



WEAVING A VIRTUAL PRESENCE: CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

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Cellphone service has dramatically improved since Verizon Wireless aired its "Can you hear me now?" commercials in the early 2000's. Our audio woes, however, have persisted. As the legal profession embraces a new culture of working from anywhere, communications struggles abound. Days of in-person meetings are replaced with web-based meetings with similar refrains: "Sorry, I was on mute." "Can everyone hear me?"

Investing in the right audio device (or devices) will help alleviate, though not completely resolve, today's audio issues. When it comes to audio, while the options are endless, not all are created equal. Before you can decide on a device, you must first decide how you are going to use it. What devices will you use it with - your laptop? Your tablet? Your phone? All of the above? Different options work better with laptops or mobile devices, and some will only work with one.

CONNECTING YOUR HEADSET TO YOUR DEVICES

If you're only joining web meetings and calls from your laptop, a headset that connects via USB may meet your needs well. If, however, you need to also use it with your tablet or cellphone, a USB connection isn't going to work. Bluetooth (assuming your laptop has Bluetooth chip) will work across multiple devices. If your laptop doesn't have a Bluetooth chip, you can get a Bluetooth USB adapter for less than \$20, although it will occupy one of your laptop's USB ports.

If you're going to use your audio device with your laptop or tablet, what freedom of motion do you need? If you need to be able to walk across the room or into another room, if you like to pace about, a wired option won't work. If, however, you're only going to use it while seated at your device, such as for meetings including webcams, or while holding your phone, wires may be a nonissue.

For those who are less mobile during meetings, wired headsets are your best bet. They have better audio quality for the price and there are fewer settings to tinker with. However, they require a free port (typically USB port or a headphone jack); many newer phones don't have headphone jacks. Further, the last thing most people need is another cord to keep organized and untangled when in transit.

Bluetooth headsets require that Bluetooth be enabled on the paired device (your laptop, tablet, or cellphone). You must then pair the headset with the device - you typically only need to do this once, but depending on the devices being paired, you may have to jump through a few hoops. Each time you want to use the headset, it must be

connected to the appropriate device. Often, your Bluetooth headset will automatically reconnect, but sometimes it won't and sometimes you have to re-pair them altogether.

If you want to go wireless but avoid Bluetooth, you can connect your headset to your laptop via USB without wires. Many headsets include cradles to place the headset when not use - the cradle connects to your laptop via a USB cord and charges your headset between meetings. Some cradles even charge a spare battery that can be easily swapped out if you don't have time to charge your headset during a full day of meetings.

Other headsets communicate with a dongle that you plug into a USB port on your laptop, much like most wireless keyboards and mouse. These suffer substantially fewer pairing and connection issues than Bluetooth headsets, but they require a free port on your laptop and don't work with tablets and cellphones that don't have USB ports.

FEATURES

Where do you plan on using your headset? A quiet home office is less taxing on the technology and the ears of your colleagues than an airport, the local coffee shop, or a home office that has children and pets creating a ruckus. Higher-end headsets include noise cancelling capabilities that minimize background noise, making it easier for others to hear you regardless of your location. Most headsets that cancel out background noise cost more than those that do not, so you may not need to pay for that feature if it's unnecessary.

If you go wireless, do you need to be able to mute and unmute yourself when you are away from your device? A mute button can be an invaluable addition to a wireless headset. If you go on mute to sneak away from your desk to get a cup of coffee during a long call, it's nice to be able to unmute from the kitchen if someone unexpectedly asks you a question.

FIT

Headsets generally fit one of two ways - over-the-ear or in-the-ear. Either style can be wired or wireless. In-the-ear designs (think Apple's AirPods), are generally smaller and easy to toss in your pocket or bag. Many wireless in-the-ear headsets come with a case that charges the headsets while they are not in use. The case itself then gets charged as needed. The headsets themselves have no charging ports and relatively small battery, decreasing their size.

While in-the-ear styles are easier to carry around, fit can be issue. Different people have different sized ear canals and differently shaped ears. What may comfortably fit in one person's ear may not fit another person's ear well. If you plan to use your headset on the move (especially the joggers out there), it's critical that the headset stay in your ear well, despite all of the jostling around. Many in-the-ear headsets come with a handful of inserts to help with fit.

Even if your in-the-ear headset fits well, you may find them uncomfortable after a while. Many people report headache and earaches caused by prolonged use. If you find yourself in this camp, consider over-the-ear designs. Most over-the-ear styles fit most people without worrying about replacing parts. Over-the-ear headsets come in two primary styles - over-the-head (think back the days of Walkmans) and behind-the-neck. For those joining web meetings with video, behind-the-neck headphones may interfere less with your hair style.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I've thrown a lot of information at you to give you the lay of the land. Here's where the rubber meets the road on each style:

In-ear models: If you're in the Apple/iOS camp, go with AirPods(\$160 or \$200, if you want a wireless charging case) or AirPods Pro (\$250), depending on whether you want the noise-cancelling feature of AirPods Pro. The AirPods work with all Apple products, including computers. If you're on iOS but also Windows, on Windows machines, AirPods behave like generic Bluetooth headphones.

If you're not in the Apple ecosystem, there's no advantage to paying a premium for AirPods. For the in-ear models, look at the Jabra Elite 65t (\$150) or Elite 75t (\$180). The difference is battery size / talk time. Both models come in "Active" variants with the same features but with added water protection (IP57 versus IP55).

For wired, over-the-ear models, Poly's Blackwire series is an excellent starting point. They're priced between \$50 and \$200, depending on features. For wireless, over-the-ear models, I would go with Bose noise-cancelling headphones (~\$300). They're pricey, but more useful than other options, especially at blocking out airplane noise when we can safely fly again.

SAMPLE