

6 MEETINGS VIA CONFERENCE CALL AND VIDEO CALL

6.1 Preparing for the call

If you are a participant, you will vastly improve the success of the conference call if you prepare for it in advance in the same way as you would for any meeting (face to face or remote) – see Chapter 2 to learn how.

If you are responsible for the conference call:

- plan ahead so as to allow participants time to prepare what they want to see
- email information in advance – agenda, papers, background info
- emphasize the importance of participants calling in on time

The email you send announcing the call could be based on something similar to the one below.

We will resume our weekly conference call on Mondays commencing on November 30 at 10:00 EST. The call information will be distributed early next week.

The purpose of the first meeting is to ...

Please let me know if you have any issues or concerns.

6.2 Knowing how the call functions and the difficulties involved

Some conferences calls are arranged so that each participant is telephoned by an operator or secretary. When you are called, the operator will ask you to 'hold the line', which means you wait until all the participants are online.

As people join the call there is generally a beep sound. As you join, introduce yourself:

Hi, this is Praveen. Who's on the call?

Hi Praveen, this is Karthik. We are just waiting for Olga, Milos, Yohannes and Pei Lin.

In audio conference calls you cannot see the other participants. It will help you if you can at least 'picture' them. So if you have not met them before, try to find photographs of them: these will also indicate whether the person is male or female (you may not be able to understand this from their name).

When you are speaking, you still have to try to convey all the information that would be in your body language if this was a face to face meeting. You can do this through a combination of words and tone of voice. For example, instead of nodding in agreement you can say *I see, yes, OK, right*, and instead of beckoning someone to speak using your hands, you can say "Milos, I think you have something you might like to add".

6.3 Being a moderator

The moderator's role is to chair and facilitate the success of the meeting.

When the call starts your first job is to check who is present by checking names.

If people don't know each other, take time for a brief introduction – it can be hard talking to faceless strangers.

It is generally best not to wait for latercomers. Move on, and when they do call in, make them wait for a gap in the conversation before recapping for them.

Run through any ground rules, for example it may be helpful if people always identify themselves by name before speaking.

Ensure that everyone is clear what the purpose of the meeting is and what all the items on the agenda are.

Try to avoid throwing questions or discussions out to the group as a whole – always direct them at individuals in turn. Otherwise, people may all talk at once, and make it impossible to hear properly.

Check periodically that people haven't got lost by directing a question or comment to them.

Take notes (or allocate someone to do so) immediately from the start of the meeting, you can then use these notes to write a summary to email to participants after the meeting.

6.4 Checking the sound quality

If you are the moderator (*italics in the dialog below*) it is a good idea to check that no one is having any technical difficulties.

Is everyone picking up all right?

This is Milos. I can hear you fine.

This is Olga. I can't hear what you're saying – there's a high-pitched noise going on.

Is that any better?

That's fine now.

Are you on speaker phone Karthik, because everything is echoing.

Yes, I am. I'll try turning it off. Is that any better?

6.5 Establishing ground rules

It is essential to set some rules at the beginning of the call. Unlike a face-to-face discussion with multiple participants, in a conference call people cannot use body language to indicate that they wish to interrupt. This means that rules need to be made with regard to turn taking and also to avoid several people speaking at the same time. For example, if you are the moderator you could say:

OK everyone is here now. First could I ask you all to introduce yourselves? Just your name and department will be enough. *everyone introduces themselves* We have a couple of people on the call who are not native speakers. If this call is to be successful, we need the native speakers to speak as clearly as possible. If anyone isn't sure about something please feel free to request for the information to be repeated or clarified. Also, can I just remind you all to say your name when you speak. At least the first few times. And if you ask a question, try and direct it to someone in particular.

If the moderator makes no reference to the difficulties of the non-native speakers, then it is a good idea for you to mention it immediately. For example you could say:

Speaking on behalf of the non native speakers, I would really appreciate it if you could all speak very slowly and clearly.

6.6 Using chat facilities

Particular when there is a mix of native and non-native English speakers, using the chat facility to send messages can help resolve many difficulties. If you need to receive or make a clarification via chat, you can say:

Sorry, I am not too clear about what Praveen said. Could you write it down for me?

Can we just stop a second, while I write down the names of the products for you?

Would it be OK to pause for a second and just use the chat? I think it might help us to clarify things.

6.7 Tuning in

Understanding someone on the telephone can be hard, particularly if it is the first time that you have heard that person's voice. So it is useful to dedicate a minute or two to small talk, so that everyone can get used to the sound of each other's voices. Banal questions can be used:

So Praveen, what's the weather like in Bangalore?

Olga, how did the conference go?

Here it is pouring with rain, what's it like with you?

Milos, what time is it with you?

Karthik, how was your holiday?

Yohannes, how are things going in Ethiopia?

6.8 Reminding participants about the agenda and ensuring they have all the documents required

Conference calls are often arranged at quite short notice. It is always a good idea to announce the goal of the meeting and the agenda. So the moderator could say:

The goal of this call is to discuss ...

