



FORSA

Guide to online branch meetings

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Introduction

Due to the Covid-19 public health crisis, many of us are continuing to work remotely and restrictions on workplace attendance remain in place. As a result, the opportunity to hold Fórsa branch meetings remains limited.

It's important that Fórsa branches continue to communicate with members and meet to discuss important workplace and work-related issues, including the safe return to workplaces and supports to members who continue to work remotely.

This short guide is designed to help you to set up and host 'virtual' meetings using one or more of the many digital tools now readily available.

Digital meeting platforms

There are many platforms available to host your virtual meetings and each has its own pros and cons. All platforms can be accessed by mobile phone, tablet and through using desktop facilities but, for the purpose of branch meetings, participation via computer or a large-screened device is advisable. Here are some of the options:

GoToMeeting

Pros:

- 14-day free trial includes unlimited meetings of any length for up to 150 people
- Easily integrates with Outlook to send meeting invites as calendar appointments
- Decent screen sharing capabilities
- Virtual hand raise feature (but can be difficult to see)
- Can call in for audio
- Built in note-taking and transcription available on some price bands.

Cons:

- Mobile app isn't very good as participants are difficult to see
- Reports of audio difficulties, where you have to restart the programme to get it working
- Depending on price band, there's a limit on the number of cameras that can be on at the same time. So if your meeting exceeds this, you can't see everyone at the same time.



Sign up for a free trial [here](#).

Packages start from €10.75 per month. Click [here](#) for more details on pricing.

Learn how to set up a meeting [here](#), or watch an instructional video [here](#).

See a more in-depth review [here](#).

Lifesize



Pros:

- Easy to use
- Free tier allows unlimited meetings of up to 25 people
- Free meetings don't have a time limit
- Can call in for audio
- Can choose between speaker view where the screen changes to show who is talking, or a grid view where you can see all participants
- Includes feature where participants can raise a virtual hand where the chair can invite them to turn on their microphone and speak
- Hardware available for purchase
- 4k capacity.

Cons:

- Have to pay for meetings of more than 25 people
- Lifesize's cloud-based calling capacities are hosted by Amazon Web Services, which are seen as highly secure. But it means that Lifesize doesn't manage the security and integrity of the data created on its own platform.

Fórsa staff have full licences for Lifesize so you have the option to collaborate with an official where they can host the meeting on the branch's behalf. If you would rather operate independently, here is some further reading:

Sign up for free [here](#).

Packages start from \$12.50 per month. Click [here](#) for more details on pricing.

Learn how to set up a meeting [here](#).

See a more in-depth review [here](#).

Microsoft Teams



Pros:

- Comes packaged with Microsoft 365 business and enterprise plans
- The platform has a full set of quick and easy-to-follow training videos [here](#).

Cons:

- If you don't already have access it's very expensive as a standalone product. Purchase requires an annual commitment
- Difficult to see all participants. Usually just features the camera of whoever's talking if you don't download the app version.

Fórsa staff have full access to Microsoft Teams so you have the option to collaborate with an official where they can host the meeting on the branch's behalf. If you would rather operate independently, here is some further reading:

Click [here](#) for details on pricing. Note that prices are listed at a monthly rate, but you must commit to a full year's subscription.

Learn how to set up a meeting [here](#).

See a more in-depth review [here](#).

Webex

Pros:

- Free tier allows 100 people participate in unlimited meetings for unlimited time
- Simple user interface
- Good screen-sharing capabilities
- Capabilities to create whiteboards and pass keyboard and mouse control
- Free call in for audio
- No downloads necessary to access meetings - just needs a web browser
- Can choose between speaker view where the screen changes to show who is talking, or a grid view where you can see all participants
- Good external app integration (eg, use with Outlook, office 365, Gmail, etc.)

Cons:

- The default browser chosen by WebEx is Internet Explorer. If you prefer to use Firefox or Chrome, you have to change the browser settings before clicking on a link shared through the tool
- End-to-end encryption not included by default.



Fórsa has a Webex licence so you have the option to collaborate with an official where they can host the meeting on the branch's behalf. If you would rather operate independently, here is some further reading:

Sign up for free [here](#).

Packages start from €12.85 per month. Click [here](#) for more details on pricing.

Learn how to set up a meeting [here](#).

See a more in-depth review [here](#).

Whatsapp

Pros:

- Group chat and group video call capabilities
- Free
- Available as a web version also

Cons:

- Very basic means of communication
- Best used as a precursor to discuss meeting dates, agenda items, etc.



Click [here](#) for a group call how-to guide.

Download for free from your smartphone's app store.

Zoom

Pros:

- Easy to use
- High performing
- Free tier with unlimited meetings of up to 100 people for 40 minutes
- Good screen-sharing capabilities
- Attendees can join by a publicly-shared link from anywhere with no requirement to download any software
- Can choose between speaker view where the screen changes to show who is talking, or a grid view where you can see all participants
- Participants can use emojis to react to the conversation, and indicate agreement, without having to use their microphones
- Can call in for audio on some price bands.

