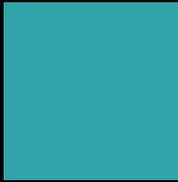
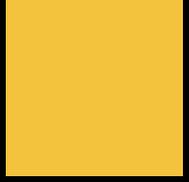


# The Rise of the Zoombie [Teambie]

A Behavioural Science guide to understanding and combating the potential issues that can emerge in virtual meetings

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**THE**  
*BEHAVIOURAL*  
**ARCHITECTS**



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## SECTION 1: Context: Video team calls are the new norm, and likely to remain so, but can lead to potentially sub-optimal outcomes and decision-making.

Since the global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, video calling platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Hangouts have become a professional lifeline as more people work from home. While only 10 million people attended meetings on Zoom at the end of 2019 before the coronavirus was widespread, in April 2020, that figure rose to 300 million.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, in October 2020 Microsoft teams reached 115 million daily active users, a 50% jump from six months prior.<sup>2</sup> According to a survey by Wainhouse Research, 57% of companies are now using Zoom, compared to 30% before the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

Switching to remote working, seemingly overnight, **has left our previous work habits in flux**. While video team meetings can be highly effective, **understanding the needs of the meeting and how to accommodate them on the video platform is imperative to reaching goals**.

The more monologue style of meeting, such as a status update meeting, generally runs smoothly because the 'one voice at a time' rule is easily facilitated. **However, once meetings require any sort of collective participation, such as brainstorming, problem-solving, decision-making or team building, the needs of the meeting become more challenging to support on the video platform.** Inevitably, these challenges increase with size and the more multidisciplinary the collective discussions become.

At a meta level, **research suggests that in these more complex meetings on the video platform there is a greater demand for conscious processing**. It becomes harder to see and process critical non-verbal cues which would have been blatantly evident in a face-to-face meeting. This can create increased **cognitive load** as people search for cues, encounter the inevitable technical issues and embrace the unnatural feel of the video platform which **often leads to sub-optimal outcomes and negative behaviours**.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/zoom-statistics/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theverge.com/2020/10/27/21537286/microsoft-teams-115-million-daily-active-users-stats>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-world-work-zoom-idUSKCN24N111>

While we are beginning to see progress towards returning to some sort of normality with the emergence of vaccines, there is still a long way to go throughout 2021, and remote working will remain central. It is also clear that for many, **working from home in some way will become the future long-term norm even when this bumpy time flattens out**. The Institute of Directors (IoD) shows that nearly three quarters of firms plan on maintaining the increase in home working, while more than half plan on reducing their long-term use of the office.<sup>4</sup> **It is thus critical we take time to understand and explore the potential negative behaviours that these platforms can generate.**

In this behavioural science thought piece, we will look at how we can optimise video platform interfaces via awareness or consciousness of these issues and, where possible, to suggest behavioural interventions to proactively counter them. **Greater understanding of the behavioural issues will help us identify patterns in our own behaviour on the video platform, putting us in a better position to recognise when to intervene with nudges and primes.**



<sup>4</sup> <https://www.iod.com/news-campaigns/press-office/details/Home-working-here-to-stay-new-IoD-figures-suggest>

## SECTION 2: Identifying and minimising the issues that can cause these meetings to be sub-optimal via awareness and intervention – video team meeting optimisation.

To help optimise communications and outcomes on video platforms, we have put together a toolkit, designed specifically for the remote working context, where collective participation to make informed decisions is required from team members in different geographical locations, operating in different functional backgrounds. In the toolkit we will bring alive potential behavioural issues that can arise, referencing any relevant academic research.

For each behavioural issue, we apply behavioural science expertise not only to explain why an issue might arise, but also to inspire interventions that can help reduce them. **We believe a combination of increased awareness and, where possible, one or more of the interventions suggested, will counter these potential negative behavioural issues and foster more optimal team working and outcomes for all.**

### The journey of the video meeting

This section will deconstruct the journey of a meeting on the video platform.

#### 2.1

##### **Behavioural Issue: The lack of time spent pre-priming of participants ahead of the meeting**

- There tends to be a lack of pre-thinking before meeting on the video platform. This is partly driven by how employees simply send and receive video call invites with a few clicks, often with little awareness of the agenda and specifics of what is going to be discussed. Employees often fuss over their appearance and background in the lead up to the meeting, instead of focusing on preparing content, anticipating what might be discussed and what questions need answering.



- Remote working takes away the opportunity to catch up with colleagues on the stairs or by grabbing coffee together. These casual conversations offer the opportunity to discuss, gather different perspectives and soundboard ideas in between meetings. **Understanding how different members of the team are feeling about various issues beforehand helps create deeper understanding and primes a more energetic mood, leading to greater preparation for the meeting.**
- Research from MIT finds that **impromptu conversations between employees who work in close proximity to one another in the same area, floor or building, boosts collaborative activity.** The team analysed the scholarly activity of the MIT community over a ten-year period, considering more than 40,000 scientific papers and 2,300 patents, of which 6,414 and 454, respectively, involved more than one MIT faculty member.<sup>5</sup> This finding supports the relationship between employee proximity and collaboration.

<sup>5</sup> Claudel, M., Massaro, E., Santi, P., Murray, F., & Ratti, C. (2017). An exploration of collaborative scientific production at MIT through spatial organization and institutional affiliation. PLOS ONE, 12(6).

- These findings suggest that creating a space for more casual conversations will help keep employees actively thinking, leading to greater preparation between meetings.

#### From behavioural insight to action:

Countering this issue by raising conscious awareness around it and via specific behavioural nudges or primes.

**Awareness:** Raising conscious awareness and saliency of the potential issue:

Most people will enter the virtual space cold or, even worse, some cold, some tepid and some warm. Be conscious that it will take longer and is harder for the team to get into synch.

