

Maintaining Presence While Working Virtually

Demonstrating presence in a hybrid work environment requires that you be intentional and deliberate in your actions. Virtual presence is a hot topic today with significantly more people telecommuting and working remotely. Being able to effectively engage, deepen relationships and maintain clear communication with colleagues is always important when working in a flexible work environment. This should not change whether you are working in-person or virtually. But how do you do this without face-to-face interactions – whether you are participating in a virtual meeting or just working off-campus?

When in Virtual Meetings

Use camera (or quality thumbnail photo when not on camera)

While the use of cameras during virtual meetings is frequently dictated by group leaders, it is important to let employees use professional judgement to determine if they should use their camera for a virtual meeting or not. This decision should depend on the type of meeting it is, who is in the meeting and how well attendees know one another. As relationships are built, cameras may not always be necessary. Initially, when getting to know people, using cameras can be very helpful and are a good way to establish virtual presence. Sometimes, when there are a lot of people in a meeting, cameras can be distracting, and it is best to rely on thumbnail photos. Not everyone is comfortable being on camera and while this should be respected, it is important to recognize that using a camera can support virtual presence even if not in-person. When a thumbnail is used in place of a camera, it is important demonstrate presence in other ways.

Maintain eye contact (stay present and focused)

When using a camera to demonstrate virtual presence, it is important to maintain eye contact with your audience. While most of us look at the screen and those that we are responding to, it is best to look directly into the camera when speaking. It is also easy to get distracted from the camera by other things taking place around you such as other work you may have on your desk, your cell phone or even a separate monitor you may be working from. When eyes wander from your audience, this can come across rude and they may wonder if you are really interested in the conversation. If you are looking at work related to the meeting on your desk or other devices, you may want to let them know and continue to remain engaged in the discussion.

Look professional

Building a professional presence starts by coming to work in professional attire and appear put together whether you are working on campus or virtually.

Be mindful of your body language

In a virtual meeting, you are not able to show whole body language, but you can show some and you should. Think about how you use your hands, hold/nod your head when others speak and how you sit in front of the camera. Make sure your body language says you are awake, interested, and prepared.

Use proper framing, lighting and sound set up

When trying to achieve proper framing think about what everyone sees when they see you on camera. This includes where you fit on the screen, what is showing on camera around you, how well can others see you and your expressions, as well as how well they can hear you. All of this can impact your virtual and professional presence.

- Try to sit at eye level to your computer camera lens. Frame yourself in the center of the lens showing your midsection up and close enough to the camera that your colleagues can see your facial expressions.
- Think about the backdrop you use when on camera. Some may prefer to use a real background in their home such as a blank wall, bookcase, or mural behind them. Others may blur their background to avoid sharing too many personal artifacts. The internet is full of all kinds of backgrounds from dream office spaces to amazing outdoor vistas to even famous cartoon and television show sets. Select the backdrop you use based on the type of meeting you will be in. For example, you may choose to use a neutral or professional looking backdrop if attending a virtual board meeting or you might select a more fun backdrop when joining a virtual happy hour with some colleagues.
- Make sure you have the right lighting conditions as it can really affect video quality. Having a lack of light can cause your video to look grainy. Try not to mix natural lighting and office lighting unless your bulbs are daylight white. Lighting from the sides or behind your camera will make your face look best. Last, test out your sound settings and know how to adjust them if needed.

Engage with colleagues

It should not matter that you are not in the same room as others. Your participation demonstrates presence in a meeting - and a lack of participation demonstrates the opposite. Your participation reminds everyone that you are there for a reason and offer value to the meeting. Ask questions, initiate, or join in discussion, offer insight when you can.

Articulate clearly and avoid controlling the meeting too much

Remember to speak up and clearly articulate what you have to say. If you are uncertain if others can hear you, it is okay to ask if you need to speak louder. Be sure to allow others to speak. When leading a meeting, you may need to moderate to be sure everyone has an opportunity to demonstrate their presence, even asking quieter colleagues for input from time to time.

Use chat feature

The chat feature of video conferencing (both Zoom and MS Teams) allows for attendees to accomplish tasks and have side conversations inside or outside of the meeting (with others in the meeting) - at the same time that the meeting is taking place. Some meeting organizers may choose to disable the chat feature for meetings because it can be distracting to those not used to using it, but it can really enhance virtual meetings by improving productivity, allowing for some side conversation about what is said in the meeting - and even make a meeting more fun. Chat features allow someone to message the group without having to speak or disrupt the meeting in progress, share attachments or links for either certain people or the entire group. Private/personal chats or private group messages can be delivered without interruption. Note taking, polling, sending GIFs and status notifications are also other great ways to use chat. Using the chat feature when in meetings is another great way to demonstrate virtual presence and remind everyone you engaged.

