

What is Microsoft Front Row?



Microsoft Front Row is a new content layout for Microsoft Teams Rooms. It aims to give people in the room a greater sense of connection to remote participants and support collaboration before, during, and after meetings.

Visually, this new layout moves the video gallery to the bottom of the screen and is fixed at a specific ratio to keep faces lifelike in size. With this layout, in-room participants can see remote colleagues face-to-face across a horizontal plane, as if they were in the same room.

Meeting content is surrounded by contextual fluid components like the agenda, tasks, and notes, which can be updated in real-time, helping participants stay

engaged and productive. Additionally, the meeting chat is brought clearly into view so that when joining a Teams meeting from a Teams Room, you can easily see and engage in the conversation in real-time. In a Signature Teams Room, this content is displayed on a wide-aspect-ratio screen to maximize the size of meeting content and the number of participants that can be viewed simultaneously.

This layout is supported across both single- and dual-display configurations. While the front row layout is especially impactful in a Signature Teams Room, front row can be used in any Teams Room running on Windows, regardless of the furniture and hardware configuration.

How to Plan and Design for Optimal Front Row Experience



This whitepaper explores the key components to ensure that you get the most out of Front Row whilst offering the very best collaboration experience for all your uses.



1. Planning

How you and your organization currently use video conferencing will indicate how you will use it in the future. In this post-COVID era, it's likely that your firm uses some form of conferencing on a regular basis, if not at least for occasional meetings. Regardless, your current usage will indicate how you should plan for the future. Microsoft Front Row layout consists of a single row of up to eight local participants to connect to multiple far-end participants. With this in mind, these conference spaces may not replace your medium to large conference rooms but will greatly enhance your team or (scrum) meeting sessions.

2. Furniture and Room Spec/Format

'Meeting equity' is a trending term around video conferencing practices today that describes attempts to create a hybrid meeting environment where remote and in-person participants can have as similar experience in the meeting as possible.

Creating a more equitable meeting environment can involve the seating and table layout of the conference room. Traditionally, a conference room may have a rectangular table or a hollow square layout with seating on all sides so that participants are facing each other. This is a great layout for an in-person meeting, but a remote participant peering through an in-room camera may feel like a fly-on-the-wall looking at the backs of heads or not properly hearing others in the room because they are not facing the microphone.

In recent decades, most conference spaces have accommodated displays and projection screens for meeting content, creating a seating orientation usually of one wall that participants can comfortably view. Due to this, most video conference rooms will place the camera near the display since the in-room participants are generally looking in that direction anyway.

Alternatively, Microsoft's Front Row layout places those in the room in a single curved row so they can view the far end, content and local participants naturally. This layout also provides the far end with a view that will make them feel as though they are on the other side of the same table. This layout is also different in that it is wide and shallow. Often adopters will reuse an existing conference room for a Front Row layout by reorientating the room 90 degrees and placing the displays on the long wall.



Figure 1 - Traditional Conference Room Layout

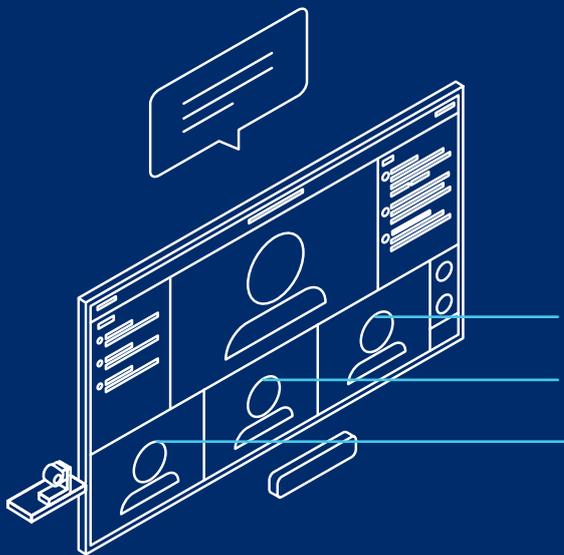


Figure 2 - Front Row MTR Layout



3. Audio/Acoustic Advice

It is commonly understood by the AV community that the audio component in a video conference is the most important. Audio technology has come a long way in recent years with noise-rejecting AI components and far-field microphone arrays that can pick up voices that are 13-25 feet away. However, room acoustics are still important to make a room more comfortable to the ears and extending audio fatigue. Even though you may not notice active sound while physically in the room, microphones can exaggerate background noises without proper processing. Carpet flooring makes for great sound absorption and a low-cost way to “deaden” the reverberation in a conference room. Acoustic tiling in your ceiling can also reduce the amount of reflective noise on the call.



4. Device Recommendation (Cameras)

Microsoft’s push for meeting equity includes ensuring that each participant is equally represented. This includes how much of the display image is taken up by each person’s feed or thumbnail at the bottom of the picture. If the screens are installed correctly, these are approximately at eye level AND not too big. For your Front Row conference room, new camera technology allows each local participant to be captured through smart camera features such as Genius Framing to ensure that heads are almost the same size. This eliminates wide-angle captures of all participants together in a single feed.

5. Display Recommendation

The content you share in a conference call can be critical to how well your message is communicated. Microsoft’s Front Row display layout has been optimized to show people, content and additional meeting info in a comfortable format. They have also developed a new ultra-wide aspect ratio (21:9) to optimize the viewing capabilities. While a few display manufacturers are producing displays with this ratio, front row can be formatted in the typical 16:9 ratio as well as an option for dual display with one display has full screen content and the other people.

It’s important to keep in mind that in the Front Row layout, the primary content only uses about 60% of the available image height, because the “talking heads” are underneath. This now means that the size of the screens must logically grow in order to show the content at the same size. Screens in many UC rooms are already too small, and with features like Front Row, this problem will increase even further. This will mean that whatever the recommended display size would be, you would want to increase it by 140%.

6. User Adoption/Experience

There's nothing like rolling out a new conference room design with the latest and greatest technology and walking by the room to see users huddled around a laptop because they couldn't figure out the conferencing system.

Ease of use, training, and familiarity are key aspects to consider when updating the technology of any conference space. This includes Front Row. Are most calls made from individual laptops or tablets? Do the current rooms have a dedicated PC for users to log in to, or are they used to using a touch panel to launch a meeting? Several manufacturers have developed touch screen interfaces (like the Logi TAP) that deliver a simple and sometimes automated experience.

In some cases, you may have to add a new process or standard in order to move forward with new technology, just make sure there is ample training, service and support for the new system. Also important is knowing who is using the rooms. Administrative personnel or technicians may set up the room. Maybe you have presenters from outside the office or company giving a presentation. Whatever the process is, ensure it is intuitive and as simple as possible.



Front row brings meeting participants to eye level for people in the room and removes stacking people on top of each other to make it a more natural interaction.

Microsoft has included a raised hand list (left panel) to promote inclusion. Meeting chat is also available (right panel) for room participants to be aware of what is happening in the meeting. In addition to this, meeting information is displayed at the top to show key meeting metadata. When content is present, it is shared in the center. Front row layout supports spotlighted and pinned participants. The spotlighted/ pinned participants are prioritized on the left in the single Front of Room mode. In dual display rooms the participants are promoted to the 2nd screen (right screen).

IT Admins can also set the front row as a default layout for a room. A default layout means a layout selected by default when starting a Teams meeting. Users will be able to switch to other layouts using the layout selector during a meeting. IT Admins also have the ability to turn off the front row if there is a need.