**Initiating direct actions:** Behavioural nudges and primes to counter this issue arising

- Spend time **priming** people for the meeting by sharing an agenda in advance to encourage and facilitate greater pre thinking and team connection. Where possible, also share slides and any other relevant material beforehand for employees to read through.
- Make the meeting's purpose **salient** so participants understand what is expected of them and how they will benefit from the meeting. Creating an agenda will also help facilitate this.

## 2.2

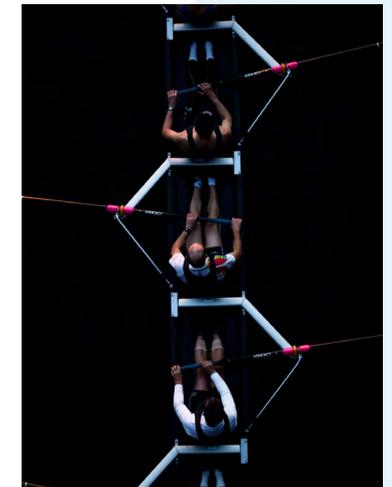
**Behavioural Issue:** It is more difficult for attendees to settle in and to create the optimal group flow. In qualitative focus groups we often talk of five stages for an effective group; forming, storming, norming, performing and dorming, which can be tricky to achieve on the video platform

- It can be more challenging to build a cohesive team, especially a multidisciplinary one, on the video platform. **Many factors determine how quickly a team will progress towards effectiveness; such as size, geographical spread, frequency duration of meetings, time pressures, synergy of team types and the stability of the team's membership.**
- To explore how teams form at a deeper level, we will use Tuckman's 'The Stages of Team Development' model to examine the needs of each stage and how they play out on the video platform.
- **FORMING:** at this initial stage, the group is no more than a collection of individuals who have come together with an objective. There is **uncertainty and confusion** as the new teammates assess the situation.<sup>6</sup>



- The video platform can make this stage feel less than harmonious as the team members gather together by appearing in boxes on a screen, a format calculated to make it harder to become acquainted with one another. **They now not only have to figure out each other's work-related behaviours, but also their video-conferencing related behaviours.** This extra **cognitive load** makes the initial stage more overwhelming. Added to that, is the fact that each participant is likely distracted by their own appearance on screen, 'Oh god, my hair looks terrible,' 'Why is my face so red?' etc
- **STORMING:** during this stage, **norms of behaviour and attitudes are challenged and rejected as members compete for roles.** There is disagreement over priorities, a struggle for leadership and cliques form. When carried out successfully, this will forge a stronger team with greater understanding of each

- individual's strengths.
- This stage tends to **unfold more slowly on the video platform** because we lose much of the **feedback** about how our messages land, receive less information from other participants, such as body language cues and vocal tones, and only one voice can be heard at a time. This results in **fewer opportunities for members to challenge each other and develop**



<sup>6</sup>Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. Psychological Bulletin, 63(6), 384–399. doi:10.1037/h0022100

- subgroups.**
- Due to the impersonal nature of the video platform, it is easy for members to feel that they are on the receiving end of unwarranted or personal criticism and become defensive or withdraw from the discussion as a result.<sup>7</sup>
  - **NORMING:** here, group members tend to **experiment and test the group's reaction to behaviours and attitudes as the norms become established.** This stage is crucial for establishing behaviour patterns, trust levels and openness alongside each individual's role and how the group will make decisions.
  - On the virtual platform it can be **easy for members to take a passive role in group discussions,** because the platform only facilitates one voice at a time. This can prompt members to feel like they are participating simply by being present on the call, as they become less conscious of the fact that they may not have spoken much. Equally, some members may become accustomed to constantly chipping in and weighing in at every opportunity. This stage can be a **breeding ground for low co-operation and allow overly dominant habits to develop.**
  - **PERFORMING:** once this stage is reached, the team is **performing to their full potential with flexibility because challenges around adjustment and leadership have been resolved.**
  - This stage should generally run smoothly on the platform as long as the three previous stages have evolved successfully. **The team should now be in a much better position to solve problems and think creatively together.**
  - However, **on the video platform we lack many of the informal cues that are important for keeping up productivity and team morale.** In real life meeting situations we are able to see how busy someone is, what they are working on and if they are having a difficult day. **Without real life feedback it becomes easier to overwhelm teammates.**
  - **DORMING:** when a team has spent a long period of time working together in the performing stage, there is a **risk that they will start operating on autopilot and bad habits can emerge.** Therefore, maintaining a team objective is key.<sup>8</sup> Without it, the **team may become less effective towards the deadline,** relationships between team members may fracture and members may regret the

final output.

- **The virtual platform can also make it harder to identify the early stages of the team's productivity decline,** again because they have **fewer informal cues and therefore make more assumptions about others' behaviour and attitudes.**
- Maintaining relationships between team members once a project has wrapped up is more challenging with remote working because there is less opportunity for serendipitous encounters.

**From behavioural insight to action: Countering this issue by raising conscious awareness around it via specific behavioural nudges or primes.**

**Awareness: Raising conscious awareness and saliency of the potential issue:**

Be conscious that the group stages or **chunks** that lead to optimal creativity and decision-making can be more of a struggle to achieve on the video platform. Anyone chairing a video meeting should keep **salient** the stages of forming, storming, norming and performing. If you do nothing else, give more time to the first stage, the foundational forming.

**Initiating direct actions: Behavioural nudges and primes to enable the various stages for optimal group function**

- During the norming stage, foster the team's sense of **social identity** and the collective role of the group.
- Agree on ways of working and interacting together. This will make each team member's expectations of one another more **salient.**
- Create occasional team reflective exercises around how meetings are functioning to help members process what went well, what didn't go so well and how these meetings could be managed more successfully in future. This **feedback** will help team members understand the strengths and weaknesses of their teamwork.
- Celebrate the team's accomplishments by tapping into the **peak-end rule** to ensure that meetings finish on a positive note.
- Deliver **feedback** that may be received as unwarranted or personal criticism in a private manner, such as a one-on-one call or in an sensitively worded email.

