

Virtual interactions

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The digital world of the 21st century developed drastically through technological advances with virtual interactions. The advanced technologies of the internet,

software, and hardware became critical components for social media, work, and general communication. Video-conferencing platforms, voice over internet protocol (VOIP) calls, texting systems, and image/document sharing became the norm during the pandemic. Wi-Fi and cellular coverage (4/5G) made remote work an option. It was the perfect storm that led to a revolution in how businesses were being conducted.

In this column, several researchers share their perspectives on how these changes during the pandemic have impacted them.

Senior Professor's Perspective

Dr. Clint Magill, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX

"Zoom was a lifesaver when it came to teaching students not allowed to come to class, but giving and grading tests was a huge problem (no drawings, etc.). Concern over cheating could not be eliminated, no matter the prevention tools available. I have found it to be a great tool for meeting with students for review session and even one-on-one meetings since my office is in the research wing of our building that is always locked. Virtual connections have also let me "attend" seminars that I would never have taken the time to cross campus for and have allowed our off-campus colleagues to regularly attend our plant pathology seminars. However, when we went back to in-person genetics seminars this semester, every speaker commented on how great it was to be 'live.'

We were able to replace our USAID-sponsored annual research meeting with colleagues in Senegal and Niger without the time needed for travel and jet-lag recovery, but the normal chance to plan together and get to know each other better during the meetings was lacking.

Virtual Faculty Senate meetings work reasonably well, but most participants turn off the camera, so there are lots of missing sensory guides from facial expressions. The same is true for Honor Council Hearings involving two faculty and two student "judges" along with the reporter and alleged violator although the cameras must remain on during the hearing.

For my wife's mostly 70 and older genealogical society, her paying for a ZOOM account provided much-needed contact with friends on a weekly basis. This was especially important to members living alone. The group even added members who were too far away to attend in-person meetings."

Research Scientist's Perspective

Chad Hayes, USDA-ARS, Lubbock, TX

"My experiences with virtual meetings have been positive for small one-on-one meetings or small group meetings. The larger meetings held virtually only were not ideal in my opinion. The breakout sessions and meeting format of large meetings seems like a burden to attend, and I've frequently skipped them. The personal conversations are missed by virtual meetings.

I do use Zoom a lot with students and employees for personal one-on-one meetings. Face-to-face meetings, even virtually, provide a level of accountability to specific projects. The ability to share the screen is really helpful, especially when there are problems an employee wants to visually show me. I also find sharing the screen helpful when students are writing research papers and theses. I attend an average of three virtual meetings per week."

Senior Administrative Officer's Perspective

Spencer Casey, Kansas State University, Statewide Research Extension Centers

"From an administrative perspective, a lot has changed in the last two years. Virtual meetings such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams have transformed collaboration and communication. Physical location is no longer a limiting issue. Employees can work from home or even in a hybrid mode. Basically, the workforce was forced to adapt and transform within the pandemic. The overlying benefit was the advancement of these tools in day-to-day operations. It is now common for real-time communication, screen sharing, virtual presentations, and collaborative editing/sharing of documents and spreadsheets. One might say it was a 'digital transformation' of the workplace."

Student Adviser's Perspective

Dheepthi Perumal, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX

"Students now have more options on how they gather information, whether it is through online classes, interviews, or counseling, which allows them to get the help they need and build interactions amongst faculty and staff. Improved interactions have allowed for higher levels of student engagement, which has helped their educational development. In return, employees have had an increase in high quality feedback given to better adapt and provide for the needs of the students through more frequent interactions.

However, with exponential growth has come some consequences with virtual interactions between students and staff. Specifically, there is a lack in the development of social skills within the current student population. Students are avoiding one another more, causing a decrease in social engagements and motivations to go out of their way to serve. This has led to an increase in conflicts due to miscommunication. Non-verbal cues are sometimes lost in virtual interactions, which is why we always ask students to have their video on when communicating virtually. With virtual interactions comes the need for technical support, which varies among the

students due to socioeconomic status. This can lead to some students being left behind while others excel."

Graduate Student's Perspective

Noah Wigans, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX

"Pros:

- It is definitely nice to be able to have a meeting with someone on the other side of the country through a virtual platform as it is a little bit more personal for one-on-one conversations than a phone call.
- It is convenient for attending meetings that students would not be able to for financial or logistical reasons.

Cons:

- Small meetings tend to be okay, but for large meetings, it is difficult to get good interaction and conversation between participants, especially in a lecture scenario.
- It is difficult to read the crowd and get a feel for engagement or understanding of what is being presented virtually.
- As someone earlier in their career, if you're in a virtual meeting with people more advanced, it can be even more difficult to get your thoughts in than in a standard meeting because people can't read your body language to know if you want to say something.
- It is far too easy to multi-task during a virtual meeting. If video is turned off, it would be easy to get distracted quickly working on something else."

Undergrad Student's Perspective

Morgan Barba, Fort Hays State University, Hays, KS

"When the pandemic first hit and our classes went to a Zoom format, I thought that I would thrive. I loved the thought of not having to turn on my camera (unless asked to) or get out of my pajamas as I could just do school from my kitchen table. While I enjoyed getting to work at my own pace and complete most of my assignments virtually, I began to notice drawbacks. One of the first drawbacks was the lack of relationship between students and instructors because most students never turned on their cameras. Therefore, the instructor only knew the name of the student, not allowing them to get to know them personally. Another drawback was the inability to receive constructive feedback or help from the instructor. I found this to be the most difficult when conducting a lab class online as students are unable to know whether they are doing the experiment correctly at home. Finally, students are unable to build connections with their classmates who may have similar majors or interests because they are simply there to log on for attendance. While I think Zoom classes can improve efficiency in a curriculum, I feel as though it truly stunts students' social skills and networking abilities."

The exponential growth that virtual interactions went through in the past couple of years has provided such an advancement in communication amongst individuals. However, there were consequences to this rapid change to virtual communication in both the education and employment environments: stunting in social development skills, falling behind for some individuals who could not meet its demands, and navigating the numerous other struggles and complexities associated with this shift. The question now arises: how do we find the balance moving forward between in-person and virtual interactions?

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