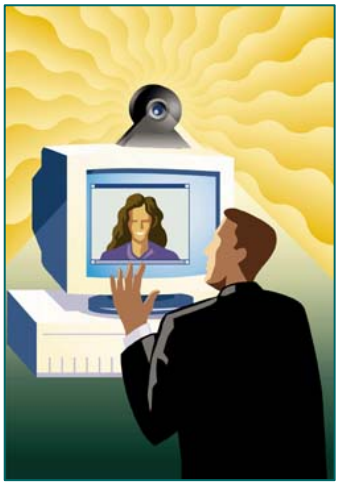
Participant's Guide to Web Meetings

A FutureU Quick Guide

It's not the technology;
it's what you do with it.



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Make Yourself Heard. At the beginning of the meeting, help the facilitator by volunteering an audio check. ("Hi, this is Claude in San Francisco. How's my audio? Can everybody hear me?") If at any point you are having trouble hearing anyone else, speak up immediately. A clear audio connection right in the beginning makes the technology itself disappear so you can all focus on the content of the meeting. ("Bob, This is Claude in San Francisco. I can't quite hear Joan when she speaks. Can we turn up her volume?")

If possible, use a headset and microphone to connect to the audio portion of a web meeting. This is essential if your audio is carried on the Internet and, even if you are using the telephone, a headset is a good idea as it prevents "crook-neck syndrome" and frees your hands to take notes.

Finally, remember to speak directly into the microphone, whether it is an external microphone or built in to your telephone hand set or head set. If any of the participating sites involve more than one person at a computer, be especially careful to make sure they can all hear and be heard.

Get Camera Ready. If you are using a live video camera, practice positioning yourself so the camera will pick up your image. After that, ignore your own camera; don't let it distract or intimidate you. Get involved in the content of the meeting as if the camera were not even there.

If you know you will be on camera, plan what you wear. Avoid strong colors or vivid patterns. You may want to keep a neutral-colored jacket in your office to slip on whenever you enter a conference where you might be on camera..

Manage Your Speaker Phone. If you plan to use a speaker phone, be sure to place it on mute whenever you are not talking. Even the sound of your computer fan, air conditioner, or foot steps may distract your fellow participants.

Stop the Music. If your phone system plays music while on hold, remember not to use the hold button during the conference.

Minimize Background Noise. At some time or other we've all done a second task while talking on the phone. One to one, the background noise is minimal but imagine the cacophony on a group call. If everyone is shuffling papers, opening cabinets, slurping coffee, clipping their nails, emptying the dishwasher, or talking (even in a whisper) with someone at their end, the combined distractions will distort the entire audio and ruin the meeting. Turn off your pager or cell phone. Don't play music or videos in the background. Turn off the alarms on your email and instant messenger service. Try to use a room where you won't be disturbed. Leave your gum on the bed post and, unless everyone has agreed to a lunch meeting, save your sandwich for later.

Do Your Homework. It's easier to hide your lack of preparation on line, where your squirms may go unnoticed. In the bustle of a web conference, your "absence" may not draw attention, but your colleagues will think back later and wonder whether you were even there. (*"I thought Phoebe was going to talk about the new training program."*) If you received background materials, review them and prepare to take part.

Use Slides or Provide Handouts. If you're the presenter and you are going to be sharing documents or images, be sure that everybody can see them by sharing them through the conferencing software or, at least, by making them available to each participant in electronic or hard copy.

Remember the Remote Participants. If you're the presenter, be sure to call on remote participants from time to time so that they don't feel left out.

Identify Yourself. Face to face, we know instantly who just spoke up. Web conferences demand a new protocol that may seem awkward at first but it is the best way to assure a smooth, confusion-free meeting. The protocol is this: Every time you enter the conversation anew, say your name. "This is Larry." Or, "Marvin here, in Boston." Do this every time, not just the first time you speak--and especially when you are talking with strangers who don't know the sound of your voice. If we all adopt this new habit, it will easily become the standard for polite, effective group communications in a teleconference.

And don't think this need goes away if you are all on camera. Especially when the screen shows multiple images, no one will notice that it is your lips moving. When you take the floor, raise, or better yet, wave your hand. Face to face, this would look downright silly, but in the more subtle environment of video conferencing, such exaggerated movements draw the eye quickly and quite sensibly toward the speaker.

Listen Attentively. Even if you think you've heard it all before, give others a chance to contribute. It's tempting to "tune out" in a web conference, but you could regret it later. Active listening keeps everyone on the same page and makes follow-up go much more smoothly.

If you feel you can help clarify an issue, politely ask the facilitator if you may interject your comments. Note your own questions or discussion points until the right moment comes along for you to speak.

If you are in a room with several participants and your group feels a need to discuss a topic or formulate a question away from the conference, let the facilitator know that you are going to put the phone on hold or mute. When you return to the conference, give a brief summary of what you discussed and share any new ideas or resolutions that have emerged.

Pay Attention. Give every web, video or audio conference your undivided attention. Don't be tempted to work on something else at the same time. Don't read your email, don't fill out your expense reports, don't put the finishing touches on that report. Buff your nails if you must, but avoid the temptation to "multi-task" during critical points. You'll only get surprised later when you are expected to have heard them.

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