"Improving the Audio Conference Experience"
By Gary Audin

We have all attended conference calls where you can't hear well, the meeting is disorganized or people are not engaged. Selecting the best technology, combined with an effective moderator and cooperative attendees, can make all the difference. Here are some recommendations that can help deliver effective and productive conference calls.

Penalties of a Bad Conference Call

When participating in a conference call, it is expected that the call will have remote attendees that cannot be personally in the meeting room. The goal is for the attendees to listen and participate, discuss problems and move forward to attain some goal or goals.

A poorly managed conference call leads to attendee dissatisfaction or stalled projects. The time of the participants is wasted. A string of poor conference calls may prompt attendees to arrive late or not at all. Some may not pay attention and work on email or other distractions, thereby rendering their attendance useless. Bored attendees may be more reluctant to agree on the results of the conference call. In all these cases, the conference call is unproductive.

The Right Technology

There are many competing conferencing products on the market. Not all are equal. One product that has the features to help address sound quality, wherever participants are seated, is the VTech ErisStation™ Conference Phone with Wireless Mics, which comes with four removable, wireless microphones that leverages Orbitlink Wireless Technology™.

Consider this list of capabilities as the standard you should require in conferencing products:
- A compact design and features that eliminate conference table clutter
- DECT 6.0 technology which provides high quality distortion-free sound between the microphones and the base unit
- Long battery life such as eight hours of talk time and 70+ hours of standby operation to support long conference calls
- Automatic gain control that ensures that the speaker volume is always acceptable
- Dynamic noise reduction to filter out extraneous sounds picked up by the microphones
- Acoustic echo cancellation technology, which enables full-duplex technology for natural-feeling, two-way discussions
- Resistance to interference from mobile phones and other wireless devices
- Easy-to-read displays

Proactive Moderator

Good technology helps, but a good conference moderator can lead an effective conference call by preparing and conducting the call in an organized manner. The moderator should:

- Provide an agenda and schedule in advance to all potential attendees
- Schedule the call so that it occurs with the least inconvenience for the attendees
- Take attendance
- Announce the objectives at the beginning of the call
- Provide a tech support number and/or website
- Request non-speakers mute their microphones when not speaking
- Keep to the agenda and schedule
- If the call lasts more than one hour, schedule a break
- Limit speaker digressions
- Speak clearly and slowly
- Record the call or have someone take notes
- Open the call to others periodically for feedback
- Summarize the call results and actions to be taken

VTech ErisStation™ Conference Phone with Wireless Mics VCS704

Responsible Attendee

Every conference call needs active attendees to make a call successful. The attendees have a responsibility to make their participation useful and productive. The attendees should:

- Connect on time
- Locate the microphone in a quiet location
- Remove distractions like PCs, tablets and mobile devices
- Never turn on music on hold
- Have their material for participation available and organized
- Ensure they use the mute button, not the hold button
- Announce themselves when speaking
- Speak precisely and unambiguously
- Try to use a landline, not a mobile phone during the call
- Speak only when you have something to offer
- Avoid social conversations

With the best phone technology, an effective moderator and responsible attendees, a conference call can produce useful results. It can also, if properly managed, actually encourage attendees to look forward to future conference calls.

Gary Audin has more than 40+ years of computer, communications and security consulting and implementation experience. He has planned, designed, specified, implemented, and operated data, LAN, and telephone networks. These have included local area, national and international networks as well as VoIP and IP convergent networks in the U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia, Caribbean, and Asia. Gary Audin's many articles can be found on www.webtorials.com, www.telecomreseller.com, www.colaborativeplanet.com, and www.acuta.org. He writes a weekly blog on communications subjects that can be found at www.nojitter.com and publishes technical tips at www.searchtelecom.com, www.searchnetworks.com and www.searchunifiedcommunications.com.