Professional meetings of organisation management in virtual environment – features and challenges

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Abstract — **The development of the new technologies provides managers with set of various tools useful for all managerial levels and applicable in almost all important managerial functions and activities. Modern business could organize professional meetings in virtual environment no matter of physical distance between participants. The only basic requirement is related to the Internet access. Specifics and challenges of planning, organisation and conducting these professional meetings are in the focus of the present article. Our major goal is to reveal characteristics of e-meetings and to draw some of the important challenges that will allow improving the quality of professional meetings in virtual reality. In addition, special research among Bulgarian managers from different hierarchical levels was conducted in order to analyze their attitude and opinion on the using of e-meetings as a part of traditional working activities. Our findings reveal interesting picture and results are strongly influenced by the economy sector, in which the company operates. However, these managers who claim that use e-meetings admit also for several important limitations due to the technical obstacles. The present article is an attempt to summarize and put under analysis these specifics of the professional meetings in virtual environment.**

Keywords: **e-meetings, virtual environment, e-platforms for on-line meetings**

JEL: **M10, M19**

I. Introduction

In order to be competitive, today's companies have to be more flexible, more adaptive, more sensible to the rapid changing requirements of the business environment, to introduce a set of innovations helping not only different managerial levels, but also employees in their daily working activities. Therefore the development of the new technologies and its achievement offers manager various solutions in almost every important part of their work. In economic sectors with high degree of innovations, these new technological solutions are put in use as soon as possible. For the rest of enterprises their implementation is a subject of managerial decision but if some solution is well accepted in the individual life of persons, then it has a greater chance to be applied in business organisations. Different technological solutions for communication in virtual environment are widely applicable both in personnel and professional field. Once accustomed to the new technological capabilities (in communication) on a personnel level, people are more likely to accept them as a part of their usual work practice and activities.

Certainly the engine of this new communication practice are namely companies with high degree of innovation climate, which are able to recognize, embrace and impose the potential of one new technological solution and to be enough brave to implement it in the working process. In this regard, the development of new communication solutions is logically supported of high-tech companies trying to gain competitive advantage. The current article is dedicated to these technological solutions allowing planning, organizing and conducting a business meeting in virtual environment. Specifics in communication at meetings conducted in virtual environment, including specifics in communication during decision-making process in such type of business meetings are analyzed and discussed. In addition, special research among Bulgarian managers from different hierarchical levels was conducted in order to analyze their attitude and opinion on the using of e-meetings as a part of traditional working activities. Our findings reveal interesting picture and results are strongly influenced by the economy sector, in which the company operates. However, these managers who claim that use e-meetings also admit for several important limitations due to the technical obstacles. The present article is an attempt to summarize and put under analysis these specifics of the professional meetings in virtual environment.

II. Literature overview

Business meetings and its goals are widely discussed matter both by practitioners and scholars. Their importance as an useful instrument in daily working life is visible in almost all aspects – internal meetings – meetings of managerial team with CEO or meetings between employees and their manager; as well as external meetings with authorized representatives of the organisation with potential or current partners and subcontractors. Whatever the concrete goal of the business meeting is, the importance of this tool is obvious and out of any further discussion. Therefore the interest of practitioners and scholars to contribute to this subject remains logical and understandable. Koester and Handford focus attention to the Hypothetical reported speech in business meetings. They admit the following: While the past two decades have seen many empirical studies on direct reported speech (DRS) in spoken interactions, fewer have focused specifically on hypothetical reported speech (HRS)… HRS was found to occur as part of specific sequential patterns, and was used largely as a persuasive device, fulfilling a range of related rhetorical functions. Like DRS, HRS can project either a sense of involvement or detachment, but unlike DRS, also allows speakers to generalise; detachment

