The microskills™ Guide to

VIDEOCONFERENCING

microskills™ is a division of the Tim Russell Group

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The microskills™ Guide to: VIDEOCONFERENCING

The best videoconferences combine your top teleconferencing and meetings skills with your most effective presentation skills. This guide highlights the main points that will contribute to your success.

The most common forms of videoconference that you are involved in are:

Videoconference studio	when you use a dedicated studio and you go to the equipment
Rollabouts	when the complete system is brought in a trolley for use in a regular office so the equipment comes to you
Webcam	when you use a video camera attached to your personal computer and the PC screen acts as the TV screen as well
Videophones	when the camera and TV screen are attached to a desktop telephone
Data as well	all of these can be supported by sending simultaneous data or graphics by a document camera, by e-mail or by fax. Video segments can also be inserted into the live videoconference
Point to point	when only two locations are connected
Multipoint	when more than two locations are involved. Obviously, each location needs to have compatible equipment.

There can be multiple cameras and sound sources. Cameras can be activated manually or remotely or be voice activated automatically according to who is speaking.

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when to videoconference
(and when not to!)

Videoconferencing is more than just teleconferencing with pictures.

The **main advantages** of videoconferencing are:
- to put a 'face to the name and to the voice'
- to let people meet 'face to face' more often
- to speed up decision making
- to get a more complete picture of the person and their ideas than just through their voice
- to enable people to see each others' reactions
- to enable people to work on a joint issue together
- to maintain a closer relationship than with teleconferencing
- to be able to see the person and their surroundings
- to see objects for discussion
- to be able to collaborate on shared documents and data
- to see things that would normally be inaccessible
- to video record meetings for later use
- to share knowledge
- to reinforce corporate values
- to make presentations remotely

as well as the same advantages of teleconferencing:
- to replace regular or routine meetings
- to distribute information fast when time is of the essence
- to get information fast
- to reduce time spent travelling and so improve people's quality of life
- to keep people in touch, if they are away a lot
- to maintain contact among colleagues who know each other well
- to save costs of time, travel and accommodation
- to replace a repetitive meeting when you might have to discuss the same issues with several different people

Try a videoconference if your next physical meeting has over an hour's travelling.

Videoconferencing is **not so good**:
- for discussing sensitive or delicate issues
- for detailed negotiations
- for replacing all face to face meetings.

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setting it all up

As with most things, **preparation** is all important.

Ensure there is a **facilitator** or leader who will co-ordinate the preparation and the running of the videoconference. If it is to be you and you have never taken part in a videoconference before, invite yourself along to somebody else's so that you can see what is involved.

Book the equipment and times and advise all participants.

Make sure that there is a TV monitor for the facilitator to **view the pictures going out** as well as those coming in.

The **more monitors** and roving microphones the better.

Have a VCR for recording the videoconference or for playing video clips.

Get a **document camera** if there are small objects or papers to be seen.

A **dedicated telephone with a light flasher** rather than a ringer enables calls to be taken without disturbing the videoconference.

Get the **surroundings** as close to a physical meeting as possible.

Sort out the **seating arrangement**. A U-shape or board table with the camera at the front is probably best. Then the camera can pick up every participant and the people in the same room can see each other, too.

Decide any **visual aids** you might need. Flip charts are better than whiteboards as they will not show reflections or any glare from lighting. Ensure that there is a camera that can see the flip chart as well. Make sure that felt tip pens to be used are in camera friendly colours. Dark blue ink on yellow paper works well.

Have a **technician's contact number** in case you get stuck.

Have a **contingency plan** in case it all falls to pieces!

before the videoconference

Send out an **agenda** of what is to be discussed and what is expected of the participants.

Distribute any **relevant materials** (charts, reports, spreadsheets) in advance to everybody who is to be connected.

Encourage people to prepare their **detailed questions and comments**.

If participants do not know each other, send out some brief **biographical details** of the participants, indicating what they have to offer and why they have been invited to attend.

Advise people to give some thought to the **colours and patterns** they will wear.   They should **avoid stripes and zigzag** patterns; **wear solid colours** rather than complex patterns; **avoid white** (it can make people look washed out); **prefer pastel shades with a contrasting colour.**

Get there early to set up the logistics and to ensure that everything is in perfect working order.

If it is relevant, **decide who will sit where** and put out name cards.

