

GETTING READY FOR ONLINE MEETINGS

Your posture

While your posture need not be perfect during meetings, make sure you consciously choose how you attend them:

- You can sit at your desk, upright, in full professional mode.
- You can have the meeting from your sofa, because you need a break from your desk.
- You can stand because you feel you need energy, or because you have been sitting down all day and need to stretch your legs.

Self-awareness

There is a faster (and psychologically safer) way of accessing emotions: altering your posture or changing how you use your body.

Study shows that slumping at the computer can result in feeling less confident about your abilities as a worker; another concluded that holding a pen between your nose and mouth (which engages the muscles involved in smiling) can make you feel happier; and finally, making a fist with your hand can increase self-esteem.

Self-awareness helps you avoid unnecessary tension in your body. Sitting in the same posture in front of a computer, while listening attentively to others, can cause tension in the neck, shoulders, lower back, thighs and jaw. If you are not aware of your muscles tensing up, this can result in a build-up of tension which might cause pain in the future.

Moreover, slumping in a chair can affect how we breathe. The centre of our breathing lies around our belly, with our diaphragm contracting and relaxing to change the air pressure in our lungs. A slumped posture can put pressure on that area, restricting its movement and affecting the quality of our breathing, however slightly.

Your body produces your voice

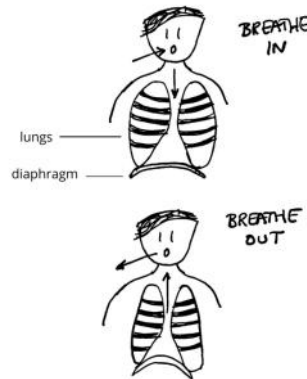
Adam@Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

UK +44(0)7779714387

NZ +64(0)273483144

How you sit or stand affects the energy and tone that your voice carries. This means that even if you are attending an audio-only meeting, you still need to monitor what your body is doing. Slumping can remove energy from your voice (as it affects your breathing), and you might be perceived as disinterested or uncaring rather than relaxed.



Adjustable desks

If you have been working at a computer for a while before you start a meeting, why not put a couple of books or a box under your monitor, to change the height of your eyeline? Adjusting your posture might prevent that extra bit of stiffness from creeping up; and if you can stand, you could consider working at an adjustable desk.

Meetings are the perfect moment to use a standing desk. You are unlikely to be using your keyboard and mouse as much as during regular work, so you can be more physically free.

In the context of modern knowledge work, where we spend so much time sitting down in front of a computer, meetings seem an ideal moment to change your posture, stretch your back and be a bit more mobile. On the flip side, there also have been articles warning of the dangers of standing desks, and articles challenging those studies. At the end of the day, you need to monitor what is best for you.

Go wireless

Adam@Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

UK +44(0)7779714387

NZ +64(0)273483144

A wireless headset also allows you to grab anything from your desk (or from under it!) during the meeting, without jolting your head by being attached via a cable to your computer. Plus you are less likely to keep your head in the same position, and risk tensing up your shoulders and neck.

The dangers of working from anywhere

If you decide to attend a meeting on the move, just pop a message in the chat box saying that you will be of-camera for five minutes. Turn your camera off, stick your phone in your pocket or your bag, and switch the video back on when you have settled down.

If you are sharing text on the screen, those attending from a smartphone will have difficulty reading it. Plus if you are all working on a shared document and you want to add something to it during the meeting, it's fiddly to do that from a phone.

If you are planning a project or event, analysing data or creating documents, it's more practical to be sitting in front of a computer where you can easily pull up documents and edit them, accelerating your workflow.

Furthermore, if we are sitting comfortably on our sofa with our laptop, or walking in the street, holding our mobile phone in front of us, we are likely to let the person leading the meeting (who will most likely be at their desk) take responsibility for making notes, sharing data, updating documents, etc.

Take breaks

Attending an online meeting can be more tiring than being present at a colocated one. If your meeting is long, take a break. But if you need to be concentrating for the whole session and you are looking through documents on your computer at the same time, you might want to step away from your screen after an hour.

During breaks, avoid doing anything that involves a screen. Try to rest your eyes, and move your body to combat stiffness. Resist the temptation to go over to your mobile or carry out any other activity at your computer. Instead, find a window you can look out of, or if you are in an office space, find a large space to look across.

