



How To Prepare Event Spaces for Hybrid Technology-Enabled Meetings

Hoteliers Must Consider Number of Attendees, Acoustics and More

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The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of virtual meetings by about 10 years, bringing us quickly to a new point in time that feels like a different world.

Overnight, we went from 99% face-to-face meetings to 100% virtual — and stayed that way for nearly two years. Fortunately, we are now swinging back to “normal” levels again, proving the deep need for people to gather is permanent.



But something happened: We now expect to be able to attend some meetings virtually. That’s the quantum leap into the future: What was once a novelty became an instant reality and now has become an expectation. So how do we design our meeting spaces so that they work for both audiences, the in-person and the remote attendee?



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The Room Matters

Technology used for hybrid meetings captures the sounds and images in the meeting room and faithfully reproduces those for the remote attendees. Technology cannot distinguish between the object of attention and acoustic and visual noise.

Acoustically, noise is defined as background noise, reverberation and noise from adjacent spaces. Microphones hear everything and noise interferes with and reduces the intelligibility of our speech, making it difficult for remote attendees to understand.

Visual noise refers to busy backgrounds or movement in backgrounds, changing or unbalanced lighting, vibration of cameras and poor camera angles. These problems cause the remote attendee to become distracted and lose focus on the message. Visual noise can also cause interruptions in the audio stream as well.

Takeaway: The better you make your hybrid meeting room, the better will be the experience of the remote attendees. A side benefit of optimizing the hybrid meeting room is that it also creates an improved experience for the in-person guest as well.

Technology Elements

Ideally, smaller and medium-sized rooms will have technology built in, minimizing set-up time while eliminating the messy look and labor cost of temporary equipment. Also, built-in technology is optimized for the room and provides a longer reliable service life than portable equipment.

However, larger function spaces in hotels will always need to use portable equipment for technology-enabled meetings to accommodate flexible configurations. The infrastructure must be designed to accommodate flexible, portable event technology.

Microphones

The limiting factor for microphones is the distance of the talker to the microphone. Small groups with a table microphone is an optimal setup.

Medium and larger meetings pose a critical challenge in capturing the voices of the in-person meeting attendees. As the group gets larger, the distance from the talker to the microphone also increases and the microphone “hears” more of the room noises and reverberation, which sound hollow and dramatically reduces intelligibility for the remote attendees.

There are several ways to overcome this challenge, and all require low background noise and low reverberation characteristics. One is to use multiple microphones located throughout the in-person audience so everyone is closer to a microphone. These systems may be wired or wireless and may be manually or automatically controlled.

Another way to solve this challenge is through a new technology that uses ceiling-mounted beam-forming microphones. These detect and steer the microphone pickup pattern to focus on the talker in the audience, but require excellent room acoustics.

Speakers

Speakers in meeting rooms have several tasks to accomplish: reproduce the sound from the program and reproduce voices from remote attendees. Smaller huddle rooms can easily use the speakers built into the display or sound bar to provide these functions.

Speakers may also reinforce the voice of the in-room presenter. This is best provided through an array of ceiling speakers or a low-profile line array speaker located near the presenter.

Cameras

In a small huddle group meeting, attendees cluster around a single camera and remote attendees can see the facial expressions and gestures of any of the in-person attendees. This visual presentation is critical for more effective communication among in-person and remote attendees.

For medium-sized meetings with 15 to 30 attendees, automation allows the cameras to compose an appropriate image of the talker for the far site to see and understand what is being said.

Some of the new medium-sized room technologies use a microphone array to control the cameras. This is effective if the attendees are seated around the system in a way that the camera has a good sightline to the attendee and if the room acoustics have low background noise and low reverberation, which typically requires sound absorption on the walls.

Displays

There are two images that must be displayed for the attendees in a hybrid meeting room. One is the presentation being shared by either an in-person or remote attendee. The other image is that of the remote attendees gallery.

Smaller hybrid meeting rooms can be easily served using a single, direct-view display; the virtual meeting application controls the windows on the display to present both images as needed.

Meeting rooms for larger groups (15 to 30 attendees) will typically require two displays; one for each of the two functions. The main center display has the presentation and a second display located in the front corner that has the gallery view of the remote attendees.

Ideally, if the meeting includes a presenter at a lectern, the room will include a third gallery view display at the back of the room so the presenter can see the remote attendees without having to look away from the in-person attendees.

Technology Design and Integration

The single most important take-away from this article is that the physical, acoustical and infrastructure characteristics of the meeting room itself are the most important factors affecting the successful implementation of hybrid technology, built-in or portable.

To get the right solution for the right space, research and seek out independent experts and consultants in the field of electro-acoustics and hybrid technology before making a buying decision. The difference between “good enough” and excellent will drive your reviews, guest satisfaction, and reputation in the long run.

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