Make sure everyone will have **paper and pens**.

Have water available for participants. Talking can be thirsty work. Best not to have tea or coffee as it can be distracting serving it.

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at the beginning

Videoconferences run better if all the participants are **warmed up.** Ask people to arrive a few minutes early to settle themselves down and have some informal chat.

Allow people to **see themselves on camera**.

Let them **experiment/play with the equipment.**

Shut the door of the room before you start and ensure there will be **no interruptions**.

Agree when to have **split** and when to have **whole screen** images. Changing occasionally will maintain viewers' attention. If a speaker is also referring to written material at the same time, split screen is ideal.

The **tone of voice** and **facial expression** of the facilitator at the very beginning will set the atmosphere for the whole videoconference. This is something that the facilitator might want to practise, rehearse and get feedback on.

Don't be too serious. The best videoconferences are enjoyable as well as purposeful.

Ask everyone to **introduce** themselves briefly.

Establish some **ground rules** for how you are going to operate. These might include:
- only one person speaking at a time
- specifying any particular person who might be addressed
- no one dominating the discussion.

The facilitator should suggest a **modus operandi**, how each item on the agenda is to be tackled, whether there will be a brief presentation first and then questions or whatever method seems most appropriate.

Summarise the **purpose** of the meeting and remind people of the agenda. If no agenda has previously been circulated, put one together quickly!

Check that everyone has received the previously sent **background information**.

Switch on any computers that might be used and inform all parties who has access to what.

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during the videoconference

Try to **stick to the ground rules**. The facilitator might need to reinforce some of the disciplines of videoconferencing occasionally.

Position yourself on-camera according to the **elbows and wrists rule**: when you stretch your arms outwards, the edge of the screen should fall between your elbows and your wrists. Check occasionally that you are maintaining on-camera positioning.

Look directly into the camera as if into the other people's eyes. Think of the camera as a person you are talking to.

Check with the viewers if there is a distracting **reflection on anybody's glasses**.

Maintain **eye contact** and speak in a **strong clear voice**.

Don't worry if the **voices seem out of sync.** with the pictures. They usually do.

Move in a fluid, non-distracting way, gesture normally; don't sway, rock or pace..

When using a **webcam, don't move too much** or you'll disappear from the other person's screen. Tape your movement parameters. But don't stay frozen or they'll think you've died!

Use **close-ups shots** judiciously. It is important that participants see the speaker's facial expressions, but the camera is very sensitive to movement and will exaggerate blinking eyes, moving hands or shifting in chairs.

Use **group shots** when appropriate and make sure the camera's line of sight is not obstructed.

Make the session **interactive** to maintain interest beyond talking heads.

Use **big writing on flip charts**. Use bullet points and simple fonts. Keep it concise.

Use **colours in the middle range**; blue on yellow, black print and bold colour ink on pastel paper. Minimise reds and greens.

Ensure plenty of time for the **slower reader** to read text.

Show only **very short pre-recorded video segments** as long ones will be jerky.

Personalise by **using names and location**. This stops people lapsing into passivity - they might otherwise think they are watching broadcast TV.

Speak slowly and double your usual pausing time to cover delays caused by transmission compression.

Repeat each question or comment ensuring all sites can hear.

Describe any changes that are taking place, particularly if anyone joins or leaves the group. Explain any noises or movements that happen during the videoconference.

The facilitator will need to **maintain the momentum** of the videoconference to avoid any embarrassing silences. If there are silences, the facilitator should be the first to fill them. A **recap of progress** so far might be appropriate.

The facilitator should **bring in people by name**. You will know why they are there and what they have to contribute.

Ask the other participants for content feedback on the topic being discussed.

Also **ask for process feedback** on how the videoconference is proceeding.

Give feedback yourself on the content.   And also on the process and what might help the videoconference to run more easily.

Every ten minutes or so, **have a change or break** - a new topic or a feedback review.

Make sure someone is **taking notes** of what has been discussed and agreed.

Do a **final recap** of who will do what and by when.

Finish the videoconference with a short period of thanks and **team congratulations**. This will smooth the way for the next time.

after the videoconference

Evaluate what went well, what was learned about videoconferencing and what could be improved next time.

Calculate how much each participant has saved in time and money.

Shout about your successes and encourage more people to videoconference.