

Credit: Shanmuga 7

# 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.



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The conference call is a gangrenous finger on the clammy hand of human achievement.

Designed to bridge communication between distant parties, this particular technology is so sonically enraging it's a miracle humans haven't given up on talking altogether.

[tooltip text=Scientifically]I'm not a scientist.[/tooltip] speaking, conference calls are [tooltip text=bad]Objectively true.[/tooltip]. In a completely unofficial Twitter poll I conducted, every respondent lamented on various aspects of conferencing, most notably attendees not muting themselves. This leads to intrusive background noise including:

- Dogs barking
- Mysterious coughing
- Unwelcome snacking (a nightmare for those with [misophonia](#), myself included)
- And in at least one case, [toilet flushing](#)

There's an entire corpus of online coverage about the pox of conference calls.

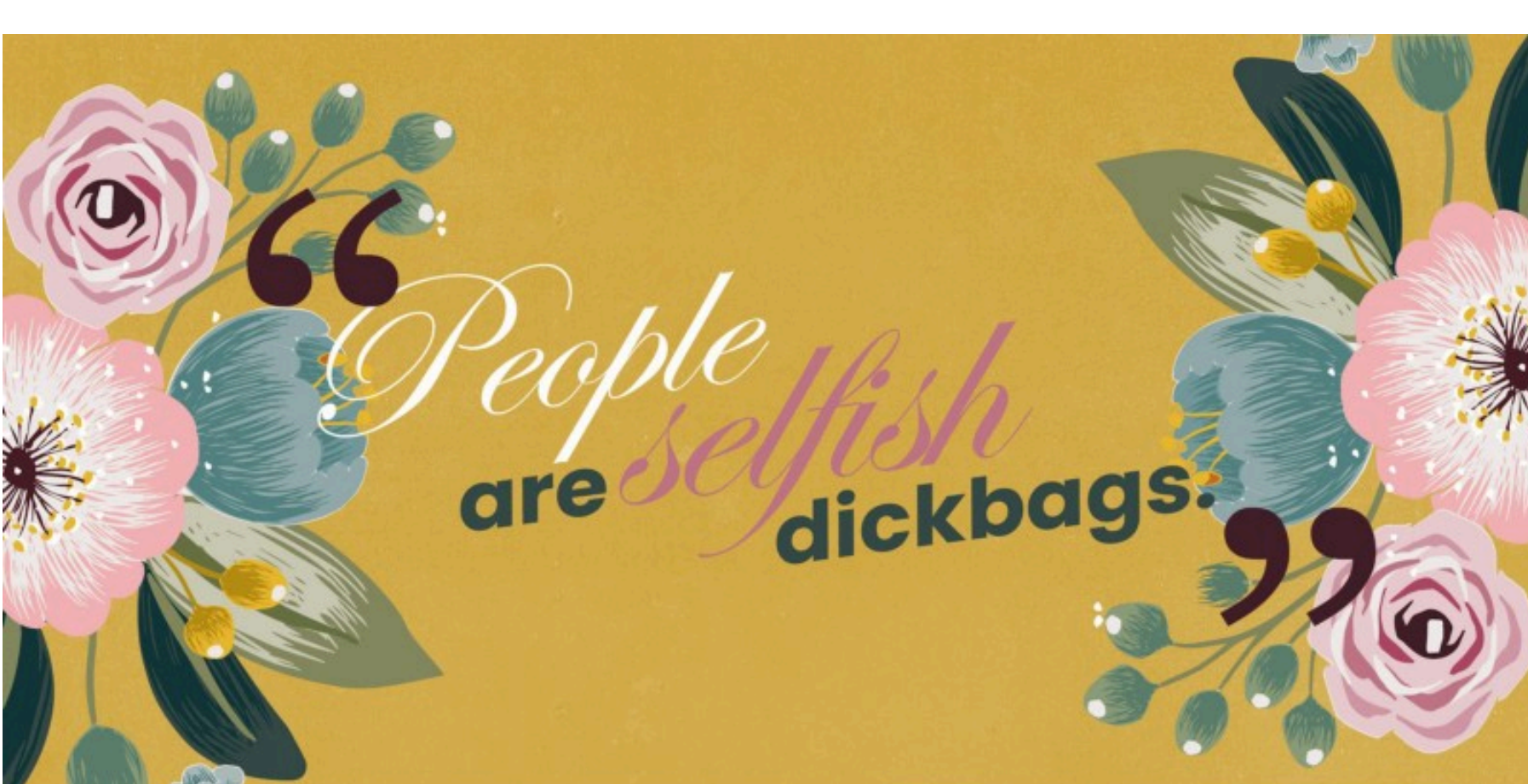
Wanna learn five reasons why web conferencing sucks? There's a [piece for that](#) very specific need. Wanna find five tips to improve conference call audio? We [got that, too](#). The list [goes on, and on, and on](#).

