings may be conducted by videoconference or teleconference, when authorized by the bylaws and when regulated by appropriate special rules of order and standing rules specifying such things as how recognition is
to be sought and the floor obtained. On the other hand, it warns that although e-mail or faxes may provide a suitable substitute for postal mail in the issuance of calls for meetings or the conduct of mail voting, they are not suited for the conduct of the deliberative process under the precedents and procedures common to parliamentary law.”

4. Modern parliamentary practice should attempt to keep pace with new technologies.

5. The National Association of Parliamentarians is the leading organization for the professional practice of parliamentary procedure.

6. NAP should take a pro-active role in the development of procedures for the modern-day practice of parliamentary procedure.

7. As a whole, NAP members do not expect a sample set of basic rules of procedure for electronic meetings and voting, but many members would appreciate having guidelines for the development of such rules.

8. NAP should serve the needs of its members; members serve the needs of their clients.

Based on these determinations, the committee then undertook its charge to review the enacting clauses of the proposed resolution.

Research Overview

All committee members were responsible for conducting research on e-meetings. Research was further delineated to include various techniques and issues, advantages, and problems with each format. Members also searched for samples of available rules regarding e-meetings.

This research was conducted using newspapers, publications, the World Wide Web, and personal interviews with individuals who actually use the technology.

Two virtual meetings were held, although not all committee members were able to participate. Members also participated in actual e-meetings with other organizations.

In all of the research conducted by the committee, it was evident that there is a plethora of information about the technology but very, very little information or suggestions about rules to govern e-meetings.

Issues

Modern technology includes a variety of electronic communication tools, and it is safe to say that groups are already meeting electronically. That same technology is pushing the issue of holding e-meetings. The economy and the competitive nature of business have accelerated this use. Companies are pressed to provide information faster with more personal attention—all at a lower cost.

A Google search of the term “e-meeting” in June 2005 resulted in 82,400 hits in many, many languages. By August, the number of hits had increased to 91,700. E-meeting is evidently an international term.

The bottom line is time and money. Time is an increasingly scarce asset, and the costs associated with face-to-face meetings have a significant impact on budgets.

According to the newspaper USA Today, the web conferencing industry was expected to generate $3.7 billion in revenue in 2004. WebEx, a company not yet ten years old that specializes in Web conferencing and controls more than two thirds of the market, expected to earn $250 million from over 10,000 customers in 2004. Providers of these remote conferencing services say sessions are becoming shorter but more frequent, evidently becoming just another daily business tool.

Just as for businesses (and perhaps even more so), non-profit organizations are becoming more aware of saving time and money since they are dependent on the services of volunteers and have limited resources.

The need for communication among members of a society or of a specific group within that organization is essential in successfully fulfilling the society’s mission. There may be
times when organizations need a quick meeting to discuss an issue, and finding a location and coordinating people’s travel schedules on short notice is not always possible. Weather in some areas of the country may also be a factor.

People, including parliamentarians, are asking for assistance with these complex issues.

Most state statutes govern how meetings of non-profit and for-profit organizations may be conducted. Many require that all persons participating in the meeting can hear each other or that there is an opportunity for simultaneous communication.

Suffice it to say, rules are needed!

**Terminology**

It is important to understand certain terminology regarding electronic meetings.

- **asynchronous** – not synchronized; not occurring at predetermined or regular intervals; sometimes called start-stop transmission. Most communication between computers and devices is asynchronous.

- **browser** – provides computer access to the World Wide Web and to the Internet (i.e., Internet Explorer, Netscape, Safari)

- **e-meeting** – electronically enhanced meeting

- **Internet** – networking infrastructure; massive network of networks; used for e-mail, newsgroups, and instant messaging

- **posted thread** – a series of messages that have been posted as replies to each other. By reading each message in a thread, one can see how the discussion evolved.