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and generalisability being particularly relevant to a business context (Koester, Handford; 2018). Oittinen and Piirainen-Marsh presents interesting research, dedicated to the different techniques of opening in technology-mediated business meetings. The authors claim the following: The prerequisites for opening a meeting, or beginning any kind of interaction for that matter, are participants' presence and shared orientation towards the situation at hand… Drawing on video-recorded meetings in an international company, it documents the multimodal practices used in the process of establishing co-orientation to the shared meeting space and achieving entry into the meeting. The analysis shows that the stepwise unfolding of the opening phase requires the coordination of verbal and bodily conducts as well as the affordances of the technological artefacts utilized (Oittinen and Piirainen-Marsh; 2015). Gritsenko explores in depth the specific of group communication in virtual environment. He consider: In the digital age, group communication migrates online. Web forums serve as communication hubs for people who work together to solve particular problems. The author uses qualitative content analysis and interviews to determine whether discussion threads on an IT user forum could be viewed as group communication in the traditional scholarly interpretation of the term. The findings suggest that online discussion threads dwelling on non-mainstream issues have all five features of face-to-face group work – size, interdependence, task, identity, and norms. The scholar concludes that though online forums introduce limitations to interactions, discussion threads can indeed be viewed as group communication (Gritsenko; 2016). Exploring the specifics of digital communication and its applicability at work, Mukherji and Arora admit: Communication in the 21st century has moved forward by leaps and bounds from the realm of Aristotle's 'rhetoric'. The study of communication as a discipline drew the attention of scholars around the early 20th century and gained momentum after World War II. From being a subset of sociology, psychology, political science and organisational behaviour, the study of communication as a discipline by itself was taken forward by scholars like Lazarsfeld, Lasswell and Schramm. A quantitative orientation was provided with the development of cybernetics and information theory. Modern technological advances have enabled today's generation to function in the era of virtual communication. An organisation is no longer encased within geographical boundaries. Team members are often physically dispersed, work across time boundaries and have multiple reporting relationships. The concept of team has become dynamic as membership of teams shift regularly (Mukherji, Arora; 2017). Ranney and Troop-Gordon analyze the specific in digital discussions and characteristics of conversation process. They present a profound survey and summarize: To understand the effects of information and communication technologies (ICTs; e.g., texting, instant messaging) on conversational processes and socioemotional well-being, researchers have often relied on experimental designs in which unfamiliar adults engage in relatively superficial conversations. This paradigm limits our understanding of ICTs, as individuals rely primarily on ICTs to converse with close others, in more intimate discussions. To address this limitation, this study examines the use of ICTs by friends engaging in problem-focused discussions. Fifty-three female friend pairs engaged in problem-focused discussions in an ICT-mediated or face-to-face context. Observers rated the degree to which individuals exchanged information, dwelled on negative affect, rehashed problems, and speculated about problems. Participants provided ratings of perceived self-expression, similarity, self-disclosure, positive and negative affect and closeness with the friend. Participants in the ICTs condition reported less positive affect after the conversation than those in the face-to-face condition. Although participants interacting through ICTs exchanged less information, rehashed problems less, and reported lower levels of perceived self-expression, they experienced higher levels of perceived similarity and self-disclosure. Discussing problems through an ICT was indirectly related to dampened closeness through observed information exchanged and enhanced closeness through perceived similarity (Ranney, Troop-Gordon; 2015). The scientific team from Netherlands conducts a survey among 1222 employees in creative industries in attempt to determine the important digital skills. They admit the following: The current workplace increasingly asks for workers with highly digitally skilled knowledge who produce and distribute ideas and information. As such, understanding the factors behind differences in the level of various 21st-century digital skills is of decisive importance. They examine the level of 21st-century digital skills among knowledge workers, and the determinants contributing to the level of these skills. They explore in depth the following digital skills: information, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving. Potential determinants that can be influenced by stakeholders are also included, such as social support and training. The results show that the level of 21st-century digital skills varies considerably. Furthermore, each 21st-century digital skill is explained by a different set of determinants, thereby requiring unique approaches for the development of each skill (van Laar; van Deursen; van Dijk; de Haan; 2019).

