COMMUNICATION

TOOL 4: NAVIGATING ONLINE COMMUNICATION

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TOOL 4: NAVIGATING ONLINE COMMUNICATION

Who is this for

High priority
- Direct managers
- Corporate cross-departmental managers

Practical Information
- HR Professionals

Useful to Know
- Executive and Senior management

What guidance does it provide?

- How to facilitate and adapt to the new normal of communication and connect with employees with disabilities
- To provide an easy to use and experience-based resource to increase the effectiveness of virtual meetings

Take-home points

- Ask your employees in advance what works the best for them and whether they have any specific needs. This includes asking what format they want to receive materials in, and what they need to participate in the meeting itself.
- Agenda and meeting guidelines should be sent in advance to all participants. Use large, clear fonts, keep imagery simple and avoid flashy transitions, auto scrolling, and other frills. Utilize layout tools for increased accessibility, strong colour contrast and caption all images.
- Practice patience and time delay for the interpretation to take place between the signed language and spoken language. For example, when you are speaking the information is being translated to ASL or LSQ. Pause and wait for a response from the individual before you continue.
- Ensure you speak directly to employees and not interpreters. This applies both online and in person when communicating with individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing or English is their second language
- Record the meeting for future viewing: When you record a meeting for later viewing ensure that the captions are enabled in the accessibility settings of the recording and the ASL interpreters are pinned in the video.
- Ensure closed captioning is also recorded for future viewing

The New Normal: Virtual Communication

With the uptake of working from home and other remote work settings, this new disruption in our professional and personal lives have come with a lot of challenges that every company, institution, and individual must face. To ease into the transition to a new normal, more and more virtual communication options are becoming the standard methods of communication.

Improving Virtual Communication

The challenge now is to create virtual workplaces that function as “high touch” environments, providing multiple points of contact and interaction between team members. There is no shortage of technological solutions to help encourage virtual interaction, but that’s only half of the equation—remote employees must communicate well to maximize the team’s performance.

There are many ways in which communication is different in virtual settings: [1]

- People’s perception of time flows faster than offline
- Body language is missing. Facial expressions and hand gestures are present, but do not always provide the full story.
- Distractions from others and the external environment have even more of an impact on the transmission of information
- Lack of opportunity to engage with coworkers
- Challenging for employees with disabilities to be heard and seen in the right environment

The experience of personal “presence” is very different, it is easy to get bored or distracted, lose connections with others, and to struggle establishing and developing trust. It is also increasingly common for people to experience very real “Zoom fatigue,” which adds to the complexity, especially for those with disabilities. Whether you are organizing, leading, or taking part to virtual meetings and events, it is important to consider these factors and to hone a few skills that are key for successful virtual communication. [1]

THE NEW NORMAL: VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION

Work with your employees to determine appropriate response times – indicate urgency and timelines of when to respond to internal staff and external stakeholders. Through collaboration, both employees with disabilities and employers can develop which method of communication (i.e., emails, phone calls, virtual meetings, in-person) work the best. When communicating through different mediums, ensure you:

- Use plain language
- Avoid the use of idioms, sarcasm, and vague language
- Be cognizant of employee's time zones
- Be very clear about action items and expectations

How to Make Your Online Meetings Accessible for People with Disabilities [1]

Here are a few steps you can take to develop your virtual communication skills:

Plan and set the stage

Provide Accommodations

Keep it Short

Engage Your Employees

Be Clear

Strive for Value & Simplicity

Learn From Your Mistakes

Show Up As a Human Being

Plan and Set the Stage

Virtual communication requires a great deal of preparation in advance. First fundamental rule: ask your employees in advance what works the best for them and whether they have any specific needs. This includes asking what format they want to receive materials in, and what they need to participate in the meeting itself. Agenda and meeting guidelines should be sent in advance to all participants. Use large, clear fonts, keep imagery simple and avoid flashy transitions, auto scrolling, and other frills to ensure screen reader compatibility. Utilize layout tools for increased accessibility, strong colour contrast and caption all images.

You should also plan for a successful interaction throughout the meeting (do not leave it to chance), closing, and follow up. Also, prepare your physical space to minimize background noise, ensure your face is well-lit so your facial expressions are perceptible, wear clothing that is not distracting, and minimize disruptions for yourself and others.

HOW TO MAKE YOUR ONLINE MEETINGS ACCESSIBLE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Provide Accommodations

Ask all employees whether they will need an accommodation. If this is your first meeting with an employee, this step can ensure the employee feels heard and valued for their insight. As frequent meetings progress, it is important to check in to ensure that your employees' needs haven't changed, and if further accommodations are necessary. Ensure your Microsoft Teams or other workplace messaging software, mobile messaging, or email notifications are on (and silent) during a meeting in case an employee wants to discuss accessibility barriers during the meeting privately. For more information, please visit Accommodations Tool 2 - Exploring Types of Accommodations

Keep it Short

Time duration online feels much faster, and it is possible to communicate in a few hours what normally takes days to deliver offline! At the same time, it is much harder to maintain everyone's attention. Be conscious and respectful of people's time (and your own): keep your presentations concise, your one-time contributions short (<2 minutes) and avoid getting lost in detail while people silently disengage. Similarly, aim to keep the length of the virtual meeting/session <1 hour. If any longer, ensure adequate breaks are provided.

