

Videoconferencing (Polycom) Distance Education¹

J. L. Gillett-Kaufman, A. C. Hodges, and R. K. Thomas²

The Advantages of Videoconferencing

Are you interested in improving your productivity and available funds by reducing travel time? Consider using the Polycom® videoconference system for your next meeting. All UF/IFAS RECs have this technology available, and a full listing of UF/IFAS facilities with videoconference capabilities is available at <http://icsde.ifas.ufl.edu/site-map.shtml>. The initial costs of Polycom® videoconference equipment is well spent by reducing travel expenditures and saving time for meeting participants. The cost of using Polycom® for a videoconference is free once the initial cost to purchase a system has been covered. If hands-on activities are unnecessary, videoconferencing can be extremely effective. More information on the costs and benefits of videoconferencing is available in Vergot (2004).

Scheduling

There are plenty of resources and individuals that can provide assistance to you in scheduling your videoconference meeting, but its important to plan as much in advance as possible to avoid any complications. Ideally, you should know which sites will be connected at least two weeks prior to the session. Official UF/IFAS In-Service Training (IST) sessions should be scheduled months in advance as this is required for the IFAS approval process. Potential participants can then register to attend via the IST website at http://pdec.ifas.ufl.edu/in-service_training/.

One of the organizers for the IST must contact each participant to determine the site at which they will attend. Even though the Polycom® videoconferencing system can handle multiple sites, there is a limit for optimum quality. A maximum of 16 sites can be connected if they are all higher quality sites such as the RECs. Lower quality sites reduce the number that can be connected with optimum clarity. It is recommended that you list which sites you plan to offer for an IST and the criteria for exceptions. Multiple states can join into a videoconference but the site number and quality limitations also apply.

In order to schedule a videoconference in UF/IFAS, you will probably need to communicate with two main groups 1) UF, Office of Academic Technology and 2) CALS Center for Online Learning and Technology (COLT). Ideally, with advanced planning you will have your location IP addresses available at least two weeks prior to your scheduled meeting. An IP address (Internet Protocol address) is a unique number that devices use in order to identify and communicate with each other on a computer network. Remember that use of the Polycom® videoconferencing system is on a first come, first served basis. Earlier reservations better ensure that you will be able to host your meeting at your preferred date and time. More information, including detailed links to necessary forms can be found on the Video and Collaboration Services website <http://video.ufl.edu/main/conferencing.php>. Again, its a good idea to already verify IP addresses of definite sites that are connecting at this time.

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2. J. L. Gillett-Kaufman, assistant Extension scientist, A. C. Hodges, assistant director-SPDN, Entomology and Nematology Department, and R. K. Thomas, Coordinator of Distance Education, CALS Center for Online Learning and Technology (COLT), Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

You will also need to confirm the training times and locations with all IT personnel associated with sites that will be used for the session. They will be your key contact for logistics arrangements and for troubleshooting any potential problems with the Polycom® at their respective sites. The IFAS videoconference website <http://icsde.ifas.ufl.edu/videoconferencing.shtml> provides you with IT contact information.

Finally, are you looking to videotape your training session? If so, it is best to broadcast from McCarty Hall Room G001. You will need to specify this request when you contact COLT staff. Again, early reservations and coordination are highly recommended for optimal planning.

Quick Checklist for Scheduling a Successful Videoconference

- Identify all sites that you would like to connect to your videoconference and obtain their IP addresses at least 2 weeks prior the meeting/conference.
- Visit the VCS website, fill-out the proper paperwork, and communicate with COLT as appropriate.
- Communicate with IT personnel at Polycom® sites, first by e-mail, and follow-up with phone messages as needed.
- Ensure that IT personnel at Polycom® sites have 1) reserved a meeting room 2) provided an LCD project and a laptop and 3) downloaded the presentations to the laptop from a website prior to the conference.
- Provide your conference presentations on a website for download (or mail CD-ROMs) at least one week prior to the meeting if possible.
- Maintain a list of emergency IT telephone numbers in case something goes wrong with the set-up.
- Ensure that the participants know the meeting room location of the Polycom® for the site that they will attend.

Facilitator Guidelines for Better Videoconferences

1. Turn on the videoconferencing system at the very beginning of test time, rather than waiting until right before the conference begins. This will give the conference technicians more time to correct any problems that may arise. Test time usually begins 15 to 30 minutes before the conference, depending upon the number of sites and the complexity of the presentations.
2. Make sure that handouts and any other presentation materials are ready and available to participants.
3. Adjust the lighting in the room for the best possible picture. For instance, do not turn out the lights in the room

to make your LCD projector appear brighter if your audience will be interacting with other sites. If your audience is sitting in front of windows on a bright day, close the curtains or blinds.

