

Tips for working virtually with groups

It's now becoming more common place to work virtually. By this we mean using technology such as telephone conferencing, video conferencing, or internet based applications to have meetings, interviews, coaching sessions, or project updates.

There are a number of ways to work and meet virtually. The main ones are telephone based conference calls, internet bases services such as Skype or interactive platforms such as WebEx. This guide focuses specifically on using Skype and telephone conference calls, however much of what is said applies to other virtual platforms too.

The first thing to say is working virtually is different. It requires people to interact and listen differently because the visual cues aren't present. To help we have included some tips on etiquette to support how you and your fellow attendees communicating effectively.

Skype

For those new to a Skype, Skype is software application (VOIP) that allows you to make voice or video calls over the internet. When calling Skype to Skype there is no charge. You can make calls like you would using your telephone and it also allows you to take part in group calls – perfect for meetings or panel interviews.

If you are invited to take part in a group call here are a few guidelines, tips and musts to consider.

Getting connected before the call – A must!

To make sure people can take part in a group call, the Host (the person instigating the call) needs to contact via Skype with those attending the call. To do this either the Host or attendee must send a contact request. Click on '*Add a contact*' towards the bottom on the left hand side.

A new screen will come up. Type in the other person's name or Skype name and follow the prompts. In order for the Host to dial an attendee in they have to accept the Skype invitation to connect. If you don't the Host can't call that person in.

Check your settings and make sure your sound and microphone or headset is working. Note, on the standard Skype version group calls are audio only. You can't do video. I believe you can have video in the premium version.

Top tip: If you are going to use VOIP regularly we recommend using a headset. Ideally with two ear pieces as it means you can have private conversations, you are less distracted, they reduce background noise and the overall sound quality is better.

On the day of your call

1. Have your Skype open at 5-10 minutes before the start time. This allows time for the software to load and to sort out any technical hitches etc.
2. Shut down other internet applications/email as it can dilute the quality of your connection.
3. If you have a headset, use it. It helps to reduce background noise and is usually clearer
4. If you can, be in a room without background noise such as TV, music or lots of people. If you can't then use your mute button when you're not speaking.
5. Be prepared. Have a drink, pen/paper and ideally print any agenda or paperwork so you aren't swapping between screens.
6. Turn other phones on to silence.

Starting the Call

At the agreed time the Host will dial everyone in. Wait for the ring tone and press the green accept button. You don't need to dial in. As people join the call you'll see their pictures appear on the screen.

A little group call etiquette

- Often people don't know each other so it's very helpful to say our names each time before you speak.
- Only have one person speaking at a time.
- In all groups there are always those who speak up quickly and those who take a little more time. Make space for others to speak and allow them to finish before you start to speak.
- Listen. One of the great things about virtual calls is it can sharpen your ability to really listen.
- As we can't see each other it can be helpful to check in with others. If there are big silences ask what's going on. I could be people are thinking. Equally people may be confused or haven't understood an instruction or question.
- Do what we call 'virtual nodding'. Make those odd 'um', 'aha' sounds so the speaker knows you are still there and listening.
- Don't be tempted to multitask. Your attention will be missed and if you are suddenly asked a question you may find yourself realising you don't know what's being discussed.

Backup

There are often technical hiccups, especially when first getting used to using the technology. If you are the Host include an emergency number for people to call if there is any problem with headsets, getting into the call etc.

The benefits and challenges

Some of the advantages of Skype:

- easy to set up and run
- relatively 'low tech' and familiar
- no distractions of body language
- reduced time away from work
- no travel time and no travel costs
- You can see who's speaking by the blue line that appears around the person's photo
- low/no cost
- you can dial in people into a group call even if they don't have Skype. You can dial them in on a landline or mobile. (The Host needs to have Skype credit to do so)
- the call can host up to 25 people

Disadvantages. Some of the challenges are: lack of eye contact and body language, the need to manage silence and to concentrate harder on listening, ambient noise on the call unless muted when not talking. You can lose or drop your connection.

How to set up a group call on Skype?