If during the meeting you feel you have been staring at the screen for long but it's not the right moment to suggest a break, rest your eyes. Place a short message in the chat to alert people you are still with them and listening, and close your eyes. You might even want to switch your webcam off.

Don't forget to have some water or other drink available –but remember that if you are wearing a headset with a microphone next to your throat, you might want to mute yourself as you drink. And if you need to snack during the meeting, don't forget to turn off your microphone. If your table manners are dodgy, turn your video off too!

CHANGING YOUR SPACE AND FOCUS

Taking a break away from your environment before attending your meeting, switches your focus. If you are working from home, stop your other work 10 minutes earlier and take a 'comfort break'. If you are in an office and can use a different room, do so; or a few minutes before the meeting, close down those applications you won't need at the meeting, take a break away from your desk and when you return, go straight into the meeting. If you are working from a coworking space, look for an area in a different part of the venue. (If you are about to join a new co-working space, find one that has meeting booths or chairs.)

Sometimes, a little ritual might help to get you in the mood for the meeting. Plugging in your headset, getting your webcam ready, changing the height of your desk, shifting from sitting to standing.

Tools and multiple windows

Just as you would gather your notebook and papers for a colocated meeting, make sure you have everything you need when you turn up online:

- Have you got somewhere to take notes?
- Are all the documents that team members will be using during the meeting open and ready?
- If your meeting agenda or points of conversation are out in an online tool or document, is that handy?
- Can you see all the windows you will need during the meeting?

Figure out what you need to be fully present. Make a note of what helps you be at your best, and make the time to be totally ready before you meet your team.

SMALL HABITS AMPLIFIED

Once you get used to meeting online and are comfortable in front of the camera, you will become less self-conscious. That is a good place to be: staying focused on the conversation and other people, instead of thinking of how we are coming across; but this doesn't mean that we should stop being self-aware.

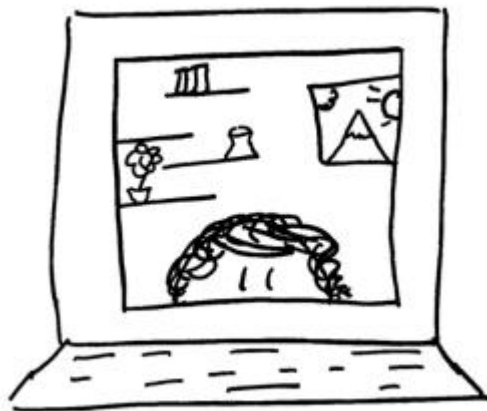
- Do you have any small habits that might get in the way of communicating with others?
- Anything that might distract them from listening or talking to you?

Regularly attending video meetings might just be the experience you need to notice those habits that can get in the way of forming a strong connection with others.

SHOWING YOUR BEST SELF

Webcam position

Before you enter a meeting, check your webcam position. Check that the lens is not pointing straight up your nose, for example, and that others can see your face clearly. If you can, have the whole upper half of your body visible, so that when you use your hands, they come into view. (This can be difficult to do, but it's worth a try.)



If you are using two monitors, place your webcam and everyone else's video stream on the same monitor. In this way, when you look at everyone else you will end up facing the camera. There might be times when you are sharing a screen on your second monitor, and your attention needs to be on your work rather than on your team members – don't worry about that. Breaking that intense feeling of being watched, due to everyone looking in the same direction all the time, can be a good thing. But in general terms, facing the camera helps you to maintain a sense of conversation and connection.

Looking into the camera

One of the things we miss when talking to others online is eye contact. One quick way of faking this is looking at the camera, so that the other person feels like you are looking directly at them.

We know that the experience of talking to others over video is different to sharing the same physical space. Hopefully you and your team members can find a different way of connecting that doesn't involve a simulation of eye contact. You can find out what works for you only through experimentation.

Mirror, mirror, on the wall...

There are advantages to seeing yourself on the screen beyond checking whether you have spinach between your teeth. You can:

- Monitor your facial expressions – for example, to check that you are not inadvertently showing confusion
- Check that your appearance isn't distracting others – for example, when your hair suddenly starts covering your face
- Adjust your camera or turn on the feature that blurs your background, if unexpected distractions start happening behind you

However, once you have checked that your lighting is OK and that your background is not distracting everyone else, consider switching of your own video stream, and turning your full attention to the other person.