4. Encourage participants to sit in a closer grouping, and closer to a microphone. People don't like to be told where to sit, but this would make it much easier for other sites to see and hear whoever is speaking. Don't put microphones close to the monitor and/or the audio speakers.
5. Use your camera control or preset buttons to zoom in on small groups or individuals who are speaking. Once again, this makes better use of the interactivity so other sites can see facial expressions and gestures of the speaker.
6. Mute your mike as soon as your site finishes speaking. When you don't, the undertone echo is a little distracting even with the echo cancellation software. Also, your site may contend with other sites for control of the picture.
7. Advise participants beforehand not to conduct conversations while someone else at the site is speaking. This is particularly bad when the conversationalists are closer to the mike than the speaker.
8. Make sure that you have an emergency number for the bridge operator and the technician responsible for your own equipment. If there is a technical problem with your participation in the conference, follow the separate list of troubleshooting procedures that has been distributed to each site.
9. For best results, stay in the room during the presentation so that you can perform the functions mentioned above and quickly deal with any problem that may arise. Each site should have a primary facilitator and a backup facilitator who is equally conversant with the equipment and procedures. If you must leave the room, be sure that you have given clear and complete instructions to a specific person in the room (student or participant) who will then be responsible for all these procedures.

Presenter Guidelines for Better Videoconferencing

1. Avoid clothing with small checks, thin stripes or intricate patterns. These will produce a moire effect (crawling, strobing) from the cameras which will look like you have a horde of locusts in your clothes.
2. If you are given a wireless lapel microphone, avoid wearing long necklaces or large pins or name tags that may knock against the mike. Refrain from coughing downward into the mike or using hand gestures that may hit the mike. Turn off your cell phone or PDA because they will interfere

with the wireless signal. If there is a fixed microphone on the podium or instructor station, do not wander away from it or turn your head to look at the projector screen as you speak. Also, do not pound the podium or tap your fingers next to the mike.

3. If your audience has push to talk microphones, remind them to press the buttons when they are asking questions. If they forget to do so, repeat the question so that the other sites can understand the context of your answer.

4. If you are using a document camera to show transparencies or to write or draw something for your presentation, make sure that the camera is focused, that your material is straight and framed correctly, and that the camera is zoomed in enough to make your material legible. Your facilitator or technician will explain how to do this beforehand.

5. If you are displaying Web pages or computer screens for some software program, keep in mind that the smallest text will not be readable to the audiences at other sites. You can show general layouts or large text and graphics, but you will have to verbally describe the smaller elements.

6. If you are using a PowerPoint presentation, use a sans-serif font such as Arial and make sure that it is bold face. A shadow usually helps against colored backgrounds. The background should be plain or with an unobtrusive pattern; avoid backgrounds of images or busy patterns. In different situations it may be preferable to use dark text on a light background, or light text on a dark background; however, do not use an illegible combination like black text on a dark blue background. The text size should be at least 24 point; 28 point or higher is even better. Try not to use more than six to eight lines per slide. Be sure to leave substantial margins on all four sides if your presentation is being videotaped or videoconferenced, so that the video format does not cut off the edges. If you have images or graphics, try to make them at least a quarter of the total area of the slide. If detail in the image is important, they should be full screen. If you have embedded video, make sure that the video file is on the computer along with the PowerPoint file. If you want to point to specific things on a slide, use the mouse to move the cursor rather than pointing to the screen in the room.

7. If you wish to show video in some other form than a computer file, make sure that the site facilitator has the capability to play that format (e.g., VHS, S-VHS, Beta or Digital tape) and that you have the video cued to the starting point.

8. If multiple sites are in the conference, try to address them specifically by site name or by the name of a facilitator or

someone you know at the site. Give each site a chance to ask questions in addition to the questions being asked by the audience in the room with you.

IST Sample Logistics

Introduction

- Participants should check in at the beginning of the program.
- It is best to have a list of sites and ask each site to check-in individually.
- If COLT personnel are running the IST from McCarty Hall, they will handle site check-in.
- Remind participants that all microphones should remain in the muted position unless a question is being asked.
- Any unused sites can be disconnected from the bridge after check-in to allow additional sites to be added.

Lecture format

- Presenters should announce slide changes so the group can remain synchronized.

Roundtable discussions

- Each participant should give a brief introduction to stimulate questions.
- Roundtable members can be at remote locations.
- All participants should be introduced or introduce themselves.

Adjourn

- Post IST surveys or tests can be delivered on the website from which PowerPoint presentations were accessed.
- Polycom® videoconferencing system microphones and monitors are switched off.
- Projectors and computers are shut down and secured.

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Reference

Vergot, Pete, III. 2004. Using Web-Based Interactive Video to Enhance University of Florida IFAS Extension. *Journal of Extension* <http://www.JOE.org>. June 2004 Volume 42 Number 3. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2004june/index.php>.