<sup>7</sup><https://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/oucontent/view.php?printable=1&id=2836>

<sup>8</sup><https://kfkknowledgebank.kaplan.co.uk/tuckman%27s-stages-of-team-development->

## 2.3

**Behavioural Issue:** the technology itself can fuel team disconnection on a number of levels

- **Technical difficulties and the array of distractions that come with them make employees feel less connected on the video platform.**
- Carol Nash, a scholar from the University of Toronto with a focus on human connection through technology, explains how we use a range of precisely timed vocalisations, movements and gestures to communicate, and rely on precise responses from others to see if we are being understood.<sup>9</sup>
- Research by Microsoft revealed that **nearly 60% of people they surveyed had felt less connected to their colleagues** since working from home, while in **China this number rose to 70%.**<sup>10</sup>
- This loss of connection is largely driven by how much more effort each interaction takes when using technology compared to face-to-face interactions. According to Jeremy Bailenson, professor and director of Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab, **technology disrupts our normal intricate human communication methods that have been finely tuned over centuries.**<sup>11</sup>



- Below we will examine some of the behavioural issues caused by this technology, including: the unnatural speech it creates, the significantly reduced visual cues we have to rely on, and the simple fact that it is not easy to be 100% in the moment in a video meeting because of the myriad of distractions open to us.

<sup>9</sup> Nash, C. 2020. Report on Digital Literacy in Academic Meetings during the 2020 COVID-19 Lockdown. Challenges 11:2.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/blog/2020/07/08/future-work-good-challenging-unknown/>

<sup>11</sup> Nash, C. 2020. Report on Digital Literacy in Academic Meetings during the 2020 COVID-19 Lockdown. Challenges 11:2.

## 2.3a

**Behavioural Issue:** Sound is disjointed and has an unnatural flow – it does not favour or build fluid conversation or debate

- On the video platform we have to navigate connection delays and poor speech clarity. Even the best internet connection cannot match the immediacy of in-person meetings. In fact Robby Nadler from UC Santa Barbara, finds connection **delays of even a few milliseconds can subconsciously register in our brains as an issue, alerting us to the risk of missing or misinterpreting information and demanding more cognitive effort.**<sup>12</sup> **This disrupts the social norms of the natural rhythm of speech, creating immense cognitive strain.**<sup>13</sup>
- While moments of silence are normal in real life, in the context of the video platform, they increase anxiety by prompting fears of technical issues and malfunction. **Fragmentation of speech prevents discussion from flowing and limits the depth to which different perspectives on issues would be otherwise explored.**
- Connection delays and time lags, operating at slightly different speeds for each participant, result in speaker interruptions. In person, when two people accidentally overlap, one speaker quickly yields, while on a video call it can take longer for the clash to be resolved.
- Felicia Roberts, professor of communication and linguistics at Purdue University, and her team carried out a series of experiments to understand listeners' perceptions of trouble during interaction. They found that **repairing these drawbacks regularly can break the focus of discussions, putting our brains under more cognitive strain in order to refocus.**<sup>14</sup> If these drawbacks continue, participants understandably give up trying to make contributions because it requires too much mental energy and becomes awkward.

<sup>12</sup> Robby Nadler. 2020. Understanding "Zoom fatigue": Theorizing spatial dynamics as third skins in computer-mediated communication. Computers and Composition 58, 102613.

<sup>13</sup> Wiederhold, B. K. (2020). Connecting Through Technology During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic: Avoiding "Zoom Fatigue." Cyberspsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking.

<sup>14</sup> Roberts, F., Francis, A. L., & Morgan, M. (2006). The interaction of inter-turn silence with prosodic cues in listener perceptions of "trouble" in conversation. Speech Communication, 48(9), 1079–1093.

- Another consequence of connection delays is that they can **create negative perceptions and distrust between people**. Exploring this phenomenon, Roberts et al. (2011) found that **negative judgments increase with increasing lengths of silence**, regardless of the language background.<sup>15</sup> For example, positive answers to questions such as “Can you help me with the report?”, answered with “Sure” were rated as less genuine if the responder took more than 0.7 seconds to reply. That is because in real-time, it takes less time than that to respond with a positive statement. **If the response takes longer, the listener assumes that the speaker is taking time to craft a response**<sup>16</sup> which naturally takes a toll on team dynamics.

**From behavioural insight to action:** Countering this issue by raising conscious awareness around it and via specific behavioural nudges or primes.

**Awareness:** Raising conscious awareness and saliency of the potential issue:

Understand that the **social norms** around conversation will come with silences and delays and adjust your expectations accordingly. By altering your expectations of the natural rhythm of conversation, you will be better placed to work through and around these sound issues.

### Behavioural nudges and primes to counter issue

- **Reframe** blame triggered by tech issues by reminding yourself that it is the platform, rather than the speaker’s fault.
- **Use a virtual talking stick that is passed around to each team member**. The **saliency** of this virtual stick will not only give the speaker a space to talk uninterrupted, but also the responsibility to share ideas and opinions ensuring that every team member is heard before the discussion is over.
- Encourage moments of silence for people to process what has been discussed so far and gather their thoughts. Regularly embracing breaks will not only make them seem less awkward but also **reframe** them as something that will aid processing and thinking. With tech issues there may be a need to say, ‘let’s take a moment to think about it,’ so people are reassured that the sudden silence is not because their connection seized up and to avoid ambiguity aversion.



