

How Cisco Uses Web-based Enterprise Conferencing

Cisco engineering teams use Cisco Unified MeetingPlace to increase productivity and reduce travel costs.

Cisco IT Case Study / Conferencing / Enterprise Web Conferencing: This case study describes an internal engineering team's use of Cisco Unified MeetingPlace, a leading-edge, Web-based enterprise conferencing tool. Cisco customers can draw on this real-world experience to help support similar enterprise needs.

“During the product test process, we have been able to significantly reduce the time required to fix bugs. Using Cisco Unified MeetingPlace is like being in the same room together, so we can all focus on the same problem at the same time. This makes it possible to resolve problems much more quickly than through e-mail or phone conferencing alone.”

– Olga Volkova, Test Engineer, Unified Communications Group

CHALLENGE

With the ever-increasing costs of travel, concerns around efficiency, and the need for employees to multitask to stay on top of their job responsibilities, enterprises are actively seeking solutions that use technology to improve the productivity of business and technical groups.

Cisco Systems®, like many other large, multinational companies, fields diverse teams whose members are dispersed worldwide. These highly skilled professionals must find efficient, cost-effective ways to communicate, whether they are grappling with the intricacies of product development and testing or with launching and supporting a new product.

Heather Paunet, senior software engineer and lead of the Cisco® Unified MeetingPlace® for Lotus Notes team, explains

her group's requirements this way: “We are a global team with members in San Jose and Belgrade. Frequent communication is critical to our success and to working effectively with the customers who use this product. Because of this, we need a technology approach that is much more effective than e-mail.”

SOLUTION

The use of rich media for conducting meetings is a robust, effective solution to the challenge of supporting global teamwork. The Rich Media Communications and Rich Media Solutions teams at Cisco have taken the lead in promoting rich media applications throughout the enterprise. Interestingly, one of their first “success stories” within a product development organization was the use of Cisco Unified MeetingPlace to facilitate meetings conducted by the very group that is developing Cisco Unified MeetingPlace for Lotus Notes.

How Cisco Unified MeetingPlace Works

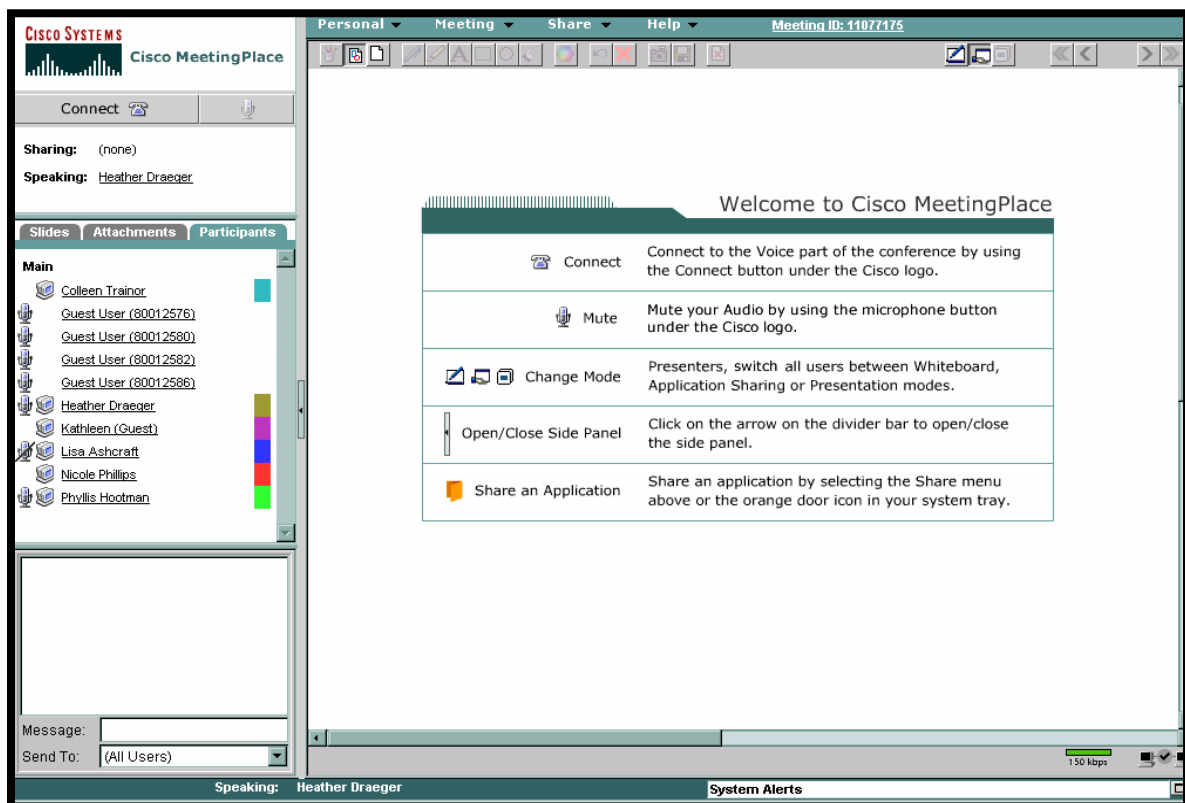
Cisco Unified MeetingPlace is an end-to-end conferencing tool that enables groups to meet and be productive, regardless of the location of individual members, using a robust Web-based user interface and voice and video telephony.