III. SPECIFICS OF ORGANIZATIONAL MEETINGS IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

At first glance there are no such significant differences between traditional direct business meetings (face to face) and business meetings, conducted in virtual environment, but the similarities are only apparent on the surface. From managerial point of view both types of meetings possess its important elements such as: time oriented (precise date and time); participants (number of people – internal or external for organisation who are invited to the meeting); place, where the meeting will be conducted (geographical location or e-platform for business meeting). On the other hand we have also content elements of the meeting – aim of the event, major problematic topic of the meeting, agenda, moderator, initial preparation activities results etc… All-important elements of the business meeting are presented on fig. 1.
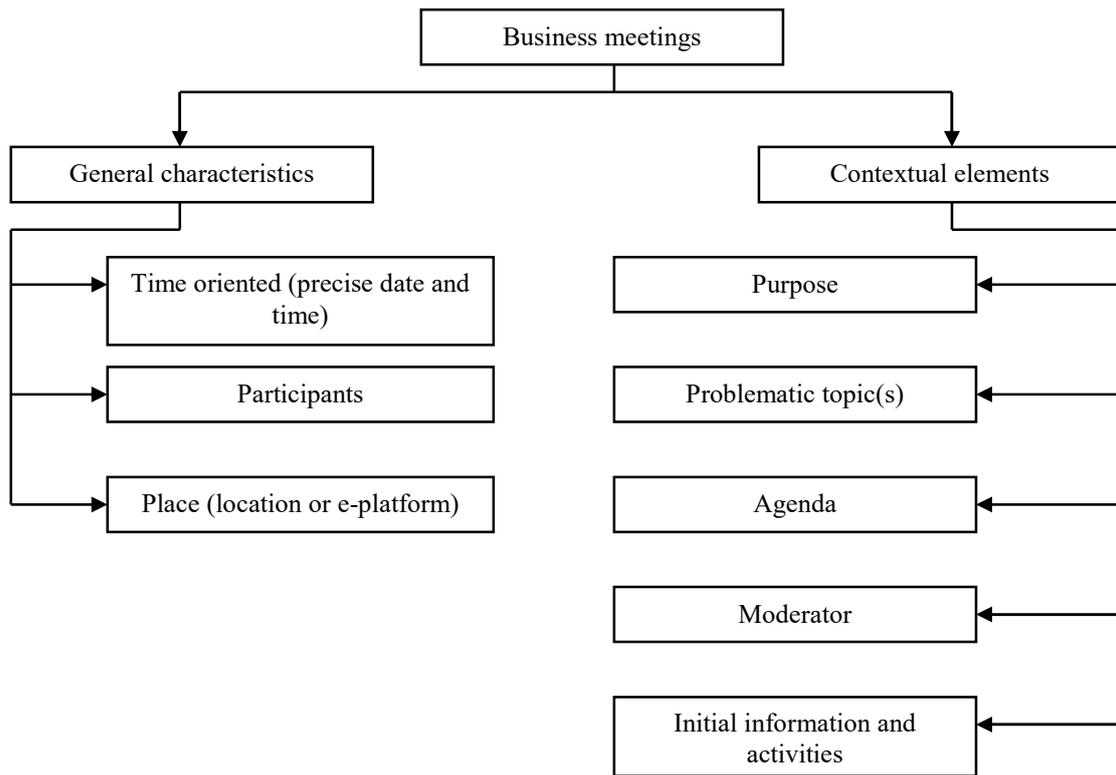
Fig. 1. General and contextual elements of business meetings (traditional and online)
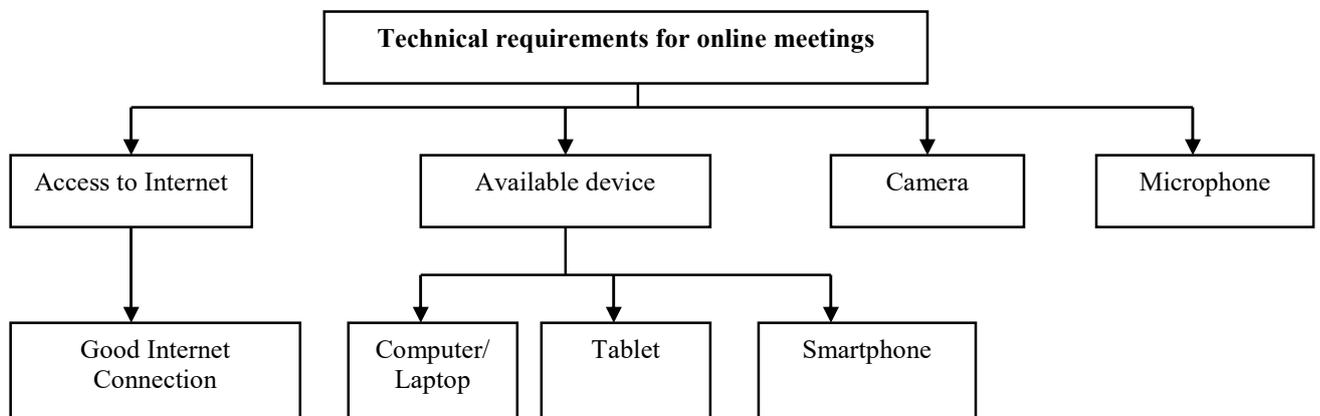Source: Based on the Cultural Heritage Law

