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Confair Buddy – Makes Remote Seem Like In-Person

Wilkhahn is presenting a very innovative prototype of its Confair Buddy at Orgatec in Cologne during the Confair Next range's world premiere. As a hybrid avatar, the Confair Buddy will make incorporating remote attendees of in-person meetings much better. A rechargeable battery is all that's required for a cordless power supply of the height-adjustable, mobile totem. With a perfectly integrated tablet and audio system, people can join meetings or workshops from anywhere. The totem can be placed at tables with the tablet at seating height. Or people can grab the totem's handles and place the tablet at standing height, in front of a whiteboard, for instance. The result is an equitable experience for everyone. The clever part is that the AI-capable camera rotates to provide a 180° field of vision. Remote participants can easily control the camera by hitting keyboard arrow buttons while in-person attendees use gestures.

Bad Münden, Cologne, October 23, 2024. Wilkhahn's Confair Next is a comprehensive furniture solution. It applies mobile components to tap into new dimensions of proactive, agile collaboration at all levels. The range is technology neutral, intuitive to use and comes in a consistently high-quality, customizable design. It also stands apart for its integration of both analog and digital media.

Development background

In an era of hybrid collaboration, Wilkhahn was challenged with ensuring much better incorporation of remote participants in group dynamics and improving teams' abilities to work with analog media. Because the downside of online participants in conventional video conferences is that equitable integration and interaction isn't possible. Even worse, when some attendees aren't on site, meetings often just have an online-format – even with people who are in the same room. As a result, there's a loss of spontaneity, engagement, active participation, connection or even emotional commitment. In other words, everything that defines in-person meetings and is so crucial to processes of innovation and change. Wilkhahn wanted to cut down on these drawbacks significantly and make in-person meetings attractive again, even for hybrid forms of collaboration. As a result, we've come up with the Confair Buddy, a brand-new item that realistically integrates remote participants into in-person events.

Confair Buddy - hybrid avatar for in-person meetings

Thanks to the hybrid avatar, Confair Buddy, an online attendee at conferences and meetings can sit with others at tables. By hitting the arrow buttons on their keyboards, online attendees can choose the direction they look in via the AI camera's control system. Their own faces can be seen in the Confair Buddy display in the correct position and voices heard clearly. The camera can also focus on other participants, or shared analog or digital displays, for example during presentations. To attract and direct their attention,

in-person attendees can also use gestures to influence the direction the person is gazing in.

These interactive and mobility advantages are even more important in creative collaboration methods. During these use cases, people also examine objects from different perspectives. Or they might change positions in the room for group work and discuss analog-based results standing up, which are displayed on pinboards, Liteboards and whiteboards. Magnetic markers can also be applied to define sections that the Confair Buddy's AI-based camera needs to zoom in on automatically.

By simply pushing up the display with the camera, loudspeaker and microphone, remote participants are suddenly at standing height, or people can grab the handles and move the totem round the room. Active involvement in group activities and integration of attendees because everyone can direct others' attention encourages better interaction and engagement with content. It also fosters connection and a sense of community.

The Confair Buddy's design and technology

The Confair Buddy is the product of 25 years of research and development experience. Which started with our Roomware, presented during the EXPO 2000 world exhibition. To ensure it blends in well with interiors, it's designed as a mobile, high-quality totem. It matches the other Confair Next modules perfectly thanks to the radii of its frame with optionally fabric-covered sound-absorbent fleece on both sides, foot sections in the same shape and the colors. Because the cover at the rear is attached with magnets, it's easy to remove to install any technology.

The centerpiece is the section at the top consisting of a tablet display, AI camera, microphone, loudspeaker and a 180° rotatable lens, which can be moved from sitting to standing height, in front of the display. This ensures audio-visual contact at a realistic height in every position. The camera lens can be controlled remotely using standard video conferencing applications such as Zoom or Teams, or switched to AI-automatic mode using gestures. It then auto tracks the person in front of the camera or zooms in on whiteboards.

Underpinned by an invisible computing ethos, the camera and audio technology are incorporated in a compact and stylish way. The goal is to focus full attention on the remote participant's almost life-size face. A powerful rechargeable battery is built into the frame and powers the Confair Buddy cordlessly for a whole day. A pull-out cable allows direct charging via wall power or an external charger. The large, lockable casters plus the appealingly tactile and well-designed handles at the sides make it easy for one person to move the Confair Buddy around the room.

This solution has two key advantages over way more complex robots. Firstly, the risk of collision and accidents is virtually ruled out. And secondly, the care and attention taken on site boosts integration into the group.

These characteristics mean the Confair Buddy engenders a hybrid form of collaboration that almost makes online participants feel as they're attending in person. It enables events that place everyone on an equal footing and real interaction.

In the next few months, Wilkhahn will evaluate feedback from the trade fair, potential features and appropriate business models and decide on the future marketing strategy.

Images:



Because of the height-adjustable section at the top with a display, AI-based camera, microphone and loudspeaker, the mobile totem allows equitable participation of remote attendees at sitting or standing height, to discuss results on a whiteboard for instance. Photo: Wilkhahn, Confair Buddy, design: Wilkhahn



The rechargeable battery unit incorporated in the totem frame cordlessly powers the Confair Buddy throughout the day without causing tripping hazards. The pull-out cable allows recharging at any standard socket. Photo: Wilkhahn, Confair Buddy, design: Wilkhahn



If uninterrupted operation is required, the Confair Buddy's portable rechargeable battery is easy to remove, replace and recharge via a separate charger. This is a reliable option if people have forgotten to recharge the Confair Buddy via wall power. Photo: Wilkhahn, Confair Buddy, design: Wilkhahn



The Confair Buddy's design matches that of Confair Next. The same goes for the easy-access technology. The Confair Buddy's reverse has an optionally fabric-covered, sound-absorbent fleece that's easy to remove because it's affixed with magnets. This means that all the technology is both invisibly integrated and easily accessible. Photo: Wilkhahn, Confair Buddy, design: Wilkhahn



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