

Hard Truth: Conference Calls Suck Because You're Lazy

It's not the tech, friend. Here's how to create a better and more inclusive call for everyone — addressing the real costs and who gets heard.

The conference call is designed to bridge communication between distant parties, but this particular technology is so sonically enraging it's a miracle humans haven't given up on talking altogether. Common complaints include: dogs barking, mysterious coughing, unwelcome snacking, and in at least one case, toilet flushing.

'If people were generally considerate, conference calls would be fine,' one respondent opined. 'But let's be honest, generally people are selfish and this translates to terrible conference calls.'

'In a broad sense, people are ultimately kind of lazy,' says Marc Weidenbaum, who consults with companies on acoustic branding. 'They're not lazy in the sense that they don't wanna do anything. Most people are not thinking of other people, and honestly they're not aware. Acoustic literacy is just not something that's taught in schools.'

Zoning Out

Having 'bad conference call hygiene' can deleteriously affect employee focus. Poor sound quality on a call — due to someone using speakerphone, for example — leads to people tuning out. Employees check their emails, answer texts, or do other work they could've been doing in lieu of the meeting. This isn't done out of disrespect: it's because most people don't want to listen to something that sounds terrible.

The Consequences of Sound

The financial implications of conference call gaffes are pretty significant. Losing time in a meeting due to technological difficulties (and thus, lateness) is expensive, especially when a meeting is only about 30 minutes long. That wasted time becomes frustrating for managers paying employees and employees who just want to do that work and go home.

'There's fundamentally a large problem in the abuse of meetings,' says Dr. Julie Gurner, an executive coach. 'Managers forget there are bottom line repercussions as well as productivity drops associated with every person who is being paid for that hour and not able to accomplish their work.'

Who Gets Heard?

Feeling valued is at the crux of the conference call conundrum. This is especially true for certain groups of people, including women and minorities, who already struggle to be heard in the workplace. Research shows that women are overwhelmingly interrupted more than men, and that Black, Latino, Asian, and LGBTQ+ employees experience workplace discrimination in multiple forms. The auditory nuisances of a conference call amplify this feeling of 'not being heard' literally and figuratively.

'Conference calls require people to be more assertive than they may have to be in a real-life meeting,' Gurner said. 'For certain populations who already feel reticent to engage, this can make matters worse.'

Making Lemonade from Cursed Lemons

- Mount sound-absorbing art to office walls to help reduce background noise
- Spend time and money considering the effects of sound in a conference room, not just filling it with expensive gadgets
- Be more discriminating about scheduling meetings and determining who needs to attend
- Let employees know what they'll be asked to speak about ahead of time
- Meetings should be about doing work, not just talking — everyone should feel equally valued
- Use the mute button