



Video conferencing is here to stay

“YOU CAN’T WORK AT HOME WITHOUT IT.” TIPS TO USE ZOOM MORE EFFECTIVELY

CAALA staff, including me, began working remotely on March 16. My first Zoom video conference came three days later. By my unofficial count, that’s 120 days of working from home and what feels like at least as many Zoom meetings.

Everyone doing business today can agree that, like it or not, video conferencing is here to stay. To paraphrase a famous American Express advertising line, “You can’t work at home without it.”

Zoom is by far the video conferencing format of choice, but I admit I have decidedly mixed feelings about it. Zooming is not the same as talking face to face with someone; you are just talking to the camera on your computer. Zoom even lets the other party use a photo of themselves or pretend that they are somewhere they are not. Regardless, video conferencing isn’t going away. We need to understand it, embrace it, and master it; or we will be left behind.

Trial lawyers are no exception. More and more of the things that you used to accomplish with in-person meetings are now being done remotely. Every day I hear of lawyers using video conferencing for everything from client-intake meetings to mediations, and a whole lot in between.

According to the L.A. Superior Court, more video conferencing is on the way. LASC has rolled out the new LACourtConnect technology that Presiding Judge Kevin Brazile says will “Provide a safe and convenient alternative to coming through the courthouse doors to appear for your hearing.”

LACourtConnect was introduced in June and by the end of the summer it will be launched in phases for all Limited Civil, Unlimited Civil and Complex, Family Law, and Traffic courtrooms. In announcing the new technology, Judge Brazile said “The COVID-19 pandemic – and the Court’s response – will lead to lasting changes in court operations as we develop and introduce even more technology solutions to modernize the largest trial court in the nation.”

On July 10 Judge Brazile issued an emergency order, in part to “safeguard the well-being of court users.” It included the following: “Parties and counsel are strongly advised to consider using technology for remote appearances, whenever possible.”

So, there is no doubt that Zoom, and other video conferencing formats will play an important role in your practice moving forward. Many CAALA members have been using Zoom regularly for months, but others are using it for the first time. Here are some tips that will help you make the most out of your Zoom meetings.

- Use your laptop, tablet, or desktop for video conferencing. Only use your cell phone as a last resort.
- Ensure your internet connection is strong and reliable. Use an Ethernet cable connection to your router rather than wireless whenever possible.
- Face the light. Make sure a window or your desk lamp are in front of you rather than behind you. Light from behind can cause a silhouette-like effect.
- Elevate your laptop. Look directly into the computer’s camera. It is on the top edge of the monitor or laptop. Prop up your laptop on books or a book stand to bring it to eye level. Make sure you are in the center of the screen.
- Before beginning, familiarize yourself with Zoom or the platform you are using. If you are used to one platform, you may need to study the functionality of the new platform.
- Download the Zoom app and use it rather than your browser. The browser will work, but the Zoom app offers you more control as you participate in the conference.
- If no one can hear you, you are probably on mute. Learn how to click the microphone icon on Zoom to unmute yourself so you can be heard. There is no shame in this, it happens to everyone. If you continue having audio issues, Zoom allows you to dial into any meeting using your phone.
- If your laptop heats up while you are video conferencing, unplug any accessories and close other applications you might have open. Random background programs can also slow down your connection.
- Be kind to others and use headphones; it prevents annoying feedback when you are speaking.
- You should not have to shout to be heard. Consider investing in a clip-on microphone; for less than \$25, others will be better able to discern the inflection in your voice.

Many of you will soon be using video conferencing for online court appearances. Court appearances are different from a Happy Hour, staff meeting or standard Zoom video conference. Here are some tips for online court appearances.

Make your appearance professional

- You need not wear a suit or even shoes, but remember you are in court. Stay away from tee shirts and opt for a more formal solid-color shirt or blouse.
- Plan your background. Keep it simple. People are looking at what is behind you and you don’t want the background to be distracting.
- Use a stationary chair, not one that keeps swiveling.
- Keep your eye on the camera, not on the faces of the others in the meeting. They may appear in different parts of the other participant’s screens.
- Watch the judge, just as you would if you were there in person.

Be prepared and come early

- Test all your devices before the event and check in to the video conferencing platform at least 15 minutes before the session. Turn on your camera and test your audio with the Zoom app.
- Position yourself in front of the camera so you feel comfortable.
- Make sure your documents are easy to find.

Plan for communications failures

- Technology will fail. Be prepared.
- Have a mobile hotspot available as a backup in case you lose your Wi-Fi. Remember, newer iPhones are also hot spots.
- In case your laptop crashes, have a backup one available.

No one can say with certainty when COVID-19 will be behind us. One thing is certain though: Video conferencing is now the way to meet with clients, attorneys, staff, or friends. CAALA will be using Zoom technology as a part of all future meetings, even when we are able to gather again in person. I look forward to “seeing” you at one of those meetings.