Fig. 2. Basic technical equipment requested for participant for online meeting

These outlined elements of the business meetings presented on figure above are obligatory, regardless the type of the meeting – online or direct face-to-face. The major difference is the environment, which could be described as essential characteristic for the manner trough the help of which a business meeting is moderated and conducted.

As a result of the virtual environment in which on-line meeting takes place, we could outline various restrictions that both moderator and participants have to comply with from the contextual point of view. On the other hand, when we explore the specifics of the business meetings, which take place in virtual environment, we have to consider that there are several important technical requirements, which could be described as obligatory for any participants in the business meeting. These requirements are presented on fig. 2.

As we can see from the figure 2, although geographical distance is no loner big challenge for participation of the meeting (possible in virtual environment), all participants

of the online event have to be provided with technical basic equipment. Once each of the participants has the technical equipment, the next step comes the choice of the e-platform or programme or special application for online meeting. The different options in this choice are really diverse and numerous – from functions of pure social medias such as Facebook and Instagram, trough different communication applications such as Whatsup and Viber to special platforms such like Microsoft Teams, Zoom etc. This choice as usual is subject of a managerial decision, but on the other hand, the answer could be found in the organizational culture and the programme/platform/application that the major part of participants is accustomed with. In this sense the online meeting could be considered as a logical continuation of a normal and traditional working activities but this time in the virtual environment.

The online business meetings have slight differences comparing to the traditional ones in terms of managerial approach, but on the other hand there are several important restrictions that have to be outlined and put on the further discussion. They are graphically presented on fig. 3.

As the restrictions, due to the technical specifics of meetings in virtual environment are concerned, the major of them are connected with lack or partially visualization of speaker or participants. This restriction could be considered as not so important, but only at first glance. If we have a profound look, we will understand that the lack (in full degree or partially) of the visual access of speaker and participants of the meeting in fact deprives us of the important information due to the lack of nonverbal communication signs, facial expression and gestures. Information, collected from nonverbal communication complete the official one. Therefore each participant in traditional direct meeting could check official information with the nonverbal communication and to conclude for himself whether he can trust the communicator or not. On the contrary, in online meetings such type of check is really difficult to be executed and the participant has to confess only on the official speaking. Sometimes in business negotiation for instance, these restriction could play very important role in the overall negotiation process. Something more – in case of discussion of a difficult subject, the lack of personalized view of the participants could influence on the impossibility of gaining of initial supporters and partners of some idea. All restrictions coming as a result of the technical specific of the platform could be consider as direct challenges and concrete tasks for future work of technicians and developers. The logic of the last few years is leading to the fact that the technological progress is strive to approach the virtual reality as much closer to the real as possible.

Contextual restrictions could be considered as essential for the online meeting which frame several important specifics of these types of meetings (fig. 3):

1. Strong moderator activities and skills – the role of moderator of the meeting is important as usual, but here (meetings in virtual environment) the moderator is in the heart of the event. The moderator conducts the event, but due to the specifics of the virtual environment (muted microphones of the rest of the participants in the major part of the meeting), in case of discussion the moderator has to be more precise and correct than usual. Therefore the meetings in virtual environment require strong moderator skills.

