

# Collaborating Online: Virtual Meeting Spaces



People around the world can meet and work together without leaving their home base.

## Article Summary

Web conferencing and Web-collaboration software are coming of age, allowing groups of people in different locations to meet online. Collaboration software lets companies create a virtual workspace in which teams can conduct meetings and share information online. Not only does it reduce travel costs by eliminating the need for in-person meetings, but it allows companies to focus their resources on projects and to use new techniques to meet with and present information to customers and partners.

One of the remarkable ironies of the Information Age is that computer networks and software have done little to minimize the need for business travel. Despite increased connectivity, most of us still find ourselves enduring crowded flights and stale hotel rooms in the ongoing quest to conduct business effectively. When the time comes to make an important sales call or gather a group together for a crucial meeting, nothing less than a face-to-face meeting will suffice.

The Internet was supposed to change all of that by eliminating geographical barriers and facilitating widespread collaboration between workers and organizations in disparate locations. But technological and practical limitations have created more than a few potholes on the road to collaborative utopia. It has been difficult to create online systems that mimic the way people work offline and seamlessly integrate various capabilities within a single virtual workspace. Lacking ubiquitous high-speed connections, bulletproof reliability, and outstanding integration, many programs and capabilities come to a screeching halt.



Fortunately, the technology is beginning to mature, and Web conferencing and Web-collaboration software are finally coming of age. A growing number of companies are holding meetings, conferences, and presentations online. By venturing beyond the flat earth of in-person gatherings, they are cutting travel expenditures and maximizing resources by concentrating on the business rather than on the travel. According to Forrester Research, 48% of executives plan to use Web conferencing with partners by the end of 2001. Among the leading reasons for adopting the technology are greater efficiency, lower costs, and competitive advantage.

#### A New Way to Meet

"Web conferencing is changing the way people work and interact," explains James Johnson, chairman of The Standish Group, a market-research and advisory firm. "It's beginning to deliver on the promise of boosting collaboration for project teams, meetings, and other enterprise needs." Although Johnson readily admits that collaboration software isn't always a replacement for face-to-face discussion, "it's an untapped resource for a lot of companies."

In the simplest sense, Web-collaboration software enhances online conferencing by offering a group of participants a virtual conference table where everyone can view documents or slides, change or annotate them, and share their thoughts and comments using text chat, telephone (traditional or IP-based), or video. Although the first generation of programs required specialized software and hardware, the current tools from companies such as Astound, Centra, Lotus, Microsoft, PlaceWare, and WebEx-work through a standard Web browser.

"During the past several years, Web collaboration and conferencing applications have grown up," notes Mark Levitt, research director of Collaborative Computing at IDC. "Advanced features have been added to meet the needs of power users while balancing the continued need for ease of use."

#### The Virtual Workspace

The heart of any Web-collaboration package is a virtual workspace where people can interact and share information without everyone being in the same location. Using built-in tools, including a virtual whiteboard, participants can annotate, edit, or view documents, slides, video, and Web pages as part of a presentation. Among other things, it's now possible for a salesperson to demonstrate a product, for a group of executives to analyze a contract or proposal, and for an organization to hold a training session, workshop, press conference, or investor presentation for hundreds of attendees.

Videoconferencing adds yet another dimension to online collaboration, allowing participants to see one another and gauge body language. Additionally, project-management and scheduling software providers, such as Adexa, Artemis Management, i2 Technologies, and Syncra Systems, help virtual work teams operate seamlessly. By eliminating multiple versions of documents and ensuring that all data is current and synchronized, online collaboration is finally becoming a real proposition.

The concept appeals to Johnson, who uses Web collaboration to cut costs and improve communication at The Standish Group. In the past, client meetings almost always required air travel, hotel stays, and days out of the office. Today, the company often schedules online research briefings and product demonstrations with clients as far away as South America and Europe, slashing the cost of a typical event from \$100,000 or more to about



\$10,000. Johnson adds, "As soon as the research is complete, we are able to schedule a meeting. There's absolutely no delay."

Johnson uses WebEx to conduct focus groups. In years past, setting up such events required him to gather a group of people in a single location and engage in face-to-face discussions. Now, he can work with participants from a wide geographic area and exchange information in real time. Later, he's able to share the results of the study online with a client. Using the Web has compressed the entire process from three or four months to two or three weeks.

#### **The Price of Collaboration**

The cost of Web-collaboration software varies greatly. WebEx, for example, charges on a per-minute, per-person basis usually ranging from 20 to 35 cents. Astound charges approximately \$500 per seat, per year. Microsoft's NetMeeting, which works over the Web but requires client software on each PC, is available as a free download; however, it doesn't offer some of the high-end capabilities of other applications.

Although the costs of some services can add up, the primary allure of collaboration software is that it can actually save money while improving interactivity. For example, a salesperson can eliminate an initial trip to qualify a lead by instead offering a product demonstration online. Once he or she has established that the potential customer is serious, it makes sense to travel for an in-person meeting.

Web conferencing isn't without limitations and challenges. For one, participants must have adequate bandwidth. Participants using cable modems, DSL, or faster corporate connections can realize a full multimedia experience and participate without delays. Although the applications

usually work over a 56 Kbps dial-up connection, the performance is poorer, making videoconferencing or IP telephony dicey propositions.

#### **The Right Message**

Additionally, not all presentations are suited to the Web. The medium works best for visually oriented and multimedia-rich material, and it can take a good deal of work on the front end to ensure that slides, images, and information are presented in both a clear and understandable way. Although some of these issues exist in the physical world, they can lead to worse distractions and problems when people aren't located in the same room. Finally, Web conferencing and collaboration require people to adjust the way they work. Ultimately, says Johnson, "the tools aren't perfect, and they're not right for every situation. There are still plenty of cases where you need to conduct business in person."

Yet, it's clear that Web conferencing and collaboration will emerge as viable Internet technologies. "They allow people to communicate better and commute less," says Marilyn Muller, a former industry analyst for Summit Strategies. "By providing a common space where workers can share knowledge, documents, and project tasks, these tools open up new opportunities."

#### **About the Author**

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