

"Meetings in an Electronic Environment"

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Background

The AlphaCom Project - Meetings in an Electronic Environment, a pilot project funded by Ministry of Education & Training (MET) involving Laubach Literacy Ontario.

The AlphaCom Project deals with adopting parliamentary procedures to an online discussion group. The Laubach Board of Directors has conducted two field-tests using the Alphacom discussion groups as the meeting forum. Meeting online has proven to be a cost effective; however, the general sentiment among participants is the same fellowship associated with a face-to-face meeting is lacking. Online conferencing seems to supplement face-to-face meetings rather than replace the need for them altogether - it is worthwhile means of connecting people separated by great distances.

I am in the process of revising the Handbook for Online Board Meetings. Upon completion, the Handbook will be presented to the project reference group for peer review. A final edit will be done and then the Handbook will distributed to MET and the literacy field.

I will post the April issue of the AlphaCom report. I hope it provides you with a good understanding of this project's mandate to develop a model for directors to conduct board meetings online. I appreciate the interest you have shown in the project and I am sure the results will benefit the field.

Respectfully,
Maia Shapley

The Alphacom Report

A second field-test was held in March 1998 with the Laubach Board of Directors. The meeting was divided into two sessions, part one & two.

Part One – March 23rd – 25th

Call to order
Approval of the Agenda
Approval of the Minutes
Treasurer's Report
Staff Report

Part Two - March 30th – April 1st

Committee Reports
New Business
Adjournment

What's new?

- The board meeting is staggered over two weeks – 6 days in total.
- A new message category is created for the secretary.
- A *Motions Summary List* is posted daily to the board conference.
- The chair will discount votes cast before a formal vote is called.
- Directors are provided with guidelines on how to make an amendment.
- Committee reports will be submitted electronically and posted to the Alphacom.
- Directors are given a worksheet (*Tracking My Votes*) to keep track of the their votes.

Major Meeting Events

The vice president of the board chaired the online meeting. The Alphacom system was shut down for maintenance on the evening of the 23rd. One director unable to get onto the Alphacom system tried to cast a vote by email. The meeting resumed on Tuesday morning. Several directors experienced technical difficulties subsequently on the 24th & 25th; messages weren't getting through and/or they were unable to log onto the system altogether. Some confusion and miscommunication resulted. In response the chair halted voting and called an early recess on Wed afternoon.

During the meeting break, some directors continued to hold discussion in the board conference and get caught up on meeting events. The meeting reconvened on morning of the 30th. Participants were asked to confirm whether or not they were present and had read the conference messages. By calling a roll call the chair was able to assess if all directors were present or not.

In Part two of the meeting, committee reports were electronically submitted and posted to the board conference. Discussion was held, motions made and votes cast. Part two of the board meeting ran more smoothly and adjourned on Thursday.

Directors' Evaluation of the Online Meeting

Fifty percent of the directors reported they liked the meeting and felt it was worth the time and effort. Half of the directors did not like the meeting because they found it difficult to share ideas because of the lack of body language. Many persons felt their messages were misread or misinterpreted.

The majority of directors felt:

- the meeting was better organized
- the *Motions Summary List* was helpful
- the new meeting schedule was flexible and less time consuming
- online board meetings should be alternated with face-to-face meetings
- the *Tracking My Votes* worksheet was helpful, but not used by many
- technical difficulties were extremely frustrating
- miscommunication caused some hurt feelings and confusion among group members

Additional comments made:

- too much time was spent in discussing relatively unimportant details
- tact and diplomacy are important when responding and posting messages
- the task of tracking votes was made easier with tally sheets
- the chair's role is time consuming
- people who feel it is easier to speak face-to-face are less likely to write and post a message
- it is difficult to assess whether or not people are following instructions and/or discussion if they don't post any questions or comments
- some agenda items are best discussed in a face-to-face meeting
- people have diverse learning styles and preferences

Some individual recommendations made were:

- reports should clarify what actions/decisions are being asked of the board
- reports should be written in plain language
- mandatory motions should be indicated on the meeting agenda
- write your comments or messages offline before posting them to the conference
- contacting directors individually outside the online meeting should be encouraged as a means of staying connected
- definite timelines should be developed with respect to discussion and voting
- a live webchat may assist people with different learning styles

Summary of Second Field-test

In the second field-test participation was more consistent than the last. An average of eight people participated per day. The flexible meeting schedule accommodated for the technical delays as the meeting was recessed when necessary and the majority of agenda items were still addressed.

It is impossible to expect all directors to logon to Alphacom daily for a variety of reasons. However, participants consistently tried to check into the meeting on a regular basis. Because of this dedication we had enough votes to carry every motion. Fewer motions were made this time - 11 in total. The tendency was to discuss a motion one-day and call the vote the following day. This provided directors with a greater opportunity to make an informed vote. Over two hundred conference messages were recorded.

Technical difficulties and the lack of body language affected the board's feeling of togetherness and patience. These miscommunications affected the flow of information and the meeting process. It was like the left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing for a short while. However, the Laubach board came to this meeting with a strong group identity and working relationship prior to the field-test. Because of this group members sought alternative means of communicating (by fax & phone) when faced with these obstacles. Additionally, experience suggests some issues are better dealt with in person rather than over the Internet.

After the meeting, directors and staff were looking forward to the next face-to-face meeting. There was a general willingness to meet online again; however, many of issues that arose during the second field-test would have to be addressed.

Issues to be Addressed & Investigated

Issues to be addressed	Investigated
Tracking Participation	Methods for tracking participation in online meeting and determining quorum.
The wording of a Motion	Tips on how to word a 'good' motion in an online meeting.
Standard Agenda	Address the sequencing of meeting events and when are motions required.
Making an Informed Vote	Guidelines on how to cast an informed vote in an online meeting.
Coping Strategies for meeting in asynchronous time.	How participants can stay connected and feel in touch with group members .
Alternative Voting Methods	Casting a valid vote by phone, email or fax.
The Secretary's Role	Tips and strategies on how the secretary can track discussion in an online meeting.
Student Support	Guidelines to support student participation in an online meeting.
Meeting Evaluation	How participants can provide feedback on the meeting process.
Online Meeting Checklist	A checklist of things done by the board to ensure meeting protocol was met.
Frequency of Meetings	How often should the board meet online?