Turning on My Camera: The Virtual Conference

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Online conferences have begun. While many hold out hope that their late summer, fall, or even winter conference will still be held in person, the reality is that across the globe we are all at different stages in terms of our openings, and many are worried about the potential recurrence of what we affectionately call coronavirus or Covid-19. I am very fortunate to have been working at home for many years by now; my desk is set up, my dual monitors firmly in place, and most importantly, there’s a door that separates me from my kids as they distance learn. But in this new environment, many of us are trying to mimic the same activities we had previously enjoyed, including conferences. Online conferences and meetings have their own set of parameters that need to be managed and followed in order for them to flow smoothly.

I’ve attended a few virtual conferences for work and in my town community—even some with my kids—and have a few take-aways on how they’ve been managed.

Technical and IT issues seem to be the number one concern. There are a few tips and tricks we have all learned while using Zoom, Google Meet, and other online tools to share our screens and see each other. Some of us have fun backgrounds, noise canceling headsets, comfy chairs that position us well in front of the camera, and many have had to purchase the higher-end internet package to stay connected.

One important facet to a successful online meeting that I have observed is having a point person who can troubleshoot in real time, keep things on track, and calm the nerves of the speakers and the participants while fixing any issues. Keeping a level head and an upbeat attitude while these issues are occurring seems paramount for managing glitches. We have lost the important component of the AV folks who would come to our rescue when the mic didn’t work or our slides wouldn’t show up. Making sure you have a successful dry run of your online presentation/discussion is vital to the success of any online meeting or workshop.

Participant fatigue is another important component to consider. Recently, I attended a meeting that didn’t start until after lunch, had a couple of breaks in between, and ended at the ‘normal’ end of a working day. This type of a schedule worked well as I was able to get my kids going for the day, cut down the majority of my emails that had come in, eat, and settle in to listen to some talks. This may mean we need to stretch our meetings over a few days, but that really worked better for me in order to balance my home and work life. I would have thought twice about my attendance if it had been a full two days at my computer.

Virtual Happy Hours can be productive social time that we are all craving, but they need to be managed. The meetings I’ve been to have had a sponsor for the happy hour and, more importantly, a moderator who kept things on track and was an important component to these gatherings. For some it’s hard to even turn your camera on at these meetings, so having someone who is completely comfortable and draws out people virtually is helpful in this new medium.

If you’ve been hesitant to sign up for an online meeting due to time constraints or camera fear, try and step outside your comfort zone, this is the time to reinvent yourself on a different stage. You can always turn off the camera if the cat runs across your screen (you’ll most likely always be muted automatically), or if you have to break up a fight between your kids. We are all just trying to get by in this new and different work atmosphere we are in, all while keeping our heads above water and getting our work done. But don’t pass up the opportunities to learn and share with your colleagues—the good and the bad of our current situation may craft the future of what our conferences look like. Moving forward there might be hybrid models available to participants, and we are the pioneers of this new era—embrace it!

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