

Virtual meetings won't cause the demise of travel

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What's the Deal By Daniel Lesser

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(The views and opinions expressed in this blog are strictly those of the author.)

Video conferencing platforms are relatively inexpensive, convenient and readily available over the internet on a variety of devices. With the release of AT&T's Picturephone at the 1964 New York World's Fair, the introduction of video conferencing was famously expressed as a futuristic demonstration.

Several years later, the commercial rollout of video conferencing was expensive, clunky and ultimately a failure. Despite these setbacks, Bell Labs, AT&T's research and development division, and several large Japanese electronics companies persevered with additional unsuccessful attempts.



During the early 1990s, the World Wide Web was opened to the public. Internet availability, coupled with the mid-2000s introduction of laptops and smartphones with built-in webcams, finally rendered video conferencing viable for the masses. The increase

in video conferencing availability during the past 25 years has resulted in continuous predictions of the demise of corporate and group meeting and convention travel, which has yet to come to fruition.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, billions of people have been participants in the largest unintentional social experiment ever conducted, namely testing if video conferencing ultimately replaces face-to-face communication.

I recently completed two full days of service as a party-appointed arbitrator in connection with a hotel management company dispute. Utilizing the American Arbitration Association (AAA) Zoom platform, for the most part the proceeding went off without a hitch. Being able to assess the credibility of attorneys pleading their cases and the testimony of fact and expert witnesses was a challenge through the electronic platform.

Triers of fact decisions often hinge almost entirely on the testimony and credibility of witnesses. Evaluating a potential expert based on credentials and experience is only half the analysis. Particularly when a witness is addressing a complex subject, judges or jurors may have difficulty understanding the technicalities associated with their explanation and depend instead on credibility for evaluating the testimony. In other words, an arbiter or judge may rely on their impressions of a witness rather than a deponent's declarations of facts or opinions.

The use of video conferencing technology platforms has yet to trump the benefits of live human contact, as the ability to read the nuances of body language is lost. Looking someone in the eye is vastly different on a digital link compared with in person. In addition to facial expressions, face-to-face interaction results in people sending signals out with their eyes, which play a vital part in revealing an individual's thoughts and attitudes. Of all body language signals, one's eyes most accurately expose feelings and emotions. Currently available video conferencing applications tend to miss cues that humans utilize when communicating including gestures, postures and glances.

Although citizens of the world might be spending similar amounts of time participating in business and personal meetings, many find virtual gatherings to not be as effective, productive and satisfying as person human interaction. The current generation of video conferencing offers meeting participants a fixed gaze from one camera, resulting in attendees relegated to a single dimensional square on the screen.

Like many, I find video conferencing more challenging to process and retain information compared with face to face meetings, and the cumulative negative aspects of meeting virtually to be mentally exhausting.

COVID-19 will eventually pass to the point when we can once again meet in person. While virtual connectivity will continue to be a widely used tool for many, the notion of technology resulting in the demise of travel to meet in person currently remains farfetched.

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