

Vive (avec) la difference

It's 11pm in London. It's 5pm in Minneapolis, 6am in Taipei, 3pm in Vancouver and 8am in Melbourne. Trying to work out the time zone makes my head spin. It's midnight in Pretoria and in Vienna and they're not on the call.

This is a monthly board meeting of the International Association of Facilitators (IAF). My question in the May issue of governance was whether or not I would find that being on a global board would be any different from being on a UK board.

I have an answer for you.

Yes it is. But I'm finding it is possible to live with the difference – yes, vive la difference.

I am finding that to have any chance of making virtual relationships work, calls for lots of extra effort, attention and patience.

It's hard enough when you have all the advantages of meeting around a real table in 'real time' – which is modern-speak for all being in the room together facing each other with a hot drink made with water from the same kettle. (Hmmm ... Can anyone tell me what 'unreal time' might be?)

I am finding that meeting together across time zones and down a cable is far harder. It's a challenge even just to join the meeting before you can get started with the conversation.

Someone's wanting to go to bed. Someone else is wanting breakfast. Someone else has just jumped online having come hot-foot from a morning meeting. Everyone finds the technology more or less challenging. (Oh no they've just upgraded the software again and my screen looks all different).

Click click click. 'Join the meeting'. I'm in. I think. Can you hear me? No? Click the mute/unmute icon. That's better. Who else is online? I know only by seeing their names on screen. That's all. By contrast, face-to-face meetings are a breeze.

This is the first two minutes of 90, with the only live visual clues being the chat box on the right side of the screen. I will not see the whites of the eyes of my fellow directors. I will not see if they're distracted. I will not see if they, heaven forbid, are checking their emails during the meeting (in a face-to-face meeting at least you can see the shifty eyes looking at the phone held under the table).

I scan the documents and feel my brain straining to keep up and stay on the point. I am struggling to learn a whole new skill. I do my best to remember that autumn for me is someone else's 'fall', which is when spring flowers are blooming on the other side. Are human beings built for this kind of thing? Gazing at my screen, I reflect on how far mankind has travelled from the cave.

So I and we in IAF have made a choice. We choose to embrace this challenge and explore and live with the difference – between time zones, cultures and between face-to-face and virtual meetings. We do this because we believe that good facilitation can solve problems, improve group and team processes, resolve conflicts, and make the world a better place.

Good morning, good afternoon, good evening. Shall we start our meeting? ●

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