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Telework

How's That Working For You?

BY KATHI MESTAYER

Remote work, or telework, accounted for roughly 24% of the workforce before COVID-19 arrived on the scene. However, more workers were working remotely by May 2020 because of COVID-19, bringing this figure to about 35%. After that, teleworking due to COVID-19 decreased, as businesses reopened, to the mid-twenty percentiles, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Of course, those of us with hearing loss are a significant part of that population.

The New York Times notes that for some companies and industries, the increase in remote work is expected to be long-term. Facebook, Twitter, Nationwide Insurance and others have announced that the long-term conversion to telework will continue, and in some cases, grow even more.

Meeting remotely—which seems to be an oxymoron—via platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, BlueJeans, FaceTime and others, is fundamentally unlike in-person interactions, and the differences can play out in ways that are surprising. Having a conversation with someone whose face is right on your laptop screen, with clear audio and video, good-quality captions and fewer interruptions can actually make understanding them easier. Compare that to being in an echo-prone conference room with a humming HVAC system, a speaker who faces away from you and distracting side conversations.

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Telework Requires Workarounds

With this new way of communicating, everyone must make adjustments, whether it is because of hearing loss; stuttering lags in audio and video; slow Wi-Fi; lack of webcams; malfunctioning microphones; crazy captions; speakers in front of sunny windows and so many other factors. As remote technologies and our ways of using them evolve, the tradeoffs will continue to shift and change, regardless of our hearing loss, or lack thereof. How this will play out remains to be seen—and heard.

Hearing With Our Eyes

A major benefit of remote meetings is that they enable us to see the speakers' faces on our screens, which—if the screen is big enough—allows us to read their lips and other facial expressions. In an in-person meeting, having that kind of visual connection can be difficult, unless it's a one-on-one meeting with no noise. The added visual input can significantly improve anyone's speech com-

prehension, whether they have hearing loss or not. Of course, that assumes the meeting uses good-quality video that is in sync with the audio and that freezing images are not a problem.

But when the webcams are turned off, those of us with hearing loss are hit with a double whammy. We don't get the extra boost in speech comprehension, and it's disorienting not to know if the person behind the empty rectangle is listening, paying attention, reacting or multitasking. A frequent teleworker with hearing loss shared her strategy:

I get on the call before anyone else and turn on my webcam. If someone I haven't met joins the meeting without a webcam, I say, 'Hey, we haven't met. Can you turn on your video?' That usually works. Once we're all logged on, if any webcams are off, I say, 'Let's do video!' It's working great—so far.

Screening Out Distractions

Teleworking is like being in two places at the same time. We're sitting in a real 3D space, facing each other on small, flat screens. The people we're interacting with are sometimes in front of false backgrounds, and could be smaller, bigger, closer, farther away or invisible.

Then there's seeing your own face on the screen. As Lance Strate, professor of Media Ecology at Fordham University, who has been teaching his students remotely, points out:

In normal interactions, we're used to hearing our voice, but we are not used to seeing our own face, which can seem odd and be distracting. And we are often at different distances from our cameras, so we can appear much closer on the screen than we would normally be in person. I often have to adjust the volume, depending on the speaker's distance from their mic.

Dr. Strate is right on the mark; distance from the mic matters—a lot. Another person who teaches online shared the feeling that seeing her face on the screen was driving her crazy. "It took awhile, but I finally figured out how to get my image off my screen but still have it visible to my students," she said. "It just isn't normal for me to be teaching to my own face."

The split meeting, with both remote and in-person participants, is another recent phenomenon. A financial firm manager reports, "Our split meetings have several people in person and a few on a remote-meeting platform. What I've found is that the people who participate remotely are completely ignored by the in-person attendees, so it's almost pointless to participate."

Another IT manager offers, “If I’m online, and part of the group is in a room together, it’s impossible for me to hear them. The mics are all over the place. And then there are the side conversations and casual noises.”

Conquering the Captioning Conundrum

Everybody who uses captioning for online meetings knows it’s not perfect. Online captions are provided by a live, Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) captioner or an automatic speech recognition (ASR) system, which is a collection of computer programs that do their best to understand, translate and improve captions. It’s a tough challenge for the software—just as it is for us—when the audio quality is poor; the speaker is whispering, speaking fast or has a heavy accent.

So, it’s not surprising that bringing captions up to speed, in terms of availability and accuracy, remains a challenge with teleworking. In fact, according to Lise Hamlin, director of public policy for HLLAA, there are no consistent standards for caption quality. Fortunately, the Global Alliance of Speech-to-Text Captioning is working on that. HLLAA supports the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) development of performance standards for phone captions provided on the Telecommunications Relay Service or Internet Protocol Captioned Telephone Service (IP CTS). Just this past fall, the FCC opened a rulemaking proceeding addressing standards for IP CTS, so we’re on the pathway for phone captions, but ensuring that those standards also apply to video conferencing will be another step.

Last fall, I watched a webinar about how to use captions on a popular platform that was just beginning to provide them. The format featured a presentation on the screen, with an invisible narrator. The captions for the presentation lagged so far behind the speaker that it was very difficult for me, as a person with hearing loss, to follow. I never did learn how to access their captions.

Quinn Keast, a product designer at a technology firm who also has hearing loss, shared his experience with his team:

We experimented by running a meeting with our speakers turned off and relying only on captions. We realized that it was easy for team members with hearing loss to lose the thread of the conversation when something went wrong with the captions, so we all turned our captions on. It gave us a chance to monitor the captions and share the responsibility for communicating well. My company is fully remote and globally distributed. If a teammate has noise in their environment, it’s a temporary stress case that captions can resolve. Other team-

mates speak English as an additional language: those teammates benefit from captions as an extra source of linguistic feedback.”

Telework Offers a New Connection

Some teleworkers have discovered that remote meetings can actually bring people closer together. An engineering manager at a state agency shared her experience:

When we first went to working online, nobody’s laptops had cameras. So I went online, and bought everybody a web camera for \$14.95 with overnight shipping. I still don’t know if I’ll get reimbursed, but I don’t care. We were so used to being together at the office, in the cube farm, that we found ways to stay close online. I shared pictures of my garden, which I would never have done in the office. When you see people in their houses, you feel like you’re really getting to know them. We’ve even had kids break into our meetings! I feel like we’re all part of a family, maybe now more than ever.

An IT manager observes that:

If we’re all on our screens, we can see each other, even with smaller images. It’s helpful to see peoples’ visual reactions to what’s being said—smiles, nods, thumbs-up or raising a hand to ask a question or make a point. It feels more like being part of a team.

COVID-19 has accelerated acceptance of a process that was already established, and the use of remote communication for business meetings is not going away anytime soon. The demand for technology solutions that will improve efficiency and effectiveness for teleworkers is expanding right alongside it. In a sense, we’re all in the same boat whether we have hearing loss or not, so it’s up to all of us to work together to communicate as well as possible and stay connected. **HL**



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