WFH | How to hack your Zoom meetings, the Tech Launch Arizona way

Tech Launch Arizona
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We've all heard the news. In fact, we don't need to hear it. We're living it: Zoom burnout. Our Homo sapiens brains aren't accustomed to paying that kind of attention to that kind of stimuli for extended periods.

At the same time, we've embraced the experience. We understand it's essential to keeping our University alive and well. As teams, we need to interact to do our jobs and fulfill our mission. And as humans, in the face of isolation, we need to interact to stay sane. We can't do our work alone.

So, what's a team to do? At Tech Launch Arizona [1], we decided to take a bit of a risk and have some fun.

"We started dress-up days as a way to have a bit of fun during our weekly Friday all-staff Zoom calls," said Anne Spieth, marketing associate. "Early in the week, we think of a theme and make simple costumes using things we have around the house. The TLA staff really enjoyed the first one, so we decided to keep it going."

The idea came from Aileen Dingus, marketing and events coordinator and site program manager for NSF-Innovation Corps [2]. Her inspiration: a creative friend who also is working from home.

"Unlike many of us," Dingus told me, "she has a closet full of costumes, wigs and accessories from her background in musical theater and her love of cosplay, and has turned her collection into a lighthearted bit of fun."

In pictures Aileen shared, we saw her friend attending her company's meetings dressed as Ozzy Osbourne, Baby Shark and Batwoman.

As a team, we just couldn't resist.

Our first foray into Dress-up Fridays took place in late March, when on a lark the three of us decided to show up to the all-hands Zoom meeting dressed for a formal cocktail party. While the rest of the staff appeared in their normal "quarantine casual" attire, Anne, Aileen and I showed up with the Buckingham Palace ballroom as our virtual background. To match the scene, we were dressed to the nines?the women in cocktail dresses and me in a jacket and bow tie.

Stunning, to be sure.
We have continued since then with a different theme every Friday, including Pirate Day, Spa Day, Fruit Ninjas Day and Animal House Day (TO-GA! TO-GA!).

We've even added a little mystery and interactivity. We don't announce the theme ahead of time, and when the meetings begin, our videos are turned off. All the other team members can see are our Zoom names, which change to serve as hints. Then everyone else tries to guess what the day's theme is.

Aileen was "R2-D2" on Star Wars Day, "R&R" on Spa Day to "Grace O'Malley" on Pirate Day.

When the guessing is done, we count down ? "3 ? 2 ? 1!" ? and do a big video reveal.

We’ve carried on the tradition every week since that first day at the virtual palace, even instituting "All-play Fridays" once a month where we invite everyone at TLA to participate. Star Wars Day was a major success: We had a Baby Yoda, Han Solo, R2-D2, Emperor Palpatine and even a Jawa, complete with light-up yellow eyes. Lewis Humphreys, senior licensing manager for software and IT, even brought a lightsaber. (Because ... lightsabers!)

"I think it's essential to have fun at work, and especially during these emotionally charged times," Aileen told me. "I appreciate that TLA has an environment that encourages fun and that everyone seems to be getting into the spirit of things."

At the June 5 All-play Friday, with "The Sound of Music" as the overall theme, we challenged our teammates to choose their favorite Von Trapp family background and bring a personal keepsake in response to a request to tell stories about "a few of our favorite things." (Can you hear Julie Andrews in the background singing about raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens?)

With the success of the Dress-up Fridays, Aileen thinks it will be a challenge to go back to regular meetings without costumes and fancy backgrounds, and is considering lobbying for Dress-up Friday to continue once everyone returns to the office.

As for me, so long as we can deliver on our commitments and continue to provide great results and performance for our team and the University, I'm all for it.

After all, we are Homo sapiens, not Zoomo sapiens.

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