Cons:

- Meetings on the free tier end after 40 minutes
- There has been some data privacy concerns with the platform.



Sign up for free [here](#).

Packages start from €13.99 per month. Click [here](#) for more details on pricing.

Learn how to set up a meeting [here](#).

See a more in-depth review [here](#).

Inviting participants

Once you have your meeting scheduled and set up (after following the platform's instructions), you must share the link with all participants.

It's best to do this well in advance of the meeting taking place, in line with normal notice procedures.

One suggestion for your invitation email is to share the meeting's link (generated by the platform). Here you can also include the meeting date and time, the agenda and any other documents for consideration. Let attendees know ahead of time if you need decisions to be made during the meeting.

Most platforms put passwords on your meeting. Participants will need the password to access the meeting. For security and GDPR reasons, it's best practice not to include the password in the same email as the invitation link.

You should clearly indicate to participants that the meeting requires a password for entry. Tell them where they can find it in your invitation email. You can text it to people, put it into a WhatsApp group, or just send it in another email.

To ensure a smooth start to the meeting, it is advisable to ask participants to set up an account on your chosen platform well in advance. You could make this request in your original invitation email.

If participants need an account on the chosen platform, you can copy and paste the 'sign up for free here' links set out in the previous section above.

It's a good idea to send a final follow up email the day before the meeting to remind people of the time and date, where to find the password, and ensure that they have the necessary software installed on their device.

When the meeting takes place, participants just have to click the link in their invitation email and input the password. Sometimes their device will ask if the software can have access to their microphone and camera - they should allow this.

If you need advice on anything in relation to hosting online meetings, your official or organiser should be the first point of call. However, there are also many articles readily available online with easy to follow, step-by-step instructions on every element of setting up, executing and following up online meetings.

Managing your meeting

- Be patient with technical glitches and participants trying to familiarise themselves with new software.
- Once the meeting commences, it's good practice for all participants to mute their microphones when they're not talking. This eliminates any feedback and background noise. On some platforms, the host can mute everyone else's microphone too. Be sure to tell participants if you do this - and unmute them when they want to speak.
- It's beneficial if the chair gives a brief rundown of how the meeting will operate and how people can interact.
- As in a normal meeting, the chair needs to keep order. At the outset of the meeting, you should ask participants not to come in unless called. There are a number of ways that participants can indicate that they want to speak:
 - Raise their hand on screen so that the chair can see they want to speak
 - Most platforms have a facility to send written messages, either to the whole meeting or to an individual participant. This can be used to indicate a desire to speak. (In a large meeting, it might help the chair if someone else keeps an eye on this on their behalf).
 - Some platforms, allow participants to raise a virtual hand (by clicking an icon). The host or chair can invite people to speak in accordance with who has their hands raised to maintain order and efficiency.

- If you are giving a Powerpoint presentation via screen-sharing, it's best to have it loaded and ready to go before the meeting commences. Make sure there's nothing on your screen that you don't want others to see. There are many articles online about how to screenshare on your preferred meeting platform.
- Setting time limits for each agenda item helps keep the meeting moving.
- It's best not to do other work or look at other browser tabs while the meeting is in progress. The same goes for participants.
- A good tip is to ask direct questions or invite individual people to give an opinion. Asking open ended questions can result in dead air or multiple people trying to speak at once.
- Sometimes participants will drop out during the meeting as a result of failed technology or poor connection. It's best to try continue on where possible and provide a very brief recap of what they missed if they manage to reconnect. This is why good minutes are important so people can see what they missed out on after.
- And finally, before you wrap up, do a brief recap of the meeting and ensure everyone was happy they had an opportunity to contribute.

After the meeting

It is best practice to send a follow up email once your meeting has finished to thank participants for attending, make a list of any agreed action points and, where necessary, indicate a date and time for the next meeting.

At this point you should also follow up with participants who had difficulties with the technology and try work through those issues for a smoother experience next time.

If you are both comfortable with video calling from your phones, (this can be done for free on WhatsApp or FaceTime) it can be useful if the person struggling shows you their laptop or computer screen through the phone and you can talk them through what they need to do.

Alternatively a phone call will also suffice where you can take it step by step together.

Be sure to circulate the minutes as soon as possible as people may have dropped out during the meeting or not fully understood what was discussed/agreed due to poor connection.

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Further information

If you need help or advice on organising a digital branch meeting or AGM, you should contact your Fórsa official in the first instance.

Access to enhanced versions of select platforms is also available if you organise your meeting through a member of union staff. Fórsa has licences for Lifesize, Microsoft Teams and Webex which branches can avail of, should they wish.