2. Relatively passive role of the participants during online meetings – most of the time participants of the online meetings are with muted microphones due to the fact, that more microphones switched on at the same time means introducing unnecessary noise of the communication channel and respectively – difficulties in listening and understanding of speaker. On the other hand, this muted microphone could be considered as barrier (not so strong, but still available) in front of the desire of taking the floor. If we consider the case when the moderator of the meeting is CEO of the company himself and there is a discussion, only few numbers of employees could dare to express their sincere opinion freely (especially without visual support from other participants). Something more – usually in virtual meeting each participant is alone and therefore it is difficult to feel the support of the rest of the team members.

3. Difficulties in dialogue interactions – again due to the specific of the environment, the interactions of dialogue are limited and the dialogue usually could happen only on the general topic (but not profound details). Having in mind this specific, the managers could combine different channels. If some online meetings require profound discussion, initial information could be sent via e-mails with the deadline for comments and recommendations. Thereby each of participant will have enough time for preparation, will have the time for forming own opinion as well as to check with the other participants (coalitions and partners). Therefore the proper planning and preparation of the online meeting could be defined as key elements of the meeting success or failure.

4. Difficulties in online vote procedures – in case that the agenda provides vote, the managerial options here are really restricted. In small groups (up to 10 people) this vote in virtual environment could be with simple individual speaking of each participant claiming "for"/ "against" or "abstain". But this solution is not applicable in big meetings or in case that the vote has to be secret. This limitation is also one of the biggest weaknesses of the available tools for online meetings.

In summary of all these restrictions of the meetings which are conducted in the virtual environment, we could say that online meeting require from managers more initial work in planning and organizing the meeting; strong moderator skills and sensibility to the participants; ability to build trust of the participants in the situation where they are initially limited due to the virtual environment; strong managerial skills to know team members (employees) and high quality initial work to study potential partner/ contractor/ subcontractor in case of online meeting with external for organisation participants. Based on these specifics of online meetings we are able to present the specific situation where online meetings are preferable than the traditional face-to-face meeting (fig. 4).
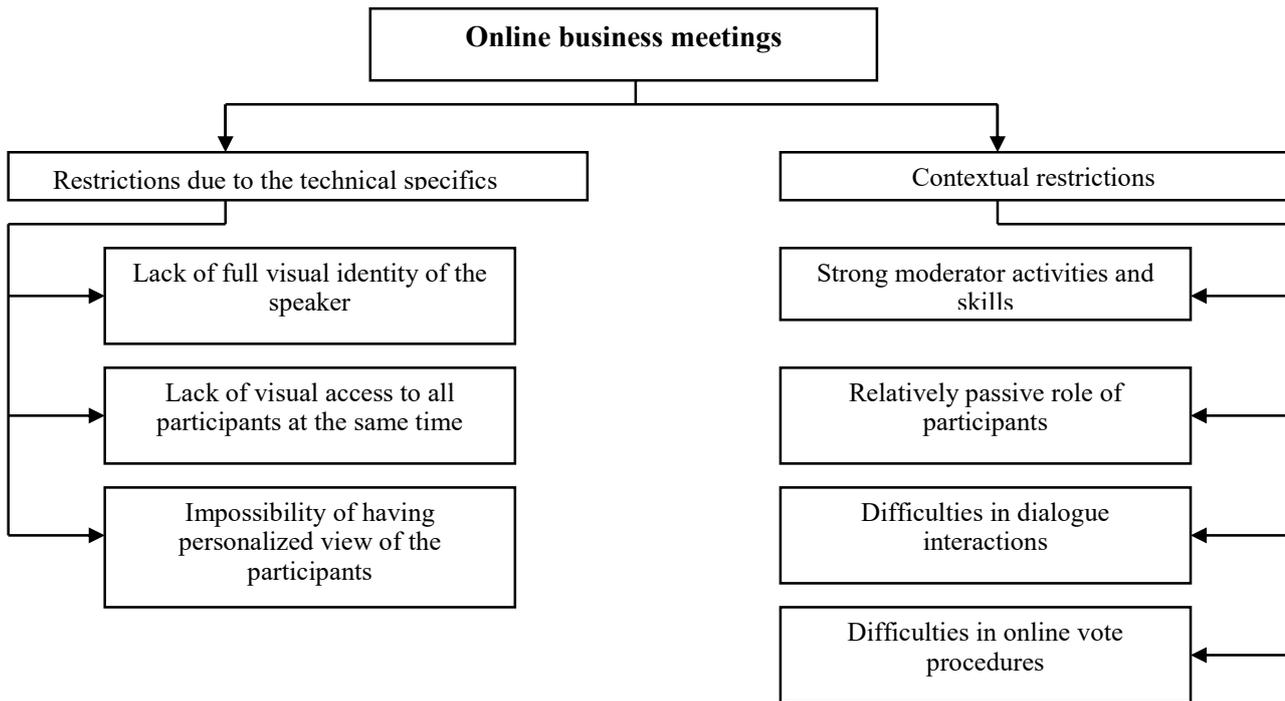
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Restrictions due to the technical specifics	Contextual restrictions
Lack of full visual identity of the speaker	Strong moderator activities and skills
Lack of visual access to all participants at the same time	Relatively passive role of participants
Impossibility of having personalized view of the participants	Difficulties in dialogue interactions
	Difficulties in online vote procedures

