

Meeting the Challenges of Videoconferencing

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Increasing numbers of organizations are using two-way videoconferencing to hold meetings with people separated by distance. Instead of the expense of traveling to meet face-to-face, participants gather in remote locations and meet as a larger group via a system of video cameras, monitors and audio microphones. Both visual and sound information can be shared between the two or more locations involved in the meeting.

This technological marvel can have tremendous benefits by bringing people together from distanced locations. Besides the economical aspects relevant to travel, organizations reap the benefits of people meeting more often. However, managing the technology by changing the behavior of the meeting participants is critical to avoid frustrating situations such as one-way communication, misunderstood intent and lack of participation. You may have endured a multipoint videoconference where some participants were on camera and talking the majority of the time, while other people at the meeting had no opportunity to share information or ask questions. Perhaps the facilitator posed a question and the participants at other locations seemed to stare blankly at the screen. Or, someone wearing a brightly patterned shirt would move in front of the camera and create a distracting blur. With a little preparation and special attention to communication, the facilitator and meeting participants can work together to ensure a successful meeting.

The Technology Issues



Understanding the technology and hardware involved in videoconferencing is the first critical step towards a successful meeting. The video conferencing system used by the University of Nevada is *compressed video*.

Compressed video uses phone lines to transfer video images and audio signals from one site to another. Because a phone line is a narrower “highway” to transmit the information than a televised broadcast, the video and audio information must be processed by a piece of equipment called the *codec* (*coder-decoder*) before it can be transmitted. Signals from the camera and microphones are coded and then decoded prior to being sent to the monitor and speakers. All of this signal processing can have a negative effect on the image and sound. Here are some of the problems that may result:

Image softness is how the codec compensates for rapid information flow. This can make rapid motions look jerky. Information is compressed via decreasing the image resolution, which can make the picture look blurry or as if it is broken into squares. To minimize these effects, simplify the visual image whenever possible. Avoid rapid motions, wear plain colored clothing and provide a solid background in a light color.

Audio clipping or echoes might occur if the sound system needs to be reconfigured. If your system has an echo canceller, try resetting this function and cut down on background noise.

Audio delays are caused when the information is compressed, travels over a distance and then is decompressed. This entire process will take about a second. If you are new at videoconferencing, you may feel awkward in waiting a moment before expecting a response to a question. Since there is no way to prevent this delay, conversations will be smoother if participants finish thoughts in a single statement with a clear ending. Avoid relying on brief verbal affirmations of understanding (“I see” or “uh huh”) and instead use longer verbal clues (“Yes, Jane. I understand”.) Strong visual clues such as nodding or shaking your head may also be appropriate.

If there are more than two sites involved in the conference, the system will “choose” to display whichever site is making the loudest noise. So, if someone is talking the system will display his or her image to the other sites. If someone at another site is talking also, the system will switch from one picture to the next. Consider keeping the audio on mute at a location if no one there is addressing the meeting.

The People Issues



The meeting facilitator and participants can work together to ensure the success of the event. By adhering to the following guidelines videoconferencing can be a useful tool.

1. Follow the basic guidelines of good facilitation. Have an agenda that is distributed to all the meeting sites. Consider using fax, email or the document camera to have the agenda distributed before the meeting. Review the agenda at the start of the meeting. Make sure everyone at each site is introduced and someone at each site knows how to operate the equipment.
2. Know how to operate the equipment. Practice ahead of time.
3. Maintain eye contact with the person to whom you are talking. If you are speaking to someone in the room with you, do not look directly into the camera. Only look into the camera if you are speaking to someone at another site.
4. Use care when communicating. Remember the audio delay will take at least a second, so give people time to respond. Non-verbal communication cues should either be big enough to be seen and understood, or eliminated in lieu of verbal clues. Use a strong and clear voice
5. Dress appropriately. Remember, bold stripes or patterns will cause a blurry picture. Wear dark or neutral colors.
6. Use care when moving in front of the camera. Rapid movement will cause blurry pictures and will be distracting. Choose a place to sit where you are in the picture and stay in that place if possible.
7. Be courteous. Do not use the technology to hold side conversations with those in the room with you, alienating participants at other sites.

Special Tips for the Facilitator

Using all your best facilitation skills will be a tremendous help toward ensuring the success of a videoconference meeting. Working from an agenda; distributing the agenda well before the meeting; managing the flow of discussion and allowing everyone to provide input are all facilitation skills used in any meeting that will be critical in a videoconference. There are a few additional considerations required when working with groups at multiple locations connected via technology.

Humanize the process by creating an atmosphere that focuses on the importance of individual input. The facilitator can do this by repeating questions and input do it is heard at all sites. Encourage group members to address each other individually. This will help overcome distance and establish group rapport. This is particularly critical if someone is alone at her remote site and has never participated in a videoconference.

Participation in videoconferencing refers to the process of getting beyond the technology by providing opportunities for spontaneous interaction among participants. Facilitators want the people at the meeting to interact with the information provided. By building time into the meeting to attend to communication needs, participation levels will increase.

Feedback is critical as a means of getting information about the message that helps the facilitator and participants complete the communications loop. Paraphrasing for understanding will help correct misunderstandings and fill in the gaps. Remember, visual clues might not be practical as a means of receiving feedback. Verbal checks for understanding will be necessary.

Videoconferencing is not like watching television, but it might be difficult to stop long time habits you have developed in front of a monitor. While watching T.V. we tend to tune out what is on a screen, or expect to be highly entertained by what we see and hear. If we're not interested, we quickly channel surf to another show. A videoconference is not a show. It is a meeting involving exchange of information between people who are using a technology-based tool to span distance. With a little preparation and awareness, the exchange can result in a successful meeting.

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