

## To see or not to see? That is the question ...

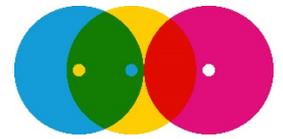
By Jude Tavanyar

### Some thoughts on using webcam – or not – in your live online training sessions and meetings

A much-asked question, and as technology becomes ever smoother and more sophisticated, it will be important to keep under review what ‘visual connection’ brings you when meeting people online in the professional context. Here are some comments on best practice to date.

#### Arguments FOR webcam use:

- Especially for the inexperienced virtual facilitator, loss of face to face connection feels like loss indeed. We are so used to face to face contact that we may feel that we cannot build such trusting and effective relationships with people if we cannot see their faces moving.  
If you are working with a training group who expect webcam out of habit, you may need to anticipate negative reactions, and think of ways to manage those, if you do not use it.
- Working with small groups eg of up to 4 people – especially who already know each other - using webcam may be an engaging and energising way to work. The demands on bandwidth will be reduced in a smaller group, and for many it feels like a friendly approach.
- Using the webcam to ‘highlight’ transitions in the session from one activity to another, and to introduce a change of pace can be a very good method to keep engagement. The facilitator may decide to turn their webcam on to create a different focus for the session and draw attention away from the session slides, in order to transition in to a new phase of the session. Thus, webcam can be a kind of ‘punctuation’ for the session if used judiciously in this way.
- Many of the reasons why people dislike webcam – such as the ‘noise activation’ factor eg being caught eating a sandwich because you were munching noisily and the noise activates your webcam! Or sneezing/coughing etc – are ironed out if the facilitator takes care to explain the **virtual etiquette** regarding webcams. If people know webcams are (currently) noise as well as speech-sensitive, they can avoid this

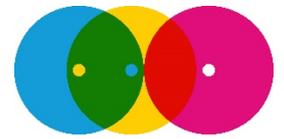


problem. Similarly, using a process such as a 'Webcam Check In', where people turn their webcam off after they have said something, is a controlled approach which minimises (if not entirely prevents) the chance of 'frozen images', embarrassing 'sandwich -eating moments' or other disruptions.

- Bandwidth difficulties and increasingly sophisticated technology means that the nuisance factor of webcams will increasingly be minimised. It will soon become ever easier and technically smooth to see multiple faces on screen, all moving and reacting to what they are seeing and hearing from the facilitator, with no camera 'crashes' or noisy embarrassments. So perhaps it will come back to personal preference and training style in the end.
- Webcam use at chosen moments by the facilitator may be a very good way to 'move a session on' visually and vocally if there is a disruptive participant / someone who is not fully engaged, for example. However, this is a high control tactic and may not be one we would all wish to use – except with some good humour and a light touch perhaps!
- Culturally speaking there are diverse preferences regarding visual contact, and for people in some cultures, not being able to see the eyes and face of the facilitator may seriously diminish trust and respect for the learning process/meeting.

## Arguments AGAINST webcam use

- Increasingly, researchers and academics notice the 'power of voice' and the ability vocal tone and range has to create nuanced meanings, convey energy and build trust when working virtually. Ghislaine Cautat, leading academic and commentator on virtual communication at Ashridge University, is in many ways a pioneer in this regard, her extensive experience in working with virtual teams highlighting her idea that visual connection via webcam can be simply a distracting diversion from the 'action' of the session, carried via vocal contact and what our screens show us.
- Others interested in innovative ways of working virtually notice the power of visual slides, for example, to create a mood and reflective space for virtual working. When the webcam is switched on, we are back to the 'here and now' realities of where people are located physically. This is OK for some aspects of the session but may get in the way when people want to use their imagination, brainstorm, and so forth, because of the precise focus of attention the webcam creates.
- Furthermore, for many there is something relaxing about not being visible as facilitator or participant, because one can wear what one wants and be less than perfectly groomed. That may be a relaxing bonus for many, and can help to create a relaxed mood also. Another aspect of that is that less than sophisticated and glamorous surroundings are invisible if working without webcam – we can be in an



expensive office suite or tiny box-room, no one will know if the camera is off. This is an important factor in cost/image terms, and in many ways a great 'equaliser' of human differences.

- Perhaps a further dimension of invisibility is that some people are distracted by their own image on webcam when facilitating or participating. It is too tempting to look at how we are coming across, rather than simply get on with engaging with the activity at hand. The 'distraction factor' applies to men and women alike, and can be significant according to some anecdotal accounts from people on virtual training and coaching courses.
- The 'bandwidth' issues are still relevant, although that is likely to change. For now, the fact remains that using webcam in a large group may mean some chaos – people not visible when they wish to be, others visible when they don't wish to be, frozen images and inaudible voices at times. 'One at a time' is still the preferable order of the day, but even then, on Webex at least, there can be some 'stuck' moments.