Fig. 3. Technical and Contextual restrictions of online business meetings

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│  Meetings in virtual environment│
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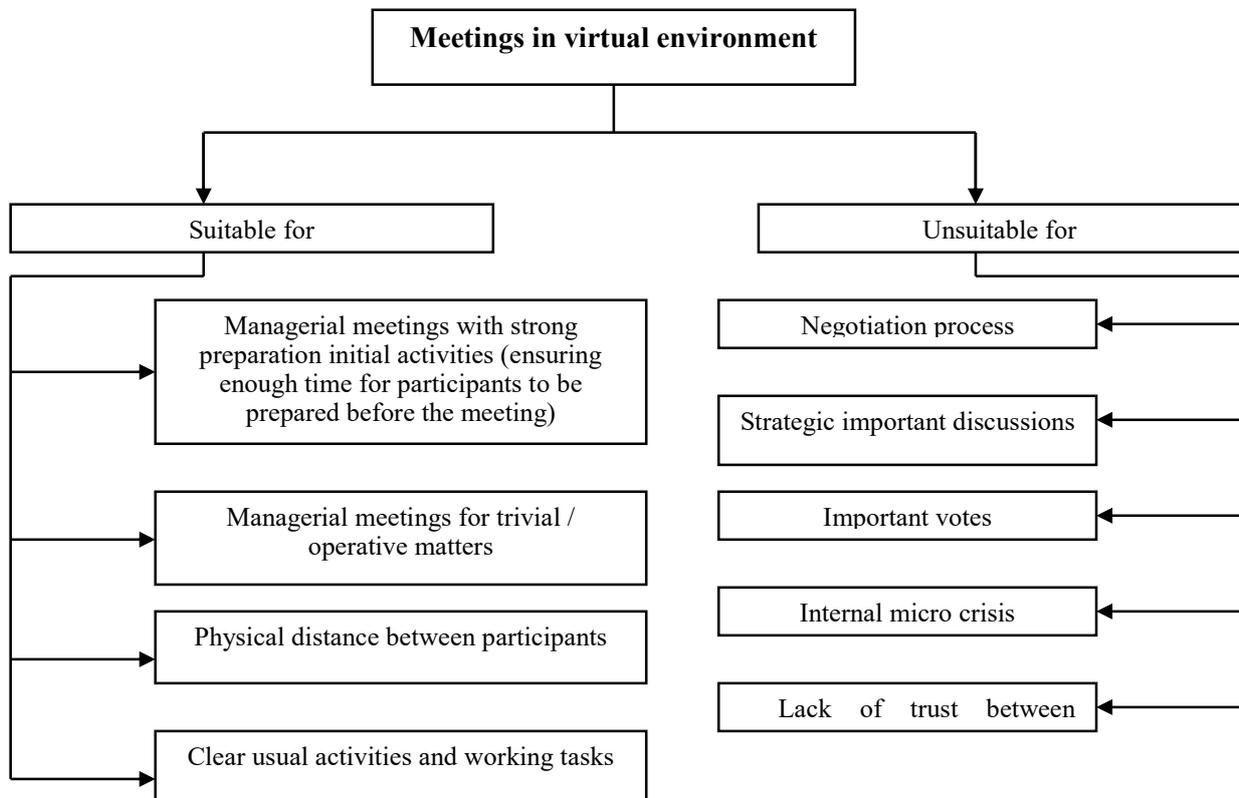| Suitable for	Unsuitable for
Managerial meetings with strong preparation initial activities (ensuring enough time for participants to be prepared before the meeting)	Negotiation process
Managerial meetings for trivial / operative matters	Strategic important discussions
Physical distance between participants	Important votes
Clear usual activities and working tasks	Internal micro crisis
	Lack of trust between

