

# **Parallel Meeting Chat Guide for Moderators and Participants**

Drawing on findings from Microsoft Employees During COVID-19

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This report provides guidelines for meeting moderators and meeting participants using parallel chat in video meetings for work. It draws on a large-scale (N=849) study of Microsoft employees' experiences of all-remote meetings during COVID-19. The report covers chat issues before, during, and after the meeting. There is an emphasis on accessibility practices for ensuring that parallel chat is inclusive of people with a range of abilities.

**CCS CONCEPTS • Human-centered computing ~ Collaborative and social computing ~ Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Most videoconferencing platforms enable attendees to post text, images, files, links etc. in a meeting chat pane or window simultaneously with audio/visual (A/V) modalities. This *parallel chat* is typically open to all meeting invitees and flows concurrently with the A/V focus of the meeting (for example a presentation or discussion). Parallel chat is widely used by Microsoft employees in remote and hybrid meetings, but never more so than during the 2020/2021 COVID-19 pandemic.

A large-scale (N=849) internal study of Microsoft employee's experiences in all remote meetings during COVID-19 [1] found that 69.7% reported using parallel chat, of which 26.6% reported using it in every meeting or almost every meeting, 24.1% at least once a week, 16.8% a few times a month, and 2.1% once a month or less. However, behavioral norms around use of parallel chat can be unclear. A deep-dive analysis of parallel chat in work meetings [2] found that while parallel chat is considered a net positive, it can also be distracting, especially in meetings that involve more than a small group of people. Parallel chat may also not be accessible or inclusive. Given the [increasingly global work environment](#), we should no longer assume that all participants can engage equally in single dominant language chat. Further, in the U.S., [26% of adults have some form of disability](#), and similar figures can be found worldwide. For all employees to participate effectively in meetings that involve parallel chat, coping with distraction, accessibility, and inclusion are key factors. These guidelines are an attempt to scaffold that balance.

Finding that balance is not a matter of following hard and fast rules: meetings vary widely by context, purpose, and size, while meeting participants also vary widely in their perceptual abilities, expectations around multitasking, and so on. Exercising this type of contextual judgement is a quintessentially human endeavour. This judgement needs to be exercised by meeting participants, but benefits from the centralized help of a moderator. This may be an informal or formal role and could also be a someone designated specifically to facilitate the parallel chat itself in large meetings (akin to the common practice in live online events). The goal of a parallel chat moderator is to ensure that its use is aligned with the meeting goals.

Parallel chat moderation can be challenging, and moderator contributions may not always be fully appreciated. With the goal of making this type of moderation more widely accessible and effective, we offer this document as an informal guide to parallel chat moderators. Our primary audience is employees who find themselves in this role, whether by explicit designation or implicitly as the person in their workgroup responsible for keeping key meetings from going awry. Our hope is that you can use these considerations as a checklist, to prepare for challenging judgment calls you will find yourself needing to make in the moment during meetings.

With or without a designated parallel chat moderator, the chat moderation function can also be augmented or exercised collectively by meeting participants, if they are aware of how some uses of chat may be more distracting than helpful to others. Therefore, our secondary audience is employees who routinely participate in parallel chat. We invite you to review this guide, to raise your awareness of how your own parallel chat contributions can be more beneficial and effective.

For more information on making remote interactions more accessible, especially for large events such as conferences, see the [ACM Guide to Accessible Remote Attendance](#). For more information on accessibility in general, see [Microsoft's 10 inclusive behaviours](#).

## **2 BEFORE THE MEETING**

### **2.1 Set the stage**

- For recurring meetings, develop and circulate a standing set of guidelines for use of parallel chat (feel free to adapt from this document). Ideally, recurring meetings involving more than a few people already have a set of written guidelines, laying out goals and standing agenda items, to which any parallel chat guidance can be appended.
- For any meeting, consider putting parallel chat guidance into the chat at the start of each meeting, as a reminder. This can reduce the need for a moderator to “police” chat during the meeting.
- For a one-off meeting, or meetings with a mix of agenda item types (e.g., both informational and discussion items), tailor parallel chat guidance to the agenda goals. For example, in a discussion or brainstorm section of the meeting, parallel chat will be useful for ideas, disagreement, questions, etc. For getting through an update efficiently, parallel chat could be reserved for clarifying questions.
- If new people are joining the meeting, moderators should make a practice of checking in with them beforehand, for example to understand how they prefer to be addressed (including name pronunciation), to identify any accessibility requests, etc. This function may already be performed by a general meeting moderator, in which case chat-specific questions could simply be added to the check-in (for example, are @mentions by first name only ok with the person?).
- Depending on the meeting, chat moderation can be hard work. To ensure that those who take on this role also get their say, consider rotating the moderator role across different meetings, and/or distributing some aspects of the role across multiple people for more complex meeting.