<sup>15</sup> Roberts, F., Margutti, P., and Takano, S. (2011). “Judgments concerning the valence of inter-turn silence across speakers of American English, Italian, and Japanese.” *Discourse Process*, 48, 331–354.  
<sup>16</sup> Roberts, F., Francis, A. L., & Morgan, M. (2006). The interaction of inter-turn silence with prosodic cues in listener perceptions of “trouble” in conversation. *Speech Communication*, 48(9), 1079–1093.

## 2.3b

**Behavioural Issue: The video team visuals mean many of the cues that aid effective communication are absent**

- Humans communicate even when they are quiet. **During in person conversations, the brain, while focusing on the words being spoken, also searches for additional meaning from non-verbal cues.** For instance, someone might face you slightly turned away, stiffen their posture in reaction to what you say, fidget while you talk, or inhale quickly in preparation to interrupt,<sup>17</sup> none of which are facilitated by the video calling platform. Brenda Wiederhold, co-founder of the Virtual Reality Medical Center in California, points out that this makes it difficult to know if others are still with you and whether they have understood everything as the conversation moves along.<sup>18</sup>
- **In person, we often take silence and stillness to mean we have people's full attention.** Whereas silence and switched off video cameras on the video platform can prompt us to wonder whether our colleagues have gone to make a cup of tea, leaving us less confident of their commitment to the work in hand.
- When we are in the physical presence of another person, we have an array of cues to process besides their words. We can feel their presence through body language, smell and touch, which do not translate through the video platform (yet!). It is a strange concept that our minds **are together when our bodies are not.**<sup>19</sup>
- Gianpiero Petriglieri, a professor of organisational behaviour, explains how this can **prevent us from naturally relaxing into the conversation.** Petriglieri explains how **it is easier to be in another person's presence or in another person's absence than the constant presence of another person's absence.** These encounters can feel like wearing a blindfold, because we sense little and can't imagine enough. That dissonance, which **subconsciously confuses the brain, causes people to have conflicting feelings which can be exhausting.**<sup>20</sup>



<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/science-and-technology/2020/04/zoom-fatigue-is-taking-the-brain-heres-why-that-happens>

<sup>18</sup> Wiederhold, B. K. (2020). Connecting Through Technology During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic: Avoiding "Zoom Fatigue." Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/yolarobert1/2020/04/30/heres-why-youre-feeling-zoom-fatigue/?sh=7a51a6352ac5>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/yolarobert1/2020/04/30/heres-why-youre-feeling-zoom-fatigue/?sh=7a51a6352ac5>

- Has that large face in the middle of your video meeting ever made you flinch or feel anxious? If so, you're not alone. According to researcher Jeremy Bailenson, head of Stanford's Virtual Human Interaction Lab, **it can be unnerving to have a person's enlarged face in your space, something our brains have evolved to recognise as threatening.**<sup>21</sup>
- Even though subconsciously we know we are safe, our **system-1** thinking registers these **large appearances and prolonged eye contact as intimidating, and it triggers a 'fight or flight' response which causes us to release stress hormones.**<sup>22</sup>

**From behavioural insight to action:** Countering this issue by raising conscious awareness around it and via specific behavioural nudges or primes.

**Awareness:** Raising conscious awareness and salience of the potential issue:

- Be conscious that having a face-to-face conversation with someone who is not in your actual physical presence is not natural and will create **cognitive strain** and **dissonance** as your brain works harder to make sense of the restricted information available.

### Behavioural nudges and primes to counter issue

- **Keep a simple and stable visual.** Adding in animated or simulated backgrounds can cause **cognitive dissonance** and draw too much attention when our brains are already **cognitively strained**. Take video calls on your laptop rather than your phone if possible, to ensure you'll always have a stable image. It's hard to prop up your phone and it inevitably falls over at some point and changes angles.
- **Keep your background simple.** Where possible, opt for a plain white background, avoid having a window behind you to prevent the shadow effect and do not become embroiled in bookcase credibility! Adding in animated or simulated backgrounds can cause **cognitive dissonance** and draw too much attention when our brains are already **cognitively strained**.
- **Keep a stable visual.** Take video calls on your laptop rather than your phone if possible, to ensure you'll always have a stable image and minimise **cognitive dissonance**. It's hard to prop up your phone and it inevitably falls over at some point and changes angles.

- Behavioural science implies that **head and shoulders should both be inside the frame**. This helps people's images appear more natural and reduces feelings of **cognitive dissonance**. This means your face isn't overly large on screen making you less menacing and means others can read top of body cues as well as facial cues too.<sup>23</sup>
- **Light the front of your face** to make it easier for people to read your facial expressions and gather non-verbal cues. This will help them understand what you are thinking and feeling.

### 2.3C

**Behavioural Issue:** It is easier to be open to distractions and not be fully engaged in the moment

- When we attend meetings on a video platform it is **easy to tune out and not to be in the moment, because we simultaneously have access to an array of online distractions**, from emails, Slacks, work documents (unrelated to the discussion), our phones, the news, online shopping at our fingertips, as well as offline distractions, in the home, out of the window etc.

- **The temptation to multitask is fuelled by how many of the online distractions send us push notifications and by the fact that we are sitting in our homes where we are under the illusion that no one will notice what we do.** With the best intentions, we can allow our tendency towards **overconfidence to convince us that this 'efficient working' will help us accomplish more by the end of the day.**
- However, research finds that trying to multitask causes **cognitive overload** which diminishes performance. One study found that **shifting between tasks reduces productivity by up to 40%.**<sup>24</sup>
- Further, researchers at Stanford found that **those who multitask cannot remember information as well as their more single mindedly focused peers.**<sup>25</sup> On the video platform we need to be **100% in the moment, or all the aforementioned issues become magnified and the team performance is quickly made sub-optimal.**
- Another source of distraction on the video platform can be **looking at ourselves on screen, and, more distractingly, looking at ourselves in comparison to others.** We are not used to seeing ourselves talking in real-time, and it takes time to adjust to this novelty.<sup>26</sup> We are forced to constantly evaluate ourselves, making our body language or facial expressions **salient** throughout.

