



EUROPEAN MEDICINES AGENCY
SCIENCE MEDICINES HEALTH

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Meetings, virtual meetings and alternative ways of communicating

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Background note

As part of its remit to champion the use of technology to supplement, and where possible replace, the need for “face-to-face” meetings for aspects of the work of the European Medicines Regulatory Network (the “Network”), the MBTC has prepared the attached document. The paper analyses briefly the communication needs across the Network, summarises the relative advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face and virtual meetings, and proposes a way of reducing the number of face-to-face meetings.

Matters for consideration

The major arguments for reducing the extent of face-to-face meetings are the amount of time saved by individuals who, if not participating in person, need incur no travel time, and the savings in the Agency’s budget that result in the differences in cost between virtual meetings and face-to-face meetings. The paper proposes (a) that the chair and coordinator of every planned meeting that requires one or more individuals to travel should be required to consider, and justify, why virtual meeting technology cannot be used for the meeting in question; and (b) that each group should propose a communication and meeting strategy specifying which of its meetings need to be held face-to-face, and which not.



Meetings, virtual meetings and alternative ways of communicating

Introduction

At its meeting on 17th March 2010, the Management Board Telematics Committee (MBTC) confirmed that it would champion the use of technology to supplement, and where possible replace, the need for “face-to-face” meetings for aspects of the work of the European Medicines Regulatory Network (the “Network”). The Committee discussed the topic at its meeting in June 2010.

The purpose of this discussion document is to outline ways in which communication may be rendered more efficient, and the need for meetings at which individuals need to be physically present, reduced. The subject is addressed from the perspective of support for all of the Network’s operations.

This paper summarises the communication needs across the Network, and suggests a route to fulfilling these needs in the most efficient and cost-effective manner possible, whilst both minimising the need for face-to-face meetings and meeting the communication needs in each instance.

Communication needs for collaborative working

The scope of this paper is not to address the communication needs of the Network in all contexts. It is limited to communication needs in the context of collaborative working, and in particular, meetings. For this purpose, the work of the Network is considered as being a coordinated effort across multiple organisations aimed at satisfactorily completing tasks defined by processes that support a common mission. The communication needs within the programme may therefore be seen in the following contexts:

- Support for the processes for the evaluation of medicinal products;
- Support for pharmacovigilance arrangements; and
- Support for other activities required to regulate medicinal products.

The need for meetings in all three of the above areas is similar. At certain points during a process or in the context of emergency activities, it is necessary for those involved to exchange information and debate points of detail in order to reach consensus conclusions, either as regards future activities, or as outcomes. Such meetings will usually be based on a set of information that has been made available to all in advance so that a degree of consensus already exists, and the points for debate and decision have emerged, and are recognised by all.

The requirement for communication of this type needs to be considered in the context of the resources available to the Network, and the physical distances that separate those that are working together. Distances, if “face-to-face” meetings are to be held, entail travel by one or more participants, whose time while travelling will inevitably be less productive than time at the office.

Communication

Generally, the current way of working is as follows: Work is done, and meetings are held regularly in order to provide regular review points and milestones as well as a means of assuring consensus. Communication outside of meetings is generally via e-mail, and knowledge sharing is therefore usually coordinated by targeting documentation at implicated individuals.

The communication requirements for the Agency's opinion-making bodies, based on the above, may be seen in terms of information dissemination, authorisation and approval, and discussion on complex issues in order to reach consensus and where necessary, decision. In general terms, meetings are mostly not necessary for the dissemination of information, although a mechanism that ensures that disseminated information has been absorbed might be a useful tool. Authorisation and approval meetings are unlikely to need to be face-to-face, and in certain circumstances, a purely written procedure will suffice. Virtual meetings will in most circumstances more than suffice. Face-to-face meetings will be required where the subject matter is particularly complex and/or contentious, and the need for understanding and consensus is paramount.

Another factor that needs to be taken into account is the number of participants: in general terms, the larger the meeting, the more difficult it is to direct towards concrete results in the virtual scenario.

Teleconferences have proven to be reliable and effective for both small and large groups, though for particularly contentious points, consensus can be difficult to achieve. Vitero works well, particularly for smaller groups concentrating on a small number of well-prepared topics, where the technical connections have been established before the scheduled beginning of the meeting.

During the second quarter of 2010, air travel was restricted across Europe due to volcanic ash being suspended in the atmosphere. In consequence of this, a number of interactions that would have been scheduled in the form of "face-to-face" meetings were undertaken using virtual meeting technology. The experience was positive overall.

Analysis of advantages and disadvantages of virtual meetings

Virtual meetings and face-to-face meetings are compared in the table below.

Face-to-face meetings	Virtual meetings
Non-verbal, non-written communication is possible	Non-verbal, non-written communication is either impossible (teleconferences; Vitero), or of limited effectiveness (video-conferencing)
Reactions from those other than the currently speaking individual are observable	Reactions from those other than the currently speaking individual are not observable
Interactions in the margins of meetings are possible	Interactions in the margins of meetings are not possible
Conferring with fellow participants during a meeting to confirm facts or a position is possible	Conferring with fellow participants during a meeting to confirm facts or a position is either difficult or impossible
Detailed discussion of issues is appropriate	Detailed discussion of issues can be difficult to achieve

Participants will need to spend time travelling to and from the meeting. Where this period of time is lengthy, some of it may be used to prepare for the meeting	Travel time is minimal. Time to prepare for the meeting needs to be set aside, but in general, participants will save time overall
Technical difficulties are a minimal hindrance	Technical difficulties can occur, and may significantly impair the usefulness of meetings
Constraints on travel can affect attendance at meetings	Attendance at meetings is easier to assure, and participation from those located physically away from a host's premises is easier to assure
Travel arrangements can impact on the length of time participants can attend	Logistical impacts on participation are minimal
It is usually easy to establish who is speaking	On teleconferences, it can be difficult to establish who is speaking
The number of participants is limited by the size of the physical location	The number of participants can be limited for technical reasons
The average travel and subsistence cost per participant per meeting of those attending meetings at EMA in 2009 was €808 ¹ .	<p>The average cost per participant per minute of teleconferences is €0.25 per minute. Attendance at an all day meeting (say 8 hours) would then be €120.</p> <p>There is no per minute cost of using Vitero².</p>

Proposals for discussion

It is proposed that the chair and coordinator of every planned meeting that requires one or more individuals to travel should be required to consider, and justify, why virtual meeting technology cannot be used for the meeting in question. In parallel, the leaflet on the use of Vitero should be distributed, first within the European Medicines Agency, and then across the organisations making up the network.

For committees, working parties and other groups that meet regularly, each group should propose a communication and meeting strategy for the next 12 months, and an outline for the following 12 months, describing the need for meetings, and specifying which of these need to be held face-to-face, and which not.

¹ The cost of setting up and maintaining appropriate meeting facilities has not been included.

² The cost of setting up and maintaining the Vitero facility has not been included.