Virtual meeting etiquette in today's workplace

While remote work and hybrid work continue to be a part of the new work landscape, virtual meeting etiquette may not be clear to everyone, especially across different organizations.

We've all been there — stuck on another video call and wondering what exactly is appropriate. I've been in back-to-back meetings, can I eat a quick snack? Is it ok to drink my coffee? Put my feet up on the desk? Do I need to turn on my camera just because everyone else has? Do I really have to put on dress clothes and clean up my office?

Many of the same rules of etiquette apply to a virtual meeting that would apply to one in the office. Being prompt, making eye contact with the speaker, and paying attention will go a long way in making the meeting a success.

But how do you ensure your Zoom, Skype, or Microsoft Teams video meetings stand out, make an impact, and avoid any faux-pas?

Set the ground rules

In person, it's easier to get a read on the room and see body language. If someone has a question, they can hold up their hand, or often, you can simply pick up on their non-verbal cues.

On a video call, it might not be so easy. Is it appropriate to interject and ask a question? You might not see if one of your team members holding up their hand, especially if a meeting has lots of attendees. That's why it's important to establish some protocols with meeting participants.

Should questions be held to the end? Is this more of an informal conversation? Who's taking the lead on steering the meeting? Should questions be submitted through a question feature? Does your online meeting

provider have a "raise your hand" feature?

Are employees expected to keep their cameras on? Or is it ok to turn them off for a company-wide presentation?

The answers to these questions won't be the same for everyone and every meeting. That's why it's important to establish any etiquette rules at the beginning of the meeting.

Make technology work for you

The technology side of video conferencing is one that you can't ignore. Or you can, but at your own peril. Sometimes hiccups will occur that are difficult to avoid, but if you're proactive in understanding the technology you use, you'll be able to avoid many of them.

Learn the features of the platform you're using

Hosts and participants alike should familiarize themselves with the platform being used. How do you set a background? Where is the mute button? How do you turn the camera on and off? Are you able to mute and unmute other participants? If the meeting is being recorded, do you know how to start the recording process?

Doing so will ensure you're not fumbling around with the tech when it's time to get started or throughout the meeting.

Check your internet connection

Most of us have been there — you join a Zoom call, and suddenly you're frozen, choppy, or perhaps your colleagues are only catching every other word. Sometimes internet issues are out of your control, especially for remote teams. However, it's important to do your best to ensure you have a solid internet connection.

Minimize other tabs and pages open on your computer that could draw bandwidth away from your call. Ensure that no programs on your computer are trying to update. If you're at home, keep the family off of video streaming services and internet games during an important call.

If you know your home internet can be spotty, consider taking an important business meeting from another space. A coworking space, study room at the library, or your local office if you have one, might have more reliable internet than your home office.

Join early

Without fail, if you try to jump on your call right at the start time, technical difficulties will pop up. Hop on at least 5 minutes early, or more if you are hosting. If you've never used the platform before, be sure to give yourself time for any downloads that might be necessary.

This might not always be possible if your company books video calls back to back. In that case, be sure to prepare all of your notes and documents ahead of time. Then, log on as soon as the meeting starts. You don't want to be late, and *then* have technical issues.

Avoid awkward screen share moments

Always remember, if you're sharing your screen your entire screen will be visible. So make sure there's no chance of something awkward or unprofessional popping up.

Make sure to close any applications you don't want open, or at least turn their notifications off. This includes

messenger apps like Slack. You probably don't want your messages popping up on screen, mid-presentation, for everyone to see.

This might be less important in a regular team check-in, but is especially important if you're having an external meeting or presenting to a client.

Set yourself up for success

The key to success often is in what you do before the meeting.

If you are hosting, set a plan

In-person meeting etiquette and virtual meeting etiquette aren't that different in many cases. Like in-person meetings, your participants want to know what will happen during the video call, so set an agenda. Let anyone who needs to present know ahead of time so they can prepare.

Above all else, maintain momentum and stay on track as much as possible. As the meeting host, you also act as a moderator during the virtual meeting. Be sure to keep the conversation focused on the matter at hand so it doesn't become a meeting that could have been an email.

Invite only those who are essential to the meeting

Being respectful of others' time is important in the office and when working virtually. Just because you can invite someone to a Zoom meeting doesn't mean you should. Focus on inviting those who are essential and sending the meeting notes to those who would benefit from being in the loop.

Also, keep in mind that fewer participants can make the meeting run smoother from both a technical and conversational perspective.

Clean your workspace and stage your video area

If you aren't going to use a background during your call, make sure you have a clear work area and a clean space behind you. Check to see what is in the background of your camera — and remove anything inappropriate or distracting.

Make sure your lighting is working well, too. Facing a well-lit window works wonders, or even putting a lamp near your camera can help. In general, you need a lot of light for video calls, so turn on those lamps or get a ring light for your camera if needed.

You may still want to book a meeting room

If you're the facilitator of a meeting and plan to be doing a lot of talking, it may be best to book a meeting room if you're in the office. Nearby coworkers may not appreciate hearing you lead a presentation for an hour in an open workplace.

