



Even change has changed!

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Early in 2020, I mentioned to a friend that the only constant in life was change! I was immediately corrected when he pointed out that change was no longer constant, it has become exponential!

How true that is when we look at life since the outbreak of COVID-19, more than a year ago.

We have not yet held in-person meetings for the PSSA NEC since then. We have had only virtual meetings and we even had virtual AGMs for PSSA and Sectors/Branches! Is this here to stay? Will we eventually function the way we did when business was done in-person? What are the perceived challenges?

I have experienced a number of real challenges with virtual meetings. Firstly, connectivity and sound/visual quality is a challenge and this is exacerbated by load shedding. To me, it seems that a person's train of thought is broken when the audio output repeatedly breaks up and we often see persons leaving and entering the meeting, as their connectivity is lost and they re-connect.

For most of us, it is really frustrating and distracting if people have a hard time muting themselves or switching off their video, only to battle finding the microphone switch when they are requested to speak. Then there is the constant reminder to "lower the hand" after they have spoken. Is that an "old hand" or a "new hand"?

Another challenge is to keep the attention of the audience. While the presenter or chair rambles on, they have no idea about how their audience receives them. For all we know, the rest of the meeting continue reading and writing e-mails, run off to make a quick cuppa, or take a body break. We do know that when they return, they often ask the same question that was just answered!

For the chair, it is extremely hard to know who is actually paying attention (even who is present!) and what the general feeling or mood of the meeting is. He is talking to a dead fish-eye with no emotional feedback!

Whilst we are under COVID-19 regulations, entering year two, we still know each other. We care for each other, and we depend on relationships that we built during the in-person and may-touch years preceding the pandemic. We take the goodwill and best intentions of our colleagues as a given, because that is how we know them.

How are we going to function when new committees are established, and people with whom we have not had the chance to build

relationships start attending meetings? Electronic and telephonic interaction can hardly replace meeting, greeting and interacting in-person when it comes to building rapport and trust-relationships.

On the other hand, virtual meetings opened the opportunity to include people, who for valid reasons, cannot join a meeting, to attend and even to do presentations at such a meeting. We should not lose this when we move back to in-person meetings.

We have also seen numerous webinars and CPD events being presented via virtual media and we all benefited from attending, for example, the PSSA vaccines back-to-basics webinar series. We also held a few YPG-led mentorship meetings, with very valuable presentations. On an international level, FIP presented no less than 118 webinars and, in addition, held the 2020 FIP Congress electronically!

In 2020, the PSSA held its first virtual AGM and all went smoothly due to foresight and good planning. The fact that elections were uncontested and that voting for office bearers and motions closed 24 hours prior to the AGM ensured that no hold-up was experienced during the AGM. The drawback however was, because it was a virtual meeting, it left limited opportunity for discussions.

During a Sector AGM, Doodle Poll was used for voting. This resulted in some counsellors not being able to vote on the system due to technology challenges, such as different devices and computer programs not opening the voting options. This caused some delay in counting the votes as specific counsellors were allowed to vote per e-mail (named based votes). While this system allowed for contested elections, it was rather cumbersome and time consuming.

What did we learn from the virtual meetings and AGMs? Life goes on! No matter what the challenges, we can find solutions and continue serving our profession. Key to success is innovative thinking, good planning, foresight, and careful execution.

Whilst we could continue with our work, we also acknowledge the shortcomings of virtual meetings and virtual elections. For now, it is the only option available, but once we return to normalcy, we need to reconsider the alternatives in the interest of strong relationships with fellow professionals and for the future of the profession. We also need to factor in the gains we made and not lose the new platforms for communication we have opened up.

I hope to see you soon, and in person!