

## Timing it Right: Tips for Planning Remote Meetings Across Time Zones

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**NURSE AUTHOR & EDITOR, 2020, 30(4), 4**

Being part of a team or cooperating on a project is something that is familiar to all of us. Meeting regularly to exchange ideas, update members on progress, or tackle an issue collectively are all normal processes of being engaged on a team. While working collaboratively has many benefits, challenges can arise when you are part of a remote team and members are in different time zones. Scheduling errors related to time and calendar issues are generally the biggest pitfalls that result in team members showing up late or not at all to a planned remote meeting. This article shares a brief overview of the history of standard time, nuances associated

with time changes, and tips to use when planning remote team meetings across time zones.

## STANDARD TIME

Given the reliance we place on time throughout the day it is hard to conceive that the first “clock” was a sundial that reflected what was considered solar time. Mechanical clocks emerged as the standard method for keeping time around the start of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Fast forward to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the need to standardize timekeeping became evident.<sup>4</sup> The growth of technology, such as telegraphs and radios, and transportation methods (eg, railways) revealed that timekeeping was a confusing process across much of the world. Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century timekeeping was considered a regional matter and cities and towns used a form of local solar time which was maintained by a mechanical clock mounted on a prominent town building that everyone could see.<sup>4</sup> Variances in timekeeping practices across communities made it difficult to communicate, travel, and trade merchandise.

An international consensus emerged that a standard for timekeeping needed to be identified. In 1884 at the International Meridian Conference in Washington, DC, Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) became recognized as the world’s time standard. From this the 24-hour time-zone system grew.<sup>2</sup> Ironically it was the railway systems that began implementing standard time practices. The British railways were the first to adopt GMT, and shortly after American railways instituted four standard time zones in the United States.<sup>4</sup> By the early 1900s most countries started using time zones that represented a uniform standard time for that region.<sup>4</sup>

There are more than 24 time zones in the world, and many countries are comprised of multiple time zones. For example, the United States has six time

zones that span from west to east: Hawaii, Alaska, Pacific, Mountain, Central, and Eastern. However, some countries, such as China, use a single time zone; while others (for example, India) use 30-minute deviations from standard time.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 1960, the process to replace GMT with Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) began, which had been established as the more accurate and scientific measurement of time.<sup>2</sup> UTC starts counting time from midnight. The local time within a zone is viewed as the difference in the number of hours and minutes from UTC.<sup>2</sup> For example, in the United States, Hawaii is UTC-10 while the Eastern time zone is UTC-4. This means the difference in time between Hawaii and New York, located in the Eastern time zone, is 6 hours.

## **DAYLIGHT SAVING TIME**

“Spring forward and fall behind” is a saying that many of us use to remember which direction to turn our clocks during daylight savings time (DST). The premise of DST is to gain one hour of natural daylight during the summer months by moving forward one hour from standard time. When DST ends in the fall clocks are turned back, and we lose one hour. Historically, DST was established as a way to save energy. For example, if people have more daylight hours there is less of a need to use electricity to supply light. Due to advances in efficiency, saving energy is no longer viewed as the perk of DST. The benefit of extra daylight during the evening hours is viewed as a favorable advantage for both work and leisure activities. However, only 70% of the countries around the world use DST.<sup>4</sup>

When a region observes DST depends on which hemisphere they are in.<sup>3</sup> In the northern hemisphere, Europe and the majority of North America (except for the states of Arizona and Hawaii) generally observe DST in the months of March through October (or early November). However Australia, which is in the southern hemisphere, typically starts DST in October and ends in April. Africa, China,

Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and India do not use DST and remain on standard time all year.

When observing DST, a time zone's difference in UTC changes. For example, the Eastern time zone in the United States is UTC-4 when observing DST (spring and summer); however, it is UTC-5 when not observing DST (fall and winter). This change in UTC also impacts the differences between time zones. For instance, in the fall when the Northern hemisphere is ending DST, the Southern hemisphere is just starting DST although there is a gap of approximately one month, which makes it even more confusing! Depending on the date, there may be a 14, 15, or 16 hour time difference between New York and Melbourne, Australia. See Table 1 for some example dates and times.