It is worth thinking about how seeing ourselves on the screen can affect the way in which we engage with others. Furthermore, one of the reasons why people resist switching on their webcam during meetings is because they don't like seeing themselves on-screen. Using a tool that enables you to 'hide yourself' (even if that tool is a sticky note), can give video meetings a chance.

BEHIND YOU!

Our background is part of our set-up: we need to pay attention to it, and look at the ways that we would prefer it not to affect our meetings. If you have a distracting background (if you are in a busy office or co-working space) or if you prefer not to invite team members into your home, make some changes to your surroundings.

If you are attending meetings from a busy office, there might not be much you can do to change your background. If you are stuck at your desk, where there is a lot of 'people traffic', point your webcam at an area where there is not much movement.

Adam@Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

UK +44(0)7779714387

NZ +64(0)273483144

When you use a meeting room, try to sit with your back to a wall rather than a glass partition – unless you want those in the meeting to feel like part of your office environment, in which case, make sure they can see your office. As you can see, how you operate depends on what you want to achieve. There is no best practice around this.

Blurring your background

This means that you can get rid of any distractions behind you, without having to worry about finding a quiet space. It also allows you to hold your meetings at home without worrying about the state of your room, or putting up a screen.

Application like Zoom will allow you to choose cool backgrounds, some of which you can create in Canva.com.

MASTERING THE TECH

And so it goes on. Ten minutes into the meeting, and we are still waiting for everyone to be ready to start. Always turn up at least 10 minutes early so you have time to use the toilet, ask for some water and do whatever I need to do to be in front of the microphone and ready to go, right on the hour.

Building your competence

There is no way around it. When working in a remote team, you need to master the technology and be comfortable using devices. You cannot let poor use of technology get in the way of effective communication.

As you get used to meeting online, you will probably adjust your set-up. You might discover that you want to do other things during the meeting in addition to talking and listening, for example:

- Share links to documents or videos
- Share your screen so that others can see what you are working on
- Refer to your calendar often
- Insert tasks into your project management tool as the discussion progresses

If you decide to incorporate a range of online tools or applications into your meetings, consider using more than one device or screen.

Adam@Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

UK +44(0)7779714387

NZ +64(0)273483144

More than one thing at a time

As you become more familiar with your tech, you will feel more comfortable carrying out small tasks during the meeting, such as taking notes, adding notes to your calendar, updating task cards in your project management tool, etc.

However, carrying out different tasks while conversing can become distracting or counter-productive, so it's worth being aware of when you lose focus.

Some red flags to look out for:

- You realise that you haven't heard what has just been said.
- You ask questions that have been asked already, and answered!
- Team members tell you, "Yes, we've already discussed that."

Use the mute button wisely

Keeping your microphone open means that it is easier to keep communication flowing, as communication is not just made up of sentences, but also of the odd 'Hmm', 'Er...' and spontaneous laughter.

However, keeping our microphone open can interfere with communication if we are making sounds of which we are not aware. Tapping your foot against your desk or clicking your pen can distract your teammates. If you are taking notes on your computer, know that the sound of your typing might go straight into someone's ears, which can be seriously distracting. Learning how to use your microphone, and how to mute it and unmute it quickly, is a skill worth mastering.

If you are using a headset, make sure your microphone is not too close to your nostrils and mouth, especially if you have a cold, as sounds from your nose will travel down the line. Similarly, if you are using the microphone on your laptop, be aware that your fan can kick into action and cause distracting background noise.

If you are in a quiet environment, using the inbuilt microphone for your computer and standing at an adjustable desk, avoid facing away from the microphone as you will become quiet to others.

The headphone-microphone combination

Adam@Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

UK +44(0)7779714387

NZ +64(0)273483144

Some people prefer to dispense with headphones completely and listen through their computer's audio or external speakers. While listening through external speakers can cause problems (such as other people's voices echoing), I have seen plenty of people attend meetings using their laptop's speakers without it affecting the conversation. There are also portable audio conference devices, which can give you decent audio without headphones.

