

As Video Conferencing Becomes the Norm, Some Question Whether It's Hurting Business

 adweek.com/brand-marketing/as-video-conferencing-becomes-the-norm-some-question-whether-its-hurting-

By Robert Klara

April 7,
2020



If there's any executive that understands the importance of professional behavior on a video conference call, it's Frank Weishaupt.

Two years ago, the Boston-based serial entrepreneur took the helm as CEO of Owl Labs, whose core product was Meeting Owl, a 360-degree mic/speaker/camera combo that highlights everyone in a virtual meeting. And so, with prospects to call, clients to support and a Boston office full of employees now working from home, Weishaupt hasn't just been doing a lot of video conferencing lately—he's been effectively showcasing his product through his own on-screen behavior.

It was unfortunate, then, that during a recent video conference the CEO conducted while at home, his 7-year-old son Cooper decided to be part of the meeting, too.

"[He] was playing dodgeball and ran into the screen in his underpants," Weishaupt recalled. "They were BB-8 underpants from Star Wars. It's not exactly the way I would have scripted it."

Two or three weeks ago, it might have been easy to criticize such a lack of decorum, were it not for the fact that many of us have seen or been the source of moments similar to this one. Even before the onset of COVID-19 sent office workers home, 4.7 million Americans worked beneath their own roofs. Today, of course, that figure is many times higher—easily into the tens of millions.

For this newly created class of homebound 9-to-5 workers, the easiest way to maintain office protocols like staff and client meetings are videoconferencing tools like Zoom, Skype and Google Hangouts. And since a good many of the people using online video are new to these platforms—and new to working from home, period—the past couple of weeks have given rise not only to wide-eyed, kid-in-his-underwear moments, but to the sort of widespread insouciance that the average American office simply isn't used to.

“Working from a home is a personal thing,” said Scott Cawood, CEO of HR executive association World at Work. “Employees are opening a very intimate part of their lives to their bosses and coworkers.”

Colleagues who've rarely been seen wearing anything other than dress shirts and pressed blouses are now appearing on camera in hoodies, pajamas or less than that. Professionals used to working at a desk are now installed on the sofa or in bed. Family members, paramours and pets make cameos in the frame as, of course, do people's private living spaces—complete with dirty laundry on the floor and the sounds of flushing toilets in the background.

Or worse. There was the story published in the New York Post about the university student who logged onto a video class just as her boyfriend rose buck naked from the sofa behind her. There was the BBC reporter on Skype who forgot that the camera was aimed at piece of artwork on the wall that showed a man fisting a cow. And there was the now-infamous instance of the woman who forgot her camera was on and sat down on the toilet.

“Right now, especially as people adapt to this change, [our colleagues are getting] a rare glimpse of our own living spaces,” said brand consultant and writer David Deal. “Sometimes the results are humorous and sometimes they're a little unsettling, but they're always interesting.”

Fortunately, most breaches of office etiquette are not this glaring. But if there's a trend that's emerged as much of America works from home, it's this: Even in the age of the casual workplace, a new era of informality has arrived.

If you do WFH and have a Skype meeting, always consider if the 'art' on the wall is:

A) In shot

B) Appropriate pic.twitter.com/CqRAvCV4AF

— Gareth Barlow (@GarethBarlow) [March 18, 2020](#)

“This new paradigm has become the new normal, and what you’re seeing is the Venn diagram of public personas and private personas,” said Robert Passikoff, a psychologist and founder of consultancy Brand Keys. “It sets up a very interesting opportunity to judge people in ways that you probably never thought about.”

Yet therein lays a dynamic that should give every office worker pause. As millions of us are treated to fleeting-yet-telling glimpses into the personal realms of business partners and clients, is any of it affecting business itself? Is seeing a colleague with bedhead and a tank top undermining a workplace relationship? If the CEO appears onscreen sitting in front of a velvet Elvis painting on the wall, is his or her authority somehow undermined?

Experts agree that it’s a stretch to suggest that all of this sudden informality might manifest itself on the balance sheet. But Passikoff said it’s also clear that the stolen looks many of us are getting into one another’s private lives are changing us—sometimes in ways we aren’t even aware of.

“You [may] not [be] reacting negatively, but I’d lay a million to one that you’re acting differently,” he said. “All of a sudden, your interactions have become different because now they’re being modified by information that you never had before.”

Will you respect me after this meeting?

While it might be easy to raise an eyebrow at a colleague who’s wearing a stained T-shirt or trying to talk above the din of a barking dog, it’s worth pointing out that most office workers don’t actually want to be working from home right now.

Brian Kropp, research chief for Gartner’s HR practice, points to his firm’s finding that 75% of employees who have the option to work remotely still choose to head into the office. And since many enjoy the friendships, camaraderie and interpersonal banter that office settings can provide, Kropp ventures that the little slip-ups that happen during videoconferencing might actually be a substitution for the former.

“What’s actually going on with all of that is ways that people [are establishing a] proxy for emotional connections that they were getting when they came into the workplace,” he said. “So, to some degree it’s OK they’re doing it because people need those connections.”

Another truth to emerge from the Zoom era is that squirm-inducing moments are almost

always unintentional. An employee sitting in bed, for example, might simply be there because it's closest to the wireless router. As for the laptop cameras showing revealing scenes, Weishaupt said that many people don't understand that colleagues on a videoconference "might be able to view more than you can actually see yourself."

Even so, is any of it harmful—to employees or to the companies they work for? Perhaps.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/O-tjwY9BIJA>

For one thing, humans are a judgmental lot and so, for instance, the employee with a decorating style that's gaudy or tasteless might well suffer some reputational damage in the eyes of colleagues—damage that could potentially manifest itself at some later date.

Passikoff conjures the analogy of watching shows like *Open House* or *MTV Cribs* that lead viewers through celebrity mansions. Invariably, he said, a moment comes when the viewer thinks, "Wow, these people have no taste at all. They have money, but no taste," Passikoff said.

"If you don't think that one single episode has done something to the perception of that celebrity, you're crazy," he continued. "And the same model is in operation with businesspeople."

This loss of collegial respect is likely to increase as you move up the corporate totem pole. Few people care that a 20-something colleague happens to live in a tiny, messy apartment full of used Ikea furniture, for example. But if it's a senior vp or the CEO on the call, chances

are high that they will be judged by the living space that shows up onscreen. And while a messy space or vulgar décor is bad enough, even a luxurious environment can be a liability in the eyes of the rank and file.

As a service to our community, coronavirus-related articles are available to everyone with a free Adweek membership. Never miss a key story by signing up for our First Things First newsletter and consider gaining full access and supporting Adweek journalism with an Adweek Pro Subscription.