- **synchronous** – occurring at the same time or at regular intervals; simultaneous communication

- **virtual** – as if real, such as a virtual classroom

- **World Wide Web (Web)** – means of accessing information over the medium of the Internet; an information-sharing model

There is also a distinction among the various types of meetings. The following are examples of synchronous e-meetings:

- **chat room** – a virtual room (channel) where real time sessions take place; participants enter text by typing on a computer keyboard and that same text appears on the other computer monitors connected to the chat room

- **instant messaging** – computer communication service that enables a type of private chat room with another individual’s computer

- **mixed meeting** – a meeting where some of the participants are in one place and others attend via telephone or video

- **teleconference** – verbal communication via telephone-based audio conference call

- **videoconference** – a conference with live images carried over digital telephone networks; television-like communication augmented with sound. Users on each end can see and speak to each other as if they were at the same location. Two types of equipment may be used: desktop (computer and video camera used by one participant at each location) and conference room system (large viewing monitor and video camera).

- **web conference** – (also known as net conference, web meeting, or net meeting) a conference wherein participants are linked via their Web browsers, are able to view pre-
sentations, documents, and live or recorded video, and are able to talk to one another via telephone connection.

The following are examples of asynchronous e-meetings:

**e-mail** – electronic mail, transmission of messages via computer over communication networks

**fax** – facsimile; digitized document (picture and/or text) transmission over communication lines

**mail** – postal mail

**newsgroup** – a forum; online discussion group using computers requiring connection to a news server

### Advantages and Disadvantages

For all types of electronically enhanced meetings, there are advantages and disadvantages. These affect the organization, the meeting itself, and the individual participants.

#### Advantages of Synchronous E-Meetings

**For the organization:**
- Saves time
- Ability to quickly gather members to address urgent issues
- Faster decision-making
- Quicker and easier dissemination of information
- Saves money
- More money to devote to other activities or projects
- Increases productivity
- Less disruption of business
- Allows for greater participation than otherwise possible

**For the meeting:**
- More succinct
  - Requires pre-meeting organization
  - Shorter amount of time necessary to complete business
  - More focused
- Opportunity to use multiple media (for web conferencing)
- Easy to document what happened in the meeting

**For the individual participants:**
- Saves out-of-pocket expenses
- Avoids stress of travel
- Lessens disruption of personal life
- Provides more time at home with family
- Safer (without air and vehicular travel)

#### Disadvantages of Synchronous E-Meetings:

**For the organization:**
- Scheduling requires the time commitment of all participants

**For the meeting:**
- Dynamics
  - More difficult to create an atmosphere of group rapport; impersonal
  - Distraction factor is higher
  - Difficulty in determining participant speaking order
  - Increased possibility of one person monopolizing the meeting
- Technology
  - Easier to focus on technology rather than issues
  - Could fail when it’s most needed
  - Meeting provider may not support all types of computers (i.e., Apple)
  - Acoustical problems (within teleconferencing rooms)
- Information
  - Available documentation in the meeting may vary from participant to participant
For the individual participants:
- Greater preparation time required
- Difficult to gauge reactions of others without observing body language
- Lack of opportunity to socialize with clients or other key people
- More difficult to build relationships with other participants
- Networking opportunities are limited
- No frequent-flier miles earned

Advantages of Asynchronous E-Meetings

For the organization:
- Saves time
  - Less disruption of business
- Saves money
  - More money to devote to other activities or projects
  - No need to find and/or pay for a meeting location
  - Most households have telephone, computer, and Internet access
- Increases productivity
  - Task oriented rather than socially oriented
  - Better suits organizations without a fellowship emphasis
  - Allows for greater participation than otherwise possible

For the meeting:
- More leisurely
  - Allows thoughtful consideration of issues
  - Greater opportunity for research and consultation
  - Supports multiple discussion threads
  - Easy to document what happened in the meeting