<sup>21</sup> Wiederhold, B. K. (2020). Connecting Through Technology During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic: Avoiding "Zoom Fatigue." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*.

<sup>22</sup> Oerther, D. and Shattell, M., 2020. Environmental Hygiene for COVID-19: It's All About the Mask. *Journal of Environmental Engineering*, 146(12), p.01820004.

<sup>23</sup> <https://hbr.org/2020/04/how-to-elevate-your-presence-in-a-virtual-meeting>

<sup>24</sup> Meyer, D. E. & Kieras, D. E. (1997a). A computational theory of executive cognitive processes and multiple-task performance: Part 1. Basic mechanisms. *Psychological Review*, 104, 3-65.

<sup>25</sup> Uncapher, M. and Wagner, A., 2018. Minds and brains of media multitaskers: Current findings and future directions. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(40), pp.9889-9896.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.dur.ac.uk/research/news/item/?itemno=42053#:~:text=The%20front%20facing%20camera%20allows,as%20nodding%20or%20smiling%20aggressively.>



- Researchers from Harvard linked being constantly easily distracted with unhappiness and concluded that the wandering mind is an unhappy mind,<sup>27</sup> which naturally reduces employees' feeling of fulfilment during the meeting.
- The background can also distract, and **being able to see co-workers in so many different backgrounds can cause feelings of dislocation which gives rise to cognitive dissonance.** The brain has to process all of these visual environmental cues simultaneously, causing further **cognitive strain.**

**From behavioural insight to action:**  
**Countering this issue by raising conscious awareness around it and via specific behavioural nudges or primes.**

**Awareness:** Raising conscious awareness and saliency of the potential issue:

- Be conscious of the number of distractions and multitasking opportunities that are available to you on the video platform. Everyone can be easily distracted, so try to allow space for people to reconnect.

**Behavioural actions that can help keep people in the moment and leverage more behavioural commitment**

- **Remind participants why they have been invited** to the meeting in the invite and reinforce this reason again at the beginning of the meeting. This will increase the **saliency** of the meeting and encourage engagement.
- **Acknowledge it is easy to be distracted** and multi task and employ **commitment devices** at the beginning of the meeting that remind participants to:
  - » **Turn off any sound notifications** on both laptops and phones.
  - » **Disable any visual pop-ups on your screen**, especially if you anticipate sharing your screen. If you want to work optimally at any time, these can be good things to do, not just for online meetings.
  - » **Consider making it a meeting rule to have plain backdrops all round.** Tempting as it is to overlay cool backgrounds or position yourself to show your high-brow bookshelf or latest art purchase, it actually makes for more effective meetings to **have the plainest, dullest backdrop you can - white walls with as little else on show as you can.** Remember that in a multi-person meeting, attendees are faced with a mosaic of screens, and if these all have a variety of backgrounds it can be quite overwhelming for the eye.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Killingsworth, M. and Gilbert, D., 2010. A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind. *Science*, 330(6006), pp.932-932.  
<sup>28</sup> <https://hbr.org/2020/04/how-to-combat-zoom-fatigue>

- » **Hide your video in your own display** so you are not distracted by seeing yourself on screen. This will allow you to better focus on others and spend less time worrying about if your hair looks a mess or if you chose the wrong shirt - or admiring your good looks!

## 2.4

### Behavioural Issue: The medium makes challenging and critical thinking less likely

- Mark Mortensen, associate professor of organisational behaviour at INSEAD business school, says that **by the time a conflict is recognised on the video platform, it is often too late, making it more challenging to repair the relationship.**<sup>29</sup>
- **Critical thinking and disagreements are essential to effective decision-making and often spur creative thinking.** Yet, while sharing opposing and unfettered opinions is beneficial, sharing them on the video platform adds another layer of complexity. This is partly driven by how, in person, we have a greater opportunity for pleasantries before diving into a tough conversation. Exchanging pleasantries beforehand helps set the tone and eases parties

into the discussion in such a way that helps any disagreement come across as 'less attacking.' Granted, on the video platform this small talk is possible, but it can come across as less genuine and more forced due to the transactional nature of the platform.

- Lindred Greer, professor of organisational behaviour at Leiden University in the Netherlands, explains how disagreements among virtual teams can escalate much more quickly than they would face-to-face. Greer's research finds that **we are more likely to take challenges personally when they are delivered virtually.** This is because when we are miles away instead of in the next cubicle, we fail to see the nuances in the context and facial expressions of the person receiving or delivering the challenge. Greer explains how, **when we lack information or feel uncertain about why someone disagreed, we are more likely to take it personally, resulting in a more emotional and aggressive system-1 response.** This is also driven by how **virtual teams often don't have a history with one another that helps build trust.** Greer goes as far as to describe the video platform as a petri dish for conflict!<sup>30</sup>



<sup>29</sup> <https://hbr.org/2015/11/resolve-a-fight-with-a-remote-colleague>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/lindred-greer-why-virtual-teams-have-more-conflict#:~:text=A%20professor%20of%20organizational%20behavior,face%20to%20face%20encounters.&text=%E2%80%99Conflict%20in%20virtual%20teams%20is,to%20escalate%2C%E2%80%9D%20she%20says.>

- Pamela Hinds, professor of Management Science and Engineering at Stanford University, points out that **we cannot tell how another person is reacting because we are not seeing body language, facial expressions or hearing voice intonation, all of which provide us with valuable feedback on how to navigate the conversation.** During moments of confrontation, or when delivering potentially sensitive **feedback** on the video platform, we are left wondering whether participants are silent because they are setting aside their feelings, or simply sulking.<sup>31</sup>
- Another interesting point is that **our brains subconsciously make reward-cost trade-offs, particularly when we are overwhelmed.**<sup>32</sup> At every level of behaviour, this trade-off takes place between the likely rewards and the cost of engaging, or the cost of searching for an appropriate opportunity to interject.<sup>33</sup> An MIT study using functional MRI data revealed that in person face to face interactions are associated with greater activity in the same brain regions involved in rewards compared to viewing recordings.<sup>34</sup> This leaves us susceptible to the **status quo bias** of passive participation on the virtual platform.

