

3

Working in virtual groups

AIMS

- A To lead conference calls effectively
- B To develop language skills for conference calls
- C To learn about success factors in virtual meetings
- D To develop cross-cultural presentation skills

A Discussion and listening

Think about it 1 What is your experience of participating in or leading conference calls? How much of your working week do you spend on these calls?

2 How often do you finish a call feeling frustrated because of an unsatisfactory outcome? Give examples and suggest reasons.

Listen to this 3  **11** Listen to an interview with Karen Skelton, a product technology department head with Alimenton, a European-based food and drink producer. She has a lot of experience leading international projects with teams around the world. She discusses the logistics of conference calls (which she refers to as *telcos*). As you listen, answer these questions.



- a According to Karen, why is it 'vital that things run smoothly'?
- b Why could it be difficult for a factory manager to take part in a conference call?
- c What is not usually discussed in conference calls?
- d What is Karen's biggest challenge?

4 a  **12** Listen to the second part of the interview and decide whether each of these statements is true (T) or false (F).

- a The main objective of Karen's calls is to clarify the status of the project.
- b She thinks everyone should have a high level of English to participate.
- c Asian participants often ask people to repeat points during a call.
- d As a facilitator, Karen doesn't think she should say much during the call.
- e She encourages people to use language which is easy for everyone to understand.

b How important is a good language level in conference calls?

Focus on language 5  **12** Karen talks about a lot of competences needed to run a successful virtual meeting. Listen to the second part of the interview again and complete these sentences.

- a ... the main purpose is normally to everybody
..... on the progress of a project ...
- b ... to important milestones have been reached ...
- c We need to an in which it's OK to admit you don't understand ...
- d ... to to use simple words ...
- e After all, it's about as simply as you can!

6 Match the sentence beginnings (1–7) with the endings (a–g) to make a short description of each competence.

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|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 Circulate the agenda | a the right people at the right time. |
| 2 Communicate | b each participant fully. |
| 3 Gather together | c opinions fully. |
| 4 Check | d at least a day beforehand. |
| 5 Encourage | e there are no technology problems. |
| 6 Discuss | f ideas effectively. |
| 7 Involve | g the use of simple language. |

7 Read this 'to do' list for a busy virtual manager who needs to prepare for his weekly team meeting. Match each of the concepts from Exercise 6 with each of these action points.

NOTES TO SELF

- i Book teleconference suite, speak to tech. officer re: equipment (problems with sound last week).
- ii Send invites to dept. heads - choose participants.
- iii Make note - remind participants: no jargon!
- iv Write proper meeting notes - no improvising!!
- v Make sure all get to speak equally (no dominators).
- vi Keep an eye on Luis - he often gets the wrong message.
- vii Agenda - copies to all pre-meeting.

Let's talk 8 Think about leading your virtual meetings. What do you find most challenging? In small groups, use this list to discuss the potential challenges when leading conference calls. Rank them in order of importance.

- Covering all the material on the agenda.
- People multi-tasking or not paying attention.
- Making necessary decisions.
- Establishing an action plan.
- Dealing with technical or communication issues.
- Getting everyone focused and participating.
- Keeping the meeting on track.
- Ease of use (and knowledge) of the technology platform.

9 You have a regular conference call, and the same issues arise very frequently. How would you deal with the following?

- a Four of the eight participants are English native speakers. They tend to dominate, using very colloquial language, making 'in' jokes among themselves and speaking very fast. The other four participants (French, Japanese and two Spaniards) don't participate much.
- b Two colleagues regularly ring in from their mobile phones. They are usually in traffic, using the 'hands-free' facility to drive and speak/listen. Other people don't comment, but a lot of time is used during the call asking the two people to repeat what they have said because of noise interference.