For the individual participants:
- Allows access at a time that suits each participant
- Accommodates people in different time zones
- Saves out-of-pocket expenses
- Avoids the stress of travel
- Lessens disruption of personal life
- Permits more time at home with family
- Safer (without air and vehicular travel)
- Enables use of familiar telephone, computer, and Internet access

Disadvantages of Asynchronous E-Meetings

For the organization:
- Requires a lengthy commitment of time from all participants
- Takes longer to make decisions

For the meeting:
- Dynamics
  - Meeting takes a considerable length of time
  - Participants access information at varying times
  - More difficult to create an atmosphere of group rapport; impersonal
  - Distraction factor is higher
  - Participants may have difficulty reaching a conclusion
- Technology
  - Easier to focus on technology rather than issues
  - Could fail when it’s most needed

For the individual participants:
- Difficult to gauge reactions of others without observing body language
- Might feel unheard, misunderstood, or ignored
- Easy to hold back, hold out, or acquiesce
- Communication tends to be more formal than spoken words
- Written word can be misunderstood
- No immediate feedback to messages
- Text messaging abbreviations may be confusing to participants
- Lack of opportunity to socialize with clients or other key people
• More difficult to build relationships with other participants
• Networking opportunities are limited
• No frequent-flier miles earned

Areas needing rules

In the May 4, 2004, edition of The Wall Street Journal, Henry Robert III is quoted as saying, “You have to impose regulations to preserve a group’s freedom to act to the best satisfaction attainable.” This is especially true in this latest meeting venue.

State statutes provide guidelines on how and when electronically enhanced meetings may be used by organizations operating within that particular jurisdiction. The bylaws of the organization must specifically allow for electronic meetings. Special rules of order also need to be developed to cover those meetings.

Much like Luther Cushing, the committee identified specific areas that would require such rules. Unlike Henry Robert, however, the specifics of those rules were not determined.

Suggested areas needing rules for synchronous e-meetings included equipment, definition of present, types of meetings and who can call them, notice requirements and agenda, quorum, timeframe, decorum, how to seek and grant recognition, frequency of participation, voting, and the record of the meeting.

The differences in requirements are dependent on the specific type of e-meeting and the organization itself. At a minimum the special rules of order would contain—

Rules for Synchronous E-Meetings

1. All participants must have access to the necessary equipment for participation in the e-meeting.
   • Chat room, web conference, and net meeting all require Internet access and (optimally) broadband connection.
   • Mixed meeting requires telephone for participants calling in and a speakerphone system at the meeting location.

2. All participants must be able to simultaneously hear and/or see in order to participate during the e-meeting. A member participating in an e-meeting by this means is deemed to be present in person at the e-meeting.
   • Chat room participants see posted threads or messages.
   • Mixed meeting participants hear.
   • Teleconference participants hear.
   • Videoconference participants see and hear.

3. Regular (board and/or committee) meetings may be held via e-meetings. The media selected may impose a limitation on the size of the board or committee; however, e-meetings can be used effectively in deliberative boards and/or committees to consider, investigate, or take action on certain matters or subjects or to do all of these things. Each organization must decide for itself under what circumstances e-meetings may be allowed, subject to any restrictions imposed by state statutes or by the organization’s bylaws.

4. Special (board and/or committee) meetings may be held via e-meetings called as designated in the bylaws, by
the presiding officer or committee chairman, or by a certain number of members.

Each organization must decide for itself whether e-meetings may be used for special meetings and who has the authority to call a special e-meeting.

5. A minimum of (hours or days) notice shall be provided to all participants via (e-mail, fax, or telephone) by the (secretary, presiding officer, or chairman). Such notice shall include the agenda and supporting documentation for business to be conducted at the e-meeting. If notice is via e-mail or fax, participants shall be required to check their messages at specified intervals and respond within a specified time whether or not they are able to attend.

Each organization must decide for itself how much advance notice will be given (keeping in mind the time zones affected), how it will be delivered, and if delivered via e-mail, the frequency of participants viewing their messages. Alternatively, notice may be provided by telephone or fax. Especially for mixed meetings (in-person and call in), no other items of business should be added unless all participants have access to the same supporting documentation.