- This suggests that video platforms do not facilitate the level of active social connection compared to face to face, resulting in less engagement, sharing and challenging.

**From behavioural insight to action: Countering this issue by raising conscious awareness around it and via specific behavioural nudges or primes.**

**Awareness: Raising conscious awareness and saliency of the potential issue:**

Be conscious that critical thinking comes from collective and potentially challenging conversations. And that this type of conversation is much harder without subtle facial expressions and body language **feedback** that face to face interactions provide. Learn to navigate the conversation without these missing pieces so that it does not result in conflict but rather empowers challenging conversation. Recognise that people might be holding back from speaking because they anticipate the communication effort being greater than the perceived reward. It can feel like a fight for air space!

## Behavioural nudges and primes to counter issue

- **Create more cues to generate debate.** Assign team members to blue teams and red teams, where blue is in favour of an idea, while red is against. Exercises like these will create an acceptable space for disagreement.
- **Ensure everyone puts their video on and designate time at the beginning for them to connect or reconnect;** to form, storm and norm before you expect to perform.
- **Create the illusion of direct eye contact** by placing the laptop at eye level for a more natural pose and try to look directly at the web camera rather than the screen. There is evidence that direct mutual gaze improves connection, generates faster responses,<sup>35</sup> improves facial recognition and memory.<sup>36</sup> Direct eye contact also increases likeability,<sup>37</sup> by tapping into the **mere exposure effect**.

## 2.5

**The behavioural issue: The medium does not favour blue sky innovative thinking**

- Blue Sky thinking is not easily facilitated on the video platform. After all, it was an absence of serendipitous chats that led to Yahoo ending its experiment with large-scale home working in 2013.<sup>38</sup> The decision was based on a desire for increased productivity and a more connected company culture. Yahoo found that speed and quality were being sacrificed with remote working.<sup>39</sup>
- **The various video platforms have no salient place for those informal between-meetings conversations,** where sharing tacit knowledge and adventurous ideas takes place. While breakout rooms aim to facilitate this, they can **lack the fluidity to liberate zigzag thinking** and many of the same issues will obviously still exist in these rooms. **It is these conversations that can lead to exploring uncharted territory and are often the bedrock of relationship and trust building.**

<sup>31</sup> <https://hbr.org/2015/11/resolve-a-fight-with-a-remote-colleague>

<sup>32</sup> Boksem, M. and Tops, M., 2008. Mental fatigue: costs and benefits. *Brain Research Reviews*, 59:125-139.

<sup>33</sup> van der Linden, D. (2013) The urge to stop: The cognitive and biological nature of acute mental fatigue. In: Ackerman P.L., ed. *Decade of Behavior/Science Conference: Cognitive fatigue: Multidisciplinary perspectives on current research and future applications*. American Psychological Association; 149-164.

<sup>34</sup> Redcay E, Dodel-Feder D, Pearrow M, et al. (2010). Live face-to-face interaction during fMRI: A new tool for social cognitive neuroscience. *Neuroimage*, 50:1639-1647

<sup>35</sup> von Grunau M, Anston C. (1995). The detection of gaze direction: a stare-in-the-crowd effect. *Perception*, 24(11):1297-1313

<sup>36</sup> Mason MF, Hood BM, Macrae CN. (2004). Look into my eyes: gaze, direction and personal memory. *Memory*, 12:637-643.

<sup>37</sup> Nummoo E, Elnav S, Hood BM. (2012). Best friends: children use mutual gaze to identify friendships in others. *Dev Sci*, 15(3):417-425.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2020/09/12/covid-19-has-forced-a-radical-shift-in-working-habits>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2013/02/25/back-to-the-stone-age-new-yahoo-ceo-marissa-mayer-bans-working-from-home/?sh=4b4763a16672>



- **The lack of connection between employees and feelings of isolation may be driving them away from sharing blue sky thoughts.** Although, previously well-established relationships, such as those with colleagues that you have known for years may not suffer much going online, it becomes more challenging to develop relationships and rapport with new colleagues without some face-to-face interaction.
- **There is, however, evidence suggesting that one on one talks on the video platform create more open intimate conversations.** Stuart Henshall, a user research analyst

who studies human behaviour was based in a “UX laboratory” [usability testing and user experience laboratory] in an Indian city where he was carrying out research face to face. Henshall observed that seeing interviewees in their natural habitat, wearing their regular clothes helped them feel more comfortable, and freer to share their point of view in a more authentic way.<sup>40</sup>

- Research amongst financial traders conducted by Daniel Ibanez at Cass Business School has come to similar conclusions. After talking to financiers during lockdown he observed that they used a more intimate communication style on the virtual platform.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/d506afe5-fe5e-49a4-a33c-d101a170ff2d>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/d506afe5-fe5e-49a4-a33c-d101a170ff2d>

**From behavioural insight to action:**  
**Countering this issue by raising conscious awareness around it and via specific behavioural nudges or primes.**

**Awareness:** Raising conscious awareness and saliency of the potential issue

Be conscious that outside the box thoughts are difficult to share, particularly when they are not tightly related to what is currently being discussed. The video platform often lacks a **salient** space or time to share blue sky thoughts. Create a more receptive atmosphere to help these thoughts and ideas feel welcomed.