**TABLE 1. TIMES BETWEEN NEW YORK, NY, USA AND MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA**

If in New York it is:	Then in Melbourne it is:	UTC Offset from NY to Melbourne	Daylight Savings Time for:
7 am, Jan 15	11 pm, Jan 15	+16	Melbourne (AEDT)
			New York (EDT)
7 am, Mar 15	10 pm, Mar 15	+15	Melbourne (AEDT)
7 am, Jul 15	9 pm, Jul 15	+14	New York (EDT)
			New York (EDT)
7 am, Oct 15	10 pm, Oct 15	+15	Melbourne (AEDT)
7 am, Nov 15	11 pm, Nov 15	+16	Melbourne (AEDT)

## TIMING IT RIGHT TIPS

Having an awareness of standard time and the influence of DST is important for planning remote team meetings. However, calculating time zone differences and accounting for time changes when sending meeting invites can be confusing. Using the right tools can help overcome these challenges.

### *Calculating Time Zone Differences*



*Figure 1. World Clock Widget in iOS*

Most of us have access to tools right at our fingertips that we might have previously overlooked. The world clock that operates in both the iOS and Android clock widget allows you to select multiple cities to see the current time (see Figure 1). An option like the world clock can also be added to Google calendar. By making a calendar setting change you can see your time of day along with a corresponding time from a second time zone. Similarly, the website Time and Date (<https://www.timeanddate.com/time/map/>) offers an interactive world map in which you can identify current local times across cities and countries by placing pins. The map also identifies when a region is observing DST. These tools are useful to quickly see what the current

time is across locations.

When planning for a future remote meeting you might find a website like Every Time Zone useful. Every Time Zone (<https://everytimezone.com/>) offers a slider bar that allows you to visualize how your local time corresponds to times across multiple locations throughout the day. You can move the slider bar through a 24-hour cycle that instantly updates the time differences. While this tool is useful for planning, it works well for communication purposes too. For example, it is handy

to identify the most appropriate time to send an email or expect a return response.

Meeting planners are also useful tools that are available through websites. For example, Time and Date offers a World Clock Meeting Planner (<https://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/meeting.html>) in which you can find the best time across multiple locations to schedule a meeting. To use the planner, you enter the projected date of the meeting and city of each team member. A timetable is generated that displays the time at each location for a 24-hour period. When you click on a timeslot additional information pertaining to each location is provided (e.g., UTC offsets and if the location is observing DST). This tool can also help you establish a rotating meeting schedule in which each team member shares the burden of having an early morning, mid-day, or late evening meeting. TimeTemperature.com (<https://www.timetemperature.com/time-tools/meeting.php>) offers similar information.

### ***Setting Up Calendar Meeting Invites***

Calendar programs available through Google, Outlook, and iCal/Calendar, to name a few, have emerged as an essential tool when planning remote meetings. A meeting invite sent through a calendar program enables you to share meeting details relatively easily. However, if not set-up properly not all team members may arrive on time as expected. A common error is not specifying a time zone or selecting the wrong time zone when creating the meeting invite. When scheduling a remote meeting across time zones you must tell the calendar program which time zone the meeting will be held in. In most programs this detail can be addressed directly after identifying the date and time, usually through a drop-down selection. For example, if you are planning a remote meeting that you will facilitate from New York, you will select the Eastern time zone. Once sent, the

calendar invite will display for the team members the time of the planned meeting according to their specific time zones.

## CONCLUSION

Being part of a team and collaborating has many benefits. However, challenges may arise when working with members across time zones. Having an awareness of standard time and the influences of time changes is important for meeting planning purposes. However, calculating time zone differences and setting-up calendar meeting invites can be confusing. The provided tips can be used to help overcome the planning challenges that often arise when part of a remote team.

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