



# OBENG'S COLUMN

## When Shhhouting into a Vacuum is a Cacophony of Noise!



It's 5 pm and it's supposed to be starting but you decide you need a strong cup of coffee before you can face it – face, that is, the audio conference. You wouldn't join if you could get away with it, but the politics of the situation means you have to 'show your face'.

Last time was dreadful. Two hours of slow and boring torture. And it was as if the others from outside your time zone had forgotten that you have a home to go to. It was OK for them - for them it was lunchtime. True you'd managed to do some real work by answering your e-mails during the call, but . . .

The conference started off in a very promising way and then quickly became an opportunity for the more vocal members of the team to compete to see who could talk for the longest without pausing for breath. The discussion went around in circles. After about half an hour one of the team joined in by mobile. You knew he was on his mobile. You also knew at what time the delayed flight to Brisbane was leaving, that Johan Freiderich had to go to airport security, the words of the latest song from Coldplay and so on. In short, the background noise was terrible.

Now, one month later, as you return to your desk with your coffee, you can't remember which decisions were taken or what actions were

assigned, you just hope your name wasn't on any of them.

Part of the reason was the constant confusion of everyone talking and over-talking each other. Unlike a real meeting there were no cues that someone wanted to speak – no opportunity to 'put your hand up.' Net result chaos!

Also the main topics you needed to discuss weren't covered at all, while there was real in-depth focus on trivial issues. In fact you discovered yesterday that one person who said almost nothing at all, actually had all the customer information you needed for planning the next stage.

It was so annoying that no one seemed to have planned what they were going to say about the key topics and the few times the discussion came close to progress you were blocked by a lack of preparation by the key people who didn't have the relevant information available to hand immediately.

The audio meeting got better as time went on and fewer and fewer people were trying to say anything. But, you suspect, this was because they, like you, had given up, put their phones on mute and were working on their e-mails!

### *There must be a better way*

Audio meetings are not the same as Face-to-Face meetings

| Face to Face Meeting   | Audio Meeting  | The same or different? |
|--|--|------------------------|
| All together at the same time  | All together at the same time  | Same                   |
| All together in the same place   | Not together in the same place   | Different              |
| Total time invested is from when you 'set-off' for the meeting until you return              | Total time invested is from when you dial in until you hang up   | Different              |
| It is good to be on time   | It is ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL to be on time for the start. Latecomers are announced and this really disrupts the meeting | Different              |
| Easy to switch from data sharing to brainstorming to decision making all in the same meeting | Difficult to switch modes – a real need to tell people that this is happening and for how long                       | Different              |
| No limitation on how many times and ways you can put your arguments                          | One chance to make your case   | Different              |
| Everybody takes their own notes if they wish   | One clear set of notes and decisions   | Different              |
| You can get away with not preparing for the meeting  | Lack of preparation means the meeting will probably fail   | Different              |
| Emotions and buy-in are easy to gauge without asking   | Emotions and buy-in are impossible to judge without asking   | Different              |

## SETTING UP AN AUDIO MEETING

1. Check time zones of participants
2. Choose a neutral time if possible
3. If it is not possible to have a neutral time, change the time of the next meeting to suit the people who were inconvenienced in the previous meeting. Make sure that everyone shares the inconvenience
4. Publish the outcomes (agenda of the meeting), the access details and highlight any preparation required so that people can come to the meeting ready to participate. This is important because for effective audio meetings each person should only have one opportunity to make their case
5. Publish the web address if you are planning to use a collaborative tool to share screens and plan to type up the notes of meeting during the call
6. Prepare a list/sequence of attendees so that you can use this consistently for rotating round the group to ensure everyone has a say

## RULES OF SUCCESSFUL AUDIO MEETINGS

### DO

1. Appoint a Co-ordinator good at managing the time and summarising all the views heard and getting sign-off

2. Set up a rotation (managed by the Co-ordinator) so that everyone knows when it will be their turn to speak
3. Agree the interruption etiquette (usually say 'excuse me' and then start by saying your name)
4. Make sure the Co-ordinator summarises every 5-10 minutes
5. Appoint a Scribe to take notes LIVE and to record actions
6. Set up collaborative tools/ screen sharing so that everyone can follow what is being noted and agreed on their PC's/ pdas

### DO NOT

7. Be late
8. Call in from from a noisy public place eg, airport, unless you can mute your phone
9. Feel you can't interrupt – if you feel strongly about something say 'Excuse me' then your name and then make your point
10. Ever do anything of no use – such as travelling to a meeting when an audio meeting would work just fine!

*Using technology to give us a better quality of life in our new fast changing and complex world, is one of Dr Eddie Obeng's passions.*

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## Do you need PR? 2005 APM Debate

The theme for this year's APM debate is 'A project is only as good as its PR'. It is guaranteed to raise the hackles of project managers! It will be held at BAFTA on Piccadilly in London from 6pm on the first day of Project Challenge Exhibition (21 September) and the APM AGM is also the same day.

Last year's motion 'Hosting the 2012 games would be a good project for the UK' was defeated by a team led by Damian Hockney, UK

Independence party leader in the London Assembly.

The 2005 event will be hosted by newsreader Nicholas Witchell. The anti-team is led by Gerald Krasner.

Entry is free (***see [www.apm.org.uk](http://www.apm.org.uk) for details***).

### 2005 APM Awards

Record numbers of entries to the awards and several new categories means the APM 2005 Awards will be a sparkling event hosted by Adrian Chiles, presenter of Working Lunch. (***see [www.apm.org.uk](http://www.apm.org.uk) for details***).