6. A majority of the (board or committee) members shall constitute a quorum for an e-meeting and, once established, shall be assumed present until the e-meeting is adjourned. Members are deemed present when they respond to the roll call.

There are different ways for members to join an e-meeting using the various media. Since visibility of members is not possible in many of the media, a roll call is the most effective method to ascertain the presence of a quorum. Once established, unless members advise they are leaving the meeting, it is assumed the quorum continues.

7. The (board presiding officer or committee chairman) shall call the e-meeting to order at the designated time and call the roll of attendees.

It is the duty of the presiding officer or committee chairman to determine the presence of a quorum.

8. Participants shall try, as much as possible, to eliminate background noise during the e-meeting, i.e., radio, television, music, appliances, and side conversations. Participants shall not place the telephone on hold if the system has music or messages playing while in that mode.

Refraining from disturbing the board or committee is definitely different in an e-meeting than in a face-to-face meeting. Background noises should be kept to a minimum.

9. The (board presiding officer or committee chairman) shall announce each agenda item in order. Each member shall be called upon (by predetermined order) to speak. The member may speak in debate, offer a motion, or pass. After each member has had an opportunity to speak the first time, the (board presiding officer or committee chairman) shall call upon each member to speak further in debate, offer a motion, or pass. By unanimous consent, a third opportunity to speak may be offered. All votes on a motion shall be by roll call.

This rule handles the problem of recognition or domination of debate by a few.
It provides an equal opportunity for all participants to speak. Each organization must decide whether participants may interrupt to make a request or inquiry, e.g., raise a point of order, point of information, etc.

10. Board procedures for minutes shall be the same for e-meetings as for face-to-face meetings. Committees should designate a member to prepare a memorandum of each e-meeting.

Some web meeting or net meeting services offer the option of supplying a transcript or recording of the meeting. Minutes, however, are still required.

Other areas that might require rules involve how costs will be covered or limited, what happens if a communication link is lost, if the chair may participate in discussion, if a second will be required, and which motions will or will not be entertained.

Asynchronous E-Meetings

Asynchronous e-meetings must be based on a trust that persons participating are authentic and authorized to participate.

Suggested areas needing rules for asynchronous e-meetings included equipment, types of meetings and who can call them, notice requirements and agenda, quorum, definition of present, timeframe, how motions are handled, which motions and how many at a time may be pending, voting, and the record of the meeting.

The differences in requirements are dependent on the specific type of e-meeting and the organization itself. At a minimum the special rules of order would contain

Rules for Asynchronous E-Meetings

1. All participants must have access to the necessary equipment for participation in the e-meeting.

2. Regular (board and/or committee) meetings may be held via e-meetings. The media selected may impose a limitation on the size of the board or committee. Each organization must decide for itself under what circumstances e-meetings may be allowed, subject to any restrictions imposed by state statutes or by the organization’s bylaws.

3. Special (board and/or committee) meetings may be held via e-meetings called as designated in the bylaws, by the presiding officer or committee chairman, or by a certain number of members.

Each organization must decide for itself whether e-meetings may be used for special meetings and who has the authority to call a special e-meeting.

4. The presiding officer or committee chairman shall develop an agenda and timeframe for the e-meeting.

The agenda establishes the flow of the meeting and allows for preparation of any presentation, information, questions, or input to the topics for the meeting. The timeframe establishes the beginning and end times for the e-meeting to ensure that as many of the agenda items as possible will be addressed.

5. A minimum of (hours or days) notice shall be provided to all participants via (e-mail, fax, or telephone) by the (secretary, presiding officer, or chair-
man). Such notice shall include the agenda and supporting documentation for business to be conducted at the e-meeting. If notice is via e-mail or fax, participants shall be required to check their messages at specified intervals and respond within a specified time whether or not they are able to attend.

