

Google announces AI-boosted virtual meeting system

September 16 2020, by Peter Grad



Credit: Google

The coronavirus epidemic has brought virtually nothing other than misery, pain, fear and disruption. Though we may still be far off from the day we can close the book on this scourge, we are now inching towards what seems like such a long-lost sense of normalcy. Sports are resuming, schools are cautiously reopening, diners are once again patronizing their favorite eateries.

And the typical corporate office is ramping up towards pre-quarantine routines. But for many such offices, there is one major difference:

conference rooms are increasingly becoming virtual.

Zoom took an early lead as the tool of choice for those embracing digital meetings. More than half the companies listed on the Fortune 500 used Zoom just prior to the pandemic measures, and in early 2020, the numbers grew higher as 300 million [meeting](#) participants registered for the video service.

But competition from Zoom's greatest competitor, Google, has been fierce. By mid-spring this year, Google reported adding 3 million users of its teleconferencing tool Google Meet per day, a 50 percent hike from early March.

On Tuesday, Google unveiled a video conference hardware suite that brings AI to the game and promises to make conducting virtual meetings practically effortless.

Google Meet Series One is an all-in-one package that includes a smart high-resolution camera; an audio bar featuring eight built-in microphones, woofer and tweeter, and a sleek touch-screen controller that promises to make the familiar messy clump of cable connections obsolete.

Users can choose between two [smart cameras](#), one with 20.3-megapixel lens and 4.3x optical zoom, and a simpler one for smaller meetings with 12-megapixel lens. Both cameras offer 4k resolution.

The smart cameras auto-frame all participants as they speak. A one-touch button option allows users to fill their frame with a single speaker, or two or three speakers sitting together at table. The camera automatically zooms out when additional people are seated.

Google said the cameras recognize the number of people in a room

"based on physical bodies and other attributes and sound," and that it can monitor attendance and, if needed, "help monitor room utilization and maintain safety protocols." Social distancing, for instance, can be monitored.

The beam-forming microphones accompanying the sound bar utilize AI to keep voices crisp and clear, according to Google. With AI employing 44 simultaneous sound channels, common distractions such as typing, the crackling of snack wraps, barking animals and hiccups, coughs and other bodily sounds should be eliminated or greatly reduced.

Google Assistant, the free accessory, enables voice commands to start and end meetings and adjust voice and camera settings.

The system uses PoE (Power-over-Ethernet), which means power and internet connection are provided over a single cable.

The system is not intended for home use, unless your personal budget can accommodate a few grand. The smallest Google Meet Series One system, which omits the meeting controller and microphone pod, costs \$2,699. A set complete with camera, soundbar, microphone pod and controller costs \$300 more. The top-of-the-line version, which comes with an additional soundbar, two microphone pods and the 20.3-megapixel [camera](#), is recommended for large rooms. It costs \$3,999.

"We understand fully well that the office is changing," said TJ Varghese, a Google product manager. "Traditional conference rooms must be reconfigured."

The Series One systems are not yet available. Google says they will be on the market "soon."

More information: [cloud.google.com/blog/products...-plan-for-the-future](https://cloud.google.com/blog/products/ai/ml/ai-plan-for-the-future)

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