What's the Best Way To Convert Meeting Rooms To Video Conferencing Rooms?

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It's official — most executives and employees like remote working and want it to continue after the pandemic, at least part of the time.

Recently, 83% of executives in a PwC survey said the shift to remote working has been successful. Less than 20% of executives want to return to pre-pandemic in-office routines and 13% are ready to ditch the office entirely. The rest are figuring out the right balance, taking into consideration that 87% of employees say the office is important for collaborating and building relationships – yet they lean toward more remote-working days than what executives would prefer.

Video conferencing is at the heart of remote working. Even organizations that return to the office full-time will be doing business with companies that work remotely.

Other surveys and reports have had similar findings. They also conclude that employees are more productive, not less, when working from home and shorter, more frequent video calls improve collaboration and provide needed social contact. In addition, sales professionals say they can have more meetings by video per day than when they're driving from site to site. Some employees spend 60% or more of their time on video calls.

Video conferencing is at the heart of remote working.
Even organizations that return to the office full-time will be doing business with companies that work remotely. So, the question becomes:

What's the fastest, most affordable way to convert your existing meeting rooms to video conferencing rooms?
Here's what one Leapfrog client learned when making the conversion and advice for making the most of your office space:

1. Boardrooms make lousy video conferencing rooms if you're going for fast and cheap

It's tough to make boardrooms deliver good results. They tend to be rectangular with big rectangular tables and lots of windows — all of which create challenges for cameras, lighting, and sound.

A typical webcam doesn't have the functionality you need for effective collaboration. The camera produces a static image and has to be far enough away from participants to get everyone in the frame. There are no pan, zoom, or tilt features that help identify and focus on who's talking, so it feels more like eavesdropping than a give-and-take discussion. Because of the distance, your remote participants can also miss body language and facial expressions, which are important for engagement.

Light coming in from the windows creates issues with the video quality and predictability. Natural light is unreliable. It can wash out the video feed, making it difficult to see anything, and introduce light that's reflecting off of other buildings, which interferes with the video signal. Even if your boardroom is an interior room, windows facing a hallway can create distractions for your remote guests when people walk by.

Fluorescent, overhead lighting isn't appealing, flattering, or professional-looking. It can also result in poor picture quality with too many shadows. The most natural-looking lighting is incandescent, comes from a variety of sources, is bright enough but not too bright, and is located outside of the camera frame.

Video conferencing using existing projectors is a non-starter. The video feedback from the projector light is worse than the feedback from the sun coming through the windows.

Sound is difficult to follow. Getting the audio right in a large room is a challenge. When a microphone is placed on top of the monitor or centered on the table, not all participants can be heard equally and remote participants can't easily distinguish who's speaking. Sub-par audio or audio with feedback is even more offputting than sub-par video.

Video conferencing on the same call while sitting next to each other causes feedback and confusion. While it might seem like a good idea for all participants in the room to use their laptop cameras and microphones for a video conference, each mic will pick up the sound from other people's computers and produce audio feedback. If you want to have Zoom or Zoom-like meetings, it's best to have everyone seated at their individual desks.

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2. Huddle rooms make much better video conferencing rooms

Huddle rooms fit three to six people and, pre-pandemic, were typically used for small internal meetings. Now, they make ideal video conferencing rooms if they're located on the interior of your office layout or can be made ideal with a few adjustments.

It's easier to create an effective video conferencing environment in a smaller room. You can more easily control the light and sound, it's less confusing to your remote guests, and your participants can get closer to the camera and screen. The meeting feels more like having a conversation.

Basic, good-quality conference room video cameras work well in small rooms. Since your remote participants can see your team's faces clearly, they're more likely to feel connected.

Interior rooms eliminate video problems created by light coming in through windows. Adding blackout curtains can also work.

Improving the lighting is a smaller job in smaller rooms. Swapping out fluorescent lights for incandescent lights or adding warm LED lighting can make a big difference, as can diffusing light through a semi-transparent material. Unlike large boardrooms or conference rooms, huddle rooms only have a few lights to retrofit. Adding dimmer switches is easy, too.

Getting high-quality sound from a central microphone in a smaller room is easier. A single microphone or device with multiple microphones placed between participants is a viable option when the seating area is small, and can be either placed on the table or hung from the ceiling.

Two 55-inch or larger video displays will do the trick. Your huddle room should be able to accommodate one display that's large enough to see your remote participants' faces and a second display to share and review documents.

When retrofitting larger rooms, experienced professionals can recommend color schemes, furniture textures, and seating placement and advise on how to manage light, sound, and distractions for video conferencing.

3. Retrofitting larger rooms is doable for an investment

For companies that want to go all-in on updating boardrooms or larger conference rooms, you can use more sophisticated, higher quality technologies and room design. Your updated space will present your participants in a way that looks natural, relaxed, and professional.

Install multiple cameras that are voice-activated by individual microphones. When the mic is triggered, the camera turns on automatically. This system operates likes an automated broadcast control room, showing a variety of speakers from a variety of camera angles to the remote participants based on who is speaking.

Choose video cameras with pan-tilt-zoom features. These cameras move, refocus, and zoom in on who's talking. Logitech or Polycom are the two nonproprietary companies that manufacture these video conferencing tools and others, if you want to design the system yourself.

Have a multimedia expert or lighting designer strategically place lighting fixtures and controls. The right combination of lights improves vertical illumination and creates lighting uniformity for each participant. For better viewing, it may be better to install your video displays in the middle of the room (parallel to the table) instead of at the ends.

Involve a meeting planner or interior designer to improve the way the room looks and sounds on video. Experienced professionals can recommend color schemes, furniture textures, and seating placement and advise on how to manage light, sound, and distractions for video conferencing. Don't forget the acoustics — you may need to eliminate echoes and background noise or install high-quality speakers.

Include your facilities and IT departments in the planning. There are a lot of details to cover, from the physical aspects of the room and technology you need (including wireless bandwidth), cable management, HVAC, and control panels. Remember to include employee training in your plan. If you partner with a managed IT provider, they may work with companies that specialize in room conversions so you don't have to start from scratch.

Regardless of the rooms you use for video conferencing or how you configure your space, you can boost camaraderie by continuing to break bread together remotely.

4. Reconfiguring your office space can make good business sense

If your company is one of the 80% or more of those making remote working part of your new-normal strategy, this may be a good time to reconfigure your floor plan. Engaging your employees in the process will create a shared sense of participation and ownership.

A space planner will be able to help you meet your new needs. This can include moving individual offices to the perimeter of your space, putting meeting rooms in interior areas, or creating more huddle rooms so you can have more simultaneous video conferences.

Vary your huddle rooms to accommodate different types of meetings. Consider creating rooms that mimic real life. You can have soft seating like couches and easy chairs, a booth-style arrangement, tall tables with bar stools, or an open space with movable seating and a large whiteboard.

Design with social distancing in mind. Until the pandemic is officially over, your team will need some breathing room while they video conference. Spaced seating, movable partitions, plexiglass shields, and other creative solutions can be integrated for safety and flexibility.

Regardless of the rooms you use for video conferencing or how you configure your space, you can boost camaraderie by continuing to break bread together remotely — there's no reason to give up on lunch meetings just because everyone's not in the same room. Order food for everyone and have the meals delivered at the same time. Digital scent technology (or olfactory technology) isn't available yet but it's in the works.

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