Each organization must decide for itself how much advance notice will be given (keeping in mind the time zones affected), how it will be delivered, and if via e-mail or fax, the frequency of participants viewing their messages. Alternatively, notice may be provided by telephone.

6. A majority of the (board or committee) members shall constitute a quorum for an e-meeting and, once established, shall be assumed present until the e-meeting is adjourned.

There are different ways for members to join an e-meeting using the various media. Once a quorum is established, unless members advise they are leaving the meeting, it is assumed the quorum continues.

7. The (board presiding officer or committee chairman) shall call the e-meeting to order at the designated time. Members are deemed present when they respond to the request for sign-in.

It is the duty of the presiding officer or committee chairman to determine the presence of a quorum. Sign-in is the most effective method to determine who is present.

8. The (board presiding officer or committee chairman) shall post each agenda item in order. Any member may then post a motion. Then other members may post debate. At a predetermined time, the (board presiding officer or committee chairman) puts the question to a vote. Members have a limited time to cast their votes, and once cast, the vote cannot be changed. The chairman announces the result of the vote.

The procedure for handling a motion differs from a synchronous e-meeting. No second is required. Rules need to be established for the length of time for consideration of specific motions. Likewise, rules need to be established for the length of time to cast votes. Methods for both secret and open voting must be established.

9. The organization shall establish how many motions can be under consideration at one time, which specific secondary motions may be offered, and which motions that bring a question again before the assembly will be allowed during an e-meeting.

An asynchronous e-meeting can allow for more than one motion at a time if postings on each motion are clearly identified. All of the motions listed in RONR may not be appropriate for an asynchronous e-meeting. Allowable motions should be identified with a timeline for their consideration.

10. Board procedures for minutes shall be the same for e-meetings as for face-to-face meetings. Committees should designate a member to prepare a memorandum of each e-meeting.

Posted messages should not be considered as the minutes or memorandum of the e-meeting. A separate document should be prepared for each e-meeting.
Just as for synchronous e-meetings, other areas that might require rules for asynchronous e-meetings involve how costs will be covered or limited, what happens if a communication link is lost, number of postings allowed in debate, decorum, definition of calendar day if participants are in different time zones, if the chair may participate in discussion, and how confidential information will be controlled.

Conclusion

E-meetings are the new paradigm for parliamentary procedure. No longer are organizations content with holding only face-to-face meetings. The differences in suggested rules for synchronous and asynchronous e-meetings included in this document are just the tip of the iceberg. As each new medium evolves, a different set of rules will be required. It isn’t one size fits all.

As reported in Fortune magazine, “Technology is simply the means to an end—the real focus should be on collaboration. And collaboration is a process; it isn’t simply the automatic result of having people connected electronically.”

Recommendation

The Education Committee recommends adoption of the following substitute resolution:

Whereas, Many businesses and organizations use electronic communication technology;
Whereas, The practice of conducting meetings in a virtual setting is becoming more commonplace in the business world;
Whereas, There is limited reference to electronically enhanced meetings in the current edition of Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised;
Whereas, Modern parliamentary practice should attempt to keep pace with new technologies;
Whereas, The National Association of Parliamentarians is the leading organization for the professional practice of parliamentary procedure;

Whereas, NAP should take a pro-active role in the development of procedures for the modem-day practice of parliamentary procedure;

Whereas, NAP members do not expect a sample set of basic rules of procedure for electronic meetings but would appreciate having guidelines for the development of such rules;

Whereas, NAP should serve the needs of its members; members serve the needs of their clients;

Whereas, Asynchronous e-meetings do not adequately allow for a deliberative process, but many organizations use this type of meeting and need guidelines for rules of procedure; and

Whereas, Synchronous e-meetings provide opportunity for simultaneous communication among all participants, which is central to the deliberative character of a meeting; now therefore be it

Resolved, That the following guidelines be recommended for use by parliamentarians assisting clients holding synchronous e-meetings:

1. All participants must have access to the necessary equipment for participation in the e-meeting.

2. All participants must be able to simultaneously hear and/or see in order to participate during the e-meeting. A member participating in an e-meeting by this means is deemed to be present in person at the e-meeting.

