



Guide to effective participation in virtual meetings

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I Foreword

Personal meetings were very common before the start of the corona pandemic. It was regarded as an appreciation of the business partner I to meet in person. Both informal exchange and networking played an important role in professional communication. Virtual meetings were the exception rather than the rule and were usually only used for brief coordinations, or were called for if the travel expenses were too high. In an international context, however, virtual meetings were not uncommon even before the pandemic, but here too the spectrum has now gotten expanded to include virtual conferences, board meetings, workshops – all occasions for which one would normally have travelled.

In a very short time, we have learned to move previously personal meetings into the virtual space in order to maintain political, social and also economic dialogues. We are convinced that this development will continue after the pandemic and will have a long-term impact on the way we communicate with each other.

In the future we will consider whether the trip to a half-day workshop is necessary, or whether virtual participation is possible or sufficient. In the future, organisers will plan for this possibility of participation and provide the corresponding technical infrastructure. Moderators should be prepared for virtual participants to be included in discussions in the same way as physically present participants.

Meetings and events are becoming hybrid in terms of the type of participation – this calls for a rethinking of all those involved.

At the same time, participation in virtual meetings increases the so-called “zoom fatigue”. People have less and less of an interest to participate in virtual meetings, not the least because it seems to be harder to concentrate for longer periods of time than in face-to-face meetings.

The current situation illustrates the value of personal communication, especially the short, informal conversations in the corridor, next to the coffee machine, during dinner or at the bar. We understand how much creative potential is lost in the absence of such conversations and recognise how a deepened personal exchange influences our thinking and consequently our decisions and actions.

Although virtual meetings are not a complete substitute for physical meetings, they will remain part of our communication behaviour beyond the pandemic and will be used more frequently.

This guide aims to show how each of us can individually contribute to making virtual meetings effective and positively influence the attention of other participants.

* For better readability, the generic masculine form is being used throughout the document, but it always refers to members of all genders.

** For more information about Zoom Fatigue click here:

- <https://www.handelsblatt.com/technik/digitale-revolution/digitale-revolution-zoom-fatigue-warum-uns-videokonferenzen-auslaugen/26002264.html>
- <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/digital/zoom-fatigue-videokonferenz-ermuedung-corona-1.4888670>
- <https://t2informatik.de/wissen-kompakt/zoom-fatigue/>
- <https://hbr.org/2020/04/how-to-combat-zoom-fatigue>
- <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/coronavirus-zoom-fatigue-is-taxing-the-brain-here-is-why-that-happens/>

2 Preparation for participation in the virtual meeting

Even before the start of a virtual meeting, every participant has the opportunity to positively influence the successful course of the meeting. The preparation of each individual has a greater effect in virtual meetings than in physical meetings.

Stable Internet connection:

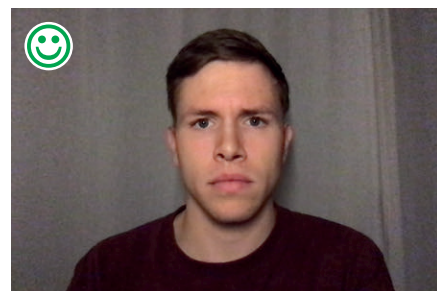
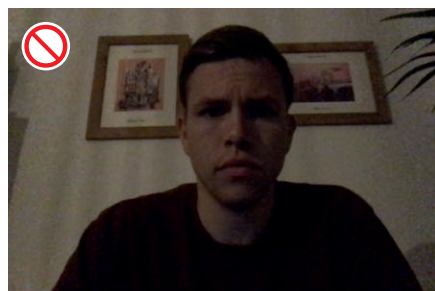
One advantage of virtual meetings is that you are flexible in your choice of location. However, you should make sure that you have a stable Internet connection with a download and upload rate of at least 0.6 Mbps to ensure that at least the sound transmission is constant and without delays or interruptions. Ideally, video transmission is also possible.

Quiet place:

In order to ensure that all participants of a virtual meeting can always follow what is being said, they should find themselves a quiet place where no background noise (e.g. a noisy street, etc.) is likely to disturb their own verbal contributions.