1. First invite your participants to connect with you. Send them a contact request, ideally a few days before
2. On the day, create your Group Call. Click on *Contacts* in the top menu, then *Create New Group...* An empty group will appear. Simply go through your contacts and drag across the people who are participating. (If they haven't accepted your request to connect it will tell you so*)
3. Once you have selected them all press the green *Call Group* button. Skype will automatically dial everyone in.
4. If someone isn't on line still add them in. When they come on line Skype will automatically connect them in and their picture will appear. (as if by magic!)

5. To dial in a participant who is on a landline or mobile. Once you have set of the group call click on *Call phones* (again towards the bottom left hand side). A key pad will appear. Dial in the number and press the green call button. You will be asked if you what to include them in the group call. Click yes. You will then hear the dialling tone and when the person answers they are connected to the group call.
6. You are now ready to start your meeting.

*If someone hasn't accepted you can send another request by following the instructions, or quickly send them a text or call telling them to accept. People new to Skype don't always know how or what to do.

Top Tips: It can take 10 minutes to load the software and create the group so start 10 minutes before your call is due to start.

If this group call will become regular you can save it as a group. Click on Save group in Contacts that appears at the top right hand side of your screen.

Conference calls.

There are many conference call providers. Most are very easy to use although and set up. Usually this is done by going to the providers website and following the instructions. Participants are then sent an email with the information of the time, date and phone numbers. The advantages are good sound quality. The Host can control the call such as muting everyone and recording the call. Connections are good so calls don't get dropped.

The main disadvantages are cost. Some of the UK based ones are 5p per minute. Some use premium telephone numbers which are blocked in large organisations.

The big difference between Skype and conference calls is on a conference call the attendees individually dial in, whereas with Skype the host dials the group in.

Pre-meeting set up

If you are responsible to organising the call:

- Communicate with the attendees clearly and well in advance of the session confirming all the details and the call in numbers, plus the dialling in procedure.
- Include an emergency number which should be a different number (probably a mobile) for people to check in if there is any problem with headsets, getting into the call etc.
- Ensure start time is clear and confirmed by all participants
- Ensure everyone has the right technology and practices well before the call. Ideally use headsets that fit comfortably (preferably over both ears, with microphones and a mute button)
- Remind people to come prepared with a drink, papers etc

- If the call is going to be more than 45 mins plan in a break time. If people are not using handsets their arms will need a rest.
- Recommend participants find a quiet room where distractions are minimum

If you are attending:

- And you're doing the call at your work desk let colleagues know you are 'in a phone meeting' so they don't attempt to interrupt you
- Make sure phone batteries will last the call time
- Don't start entering numbers until the prompt has finished speaking

The same etiquette applies to conference calls as to Skype and saying your name when to start to speak is more important as there are no visual cues at all.

Check in

As you can't see each other take time at the beginning to welcome everyone, share the outline for the call and do a check in.

- Don't rush this part - give it time and space. It allows people to settle and introduce themselves
- Use it for the technical and sound checks as well as emotional and physical and intellectual – i.e. all channels. Do encourage people to surface any technical issues early
- Share/ agree or remind the group of any etiquette of groundrules
- Really check that everyone is ready, formally invite them into the space

This is the time for laying out the timings and broad agenda for the session (e.g. how long, when you will take breaks, the review points and/or any options for the use of time etc). There is need for more signposting in the virtual meeting space and a clear view on how the host/ facilitator is going to organise things.

- Encourage discipline – being aware of noise, e.g. shuffling papers around and for set members to say if they are experiencing noise from others or can't hear someone clearly etc
- Be aware of, and flexible about, the need for breaks and offer breaks if energy is dropping - it is tiring listening at this level
- In short breaks, encourage people not to disconnect if possible – this avoids risk of losing time and connections, plus saves connection charges. Just mute and leave the phone off the hook.

Finally you may want to have the following to hand as a reminder

- Do you know where your mute button is?
- Are you prepared with a glass of water / paper and pen, notes, agenda etc?

- Have you got a comfy chair to sit in?
- Are you in a room without external noise and interruptions?
- Have you tried your headset and is it adjusted so it is comfortable and functioning?
- Do you have a clock you can easily see?
- Have you let colleagues know you're in a virtual meeting?