Well, I think you know the agenda. First Yohannes is going to tell us about how much funding we can expect. Then Olga is going to talk about where we are with the draft of the proposal. And finally Praveen will update us on ...

Conference calls often involve looking at documents, so the moderator should check that everyone received them and has them to hand.

Did you all get the files I sent you last night?

Do you all have a copy of the agenda?

Have you all got the presentation open at slide 1?

Do you all have the document in front of you?

If you are not sure what is being referred to you can say:

Sorry what presentation are you talking about?

Sorry, but I am not sure I received the document.

6.9 Beginning the meeting

If you are the moderator, ensure that you make a clear verbal signal to show that you wish the meeting to start. And clearly say who you wish to begin talking.

OK, let's begin.

Right. If you are all ready I'll begin.

OK. Yohannes do you want to start?

If you are called on to start, and you think that someone else should start, then you can say:

No you go first Olga.

No, I think Karthik should probably start.

6.10 Dealing with latecomers

Below is an example of what procedure could be followed if someone joins the call when the main discussion has already begun.

Hi, Pei Lin here. Sorry I am late.

Hi Pei Lin, could you wait a second. Then I'll recap everything for you. *Moderator finishes conversation with the others* OK, Pei Lin, just to summarize what we have discussed so far. *Moderator makes a summary* I think that's everything, do any of you have anything to add?

Thanks. Sorry about being late, but for some reason I couldn't get a connection. Just before we continue, could the others just introduce themselves so that I can recognize their voices.

6.11 Ensuring you are clear when you are taking participants through a presentation or document

If you are in a teleconference rather than a video conference, it can be quite difficult for people to follow your explanations of presentations and documents. Thus you need to clearly state what slide you are on and what part of the slide you are talking about, or what page / section / line of a document you are referring to.

So, I am going to move on to the next slide now, which is slide 12.

So, we are on slide 12 now. I'd like you to focus on the figure at the top left. The one that says 'functionality'.

Can we just go back to the top of page 20.

OK, so is everyone on page 40? The middle of the page where it says 'How to set up version 2'.

6.12 Admitting that you are having difficulty following the conversation

Given the fact that there are multiple participants, it is easy to get 'lost'. This may or may not have anything to do with the fact the call is being held in English. In any case, it is always a good idea to interrupt.

Sorry, I am not sure who is talking. Can I suggest that everyone announces who they are before they speak?

This is Olga again. I'm sorry but it's hard to understand two people talking at once.

Sorry, but the line isn't great at my end, could you all speak about more slowly?

Sorry, what slide are we up to?

Sorry, what page are we on now?

Sorry, I am not sure which figure you are talking about.

6.13 Concluding the call

Typical things that people say to signal that the conference call is over include:

I think we've covered everything, so let's finish here.

Right, I think that just about finishes it.

This is a good point to end the meeting.

Yohannes mentioned that he needs to stop at 11.45, so I think we should conclude here.

OK, I've said all I want to say, so unless any of you have anything to add, I think we can stop here.

Has anyone else got anything they want to add?

It is a good policy to tell people what you are going to do next, and what you expect them to do next.

I have taken a few notes, and I will email everyone with a summary of what we have decided. If I miss anything out, then please let me know.

I'll get the minutes of this sent out to you. Praveen, if you could send in the draft proposal for funds that would be great.

Final remarks:

Thanks everyone for making this call, particularly you Karthik, it must be in the middle of the night for you!

Thanks for your time everyone.

Bye everyone.

See you next week.

6.14 Videoconferences

Most of the above subsections are also valid for videoconferences. The main difference is obviously that you can see the other participants, so there is no need to introduce yourself every time you speak. Also, if the video quality is good you can make eye contact and you can see the reactions of the other participants.

So the only extra phrases you might need are:

Can everyone see OK?

How is the sound quality for you guys?

Can you see the slides OK? Do you want me to make them bigger?

Note that if the video quality is poor it may seem that your remote interlocutor is avoiding eye contact with you, but obviously this may not be the case.

6.15 Skype calls

Skype can be used for videoconferencing. Bear in mind that:

- whether participants will be able to use the video option may depend on the number of participants and how good the internet cable is
- sound quality may vary considerably from one participant to another – again this may depend on the line, but also on their PC, and how they are positioned in front of their PC

Given the above two points, it generally makes sense to have a sound / video quality control check before you begin the actual meeting. Typical phrases you may need are:

Vishna, your voice isn't very loud, could you turn the volume up or sit nearer the microphone.

Neervena, I can't see you very clearly – can you see me?

I think we might be able to improve the sound quality if we turn the video off.

OK, given that we have the video off, could I ask each of you to announce who you are before you say something [this will only apply when there are many participants who don't know each other].

A major advantage of Skype is that you can send written messages to each other while you are speaking. So you can exploit this option if you are having difficulty understanding someone's English or when you need to clarify something that you are saying. You can say:

Sorry, I am having some trouble understanding. Do you think you could just type the name of the product / website / document?

Sorry, I am having difficulty saying the word. I am just going to type it for you.

For more on audio and conference calls, see Chapters 11 and 12 in the companion volume: *Presentations, Demos and Training Sessions*.