Appropriate lighting:

Appropriate lighting should be used to ensure that participants have the opportunity to see the faces of other participants, creating a more personal atmosphere.



Appealing background:

By choosing an appealing background you can ensure that the participants of the virtual meeting are not distracted by it and can concentrate on the essentials.

Also, we would actually discourage the use of virtual backgrounds, as these are rarely designed to ensure flicker-free transmission without seams between face and background.

Appealing backgrounds

- + Discreet, monochrome background (wall / curtain)
- + Bookshelf
- + Plants
- + Open space

Unfavourable backgrounds

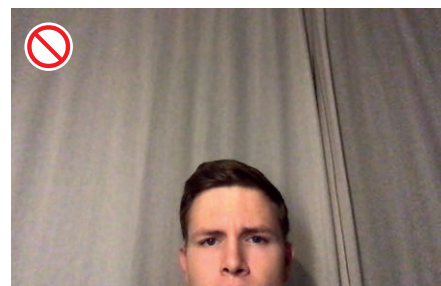
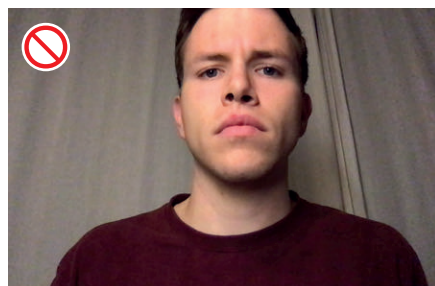
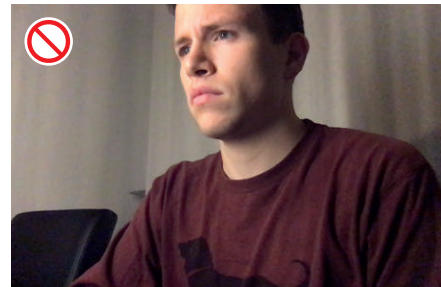
- Windows through which the light shines directly into the camera
- Permanently different people
- Very personal items (e.g. clothes rack, bed)

Placement of the laptop:

It is important for laptop users to sit at a certain distance from the device. An external keyboard helps to bridge this distance. Raising the laptop also helps with positioning. The same applies to all mobile devices (laptop, smartphone or tablet); they should be firmly positioned and not held in the hand or placed on the participant's legs or knees, because a constantly wobbling picture is very unpleasant for the other participants to look at.

Placement of the camera:

In order to create a highly personal atmosphere in the meeting, the camera should be positioned in a way that you look directly into it. This is especially important if several screens are in use. A larger part of the upper body may also be visible. The further away you sit from the camera, the more favourable is the viewing axis and the person opposite feels better being looked at.



Testing the videoconferencing tool:

Most videoconferencing tools offer similar basic functions – but they differ in their operation. When participating in a virtual meeting for the first time, the basic functions should be tested. But even experienced participants should enter the room a little earlier if possible, when using an unknown platform for the first time to test the functions and to configure the audio and video settings.

- Activating and deactivating your own microphone
- Enabling and disabling your own camera
- Sharing your own screen / Exit sharing
- Writing a message in the chat (to all participants & to individual participants)

Instructions for the most popular videoconferencing tools are usually provided by the respective providers.

Testing the microphone:

During a virtual meeting, participants only hear the processed voice of the person speaking, so the microphone used and its configuration have a great influence on the perception. Accordingly, before taking part, one should test how the microphone handles one's own voice and adjust the speaking volume if necessary.

Closing unneeded programs and documents:

Before joining a virtual meeting, all programs and documents that are not needed in the meeting should be closed in order to avoid being distracted by push notifications or open programs during the meeting and to avoid sharing confidential information with the participants of a virtual meeting if you share your own screen.

Tip: The more often you take part in virtual meetings, especially when you present yourself, you will appreciate good technical equipment. If you have the opportunity at your workplace, we recommend the use of a second, external screen, in the case of mobile devices an external keyboard and mouse, as well as a headset or external speakers and microphones (available in combination with noise and echo cancellation). A height-adjustable desk helps to prevent fatigue during long meetings.

