

Telecon Recommendations

COINS has provided a list of recommendations for having tele-conferencing (telecons) that are inclusive. These are meant to be more practical advice for how to promote an inclusive climate.

Why consider inclusivity in Telecons?

SDSS science and operations rely heavily on group phone meetings (telecons). These telecons are either recurring or one-off. While important information is often disseminated on email lists or over the wiki, telecons are important because they increase the coherence of the group attending the meeting (an effect that is particularly strong during video calls) and because regular meetings impose small, recurring deadlines that encourage progress. The agendas for and minutes/notes from telecons are also valuable to non-attendees to stay informed about current issues and progress.

There are, however, some issues unique to telecons that can present barriers to inclusiveness. COINS has put together some rough recommendations on how to mitigate these issues.

Basic Guide

If you are new to running telecons, start here with these basic tips.

Scheduling

Coordinate on a plan: If you are running a telecon, you likely have a co-chair. Come up with a plan based on the information here and the needs of your working group.

Find the best time(s): After deciding the basic parameters with your co-chair, get input from the working group about when they can attend. A online polling service - with time zone support turned on - can be quite useful for this. See discussion below about what to do when participation spans time zones that are quite different and convenient times are not possible for everyone.

Check for conflicts: Check the SDSS teleconferences page on the collaboration wiki (password-protected) for any conflicts. Note that multiple call-in numbers are available.

Running the Telecon

Pre-telecon: Send a reminder at least a day before and (probably) an hour or so beforehand. Try to get a set agenda. Decide who will take notes.

Start/end: Allow people to introduce themselves at the beginning. End on time; people will likely have scheduled things immediately afterwards as well. Strike balance between allowing discussion and keeping on topic/schedule.

See below for more details on how to make everything maximally inclusive!

Including Everyone in the Discussion

Issue

Some SDSS members have noted that it can be difficult to engage in telecons, especially when they are just starting out as SDSS members. Some find telecons intimidating and/or confusing, and either cannot get a word in or fear their contribution would not be welcome.

Solutions

- Circulating an agenda ahead of time and welcoming everyone to contribute topics is often a good way to encourage participation. It is also helpful to encourage people to send material (notes/slides/plots on a wiki page) supporting their topics. It can be helpful to specifically solicit contributions from individuals, especially those who might be new to the collaboration or have not given an update on their project for some time.
- Any request for feedback should be followed by a significant pause, allowing contributors to unmute their microphones and/or gather their thoughts.
- Telecon leaders should be aware of the presence of junior and/or new participants (roll-calls at the beginning are very important in this context) and explicitly request input from them when it is relevant.
- When two people try to speak at the same time, make sure that both get a chance to talk.
- Try to ensure that the proper person receives credit for his/her idea(s).
- It is also useful to scale the purpose of a telecon to its size; larger telecons may be better for dissemination, but smaller telecons are better for discussion.

Fostering Good Telecon Etiquette

Issue

Due to the format of telecons, they have some special etiquette rules.

Solutions

It is reasonable to remind participants of the following (e.g., within telecon announcements):

- People should mute their phones when they are not talking.
- It is easy for people to start talking at the same time. When this happens, people should stop talking and sort out who will talk, with intervention from the telecon moderator.
- Participants should respect any decisions of the telecon moderator (e.g., to move on to the next agenda item).
- Sometimes people can be difficult to understand. It is generally best to leave it to the telecon moderator to suggest, e.g., that the speaker move closer to the microphone.
- Generally, be respectful, courteous, and collegial. We are all on the same team!

Telecon Times

Issue

Because these telecons frequently are scheduled outside nominal working hours, there is additional pressure on SDSS scientists to blur the line between work/life balance. In particular, the times selected for North and South America are frequently evening in the UK and EU and this can place additional stress on people with child and/or elder care responsibilities. When a group includes scientists from the Americas, UK/EU, Asia, and Australia, the problem is further complicated because there is no one time where everyone is typically awake, much less working. Meeting times are also often selected due to the simple majority of participants, but the meeting time is then skewed away from people who are under-represented in the group.

Solutions:

An alternating or rotating telecon schedule has been adopted by multiple groups to mitigate some of these options. An alternating schedule has two times selected such that every member (or most members) can typically attend at least one meeting (this is often useful when coordinating time zones panning from Asian Time zones to US Pacific time to Central Europe time) . A rotating schedule has three times selected such that every member can attend one, but most members can attend two. This is the model adopted by groups that are spread further across multiple time zones. Essential topics should be discussed at multiple meetings to ensure a full participation of membership. Additionally, offline interaction should be facilitated and encouraged.

Issue

When scheduling a meeting time, often there are people who do not respond to the meeting time poll. When all scientists in a specific time zone do not respond, how should that be dealt with?

Solutions:

Try to reach out again individually and directly ask them to respond to the doodle poll. If there is still no response, then encourage offline interactions.

Offline Interactions

Issue:

Even when great care is taken to set a time where many people can be present, it is rare that all interested people can attend. Additionally, some people prefer to engage in offline/email discussions, either because of scheduling or simply having the time and space to think through topics more thoroughly. Language issues may also come into play for this preference. It is difficult to interact when agendas and telecon notes are either late or absent.

Solutions:

- Agendas should be provided in advance of the meeting.
- Notes should be taken during the meeting.
- Prompt posting of the notes (e.g., within 1-2 days) ensures that people who cannot attend telecons can stay up to date and can have time to react to any discussions in advance of the next meeting.

- The burden of taking thorough notes and distributing them quickly may be high, and the note-taking task should be rotated between scientists to ensure it does not fall disproportionately on one person. Explicitly encouraging comments/corrections/suggestions/reactions to the notes helps to ensure that those who are participating offline (for reasons of scheduling or preference) can have meaningful input.