

# Is It OK to Drink Alcohol, Smoke or Eat During a Virtual Work Meeting?

SHRM | Kathy Gurchiek | Feb 2021



## Set Clear Expectations for Employees

The atmosphere at virtual work meetings has gotten a tad casual since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Tuning in from their homes via Zoom, WebEx, Skype or some other platform, employees have subbed their suits and ties, blouses and scarves for sweatshirts, tees and baseball caps when attending team or staff meetings.

But as people turn on their laptop cameras from their couches, decks and kitchen tables, just how relaxed are they allowed to be? Is it OK to light up a cigarette, have a glass of wine or hit the treadmill? Can employers dictate rules for employee behavior during those meetings even if the employee is not physically on company property?

Last year, a mother in the U.K. made headlines after she breastfed her infant on camera. She had covered herself but did not mute her audio, and a colleague sent her a private message asking her to turn off the camera and microphone. The mother, outraged, said she had the right to feed her baby and that it was "rude" to talk during a meeting with no video on.

## **So what can an employer do?**

They can and should stipulate employee behavior during a virtual meeting, said Joseph H. Harris, Esq., chair of the Labor and Employment Practice Group at A.Y. Strauss that is based in Roseland, N.J.

"There is a common misconception among employees that, if they are working from home, workplace rules do not apply. This misconception can lead to problems in a number of areas, not just Zoom calls," he said. "For instance, employees may think that the rules regarding appropriate workplace conduct, anti-discrimination and anti-harassment do not apply if they are working from home or using their own electronic devices."

Developing and distributing a remote-work policy is essential, he added, "especially in this new normal," to address behavioral expectations as well as issues such as security protocols and time tracking. Legally, it does not matter if the employee's behavior takes place in his or her home or at an employer-provided location, such as an office hoteling setup, he noted.

"Employees working from a space provided, and paid for, by their employer are more likely to assume that they are 'at work' and behave accordingly," Harris said. "However, an employee working from their living room may not realize that, during working hours, they are—for all intents and purposes—at work. They may not realize what protocols apply."

"They may not understand the privacy implications. And they may not realize that their behavior during a Zoom meeting is subject to the same standards as in the corporate boardroom. That is when problems arise. It is in employers' own self-interest to proactively address these misconceptions before they lead to complaints that could create legal jeopardy for the company."

## **Establish Guidelines; Define Your Culture**

Making sure your company's culture is well-defined also is important, pointed out Keri Higgins-Bigelow, founder and chief executive officer of livingHR, a consultancy in Tampa, Fla.

"What do you allow or not allow, and what happens if someone breaks the rule?" she asked. "If it is not well-defined, you must start there. Once you have a well-defined culture, embed it into every layer of your people's employee journey. Identify what specific initiatives need to take place in order for you and your people to transform into the culture they need to feel successful and championed. Let people know what it should feel like for people to work at your organization."

Workers at Z Grills Australia, a provider of pellet smoker barbecues in Heathmont, Victoria, Australia, may not smoke during a meeting, "even if your boss is doing it," said Michael Humphreys, company founder and CEO.

"Even though you're at home, it doesn't mean that you can act in any way you like during virtual meetings," he said. That includes no alcoholic beverages or eating during meetings and no wearing pajamas or tank tops. As for having a clean and pleasing background for the virtual meeting, Humphreys spelled it out: "Don't have a video call in the bathroom."

A politician in Spain learned that lesson after he accidentally broadcast himself emerging from the shower while listening to a livestreamed council meeting.

Multitasking during virtual meetings is a definite no-no at ResumeLab in Warsaw, Poland, according to Jagoda Wieczorek, HR manager.

"Such behavior makes online conversations both fragmented and often counterproductive for each employee involved in the conversation," she observed. "To ensure employees stick to the no-multitasking policy, our line managers always ask participants to offer their input every once in a while and make others accountable for something in the meeting when possible."

Daniel Carter, who has worked in HR for the finance industry and founded Los Angeles-based Zippy Electrics, which reviews electric rides such as scooters, has a different perspective.

"Certain rules must be bent to make the shift to online meetings more comfortable and meaningful to all attendees," he said. "Having focus is gold during meetings, but my company understands that working from home has a lot of distractions to deal with. Therefore, employees [are] allowed to multitask during meetings as long as they have reviewed the shared documents in advance, and they can respond to queries in real time."

## **It's All About Culture**

"Zoom meetings are not much different than in-person meetings, and what you can do at an in-person meeting really depends on the culture of your workplace," said Ravi Parikh, CEO at Austin, Texas-based RoverPass, a booking platform for campgrounds and RV parks. "I worked somewhere once where we would have cocktails on Fridays, but then at another place we were a health company so that didn't jibe with the culture."

For example, don't plan on digging into a plate of pasta while attending a virtual meeting at CocoSign, a software-as-a-service provider in Singapore.

"We asked employees to hold off on eating full meals during the meeting," said company co-founder Caroline Lee. "Wonder how unprofessional it would be to watch someone up close eating a plate of spaghetti on a big screen?"

However, the staff meetings at Benefit Advisors Network, a national association of independent benefits brokers, are less formal than client meetings, according to Bobbi Kloss, director of human capital management services. "Quite often, we all dine together as if we were in the office," she said. "We frequently even send out dining cards so that during staff meetings we can be as relaxed with each other as if we were in the office."

And the laid-back atmosphere at music publication Music Minds is reflected in the company's virtual meetings.

"We don't mind background noise, especially when parents often can't help it" when their children get vocal or pets wander into camera range, said Elias Janetis, founder and CEO. "We also don't enforce moderation or anything of the sort, though at times that can make our meetings a little chaotic."

At Amit Digital Marketing in Glasgow, Scotland, it's OK to smoke, vape, use an e-cigarette or an e-shisha—similar to a vape—according to CEO Amit Raj, who runs the mandatory, biweekly meetings that he describes as "fairly relaxed." Vaping can create some noise, he added, but so long as people are muted, this is seldom an issue.

"Many employees work from home and juggle private life with work as needed. Taking a 'hands-off' and 'results-first' approach helped," he said.

A good guideline to follow is to consider whether the behavior during a meeting would be acceptable if it occurred at an in-person meeting, noted Sara Bandurian, operations coordinator at Online Optimism, a digital marketing agency based in New Orleans. "If you wouldn't do it in the office, don't do it in a virtual meeting," she said. "We find that this approach helps our team take their work more seriously and get into the right headspace, even while working from home."