**Behavioural nudges and primes to counter issue**

- Collectively recognise the group’s status quo and invite new ideas.
- Create pre thoughts around issues or areas to be discussed and share pre meeting to build behavioural **commitment** to these ideas.
- Create virtual pre meeting water cooler moments between pairs to explore areas and points of view to build collective **commitment**. This will also help compensate for the ‘side’ conversations employees might normally have when sitting next to one another.
- Build real ‘thinking space’ into the video meetings (not to be filled with emails etc.) to focus on blue sky thoughts around areas or issues being discussed.
- **Prime** the ‘blue sky thinking’ mood by beginning with exercises that help open the mind.

## 2.6

**Behavioural issue:** The medium tends to favour certain types of work and communication styles

- People's different work and communication styles translate differently onto the video platform. **Research finds that introverts and some neurodiverse employees, such as those on the spectrum for autism, dyslexia or ADHD etc. may be more susceptible to after-call frustration.** Introverts, because they generally come up with their better ideas once they have had time to reflect.<sup>42</sup> Some neurodiverse employees, because the way the video platform forces our brains to work harder, can make the experience even more overwhelming and overstimulating for them in particular.<sup>43</sup> **This creates a sense of learned helplessness.**
- On the other hand, **employees on the more extroverted end of the spectrum can misinterpret silence as disagreement, or lack of expertise,** and hence don't make the effort to bring their more introverted colleagues into the conversation.

- **Both of these sources of frustration damage team dynamics and miss ideas.** This is not so much the case in the office because the environment feels more natural to us and more aligned with how our brains have been evolving for thousands of years to communicate. In the office we can think and reflect on a **system-2** level more during the discussion, and timing when to interject is much simpler because there are more cues that signal to others that we have something to add.

**From behavioural insight to action:**  
**Countering this issue by raising conscious awareness around it and via specific behavioural nudges or primes.**

**Awareness:** Raising conscious awareness and saliency of the potential issue:

Take the time to understand your different teammates' work and communication styles and identify how the team can best accommodate them on the video platform. Ensure that feelings of frustration after meetings do not become a **the norm**.



**Behavioural actions to facilitate different communication styles**

- Create a **salient** place for thoughts and questions to be jotted down on the go which the team can address at different points during the meeting.
- Create more structure around the meeting agenda, by **chunking** it into different sections to protect time for each issue that needs addressing and to prevent more dominant meeting participants from hijacking the discussion.
- Ensure meeting participants, especially the quieter ones, know they are being heard by **reciprocating** with positive cues or **feedback**, such as nodding or sending an emoji, when thoughts and ideas are shared.
- Assign a team member to coordinate the conversation tapestry, by keeping note of what was said and linking different points together. These notes can then be shared and read over by meeting participants who can add suggestions, giving the quieter voices an opportunity to be heard.

<sup>42</sup> <https://hbr.org/2016/04/run-meetings-that-are-fair-to-introverts-women-and-remote-workers>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.creasedpuddle.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Neuro-teamC19-Covid-and-Neurodiversity-Guidance-for-Organisations.pdf>

## 2.7

**The behavioural issue:** The power of post meeting water cooler moments and system-2 reflection overnight is gone

- Due to the transactional nature of the platform, **meetings can come to an abrupt close, making them feel static.** This becomes an issue as, once the meeting is over, there can be a mindset of 'well that's that done', leading to a **lack of fluidity in processing the take-homes from the meeting and making a plan to put in train what action is needed.**<sup>44</sup>

**From behavioural insight to action:** Countering this issue by raising conscious awareness around it and via specific behavioural nudges or primes.

**Awareness:** Raising conscious awareness and saliency of the potential issue:

Be conscious that meetings tend to end abruptly on the video platform, leaving us back in the comfort of our own homes as soon as we click out, and how that impacts reflective afterthoughts.

**Behavioural nudges and primes to counter or reduce the 'static' nature of the call and encourage reflection**

- **Chunk** the meeting into clearly defined sections so participants know when it is wrapping up. Designate a time in the end **chunk** to give an overview of what was discussed and take closing questions and thoughts. This also provides a chance for people to return to topics that have been touched on, but where the discussion had moved on before they had the opportunity to share their thoughts.
- Wrap up with the **peak-end rule.** Make the end memorable by finishing with a compelling story, joke, or visual.
- Overcome the **intention-action gap** by forming **implementation intentions** with a clear focus at the end of what needs to be done, how, by who and by when. This will mean each member of the team will leave with a clear sense of purpose, motivating them to continue to focus on what was discussed.



## SECTION 3: Summary grid: Behavioural issues, raising awareness and actions to counter or reduce.

Behavioural issue	ACTION 1 Raising awareness of the issue	ACTION 2 Ways to counter or reduce
Little or no time spent pre <b>priming</b> people before the meeting	Ensure everyone is <b>conscious of what has not occurred pre meeting</b> such as those water cooler informal chats about the up-and-coming meeting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Prime</b> people with a meeting agenda.</li> <li>• Make attendees' purpose <b>salient</b>.</li> </ul>
The start of meetings are complex, it is difficult for attendees to easily settle in and for the collective scene to be set	Be conscious of the different stages of a team meeting such as <b>forming, storming, norming and performing</b> are kept <b>salient</b> throughout.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During the norming stage, foster the team's sense of <b>social identity</b> and the collective role of the group.</li> <li>• Create occasional team reflective exercises around how meetings are functioning.</li> <li>• Celebrate the team's collective accomplishments by tapping into the <b>peak-end rule</b>.</li> <li>• Deliver any <b>feedback</b> that may be received as unwarranted or personal criticism in a private manner, such as a one-on-one call or in an sensitively worded email.</li> </ul>
Sound is disjointed and has an unnatural flow – it does not tend to favour or build fluid conversation or debate	Be conscious that conversations will come with silences and delays and allow more space and time for these.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shift blame triggered by technical issues and <b>reframe</b> it by reminding yourself that it is the platform, rather than the speaker's fault.</li> <li>• Use a virtual talking stick to provide <b>salience</b> on who is speaking, giving them a clear opportunity to share all their ideas.</li> <li>• <b>Reframe</b> moments of silence as an opportunity to think – even encourage them so they feel less awkward.</li> </ul>
The video visuals mean many of the cues that aid effective communication are absent	Appreciate that having a face-to-face conversation with someone who is not in your presence is not natural and will create <b>cognitive strain</b> as your brain works harder to make sense of the limited information available.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep a simple and stable visual background. Adding in animated or simulated backgrounds can cause even more <b>cognitive dissonance</b> and draw too much attention when our brains are already cognitively strained.</li> <li>• Keep your background simple.</li> <li>• Place laptop at eye level.</li> <li>• Light the front of your face.</li> <li>• Ensure both your head AND shoulders are inside the frame.</li> </ul>