Companies that make video conferencing systems love to take jabs at conference call audio quality, which is funny but not entirely fair. Video adds a [whole other dimension of problems](#) to a meeting, like frozen screens and pixelated participants.

"If people were generally considerate, [conference calls] would be fine," one respondent to my twitter poll opined. "But let's be honest, generally people are selfish dickbags and this translates to terrible conference calls."

Experts? They agree.

"In a broad sense, people are ultimately kind of lazy," [Disquiet](#) founder Marc Weidenbaum, who consults with companies on their acoustic branding, told me. "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."



Joanna Walters

## Zoning out

Having "bad conference call hygiene" can deleteriously affect employee focus, Weidenbaum explained. 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 even done out of disrespect: it's because most people don't want to listen to something that sounds like a marching band leader humming "Yankee Doodle Dandy" through a traffic cone in the bottom of the Mariana Trench.

## The consequences of sound

While these concerns might sound like mild annoyances, 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 to do work and employees who, well, just want to do that work and go home.

"There's fundamentally a large problem in the abuse of meetings," Dr. Julie Gurner, an executive coach with a doctorate in psychology, told me. "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."



Nata Schepy in NVOI

## 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 than a real-life meeting," Gurner said. "It requires another level of assertiveness and for certain populations who already feel reticent to engage, this can make matters worse."

Anecdotaly, employees experience this all the time on conference calls: a lot of people talking — usually at once — and not many listening.

"It's ironic because these technologies meant to connect us actually create divisions," Weidenbaum said.

## Making lemonade from cursed lemons

Believe it or not, there are actionable things you and your team can do to make conference calls suck marginally less for everyone involved.

For one thing, Weidenbaum recommends mounting [sound-absorbing art](#) to office walls, which can help reduce background noise.

"One company I worked with had an office where the art on the walls were actually soft sculptures intended to absorb sound," he said. "All these things that looked like paintings were on top of cushions, so they just didn't look like normal sound buffers."

To that point, businesses should spend more time and money considering the effects of sound in a conference room, not just filling it with unreliable and expensive gadgets.

"Companies will spend so much money on [conferencing] technology but not in the acoustics of the room where a call takes place," Weidenbaum said. "Usually these rooms have a lot of glass and reflective surfaces, and then people are confused why their \$10,000 speaker system doesn't work. It's because they're spending money in the wrong place."

Above all, managers can — and should — be more discriminating about scheduling meetings and determining who needs to attend them. Letting employees know what they'll be asked to speak about ahead of time can make for a more productive conversation.

"Meetings shouldn't be about just talking — they should be about doing work," Gurner told me. "If you're asked to attend a meeting, employees should be told in advance they'll be invited to speak about something specific. This way no one is struggling to find something to say and everyone feels equally valued."

My personal advice? Take your expensive conferencing system, throw it in the trash and light it on fire. Carrier pigeons all the way (or just Slack me next time).

But if you absolutely must circle back/sync/regroup with your team, maybe just use the mute button.

*Marc Weidenbaum publishes a weekly email newsletter that explores the ever-changing role of sound in everyday life, called [This Week in Sound](#), and it's at [tinyletter.com/disquiet](#). You can check out Dr Julie Gurner's podcast about success on [Slate](#) [here](#).*



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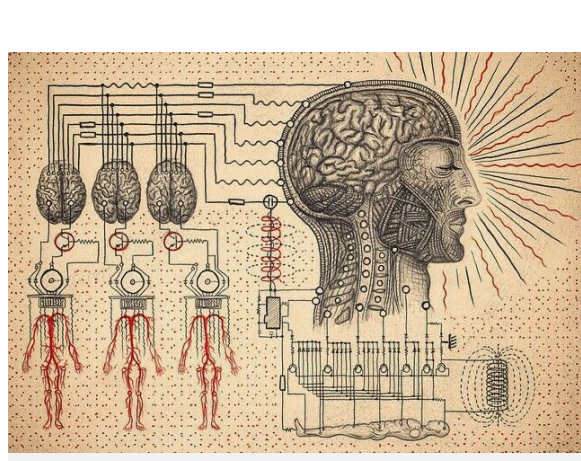
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