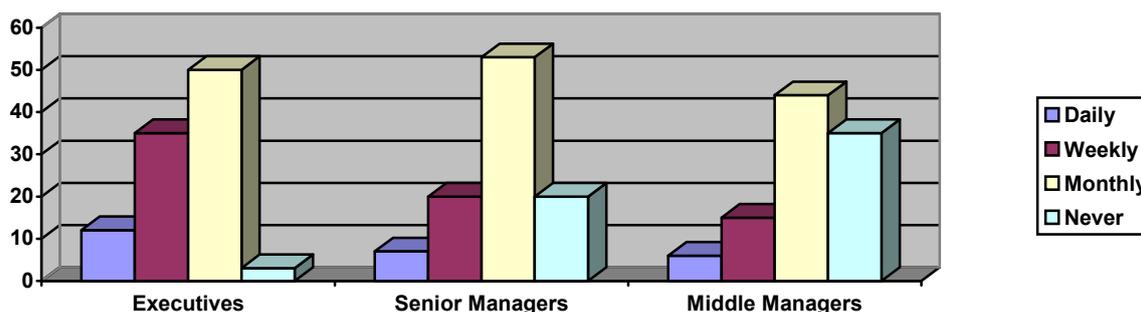Fig. 4. Possible applicability of business meetings in virtual environment

Fig. 5. Frequency of participating in meetings in virtual environment of the Bulgarian managers, in percentage

In order to reveal the experience in practice of the Bulgarian managers in online business meetings, we conducted a special survey among 32 managers in different level of managerial hierarchy. The results are summarized on fig. 5. As it can be seen from the figure, the summarized results form interesting picture, which is slight different depending on the managerial level. As one of the obvious similarity is the fact, that all managers claim using the online meetings in a monthly base. The large numbers of managers, who admit that never use or participate in the meetings in virtual environment, are middle managers (almost 35%), followed by senior managers (20%). The large number of managers, claiming the usage and participation of meeting on daily base is among the Executives (12%). On the other side, 35% from the executive admit using online in weekly base. Our survey is conducted on a anonymous and voluntary principle via Internet (Google Forms) and includes answer from managers of organisation in different economic sectors.

This picture could be totally different if we explore the specifics of concrete economic sectors, especially those in high tech. Now we have only general observation, which is the following: only 3% fro the Bulgarian executives claim that have never been in online meetings (as participant or organizer), the percentage among senior manager is 20%, and among middle managers – 35%. Therefore we could conclude, that type of work in higher levels of management requires more frequently the online meetings.

CONCLUSION

In today's increasingly global world, the opportunities that the progress of communication and information technologies provide us are becoming more important and more applicable in everyday personal and organizational business life. Thanks to the development of the technologies, business meetings can now be held regarless of the physical distance of the participants. We are already accustomed, both in personal and professional field, of being constantly connected to the internet and reaping the benefits that the global network provides. In this regard, business meetings organized in a virtual environment will be an increasingly used tool by Bulgarian managers in an

attempt to gain a competitive advantage and improve the company`s results .

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