Behavioural issue	ACTION 1	ACTION 2
It is easy to be open to distractions and not be fully engaged	Be conscious that everyone can be easily distracted and try to allow space for people to reconnect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remind participants why they have been invited and the teams collective responsibility. This is where they are for a set period of time.</li> <li>• Acknowledge it is easy to be distracted and multi task.</li> </ul> <p>Employ <b>commitment devices</b> at the beginning of the meeting that remind participants to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turn off any sound notifications.</li> <li>• Disable any visual pop-ups on screen.</li> <li>• Ensure plain backdrop.</li> <li>• Hide your video in your own display.</li> </ul>
The medium makes challenging and critical thinking less likely	Be conscious that critical thinking comes from collective and potentially challenging conversations. And that this type of conversation is much harder without subtle facial expressions and body language <b>feedback</b> that face to face interactions provide.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Create more cues or pauses to generate debate</b> – remember it will be harder to trigger.</li> <li>• <b>Ensure everyone is on video and designate time at the beginning for them to connect or re-connect.</b> To form, storm and norm before they are expected to perform.</li> <li>• <b>Create the illusion of direct eye contact</b> – encourage people to look at the camera when they talk.</li> </ul> <p>Recognise that people might be holding back from speaking or challenging because they anticipate the communication effort being greater than the perceived reward. It can feel like a fight for air space!</p>
The medium does not favour blue sky thinking	Recognise when the team is sticking to the status quo. Be conscious that outside the box thoughts are difficult to share, particularly when they might not be tightly related to what is currently being discussed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collectively recognise the group's <b>status quo</b> and invite new ideas.</li> <li>• Create pre thoughts around issues or areas to be discussed and share them beforehand to build <b>commitment</b> to these ideas.</li> <li>• Create virtual pre meeting water cooler moments between pairs to explore areas and points of view to build collective <b>commitment</b>.</li> <li>• <b>Prime</b> the 'blue sky thinking' mood by beginning with exercises that help open the mind.</li> <li>• Build real 'thinking space' into the video meeting.</li> </ul>

Behavioural issue	ACTION 1	ACTION 2
<b>The medium tends to favour certain types of work and communication styles</b>	Be more aware of your teammates' different work and communication styles and identify how the team can best accommodate for them on the video platform.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a <b>salient</b> place for thoughts and questions.</li> <li>• Chunk the meeting into sections.</li> <li>• <b>Reciprocate</b> shared thoughts with positive <b>feedback</b>, especially with quieter members.</li> <li>• Assign a team member to co-ordinate the conversation.</li> </ul>
<b>The power of watercooler moments and system-2 reflection overnight is gone</b>	Be conscious that meetings tend to end abruptly on the video platform, leaving us back in the comfort of our own homes as soon as we click out, and how that impacts reflective afterthoughts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designate a time in the ending <b>chunk</b> to give an overview of what was discussed and take closing questions and thoughts.</li> <li>• Wrap up with the <b>peak-end rule</b>.</li> <li>• Overcome the <b>intention-action gap</b> by forming <b>implementation intentions</b> with a clear focus at the end of what needs to be done, how, by who and by when.</li> <li>• Keep the minutes of what was said. When these notes are later shared with the team to read over, <b>system-2</b> reflection will help everyone think through everything that was discussed with greater clarity.</li> </ul>



# The Behavioural Architects

The Behavioural Architects (TBA) is an award-winning global insight, research and consultancy business with behavioural science at its core. It was founded in 2011 by Crawford Hollingworth, Sian Davies and Sarah Davies.

The company was one of the first agencies built around the new insights coming from the behavioural sciences. This new thinking has inspired them to develop powerful frameworks that fuel deeper understanding of consumer behaviour and behaviour change.

TBA has offices in London, Oxford, Sydney, Melbourne, Shanghai and New York and has worked with many global corporations, NGOs and governments, reinvigorating traditional research methodologies alongside pioneering new ones. Their aim is to make behavioural insights both accessible and actionable for clients.

The Behavioural Architects invests heavily in its core intelligence team dedicated to supporting its global teams, keeping them up to speed with developments in the behavioural science field, from both the academic arena and among top practitioners.

In 2020 TBA won two Market Research Society (MRS) awards; the Jeremy Bullmore Award for Creative Development Research - for our open-source guide; 'Physical Distancing: A Behavioural Science Toolkit to Aid Physical Distancing and People Movement in a Covid-19 World' and the New Consumer Insights Award - for Decoding Decisions: making sense of the messy middle with Google. This Google work also went on to win an MRG award for the best research initiative in 2020. Previously, we have also won numerous awards, including Best Presentation at the 2019 MRS Annual Conference Awards, ESOMAR's 2019 Best Global Paper, and the AQR Prosper Riley-Smith Qualitative Excellence Award in 2018.

For more information, please visit [www.thebeearchitects.com](http://www.thebeearchitects.com)

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