### **2.2 Consider accessibility needs of meeting members**

- Compile and share best practices with your group by:
  - Prior to the meeting, asking participants for any accessibility accommodation requests.
  - Based on any requests, compiling, and sharing a list of best practices for your meeting group.
  - Make this list part of onboarding for new group members.

- Familiarize yourself with how to help participants who may face the following challenges:
  - Processing parallel sources in multiple modalities: Participating in a meeting with text-based chat requires monitoring two parallel sources, which may be difficult (e.g., due to difficulties navigating between sources while using a screen reader or magnification). Simultaneous presentation of information through auditory and visual channels may also present barriers (e.g., blind participants must listen to both sources via screen reader, or deaf participants must watch two sources via transcription/interpreter).
  - Consuming and generating text: Reading may present challenges (e.g., for people with low vision who must zoom and pan, and people with dyslexia). Writing may also present challenges (e.g., for people with hand mobility problems or who do not touch type).
  - Understanding non-text chat: Non-text content may not be accessible, particularly for participants using screen readers (e.g., GIFs and emoticons without or with inadequate alternative text).
  - Understanding sentiment: It can be difficult to understand the sentiment behind written and non-written content (e.g., GIFs), particularly for participants with autism.

### **3 DURING THE MEETING**

#### **3.1 Parallel chat to encourage**

- Chat that amplifies the meeting's main A/V includes:
  - Links to items mentioned in or related to the main A/V.
  - On-point questions.
  - Questions/requests for clarification.
  - When solicited: discussion contributions, including disagreement.
  - Requests for follow-up.
- Enabling more voices to be heard includes chats from:
  - People who rarely speak or chat in meetings.
  - People who haven't already spoken or chatted a lot in this meeting.
  - People who may generally have a hard time getting a word in for many possible reasons, including low power or seniority status, minority status, or disability.

### 3.1.1 *Best practices for encouraging useful parallel chat*

- Bring useful chat to the speaker's attention, to encourage transfer of relevant ideas into the main conversation; highlight key points and clarifying questions.
- Ask participants to speak key written chat content out loud, both so the content enters any meeting recording and/or transcript, and for participants who may miss the chat; examples include participants such as presenters, or others for whom monitoring multiple sources simultaneously is difficult or impossible (as with certain disabilities). If participants are unable to speak their own content, speak it for them.
- Remind people of the option to raise their hands.
- Apply [inclusive behavior guidelines](#) to parallel chat. For example:
  - When contributions are requested, encourage people who haven't yet spoken or chatted.
  - Acknowledge when an idea advanced by one person gets ignored, then later credited to someone else.
  - Follow up privately with specific participants if you have concerns that certain chat entries may have affected them negatively. Follow up can happen during or after the meeting, as appropriate.
- Align the chat with the accessibility requests of the group, for example by:
  - Providing text descriptions of non-text chat.
  - Providing text descriptions of visual content shared in the meeting (e.g., through screen share, or in a participant's video feed) that has not been described.
  - Leaving appropriate time for participants with disabilities to respond (e.g., if using an interpreter or screen reader).

### 3.2 **Parallel chat to discourage**

- Chat that is likely of interest to only a small subset of attendees.
- Chat that diverges from the main presentation or discussion
  - This can happen when a post generates a chat-only discussion that was either off-topic to begin with or becomes off-topic as the main AV meeting agenda moves on.
  - Such discussions may raise useful topics, but if they persist "too long" they risk distracting not only the chatters involved, but also everyone else in the meeting. How long is too long is exactly the kind of judgment call moderators are asked to make.