Engage Your Employees

To keep the attention and energy levels high, aim to embed questions throughout. Remember to use questions to ask for participation, not to make people feel interviewed! Engage in online features such as breakout rooms, chat functions, muting, emojis and raising your hand function to facilitate participation in a positive and efficient way. Provide opportunities for employees to ask anonymous questions via surveys, online chat rooms or individual emails. Some of these features may also be distracting and have barriers for employees with disabilities, so be flexible and ask for feedback on access and functionality.

Be Clear

Define and state the purpose of the meeting/event: Why are we in this video call/event? Are we here to make a decision? Are we here to share progress on a project? What is the focus? Even if in virtual team meetings, support your colleagues to be focused and engaged with the flow and goals. Open with a key issue and why this is important/relevant for the attendees. Gently draw back and redirect the attention back to the purpose of the meeting whenever you notice rambling discussions or getting off topic.

Use headphones and a microphone when possible. Using a headset with a built-in microphone will make it easier to hear what you're saying and to create more accurate captions. It also prevents feedback loops and filters out background noise.

Follow etiquette and speak clearly. Use the "Hands Up" button or other visual cues when you want to speak, and only do so when you are acknowledged; never interrupt. When acknowledged, say who you are and be sure to speak at a normal rate, enunciate clearly, and get straight to the point. Pause for a beat or two between sentences to allow time for translators and captions to catch up and any confusion to be addressed. Video conferencing has made it easier to apply meeting protocols, for example by muting everyone until it's their turn to speak – just be sure the host knows how to use the system and its accessibility features.

Strive for Vaue & Simplicity

Despite how comfortable technology can make organizing meeting and events, less is more. Focus on delivering value and making the best use of everybody's time. Ask yourself: How can I add value? Is this information/feature valuable/useful for all attending? This will also help you shift your mindset from a preoccupation with means and delivery to usefulness for all attendees.

One way to ensure all your employees feel valued is to inquire and accommodate for their needs. This includes:

- Providing an agenda or outline prior to the meeting, which is helpful to ensure understanding of meeting goals/expectations.
- Assuming not everyone who needs captions will request them. Unfortunately, not all employees/participants will inform you of their need for captioning. For example, someone for whom English is a second language will find the captioning helpful to them in comprehending what is being said but may not think to ask for it, or may not think of it as an accommodation.
    - This needs to be available for all meetings. For individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing or English is their second language this is a request that needs to be addressed and offered in all meetings especially in virtual meetings. Regardless of whether meetings are 1:1 or with multiple attendees, real-time or AI captioning is needed to ensure access. Other suggestions include the use of breakout rooms to ensure you make it possible for everyone to successfully participate.

- Chat functionality should be used, where available, to clarify any speaking points, ensure proper spelling of names, or confirm topics that will be discussed, to further ensure nothing is being missed. Ensure the notifications of the chat messages do not block the captioning. One way to do so is move the captions to a different part of the screen.
- Employees who are Deaf or hard of hearing may require sign language interpreters to provide ASL or other sign language interpretation in real time. Ensure ASL interpreters are able to be pinned in each meeting, and live transcript are available. Employees who communicate through Video Relay Services (VRS) or third-party representatives may experience delays between conversations, expect pauses and delays when asking questions. Practice patience and ensure you speak directly to employees and not interpreters.

Learn From Your Mistakes

- Provide ample time to transition between meetings
- Keep the video meetings small and short
- Let employees decide if they want to be on camera

It is preferrable when speaking to turn on camera to ensure lip reading and facial expressions are easily seen.

- Keep the invites to a minimum – packing extra people into a call can extend the time and limit the productivity.

Show Up As a Human Being

Virtual meetings are an opportunity to connect with others. While we are all challenged with being physically distanced, we crave to be socially connected. Bring openness, honesty, and humanness to professional conversations, you will realize that people share similar struggles on the same journey of exploration, and they are more interested in belonging and connecting rather than criticizing and judging.

A good tip is to allow some space for free and casual conversation (even if it just for a couple of minutes at the beginning) to share personal stories and positive anecdotes, and so on. Especially in virtual meetings where connection is harder.

REFERENCES

[1] The Academy of Business in Society (2020). Toolkit for Effective Virtual Communication. https://www.abis-g1oba1.org/b1og/too1kit-for-effective-virtua1-communication