ADR TIMES

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Tips for Effective Video Conferences

Videoconferencing connects people at different locations, saves the time and expense of travel, allows real time exchanges, and provides an opportunity to see and hear others. So why do videoconferences aggravate so many people? Here are some common irritants and tips to overcome them:

Technology is intimidating. Videoconferencing can be difficult to use and often has a history of problems. **Tips**: If you are running the meeting, practice using the system with someone at a remote location until you are comfortable with it. Add the IT Help Line number to your cell phone in case you experience problems. Make a checklist of required equipment before the meeting so you'll have everything you need (e.g., have you been to a meeting where someone forgot the speakers so you couldn't hear a video?). Make sure you have cell numbers from participants in case you lose the video connection. Develop a process for participants to notify each other if the volume fails (hold up a "we can't hear you" sign or make a hand motion to indicate no sound). Also, establish a way for participants to send messages to the facilitator or committee chair and not the other participants.

We're camera shy. Most people prefer not to see themselves on screen. As a result, participants often sit as far from the camera as possible or out of range. **Tips**: If you are running the meeting, ask participants to sit where they can be seen or assign seating in the camera's range. Keep the focus on making the meeting effective, which means hearing and seeing all members.

We like to multi-task. Distractions are a problem in all meetings but seem more apparent in video meetings. **Tips**: Reinforce the usual meeting ground rules and ask participants to eliminate distractions, including the cell and landline phone ring, checking e-mail, or doing any other work not related to the meeting. The microphone picks up paper rustling and pen tapping so eliminate these actions.

We overlook those not in the room. Too often, if there is a group in a conference room and participants from other sites, those participating remotely don't offer as much input as those in the room. **Tips:** Periodically (perhaps every five minutes) ask for input from those participating remotely. Ask each individual for comments and change the order in which you ask them. Consider a "buddy system," where each participant in the room asks a "buddy" at a remote site for input.

Videoconferencing isn't perfect but neither is traveling. Whether meeting in person or by videoconference, all participants are responsible for the success of the meeting. Being prepared to address technological challenges, establishing ground rules for communicating, ensuring that all attendees can participate and are included in the discussion, and eliminating distractions are equally, if not more important, for meetings held by videoconference.

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