



CHAMBER MEMBER NEWS

Microsoft 365 Delivers the Value and Productivity Small Businesses Need

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While most businesses are returning to the office in one form or another, one thing is for certain: virtual meetings are here to stay. To thrive in a hybrid workplace, small business owners need an affordable cloud solution for virtual meetings that's easy to use and deploy.

Fortunately, Microsoft 365 and Teams provide user-friendly platforms that can help any size business get the job done. But it's more than software that's making a difference; Microsoft leverages the power of data to develop features designed to support employee well-being, improve collaboration, and increase engagement.

As business owners think about what the future of work will look like-- whether a full return to work, hybrid, or fully-remote-- they should still consider the future of meetings. Adopting the right digital tools now allows your teams to consistently deliver on expectations.

Designing Flexible Work Experiences

After the last two years, one thing is certain: the way we work and meet has changed. According to Microsoft's Work Trend Index, weekly team chats per person are up 45% and time spent in Microsoft Teams meetings has more than doubled globally and continues to rise. To keep your business competitive and to attract top talent, it is important to offer digital capabilities and workspaces that support employees from anywhere.

Making Meetings Efficient and Useful

The Microsoft also says Teams usage climbed to 115 million daily active users in 2020, and Microsoft 365 users produced thirty billion collaboration minutes in one day! According to the report, 60% of small business owners expect to raise spending on virtual collaboration tools and manager training, yet they still express concerns about altering the workplace.

A recent Gartner survey reports, "30% of business leaders are most concerned with maintaining corporate culture," 13% worry about "creating parity between the remote and in-office experience," and 13% "dwell on ways to provide seamless employee experiences."

Without a doubt, all these concerns have merit; for example, there's not a one of us who hasn't experienced "Zoom Fatigue" firsthand. So, what can be done to ensure productive meetings? According to the Gartner survey:

- Over half of respondents say all meetings need agendas
- 35% say employees "should only have to attend the relevant sections of meetings"
- 33% believe "that meetings should be shorter"
- 26% think "meeting notes should always be shared with attendees"

Creating Positive Meeting Experiences

Virtual Meetings can be excellent for collaboration, but free or open-source solutions should be a temporary fix, not a long-term strategy. Switching to a tool like Microsoft 365 and Teams puts your workplace in the cloud; this allows everyone in your workforce to take advantage of the specific features that suit their individual needs and unique working circumstances.



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Applying Innovation to Meetings

Microsoft uses artificial intelligence (AI) to understand the connection between employees, teams, and organizations. The company continues to roll out new features and improve existing ones to ensure all users get a full, 360-degree experience. The following features are some of the latest offerings designed to improve meetings:

- **Together mode:** With AI segmentation technology, meeting participants feel like they're in the same room thanks to a shared background. Brain activity research by Microsoft shows Together mode reduces feelings of meeting fatigue.
- **Dynamic view:** AI enables personalized views to support your preferences and needs. Enhance meetings with new controls allowing you to minimize shared content or put certain participants side-by-side.
- **Live reactions:** Employees find meetings hard because of a lack of non-verbal cues. Emojis enable team members to express emotions and give instant feedback. This feature also works in PowerPoint Live Presentations.
- **Chat bubbles:** Microsoft recognized the problems associated with opening a second chat window during a meeting. Realtime updates keep conversations in front of staff so they can share ideas without skipping a beat.
- **Speaker attribution:** Currently, Teams provides live captions, but Microsoft is rolling out speaker attribution for captions to help all users understand who is speaking during a meeting.
- **Live transcripts:** Microsoft is adding live transcripts to make your meetings more inclusive, with a copy of the transcript going to the meeting tab so employees can review the discussion on their own time.
- **Whiteboard:** This feature is becoming more interactive with sticky notes, faster load times, and drag and drop capabilities. These measures provide an inclusive experience for those without a Surface Hub or touchscreen.

Setting Up Meeting Spaces

Reconfiguring office spaces is a priority for many small businesses this year. Microsoft's Work Trend Index finds, "66% of business decision-makers are considering redesigning physical spaces to better accommodate hybrid work environments." Simple technology upgrades combined with meeting software enhances experiences for both in-person and remote participants.

Microsoft 365 and Teams users will soon be able to host meetings with up to 1,000 participants. Everyone can talk, use video, and chat in real-time. Their Teams Rooms hardware collaborates with Teams software for state-of-the-art experiences. Companies can purchase smart cameras and microphones, allowing remote viewers to see speakers, even as they move around the room.

Customer and Client Engagement

Customers expect seamless experiences, which Microsoft tools deliver. You can create teams for project-based work, organization-wide groups, or client-facing programs. User access controls let you manage visibility so customers can participate in workflows without risking security. With Microsoft Teams and Channels, you can:

- Invite clients to online meetings
- Have virtual conversations via team chat
- Save files securely in the cloud
- Track projects and ensure accountability
- Keep records of all conversations and meetings
- Collaborate on Word, Excel, or PowerPoint files in real-time



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Maintaining Company Culture and Employee Wellbeing

There's no shortage of data showing long stretches of meetings can fatigue employees mentally. However, flexible work schedules and an inclusive corporate culture-- combined with the right technologies-- can enhance employee wellbeing. Together, they provide what people need to get jobs done without sacrificing their sanity. Microsoft delivers features intended to support worker comfort and happiness, including:

- Focus status: Set aside dedicated time using a calendar and the focus status.
- Silence notifications: Create quiet hours or days to stop alerts during non-work times.
- Reflect messaging: Assess worker wellbeing with custom check-in questions.
- Tasks app: Make organization easy with a unified view of assigned tasks.

Microsoft 365, Teams, and Small Business Resiliency

Building resiliency into your business model is essential to navigating future disruptions. Moreover, selecting the right technology can ensure business continuity and help you scale your company. By reducing your reliance on less secure applications, you can create a foundation to actively improve your remote and hybrid workflows. Microsoft 365 and Teams:

- Provides an API to extend your capabilities and connect third-party applications
- Allows you manage files located in Google Drive, Dropbox, and Box
- Supports in-channel apps for tools like Salesforce or SurveyMonkey
- Offers bots to automate routine tasks and communications

Microsoft 365 Can Help Empower Your Employees

As employees reconsider skill sets and ponder the possibilities of flexible work, small businesses can take immediate action to retain top talent. Additionally, companies can arm themselves with the tactics and tools to delight clients while meeting expectations at every turn. Migrating your workflows to Microsoft 365 and Teams now helps you address today's issues and keeps your business ready for future needs.



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Cox Business can help your company prepare for the future of business and meetings with Cox Business Cloud Solutions, Microsoft 365, and Microsoft Teams. Our solutions are tailored to the needs of any size business, and are affordable, flexible, and scalable. If you're interested in learning more about how practical and affordable Microsoft 365 and Teams are, drop me an email and I'll connect you with a Cox Business cloud consultant: jason.ludwig@cox.com