

3.3.6: Using Audio in Business

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the strengths and weaknesses of audio in a business context



The strengths of audio—as compared with written communication—are appropriate in a lot of business situations.

A conversation is **synchronous**. That is, everyone is participating at the same time. Email or IM is **asynchronous**, meaning you may not get a response right away, and when you do hear from other people, their responses are usually carefully considered and edited. Sometimes, this is good, especially if you want people to spend some time on a question or idea.

However, there are situations when you don't necessarily want this, and audio represents a stronger choice:

- When a decision needs to be made quickly, you don't want people to take their time to answer an email and then respond to all the other emails they receive on the topic
- When it's helpful to hear people's tone of voice so you can gauge their certainty, enthusiasm, or other emotion
- When you want to ensure that everyone has understood what's being said; conversation allows people to ask questions and clarify their comments in the moment, which can cut down on confusion later

Audio is generally also pretty easy. Everyone understands how to work a telephone. Even if there are steps to go through to get on a conference line, it's a relatively unintimidating technology. This also means that having audio in place as backup for more complex technologies is always a good idea.

Audio does have its **downsides**, especially compared with other, more sophisticated methods of remote conferencing.

- While audio does allow you to hear emotion in people's voices, it doesn't let you read facial expressions, which can be helpful when a topic is sensitive or challenging.
- Another aspect of not being able to see faces is that people tend to interrupt each other more because there are no visual cues that someone is starting to speak or intends to keep speaking.
- Audio-only also allows people to be distracted or to engage in multitasking while still technically being "on the call" since no one can see what they're doing. The result of this is that you have people dialed in but tuned out.
 - Colleagues may be checking emails or reading other materials while on the call, especially if they are not expected to participate much in the conversation.
 - One consultant who works from home confessed that he used monthly board meeting calls as an opportunity to clean the cat box while on the call.

As we will see in the sections that follow, sometimes video or screen sharing offers a more effective means of remote conferencing, but if audio does what you need it to, it's easy and familiar.

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