Communicating / Working Using A Virtual Environment

Practical Considerations

Over the past few years I have worked for two global organisations training, facilitating, and managing online, or virtual events on a very regular basis. My experience of what works, and what does not work comes from both the 'issues' I have faced, and from observing the progress and pitfalls experienced by technical support staff, visiting presenters, and programme delegates.
I have used virtual training software of various types, some of which need technical support staff and a system host with up to 50 delegates, together with programmes like Skype and Cisco, used for individual meetings and one-to-one coaching.
From this background I would break down the areas for consideration and awareness as follows:

Yours & Others' Connections:

- Use a cable connection (if at all possible – Don't be fobbed off!)
- Laptop / PC away from noise / distractions
- Laptop / PC fitted with mic headset
- Laptop / PC "Sounds" set to headset only
- Poor network – stop running webcam and unneeded software

All Users:

- Check, and double-check audio and webcam
- Position yourself towards a light source
- Be prepared to raise your webcam / laptop for 'best' image
- Use a headset - although internal mic is OK for one-to-one
- Be aware of your visual background
- Turn off unneeded software
- If network is poor, freeze or turn off webcams

Deliverer / Facilitator (You):

- Personal visual preparation and background
- Know your way around the interface and controls
- Knowledge of the software and possible issues
- Globally, be aware of network strength and possible delays
- Advise visiting presenters of known network issues
- Provide presenters and delegates with a 'set-up' email
- Personally, be in virtual environment mode, (critical)
- Become practiced in virtual multi-tasking

- Use every facility available to interact with delegates

Technical Support (if appropriate):

- Connect and meet them, virtually, in advance
- Treat them with respect – an issue is rarely their fault
- Have a secondary method of communicating with them

Visiting Presenters:

- Arrange to work in a distraction-free environment
- Organise a cable connection in advance of the session
- Read any 'set-up' email, or communication, you are sent
- Set up / check your audio / webcam in advance, (critical)
- If possible, check their sound and webcam before starting
- Read the tips sheet, if provided, to improve the delegate experience
- Switch off unneeded software
- Adjust your delivery style to improve the virtual delegate experience
- Be prepared to use the Chat facility
- Be aware of network issues / delays

Delegates / Audience:

- Have a cable connection – wherever possible
- Use a headset – unless it's one-to-one
- Read any 'set-up' email or communication you are sent
- Set up headset / audio and webcam in advance of the meeting
- If headset, go to 'Control Panel' > 'Sounds' and identify headset
- Be prepared to be involved
- When listening only, turn your mic to 'off'

Additional Thoughts

- Try to avoid dumping face-to-face slides into a virtual session
- When selecting presenters, think about their voice and delivery modulation. Whatever their expertise in their given subject, will they sound interesting and work to maintain the audience interest?
- Make it interesting. Be prepared to share your screen to show 'real' examples, provide links to relevant additional material, or arrange to email appropriate documentation mid-session.

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