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Conference Call Etiquette

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Taking part in an international telephone conference is very demanding. It requires a great deal of concentration. Here are ten tips to help you to participate properly.

1: Call from a quiet location

This helps your concentration and prevents you from being distracted from the call. It also helps the other participants in the conference. They will not be disturbed by background noise from your location. This is very important when there are several second language speakers from different parts of the world involved. Background noise can really interfere in our understanding of each other.

2: Avoid rustling papers

We usually have a pile of background papers in front of us during the call. Try not to shuffle them noisily as you try to find the appropriate document. The rustling of paper seems to be magnified over the phone and can be very disturbing for the other participants.

3: Use quality headsets

Avoid mobile phones or cordless phones. They often create a background buzzing noise or a tinny sound which can also disturb the others.

4: Don't multi-task

It's very tempting to answer a few emails on your laptop during a telephone conference - after all, no one can see you and you are still listening to what is being said. But don't do it! First of all you might miss out on something important and second, it's rude. You would never do this in a face-to-face meeting. And if the others hear the tapping of you laptop keys, they will resent it enormously.

5: Announce when leaving / returning

Make sure the other participants know when you are leaving the call or when you are entering or returning to the conference. You need to tell them because they can't see you leave or return.

6: Ask for breaks

In long telephone conferences ask for bio breaks or for "quick stretches". We are not just ears! The rest

of our bodies need some attention too. If we are working in a second language, short breaks help the concentration and give you time to reflect on how the call is going.

7: Speak slowly

Speak at the speed you want to be spoken to. This is important when you have native speaker participants. They will often mirror the speed of the other participants. So give them a good example to follow so that you are not continually asking them to slow down.

8: Speak clearly

Everyone has an accent. Your accent can be difficult to understand if the others are not used to it. Accents are exaggerated over the phone. So speak clearly. Get some feedback on how you sound on the phone. If you have a strong accent, slow down and articulate your words.

9: Be enthusiastic

Put some energy and enthusiasm into your voice. The others cannot see your enthusiastic facial expression - so you have to show it by the way you speak. Energetic voices energise the other participants. Energetic voices are easier to listen to. Energetic voices underline the key messages so that misunderstandings are less frequent.

10: Describe body language

Tell the others what you are doing.

I'm nodding my head vigorously in agreement with what Frank said.

I'm smiling at what Mary said there.

I'm waving my arms to get your attention - not that that helps!

You don't want to overdo it. But just occasionally use a description of your body language to emphasise or reinforce a message.

If you follow these ten rules, your participation in telephone conferences will be improved and appreciated.

*And if you'd like to learn more, just buy yourself a copy of Ken's new book **Fifty ways to improve your Telephoning and Teleconferencing Skills** (Summertown Publishing, ISBN 978 1 905992 06 5).*

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