

Phonak

Best Practice

Making online working meetings accessible for individuals with hearing loss

As a result of COVID-19, companies are advising employees to work from home. This includes shifting the daily work meetings and discussions from in-person to online, making our world increasingly virtual. This is an adjustment for people with hearing loss, to ensure the work setup maximizes the ability to still communicate efficiently and effectively with colleagues, even when people are unable to speak face-to-face. Here are tips and suggestions for making online work meetings accessible for those with hearing loss.

How to improve the setup when in virtual meetings?

There are several ways to set virtual meetings to be more hearing loss friendly and accessible. For instance, you can test the video conference platform to see how the settings can improve the listening experience. You can check to see if the video conference platform enables live captioning. If live captioning is not accessible, there are workarounds, such as using a speech-to-text app on another device.

Additionally, you can discuss communication guidelines at the start of each virtual meeting to establish effective communication between colleagues. It is necessary to remember these communication guidelines are not only beneficial for the individual with hearing loss, but for all meeting attendees, regardless of hearing capabilities.

Such guidelines can include:

- **Camera:** Turn on the camera when speaking. The camera height should be close to eye level and sit at a distance that displays the whole face and shoulders, to allow the ability to lipread and utilize other visual cues. Attendees that are not speaking can turn their video off to preserve bandwidth.
- **Room lighting:** Avoid dark or bright backgrounds, or sitting with your back to a window, as shadows can make lipreading and other visual cues difficult to see.
- **Chat box:** Utilize the chat box feature when questions or responses are not clearly understood. When wrapping up the meeting, type out a brief summary or action points in the chat box to ensure all meeting attendees are on the same page.
- **Only one person speaks at a time:** Ask participants to mute their microphone when not speaking to reduce noise interference. Ask the meeting organizer to facilitate by establishing who talks and when. A good communication practice is for each speaker to announce their name before they begin speaking, as it can be difficult to tell one person's voice from another.
- **Headset:** For best audio quality, use a headset with a boom microphone. Place the boom microphone a little bit below or on the side of the mouth to reduce breathing sounds and to ensure your lips are visible.

How to use Phonak Roger technology in virtual meetings?

Rather than use headphones or a headset, you can plug in a Phonak Roger microphone into the computer or tablet with an audio accessory cable and pair the microphone to your hearing aids. You can stream multimedia and business calls directly to both hearing aids, and receive optimal sound quality. In addition, a Roger microphone has a battery life to last a full working day, ensuring that you can stay connected during your working hours.

There are several reasons why connecting to a Roger microphone can be more preferable compared to wearing headphones or a headset.

- Reduce risk of feedback: Headphones or headsets placed closed to the hearing aid microphones can result in a feedback loop.
- Increased comfort: Clients do not have to wear both hearing aids and headphones, which can feel heavy on the ears and cause discomfort.
- Optimal sound quality: A Roger microphone can stream high quality sound directly to both hearing aids.

In addition, Roger is compatible with most hearing devices, as long as you have the appropriate Roger receiver attached or RogerDirect activated. If you are unsure if your hearing devices are compatible with Roger, you can ask your hearing care provider.

Supporting each other

Together with a Roger microphone and the implementation of good virtual communication skills, online work meetings have become more accessible.

Everyone's listening needs differ. The more we advocate for accessibility needs, the more others can learn about effective communication for both hard of hearing colleagues and colleagues with normal hearing. These communication mannerisms are simply good communication practice for all individuals, not just for those with hearing loss.

The COVID-19 event has brought to the forefront the drawbacks and benefits of working digitally. We can all take note that inclusive behaviors that enable people who are differently abled often result in improved setups that can benefit everyone.