

# Getting Together Virtually



by Cathy Heath

**E**llen Naylor and I are Co-Chairs of the AIIP Local Groups. We would like to encourage you to develop local or special groups to get together with your AIIP colleagues. If you and your colleagues can't meet in person, a virtual AIIP meet-up is a great alternative.

## My local group

I have been part of the Asia Pacific (APAC) local group that has been meeting via Skype since Heather Carine set up the first meeting in May 2012. Our group of about ten members really stretches the concept of local. Our members are based in Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand—a spread of some 5,000 miles and four time zones.

## Taking the lead

If you would like to set up a new local or special virtual group, here are some first steps:

- Canvas to see if there is a need for it. Does it solve a problem?
- Consider whom to invite and what makes someone eligible to participate (geographic location, skill base, etc.)

- What would people like to achieve?
- What should the length of the meet-up be?
- Who will co-ordinate the first meet-up?
- What communication platform could you experiment with?
- Get going!

## Online calling technology

The APAC AIIPers aim to Skype every three months. We use the audio dial-in function of Skype (and there are alternative platforms such as Google Hangouts).

Audio Skyping has an obvious disadvantage: you can't pick up on body language cues and see who is talking. Also, it can be easy to cut people off mid-sentence due to the time-lag that often exists on Skype, which can be

jarring to the flow of the conversation. However, using the video option can place a strain on some people's Internet connection, or they may not all have cameras on their computer set-ups.

If you do choose to use the video option for your meet-up, make this expectation to your group clear so you can tidy your office if need be, and not be seen in your PJs!

## Organizing an online meeting

When setting up a meeting, you will need to:

- Send a Skype invitation to the attendees, which they will need to accept.
- Give people at least a week to respond to your invitation before your Skype meet-up.

- If you haven't received an acceptance, prompt again 48 hours before the meet-up. (It gets a bit stressful dealing with this five minutes before the Skype meet-up.)

## Planning your first meet-up:

- The organizer emails an invitation with a selection of virtual meet-up dates and times.
- Communicate the confirmed date and time for each attendee, based on what their time zone is, plus a reminder about what topics you plan to discuss.

With our APAC AIIPers meet-up, the organizer suggests some topics that we can discuss as a group, and invites others to submit ideas for discussion. These are communicated to the group ahead of the meet-up.

## Online meet-up facilitator

Someone needs to be in charge of the meet-up on the meeting day. Facilitation activities include:

- Initiating the Skype dial-in process.
- Acting as the troubleshooter. For example, if the Skype connection is of poor quality, they announce that you are going to stop the session, and try again.
- Welcoming people to the meet-up.
- Making sure everyone has their fair share of talking time and listening time, and is able to assertively do that.
- Moving things forward in terms of content of the meet-up.
- Assigning any responsibilities towards the end of the call.
- Making sure that the meet-up finishes on time.

It's a good idea for the facilitator to dial in five minutes early in case there are technology issues. Past experience has also taught us that it is handy to have access to one another's email in case there are any issues from attendees such as last-minute unavailability.

In our APAC AIIP meet-up group, we usually ask each attendee to introduce themselves and describe how their business has been going in the past three months (success and challenges). This takes each person around five to ten minutes, and often sets off discussion amongst attendees about how they have had, or solved, similar issues in the past. We then move onto the main topic for discussion. Past topics have been AIIP surveys and reports from AIIP conference attendees.

## Ground rules

Like any meeting and sharing of information, it's always good to have some ground rules for attendees, too.

- Everyone should use the Skype test call function before attending the meet-up to make sure their Skype connections are configured correctly.
- Avoid doing any downloads while Skyping. Avoid having other

software open that can slow down your computer.

- As in a face-to-face meeting, it is rude not to give someone who is speaking your full attention by being distracted with emails or trying to multi-task while they talk.
- Attendees should ensure that they are each located in a room that is quiet and without distractions.

## Conclusion

We use the virtual meet-ups to develop professionally, nurture professional networks, and support each other with empathy and humour. In the APAC AIIP region, we have good insight into our members' skills and expertise—and the range of resources that we can call upon. Despite distance, we have developed camaraderie, which can only be good for our professional development. It's a real, value-added benefit of belonging to AIIP.



Cathy's company, **Heath Research Services**, gives managers the information to make informed decisions that reduce anxiety about decision-making. This means that a market strategy will have a reduced risk profile, and allows decision makers to use the resources they have effectively.

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