Experiment with your audio until you find the set-up that suits you best.

INTERNET CONNECTION PROBLEMS

It's the stability of our internet connection. Do not underestimate that. Hopefully at some point, some of you will read this and say: "Broadband speeds? Unreliable WiFi? That's so 2020!"

Meanwhile, if you still live in a world of variable internet speeds, you need to have a contingency plan for when meetings are disrupted by choppy connections. Especially if you are working in places that you have not worked from before (for example, a new café or on the road), you and your team will want to check your connections using an online broadband speed test (just search online for 'check internet speed').

Once you are in the meeting, if you are having connectivity issues, assess whether you are all having problems or if it just one person's connection that is giving you grief. In either case, you might want to begin by switching off your video.

If you experience echo or audio delays, speak slower and in shorter sentences, so it's easier for the conversation to move backwards and forwards.

It was all going so well...

You might be about to wrap up a meeting when the broadband starts playing up. In that case, pause the conversation, acknowledge that there are technical problems, and that you will need to ask a speaker to repeat what they have said, if their speech becomes choppy or unintelligible. Everyone should be comfortable slowing down the conversation to make sure you can all still understand each other.

Adam@Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

UK +44(0)7779714387

NZ +64(0)273483144

Remind individuals that they can switch to the chat if the connection is breaking down at their end. Finally, slow down your own speech, and expect interruptions, as there will be delays.

Sometimes it is not your team members' internet connections that fail, but the platform you are using. It is worth having an alternative platform that you can all easily jump on to when tech gives you problems. If a new meeting needs to be set up, assign one person to do this, then hop of one-by-one. Make sure you have a backchannel ready (for example, a channel in your collaboration platform), in case there are problems with getting on to the second platform. If some of your team members are unsure about using the new technology, one of you can stay behind on the original platform to guide them through.

CHOOSING YOUR MEETING PLATFORM

A book on online meetings would be incomplete without a good, chunky chapter on choosing an online platform.

Some of you will have little choice as to what meeting platform you can use in your organisation; For now and concentrate instead on their features. If you are stuck with the only tool available in your organisation, it is still worth reading through this list, as the platform might have those features already, but you are unaware of them, or they might be added by the developer at a later date. There is always the possibility that the tech you have access to will change as your company's IT develops, or when you move on to another job.

Which features, which tools?

if your team values transparency, you might want a tool where it is easy to record and share the recordings of your meetings. Or, if you meet frequently with external clients and most of you work from home, you might want to blur your background at the click of a button.

If the meeting platform requires high bandwidth, will this disadvantage those team members with a poor internet connection? If you need to download an application to have the meeting, might this be blocked by some company firewalls?

Avoid overloading your meetings with tools. It's tempting to have different tools for taking notes, capturing actions or making decisions. If you are a heavy note-taking team, look for a platform with an integrated note-taking feature which can be easily accessed once the meeting is over.

Regardless of the meeting platform you adopt, learn how to use it properly. Find out which default settings can be changed to be able to run the meeting in the way that best suits your team, not in the way the platform developers imagined.

Finally, don't forget to train everyone!

DESIRABLE FEATURES IN A MEETING PLATFORM

Chat function

An online platform without a chat function limits your interactions. A chat function enables you to share website links, so that others can check them out in their own time and at their own pace. It's one of the benefits of meeting online. The chat is also the place where someone can say that they quickly need to reboot their computer, or that they have to go and get a glass of water and will be back in a second. It's an essential backchannel which can keep the team in sync without chopping up the conversation.

Breakout rooms

This feature is a bit of a luxury, but it can take your meetings to another level if there are more than five or six of you in the team. However, a breakout feature is not essential, as you can always set up parallel meetings by launching different sessions online.

Recurring URLs

Many online meeting applications create URLs for meetings. Having one link to click on, rather than creating a different address for each individual meeting, makes life easier. You can even have different, recurrent URLs for different meetings, to give you the illusion of going into different 'rooms'.

Adam@Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

Fresh-Mindset.co.uk

UK +44(0)7779714387

NZ +64(0)273483144

If you are not using a calendar to organise your meetings, then pin the URL in the relevant collaboration space, or add it to the description of the corresponding channel, so it is always easy to find.