3 Conduct during the meeting

Similar to physical meetings, it is important to observe the common understandings of personal interaction. These would include punctuality, not interrupting other speakers and being brief with own contributions. In addition, netiquette shall be observed in the chat and technical resources be used with confidence.

Acceptance of everyday “disturbances”, such as a question from one’s child or a cat running through the picture, has increased because everyone can understand the restrictions in the home office and by this, we would also share something personal with each other, something that is done consciously or unconsciously in physical meetings, too. However, these small distractions should not reduce the effectiveness of the meeting as a whole.

3.1 Communication

First, methods of stylistically confident communication in virtual space are presented.

Identification:

All participant should identify themselves on entering the room with their full names and affiliation, if applicable.

Deactivate the microphone:

To ensure that all participants in a meeting can concentrate on what is being said and are not distracted by background noise, it is advisable to mute the microphone during the entire meeting, unless you wish to speak yourself. Already typing on the keyboard or rustling with paper is often perceived as very annoying.

Video? Yes please!

The “zoom fatigue” in virtual meetings is to a certain extent related to the fact that we can no longer read the body language of our counterpart. For this reason, but also to reduce the anonymity of these meetings a little, we recommend turning on the camera, at least when you speak. If this is not possible, e.g. due to lack of bandwidth, a profile picture already partly fulfils this purpose.

*** Totality of rules for social communication behaviour on the Internet

Announce requests to speak:

Most videoconferencing tools provide ways to indicate to the moderator and other meeting participants that you have a comment on the contribution of a previous speaker or that you wish to make a general remark. The use of these possibilities increases the quality of a meeting immensely, as the flow of speech of the individual participants is not interrupted by interim commentaries.

Use of the chat function:

In addition to the channels of direct communication via video and audio, there is the additional possibility of asynchronous communication via chat in virtual space. As a rule, it is possible to send a message to all or just a single participant of the meeting. This channel is particularly suitable for short remarks to individual participants or the moderator (also for announcing a request to speak). However, it should be avoided to have extensive bilateral discussions in the chat, especially no other aspect should be discussed than the one currently discussed in the meeting (parallel discussion).

3.2 Body language and facial expressions

The lack of body language combined with the constant attempt of our mind to read it is one of the reasons why virtual meetings are more tiring than face-to-face conversations. Well-dosed, non-verbal signals can help to counteract this fatigue.

Hold still without freezing:

It is important to find a good balance. A speaker who normally gestures a lot should try to reduce this and keep the upper body as still as possible. This is because it is not always possible to ensure fluid video transmission. A constantly moving picture is very tiring for the eyes of other participants. Facial expressions and gentle hand movements on the other hand help to bridge the virtual distance. (News presenters would serve as a good orientation in this regard). Participants who are not speaking at the moment can show the presenter that they are listening attentively through facial expressions and gestures.

Better stand than sit:

A height-adjustable desk or a high desk not only prevent fatigue but also promote self-confidence. A straight back and relaxed shoulders make you look more confident and ensure that your voice resonates optimally.

3.3 Technical processes

Presentations and screen sharing:

Presentations should not be overloaded. Texts as well as graphics must be easily readable, as other participants may only see them on a small screen. Regardless of what content is presented during the meeting (videos, websites or presentations), it should be either already open or preloaded to minimise technical delays. If you feel unsure, you can send the content to be presented to the host or presenter in advance as they would be prepared to share the screen on your behalf.

Telephone dial-in:

Some videoconferencing tools allow for a dial-in by telephone. If this option is used, the moderator or host should be informed in advance for administrative reasons, e.g. for granting speaking slots or the configuration of the name displayed in the virtual meeting. If these participants ask for the floor, they can only make themselves known by actively interrupting the meeting, unless they are dialled in by telephone and computer.

Unmute:

It can quickly happen that a speaker forgets to unmute and starts speaking. Other participants will flag him accordingly through their reactions.

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