



Blog: Drop the Mic!

From Baby Boomers to Millennials: How to Choose the Right Conferencing Mic

Installing a conferencing microphone system isn't what it used to be because offices have changed. Learn what millennials expect from a conferencing mic.

Cubicles are coming down, working lunches over laptops are the norm, and jeans are acceptable Monday through Friday – and that's when we even bother putting on pants and coming in to the office at all.

It's not your father's office anymore.

Even offices that don't have cubicle-free open floor plans are shifting their cultures to be more collaborative, and a new generation of specifiers are designing spaces and meeting rooms with moveable furniture and integrated AV equipment for maximum configurability.

However, many times this focus on collaboration is coming at the expense of quality audio and negatively impacting the ability to record and distribute high-end audio.

Losing touch of what makes a quality conferencing microphone system

"Everybody wants their space to look like Google, [and that means] that they're losing touch with the requirements for a quality conferencing mic in the workplace," says Christopher Maione, principal of Northport, New York-based Christopher Maione Associates.

"Whether it be an open conference room or an enclosed conference room, the next generation of AV and IT decision makers are not seeing the need or the importance of what I would call a real conferencing microphone system versus a junk mic they can get on Amazon."

Maione suggests that this could be a contributing factor to part of a seemingly larger devaluation of quality audio technology among younger IT professionals in the AV industry.

"The basic goal of any conference or meeting is to collaborate, and share, and discuss information," says Mike Solomon, co-founder of Cardone, Solomon & Associates, Inc.

“It’s really important that people are heard and clearly understood, whether they’re sitting in a room together, or whether people are, for example, in multiple locations, New York, Chicago, London, Zurich, San Francisco, and another room in Tokyo, in a multi-time zone, global, collaborative video conference.”

The future of conferencing mics is tied to AV furniture

Paradoxically, the loss of high-quality audio in these collaborative spaces can undermine the very collaboration it is meant to enhance, especially since so many of these meetings are dialing in remote employees and partners.

The problem here is that when the heavy oak conference tables got tossed to the wayside, so too did the built-in microphones.



“First of all, it is very important to understand that the best conferencing mic position in any application is as close as possible to the source”, says Robert Moreau, Managing Director of Clockaudio.

“Yet, today’s meeting rooms often trade the conference table with multiple mic points, or the traditional dais with a built-in mic, in favor of moveable furniture that typically is not mounted with microphones.

“However, the further the microphone is from the source, you end up picking up more room sound and less direct sound. This creates a real challenge when trying to communicate effectively,” Moreau says.

But conferencing mic placement is not the only challenge for a great conferencing microphone system, because beyond just the logistics, there seems to be a general lack of appreciation for the utility of high-quality audio among some AV / IT professionals.

Generational differences... They do play a role

When asked why there might be a disparate valuation regarding audio quality between the generations, Maione adds his insight.

“As baby boomers, many of us have lived in a world before video conference even existed. We used to do things only by audio conference. Along the way, we learned that 80 percent or better of the communication comes from audio, and in many instances, 100 percent because we never had video.”

Maione adds, “Now that we do have video, I don’t think the majority of millennials realize how important the audio portion is simply because now they have both (audio and video). I imagine if we took away the video, they’d realize just why older generations feel the audio quality is so critical in the design process and to the overall “experience”, something that Millennials do seem to be very focused on.”

Outside of the professional realm, Moreau says that it’s the personal experiences of the different generations that also leads to different expectations for audio quality.

“Gen X-ers, and especially Baby Boomers, value audio in a major way because we were raised in a Hi-Fidelity era,” says Moreau.

“This was the craze at the time and the evolution of audio was pretty amazing. We saw recordings go from mono to stereo, from vinyl to CD, with amplifiers, speakers and everything else getting better and better sonically.

Essentially, for Baby Boomers and many Gen X-ers, a great conferencing microphone system at the time was similar to today’s iPod, iPhone, iPad, app craze.”

In some ways, the evolution of office culture mirrors the evolution of audio – as portability has improved and audio has merged with video, sound quality has “devolved”.



“Today, younger generations in the AV work force are listening to poor quality iTunes, compressed audio over earbuds, and they have a completely different understanding of what good audio is,” Maione says.

Targeting Millennials better

Providing some insight into the Millennial mind, Wes Lambert, project engineer at Manhattan-based Spectra Audio Design Group shares, “As Millennials, we don’t necessarily think of audio and video as being two separate things.”

“We have cellphones right now you could take out of your pocket and you could use to FaceTime with someone. You don’t think of it as being two different technologies necessarily. You just look at it as being one product that just works, and you can communicate with somebody.”

While acknowledging that there may be challenges with convincing Millennials about the importance of sound quality, Maione says it’s important to acknowledge that this up and coming generation has helped direct a new world of wireless connections with better integration and more user-friendly interfaces – or no interfaces at all.

All of which he feels is a byproduct of new users, innovators and products.

“I think what we’ve learned from the next generation is that we need to cut the cord,” Maione says. “We used to plug in a LAN cable because we needed internet connection, and now, nobody plugs in a LAN cable. Everything is wireless.”

“I think that the fact [Millennials] like to streamline and make things easier forces us to revisit how we do things, and to improve on the methods we have used in the past, which I think is great,” says Moreau. “This is all part of moving forward.”

Lambert, himself a Millennial, agrees there’s often a lack of importance placed on a conferencing microphone system in new spaces, but he doesn’t think it’s a generational divide.

“I think, in general, people just look at a microphone as being a microphone, you know, ‘How fancy could it be? I’m just going to spend the least amount possible.

“You know, we don’t even want to look at this thing, so why do I need to spend a bunch of money on it,’ is kind of maybe what people think.

“Then when they start using the product, and they realize, ‘Oh, okay, I see there’s definitely downfalls to not spending enough on a conferencing mic – like the breakdown of clear

communication. It's then that we start to see the importance and understand why it makes sense to invest more money in a better conferencing mic."

Generational gap or no, the upshot is: there's a problem here that needs fixing.

"This situation puts enormous challenges on conferencing mic designers and manufacturers to create microphones that operate in a variety of acoustic spaces, not just the traditional four walled conference room with an 8 to 12-foot ceiling, but in a lot of more open spaces," says Solomon.

Moreau says that his technical engineers have seen a huge trend and movement toward huddle spaces, which has created a need for a conferencing microphone system that provides flexibility and that can meet a variety of needs. He suggests that the solution may come, at least in part, from above.

"Hanging microphones are a very good compromise that enables designers to take the microphones off the table but still keeping them closer to the source," Moreau says.

"As far as conferencing mic positioning is concerned it is important to make sure they are deployed at equal distances from the participants. This way they will all have about the same ratio of direct and room sound." And this is a ratio that improves communication dramatically.

Solomon expects a new wave of smart, directional microphones on the market soon that will help solve a lot of the current problems. And, thanks to the relentless push of our Millennial friends towards seamless interfaces and better overall user-experiences, the future is looking, well, futuristic.

"I mean, if you look at some of the old Star Trek films, and some of the technology that was being portrayed by the creators of that series, I think we're moving more and more in that direction, I really do," Solomon says.

Indeed, if we embrace a future where technology, integration and ease of use is paramount to both manufacturers that design products and the professionals that specify and integrate them, we will find a middle ground for audio quality that supports better communication and collaboration.