3. Regular (board and/or committee) meetings may be held via e-meetings.

4. Special (board and/or committee) meetings may be held via e-meetings called as designated in the bylaws, by the presiding officer or committee chairman, or by a certain number of members.

5. A minimum of (hours or days) notice shall be provided to all participants via (personal delivery, e-mail, fax, or telephone) by the
(secretary, presiding officer, or chairman). Such notice shall include the agenda and supporting documentation for business to be conducted at the e-meeting. If notice is via e-mail or fax, participants shall be required to check their messages at specified intervals and respond within a specified time whether or not they are able to attend.

6. It is recommended that a majority of the (board or committee) members shall constitute a quorum for an e-meeting, and once established, shall be assumed present until the e-meeting is adjourned. Members are deemed present when they respond to the roll call.

7. The (board presiding officer or committee chairman) shall call the e-meeting to order at the designated time and call the roll of attendees.

8. Participants shall try, as much as possible, to eliminate background noise during the e-meeting, i.e., radio, television, music, appliances, and side conversations. Participants shall not place the telephone on hold if the system has music or messages playing while in that mode.

9. The (board presiding officer or committee chairman) shall announce each agenda item in order. An agreed means of seeking and according recognition to speak should be established, taking into account the size of the meeting and the technology available. If this is not feasible, the following process may be employed: Each member shall be called upon (by predetermined order) to speak. The member may speak in debate, offer a motion, or pass. After each member has had an opportunity to speak the first time, the (board presiding officer or committee chairman) shall call upon each member to speak further in debate, offer a motion, or pass. By unanimous consent, a third opportunity to speak may be offered.

10. All votes on a motion shall be by roll call.

11. Board procedures for minutes shall be the same for e-meetings as for face-to-face meetings. Committees should designate a member to prepare a memorandum of each e-meeting.

and be it further

Resolved, That the following guidelines be recommended for use by parliamentarians assisting clients holding asynchronous e-meetings:

1. All participants must have access to the necessary equipment for participation in the e-meeting.

2. Regular (board and/or committee) meetings may be held via e-meetings.

3. Special (board and/or committee) meetings may be held via e-meetings called as designated in the bylaws, by the presiding officer or committee chairman, or by a certain number of members.

4. The presiding officer or committee chairman shall develop an agenda and timeframe for the e-meeting.

5. A minimum of (hours or days) notice shall be provided to all participants via (personal delivery, e-mail, fax, or telephone) by the (secretary, presiding officer, or chairman). Such notice shall include the agenda and supporting documentation for business to be conducted at the e-meeting. If notice is via e-mail or fax, participants shall be required to check their messages at specified intervals and respond within a specified time whether or not they are able to attend.
6. It is recommended that a majority of the (board or committee) members shall constitute a quorum for an e-meeting and, once established, shall be assumed present until the e-meeting is adjourned.

7. The (board presiding officer or committee chairman) shall call the e-meeting to order at the designated time. Members are deemed present when they respond to the request for sign-in.

8. The (board presiding officer or committee chairman) shall post each agenda item in order. Any member may then post a motion. Then other members may post debate. At a predetermined time, the (board presiding officer or committee chairman) puts the question to a vote. Members have a limited time to cast their votes, and once cast, the vote cannot be changed. The chairman announces the result of the vote.

9. The organization shall establish how many motions can be under consideration at one time, which specific secondary motions may be offered, and which motions that bring a question again before the assembly will be allowed during an e-meeting.

10. Board procedures for minutes shall be the same for e-meetings as for face-to-face meetings. Committees should designate a member to prepare a memorandum of each e-meeting.