Recording option

it is good to have the option to record a meeting. Tools which can record in the cloud make it easier to share the recording than those that record onto your computer or device – but remember that while cloud recording might be a useful feature, it can become a security risk.

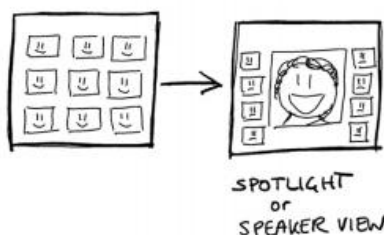
Easy customisation

If you are the host of the meeting, customise your settings so that attendees have as much control over how they turn up as possible. For example, some platforms allow you to set up meetings so that attendees' webcams switch on as soon as they join the meeting. This can surprise attendees, making them feel like they have joined the meeting unprepared.

Customisation of viewing video

In the same way as how you sit in relation to each other in a room makes a difference to those present in the meeting, how we view others on the screen during an online session can influence how we engage with the group and the conversation. Some people like to see whoever is speaking 'in the spotlight', taking up most of the screen; while others prefer to view everyone's faces at the same time, to see how team members are reacting and maintain a sense of connection throughout the meeting.

In the same way, when someone is sharing a screen, some of you will prefer to see both screen and speaker, while others might prefer only one point of focus. Being able to choose between different ways of viewing others on your screen is definitely a plus.



Hiding your own webcam stream

One of the reasons that people resist using video in their online meetings is that they don't like to see themselves. A feature that allows attendees to hide their own video feeds is highly desirable. Even if this is of no use to you (because you like to check your own position and appearance over the webcam), other people in your team may find it useful.

Screen-sharing

If you are holding regular meetings with your team, it's good to have an option where everyone (not just the host or presenter, as some platforms call the person starting the meeting) can share their screens. In some applications you can change the default settings in advance. However, in other platforms, the host has to hand over control to others during the meeting, which interrupts the fluidity of conversation. A feature that allows people to share their screen when they need to, without being granted 'special powers', is preferable.

A whiteboard or shared annotating/drawing space

Having a common place where everyone can scribble on can be handy. It's the equivalent of having a whiteboard that we can all walk over to, or a big piece of flip chart paper we can write on at the same time.

If you and your team members enjoy sketching out ideas, look for a platform with an integrated whiteboard, rather than having to pull up a separate tool. If you use the integrated option, check whether the drawings will be stored, or whether you will need to take a screenshot to save your sketches and notes.

Mobile apps

It goes without saying that whatever platform you decide to use should have a great mobile app to go with it. (Of course, there may be other options available in the future, but at the time of writing, this is what is available.)

Easy to dial into by phone

As we have already seen, not everyone in your team will have a solid internet connection all of the time. If people are in your team who move from location to location, or who need to travel for work, for those moments of dodgy connectivity you need a platform where people can easily dial in by phone.

Avatars for participants not on webcam

If some team members can't turn on their webcams, profile pictures can help others feel connected to those in the meeting. It's good to go for a platform that shows someone's picture when they are not on video, it might also help you or some of your team members. Another little feature to look out for.

Ability to join the meeting before the host

When you turn up to an online meeting where the room is 'locked', unless everyone else also has their backchannel open, you can't even talk to others. Being able to have a meeting that anyone can join before the host has its advantages –so whenever possible, pick a platform that allows you to do so.

'Push to talk': integrating the spontaneity factor

As you choose your collaboration tools, look for those with a 'push to talk' option, or one-click access to an audio or video call. It will help you and your team members have richer conversations day-to-day.

THE KIT

WRAP-UP

Be aware of your posture during your meetings. It will affect how you feel about them.

Find a set-up that helps you be as comfortable as possible (for example, wireless headsets, adjustable desks). Avoid meeting on the move.

Take a break between other work and your meetings. Think of stepping into a meeting. Clear your desktop of unnecessary windows and tabs, and take breaks away from the screen when possible.

Be aware of how you look and sound. Customise your background to suit you and your meeting. Hide your own video, if it helps you concentrate on others.

Learn to master the tech to create the best meeting experience possible.

Have a backchannel and a back-up plan for when the tech doesn't work as well as it should.