Limit distractions while on camera – Do your best to eliminate or minimize distractions when you are on camera. This may refer to things that can be seen or heard. Think about what falls in your camera frame if you are working in a kitchen or there happens to be a mess on a desk behind you - or things that can be overheard in the background. Plan for potential distractions in advance when you can. Let others around you know you are hopping on a Zoom/Teams meeting and have a need for quiet and no interruptions. Let colleagues in your meeting know in advance of possible interruptions from young children, pets or possible noise taking place around you such as construction or lawn mowers. A lot has

changed since the pandemic began and we have become accustomed to seeing the personal side of life spill over into our work more, but remember your goal is still to demonstrate professional presence in a virtual setting and these tips will help.

Working Off Campus

Check-in with colleagues – Establish a culture where check-ins with your staff and your fellow co-workers are not always centered around work. Regular check-ins with your staff, colleagues and your boss are great ways to avoid feelings of being micromanaged and makes performance management much easier over time. It's just as important to make check-in times personal. Get to know your colleagues and staff and let them get to know you. This is how common interests, experiences and work friendships develop. Check-ins can be virtual or in-person or a combination of both. They are a great way to stay in touch and maintain virtual presence.

Use modern technology and a framework of agreed upon expectations – Flexible work teams that share an agreed upon set of work expectations, particularly when they all agree to use modern cloud-based collaboration technology such as Microsoft Teams, tend to be much more productive and connected. Recognizing this and committing to learn how to use these cloud-based collaboration tools will pay off for everyone and help build connection and trust – which can enhance virtual presence.

Email and pick up the phone – Just because we have video conferencing tools such as Zoom and Teams doesn't mean that you should not email someone or pick up the phone and call them from time to time. Mix things up sometimes, keeping in mind what means of communication is likely to be most effective given your reason for using it. Reach out to those you have not seen or had the opportunity to work with often. It is a reminder that you are around and thinking of them.

Be clear and consistent about communication - What you say, how you say it and when you say it matters. This is especially true with written communication. Things can easily be misinterpreted. Always read over written communications before sending a text or email. If it's appropriate, use an emoji or GIF to illustrate intention. That is part of why they are there after all. Clear and consistent communication demonstrates that you are there even when not in person and not easily overlooked or forgotten.

Maintain your calendar – If you (and your staff) have not maintained your Outlook calendars in the past, you will need to nowadays. With the dramatic rise in flexibility today, you should not assume that everyone will be working the same schedule as you. Everyone has access to Outlook at Emory and the Scheduling Assistant feature enables one to see if someone is in or out of the office, working elsewhere, if they are busy or available. Outlook Calendar works most effectively when we all are using it. Maintaining a calendar enables you to keep track of what you are working each week, show accountability and help with performance management. You can mark time as private for things such as personal appointments or responsibilities, but this still allows others to see if you are free or busy. Maintaining your calendar is a professional expectation today and is another great example of how to demonstrate virtual presence.

Enjoy fun with colleagues– We should no longer assume that everyone is working the same 8-5 schedule or even on campus on the same days anymore. However, it is still really important for everyone to make time to have some fun together. This helps everyone get to know each other a bit more and builds morale and engagement. This includes making time with your teammates as well as your colleagues from across campus. While grabbing lunch with a co-worker at the last minute might

still happen on occasion, the key to being most successful at this requires being a bit more intentional than it did in the past. Be creative and think of fun things to do onsite, offsite, and virtually. Consider starting 'Fun Team' or ask team members to take turns organizing activities throughout the year to enjoy time together. This could be anything from a themed potluck lunch to a more involved activity like a city scavenger hunt or an escape room. Consider allowing team members to invite a significant other if they want or invite their families to certain activities. This could be volunteering together as a group or meeting up for something like a Braves game or picnic in the park.

Share your success – work and personal – When you are working off campus, you want to make sure you are still in the minds of those you work with. Another way to do this is to share your successes. This can be personal as well as professional. Let others know what you are working on and what is going on in your life from time to time.

Acknowledge others and give shout outs – Another way to demonstrate virtual presence is to acknowledge others and give shout outs to colleagues who have contributed, helped out or done a great job in some way. Again, this can be work-related or personal at times too. This not only serves as recognition that others appreciate, but it also reminds people that you are still with them even if not in person, that you take notice and care. In cases, where the acknowledgement is more personal, keep in mind that every person is a little different and some may prefer to keep things under wrap, where others may appreciate the recognition shared.

Offer to help others – Offering to help others is a great way to remind your colleagues that you are still around regardless of if you work the same hours or same days in the office that they do. This can include simple or more involved opportunities depending on your availability.

*If you manage others, set clear expectations, provide regular and useful feedback, and coach your team members in areas that may need improvement. They may not realize the importance of maintaining a virtual presence. Talk about it with them and use this article as a reference for yourself and when coaching your staff.