
Central Florida Chapter of NIGP First Hybrid Meeting

by

President Tabatha Freedman, MBA, NIGP-CPP, CPPO, CPPB, Secretary Katrina Ponzini, M.Ed., Treasurer Sean Hynes, NIGP-CPP, CPPB, and Vice President Chris Coghill, NIGP-CPP, CPPO, CPPB

Hybrid meetings? What are those? They are a new and innovative solution that will allow our Chapter members to attend membership meetings both in-person and virtually. The coronavirus pandemic affected all of us. In our little corner of the world, the pandemic resulted in the facilitation of virtual meetings, workshops, and conferences. Now, as times progress, in-person meetings are once again possible. We want to meet together in-person but we recognize the need to offer a solution for those that would prefer to attend virtually. The solution may be hybrid chapter meetings, which is a solution that addresses pandemic considerations, lower travel and professional development budgets resulting from the pandemic, and the aspiration to network in-person.

There were many variables to consider and questions that needed answers when considering a hybrid platform. If we offer a hybrid option, will anyone show up in-person? What type of technology do we need? What is the overall cost for the technology required to run a hybrid Chapter meeting? What, if any, technology does the facility need to have available? How do we track attendance? How are scholarship points distributed? What is the pricing for members? Is member pricing the same for both in-person and virtual attendance? Do we have talented members that will engage and make this work? This was uncharted territory and required a leap of faith, but we saw opportunity and promise and said YES! We can do this!

The first challenge that we faced was location. Our previous Chapter membership meeting location, a county senior center, was unavailable to us in 2022 due to construction. Searching for a new facility proved to be a set-back, but it allowed us to evaluate what was truly required in a facility to support the hybrid platform. It was determined the facility bare minimums needed were a capacity of 100 people, Wi-Fi, electricity, a little kitchen area (optional), and a location accessible from major highways. In the end, we were able to secure a city community center. We were well on our way again to making hybrid chapter meetings a reality for 2022.

Preparation began with an idea. The idea was an election platform goal of our 2022-2023 President, "continue to offer pertinent professional growth to our members, with a hybrid model of virtual and in-person options". At the 2021 Chapter Academy, the NIGP Chapter leadership program, there was a discussion regarding camera, microphone, and speaker systems. The discussion prompted our own research into the technology needed for hybrid chapter meetings. We did not have a camera, microphone, and speaker system, so a line item was included in the 2022 budget. An approved budget item is an actionable idea. It means you have designated funds to make it happen.

Our newly elected officers began communicating with each other in September 2021. We were lucky as two officers were on the previous board and we were all well acquainted with each other. Research for a camera, microphone, and speaker system was presented and voted on at our first board meeting. The Owl Labs Meeting OWL Pro was the system we decided to evaluate and purchase. As a precaution, we also ordered a portable speaker with wireless microphone system that was ultimately returned.

Our Treasurer engaged as the Audio/Visual Chair. He tested and configured our new video conferencing technology prior to the meeting. The system was plug and play with a computer. There is a mobile application required to register your Meeting OWL Pro and to access features and system controls. The mobile application includes controls such as setting a static camera zone, presenter following enhancement, and areas to be excluded from the 360° view. Becoming acquainted with functionality prior to use was beneficial to smooth operations during the meeting.

We determined that the technology requirements for hybrid meetings were as follows:

1. Zoom or comparable video conferencing software;
2. Video conferencing system, such as the Owl Labs Meeting OWL Pro;
3. Dedicated laptop (verify the connections) to run the video conferencing system and projector;
4. Presentation material and software;
5. Projector;
6. Projector screen or facility wall; and
7. Cables/extension cords necessary to connect the system.

Facility requirements include accessible electricity and Wi-Fi. In lieu of Wi-Fi, a mobile hotspot from a cellular telephone may be used. Our Chapter utilizes Zoom available through NIGP for virtual meetings. Members and their agencies donated certain technology items for the meeting that the Chapter did not have.

To assist with hybrid meeting responsibilities, we created a Virtual Committee. This Committee coordinates all virtual requirements in support of Chapter events and meetings, assists with managing the virtual comments and questions during Chapter meetings, and works with the Treasurer to record virtual attendance as needed. The required outcome/deliverable is to provide virtual coordination at all chapter meetings. This is a great committee for episodic members. It is a way to engage members for a small, one-time commitment, like a specific meeting or event.

Today is the day! We got to the location an hour early to set up the technology. We called our Chapter Ambassador to see if she was available early for testing and to start the Zoom link early. A big thank you to our Chapter Ambassador for being available and testing the link early. We also coordinated with our virtual episodic committee members to verify their participation. The extra time before the meeting proved to be extremely beneficial. Everything worked as planned!

Our January 28, 2022, Chapter membership meeting had many firsts. This was our first hybrid solution meeting; our first meeting with the new officers; our first meeting at a new facility; and, our first meeting utilizing new technology. We had approximately 70 attendees, 40 virtually and 30 in-person! The attendee feedback was great and included ideas for improvement.

During the hybrid meeting, we engaged our in-person and virtual audience by asking direct questions, acknowledging members by name, and giving them time to respond. As an example, we would ask committee member “John” to give his report. “John” attended virtually. What we plan to do differently is to have the laptop screen visible to speakers. We also found that our in-person Officers were looking at the projector screen and not the video conference camera when asking for reports and feedback from virtual attendees. We also plan to ask in-person attendees to stand up, so the virtual attendees can see the individual speaking.

Our virtual episodic committee member did a great job with attendance. However, as the member was attending virtually, some comments and questions were not communicated in a timely manner during the meeting. What we learned for the next time is to have multiple virtual episodic committee members. One may attend virtually to record virtual meeting attendance, while additional in-person, episodic members will monitor the Zoom platform and report virtual comments and questions in real-time.

The presenter we had for the first hybrid meeting walked around quite a bit. This is typically not an issue and is beneficial to the engagement of an in-person audience. However, we did not have the video conferencing system set up to follow him around the meeting space. As a result, the virtual attendees occasionally lost sight of the speaker. It is best to verify the Meeting OWL Pro settings and ensure the system is appropriately set up for the events of that particular meeting. If necessary, utilize floor markers to communicate the camera zone to the presenter effectively.

Our Chapter’s first hybrid membership meeting and presentation was ultimately a success! A hybrid platform is the new and innovative solution that will allow our Chapter members to attend membership meetings both in-person and virtually. We will continue with hybrid meetings and will implement identified improvements and continue to monitor and evaluate member feedback. We hope to share lessons learned with others, so the implementation process is successful for them as well.