- Chat that overwhelms the main conversation
  - On-point chats can still become more intensive than the main discussion, especially in large meetings. When chats start flashing fast and furious on the screen, participants may perceive them as “higher volume” than the main meeting.
  - On the one hand, the norms of in-person meetings would label side conversations as rude. On the other hand, a major benefit of parallel chat is its potential for greater inclusivity.
  - One possible way to distinguish these two scenarios is to notice whether the high volume is a result of the chat engaging a large fraction of meeting participants (more likely to be a marker of inclusion) or engaging a few participants intensely (more likely to be a marker of distraction).
- Chat that results from multi-segment meeting structure
  - In meetings with multiple segments of interest to different attendees, the chat window may frequently get out of sync with the main AV agenda. For example, a speaker in one segment may respond to questions during another segment; or a chat discussion may become divergent (as discussed above) when it starts during one segment then persists into another segment. This latter scenario is especially likely if the different segments are aimed at separate sub-groups of attendees.
- Chat that is inaccessible to meeting participants. For example, depending on the participant group, inaccessible chat could entail:
  - Visual content that lacks text description (which may be inaccessible to blind or low-vision participants)
  - Subtle sentiment implications that are difficult to perceive
  - Any other accessibility requirements participants have shared.

### 3.2.1 *Best practices for discouraging distracting parallel chat*

- If you need to ask an individual to refrain from further chats on a topic, use a private backchannel to avoid public shaming.
- For divergent topics or intense small group discussions that have gone on “too long,” ask the participants to shift to backchannel so as not to distract others. If the topic is important but not appropriate for further discussion in the main AV meeting, suggest a follow-up meeting.
- For distracting chats within multi-segment meeting structure: A Project Tahiti journal entry suggests that pausing between segments to handle that segment’s chat and establishing a norm of out-of-band communication to address questions or discussion beyond the pause, can be an effective practice for parallel chat for this type of meeting. (See first verbatim in the Appendix for the full entry.)

## 4 AFTER THE MEETING

### 4.1 Following up on the parallel chat

- If items in the meeting chat text deserve more attention than the main meeting AV was able to give them, consider sharing such items in a short follow-up email to the meeting participants. If a meeting recap is already part of the meeting's regular practice, the chat recap can be bundled into it. Examples of useful items include:
  - Relevant ideas that did not get attention during the meeting
  - Links to relevant information
- This practice can also help reduce distraction by reducing the pressure on participants to split their focus between the main meeting and the chat, knowing that chat highlights will be shared later. Reducing this pressure may be particularly helpful to participants who find it challenging to multitask in this way, possibly (but not only) because of a disability.

## 5 QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS TO CONSIDER

No rubric is perfect. A moderator's contextual judgement can be invaluable for limiting distracting parallel chat, but a moderator need not be the only source of good chat etiquette. More participant awareness of considerations can also help prevent distracting chat from arising in the first place. Therefore, we have also compiled a related set of questions that participants can consider, to gauge whether their own potential chat contributions are more likely to be valuable or distracting:

- Would my chat advance the goals of the main meeting?
  - Would it help clarify others' confusion, or provide useful background? If so – post.
  - Is it relevant to what is actively being discussed in the main meeting? For example, if this were an in-person meeting, would I still be trying to speak now? If not – refrain.
  - Is it of interest to more than a small subset of meeting participants? If not – refrain.
  - Will questions be considered and is mine important? If so – post.
- Does my chat promote inclusion?
  - Am I dominating the parallel chat, relative to the size of the group? If so – refrain.
  - Might I be inclined to post because unconscious bias makes it hard for me to attend to this speaker? If so – be more deliberate about listening before deciding to post.
- Am I considering accessibility? Example considerations:
  - If another participant uses a screen reader, will my post be accessible to them? For example, if I am posting a picture or GIF, does it have alternative text that will make it accessible to attendees using screen readers? If not – refrain.
  - Is the volume of chat overwhelming the main meeting and making it difficult for other attendees with multi-tasking challenges? Unless my chat is critically important – refrain.

- Am I clearly communicating the sentiment associated with ambiguous content, for example through emoji (e.g., 😊) or text descriptions (e.g., JK for “just kidding”? If not - refrain.
- Does someone else’s chat contain ambiguous sentiment? If so - ask about ambiguities rather than assuming intent.

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## 7 REFERENCES

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