Determine how notes will be taken

This will depend on the type of meeting. In a brainstorming session, you may normally use a whiteboard. However, doing so isn't as easy in a remote meeting.

Consider what meeting notes you'll need. Perhaps a shared Google Doc would be just fine for the whole team to jot down notes. Or the meeting leader may share their screen while jotting down key takeaways.

In a more formal meeting, note-taking may be a task left for an admin, or a responsibility that alternates between meeting participants.

Regardless, determine ahead of time what type of note-taking your meeting may need, and make arrangements where necessary.

Virtual ice breakers

Many larger meetings tart with an ice breaker to help participants settle in and get familiar with one another. These may include things like, question scavenger hunts (find someone who has a pet, find someone who speaks another language, etc…), or speed meet-and-greets.

While fine in person, activities like this may be harder in a video call, where you can't have side conversations as easily. Consider making such activities more structured — give each person 60 seconds to share something about themself, or to provide an answer to an interesting question they're assigned.

Video call etiquette

Get dressed

Everyone will know if you are wearing your pajamas. Give your best shot at dressing professionally yet comfortably. If you wouldn't go into the office with uncombed hair and wearing your favorite college t-shirt, be sure to step it up before your video chat too.

We've all seen the video meeting wardrobe mishaps, and you don't want that to happen to you. Just because the webcam may only catch your face, if you have to stand up suddenly, you'll want to be sure you're not in a dress shirt and sweatpants.

Additionally, consider the particular meeting. A virtual team might be used to check-ins in t-shirts. However, when meeting with a client you'll want to dress more formally even if you work from home.

Introduce the participants

Ensure that all participants have a chance to be introduced and welcomed. This is good etiquette normally, but even more so in a virtual meeting where it's harder to introduce yourself to others beforehand.

One way to do that is to use the waiting room feature if the platform you are using has one. Just as you wouldn't let colleagues sit through an in-person meeting without an introduction, we shouldn't do so on video calls either. Give everyone a chance to say who they are and what they do.

Eat before the meeting

Watching someone eat on video isn't very appealing. Try to limit snacks and mealtime to before or after your call. On the other hand, it is generally acceptable to sip your coffee or water during video meetings.

Look at the camera, and adjust it if it is too high or too low

Your camera should be at eye level, but you might have to get creative to raise it to a better position if you are using a built-in camera on a device.

There are many solutions available and products to purchase that will raise your device to the correct height. However, in a pinch, a stack of books under your laptop or monitor will do just fine. This will allow you to avoid those distorted views offered by a camera that's at the wrong angle.

Mute yourself if you aren't talking

We know many people are working remotely with a full house of loved ones and beloved pets. This juggling act means there's sometimes background noise. However, as people are more accustomed to virtual meetings, the ideal virtual meeting etiquette is to reduce background noise and interruptions.

This may not apply to a small team meeting, but generally speaking — put yourself on mute to avoid embarrassing slip-ups or dogs barking in the background. Also, don't forget to unmute yourself when you start talking!

Consider carefully before multitasking

It may be tempting to pull up other work instead of giving your full attention to the meeting at hand. While this is more obvious in face-to-face meetings, in virtual meetings you can easily work away on another project.

Sometimes this may be ok if you don't have much to add to a meeting, or perhaps only need to speak to a particular part. However, you don't want to be so caught up that someone needs to address you several times before you realize they're asking you a question.

Before opting to multi-task, make sure you determine how much you'll need to participate. If you do, try to focus on simple low-attention tasks so you can continue to follow along.

Finally, this is almost never suitable in a one-on-one meeting, as your split attention will be much too obvious.

If you are hosting, you should be the last one to leave

Once the host leaves, most platforms shut down the video call. To avoid the issue of cutting off someone's final

thoughts, be sure to wait until all others have left the meeting before shutting things down.

Avoid distractions

For remote teams, sometimes this can be challenging — after all, life doesn't always respect your calendar. If you have a spouse or roommate also working remotely, kids off from school, or even a pet that likes to co-star in your meetings, make sure to set yourself up in a place where you can minimize possible interruptions.

This can be as simple as closing the door. If you're expecting packages, consider putting a "please don't ring the doorbell" sign on your front door. And don't forget to take the dog for a walk before your meeting starts.

The basics still apply

There are some differences between meetings via video conference and in-person meetings. However, to run an effective meeting there are still some general meeting best practices that apply.

Have a meeting agenda

An agenda helps keep everyone on track, and ensures that any must-discuss items get covered. Generally, it's good to send the agenda out ahead of time. This gives participants time to collect their thoughts, pull together any supporting documents needed, and come to the meeting ready to discuss.

In some meetings, this may not be possible, or always necessary — but make sure everyone clearly understands the purpose of the meeting so it can be as productive as possible.

Note any follow-up items

A great discussion in a meeting can be helpful, but unless you turn that discussion into action items, you might not move the needle much. At the end of the meeting, be certain to review any items participants should follow up on, so expectations are clear.

Additional Resource: Taking meeting minutes for a virtual meeting? Consider a few of these best practices.