The user experience, from an engineer's perspective, is significantly enriched by features that include:

- The ability to log into the Web-based meeting room and be called by the system when the voice session is ready to begin

- A meeting participant list showing who is joining or leaving and—equally important—who is speaking (Figure 1)
- The ability to share engineering data, bug tracking, and other desktop tools
- Whiteboard capabilities that significantly increase the value of team interaction
- Break-out sessions that allow team members with specific tasks or concerns to leave the meeting to conduct a private discussion and rejoin it when they have completed it
- Live “chat” capabilities in the context of the meeting

Figure 1. Cisco Unified MeetingPlace Screen with Speaker and Participants Displayed



A Closer Look at Leading Effective Technical Meetings

Cisco Unified MeetingPlace provides an important vehicle for conducting effective engineering team meetings. So do best practices—for both team leaders and members. “The Web conferencing capability of Cisco Unified MeetingPlace offers a significant enhancement over voice-only meetings,” says Glenn Inn, a software manager in the Voice Technology Group at Cisco and a former member of the Unified MeetingPlace team. “And there are many best practices that, combined with MeetingPlace, boost the effectiveness of a technical meeting. One such practice is simultaneously taking and sharing minutes of meeting proceedings. Another is incorporating an executive summary into the minutes.”

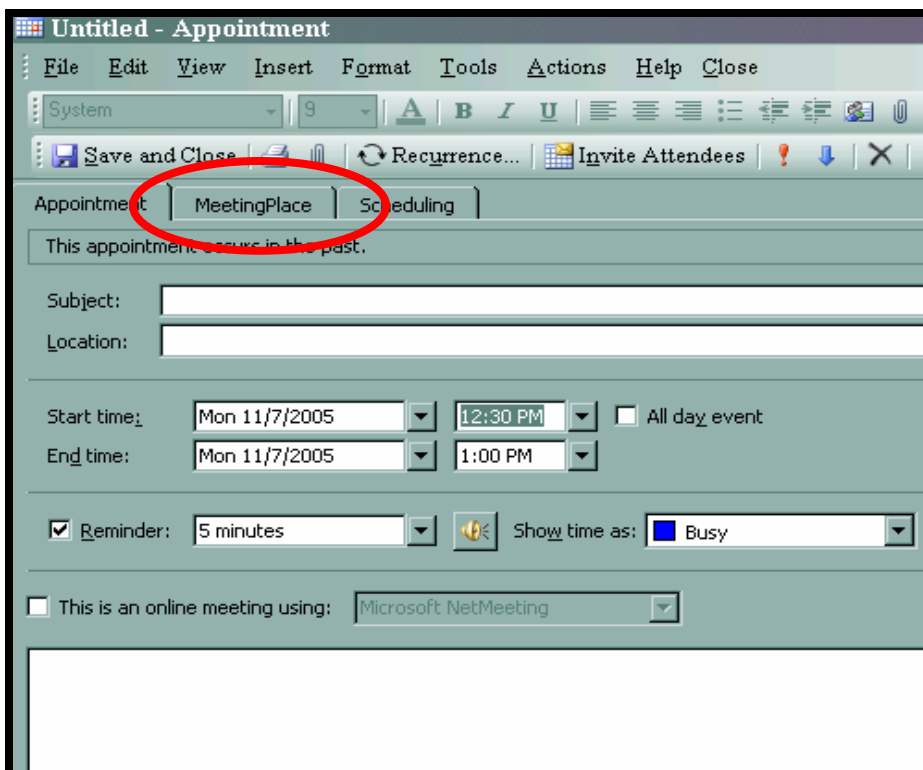
“Learning to create an effective executive summary is a valuable skill,” says Inn. “Because readers are typically business managers who are under time pressure, the summary should succinctly highlight factors that will change milestone dates. It should include any areas that require executive or management engagement, such as issues that affect or are affected by other business units.”

RESULTS

Given vigorous promoting and solid results, the use of rich media in meetings throughout Cisco is increasing. Members of the Cisco Unified MeetingPlace for Lotus Notes team are uniform in their praise of it, citing such benefits as:

- **More effective interactions**—The ability for everyone involved to share their desktops through audio and Web conferences means that debugging, consultations with other Cisco teams, and the resolution of customer problems can occur remotely—and that overall communication is more effective.
- “Cisco Unified MeetingPlace is great for those whose first language is not English,” says Milutin Cvetkovic, a Belgrade-based Cisco software engineer. “I can read the meeting minutes as they are captured and shared during the meeting, and they make it clear what was said. When something new is discussed, the minutes make knowledge transfer easier.”
- **Time efficiency**—With Cisco Unified MeetingPlace, team members can work effectively from home offices. The impact of time zone differences—the 9-hour difference between San Jose and Belgrade, for example—is minimized. Meetings are easy to schedule, because Cisco Unified MeetingPlace can be easily integrated with Microsoft Outlook calendaring (Figure 2). Meetings start on time, and participants can easily involve others as required. Participants can also multitask, tracking the meeting from their desktops and participating actively only when necessary.

Figure 2. Cisco Unified MeetingPlace Integrated with Microsoft Outlook



“When there’s a problem at a customer site, we don’t have to travel to resolve it,” says Huy Quach, senior software engineer and Lotus Notes expert. “We can work collaboratively with the customer just as though we were there in person. Cisco Unified MeetingPlace saves us a tremendous amount of time. I have more quality time to spend with my family now that much less time is eaten up by travel.”

- **Superior dynamics**—All team members noted that audio and Web conferences were “always preferable” to “straight audio.” They also liked being able to “see” people join a Cisco Unified MeetingPlace conference

through the participant list and knowing who was speaking or sharing information. The participant list is a powerful feature of Cisco Unified MeetingPlace that associates team members' voices and names with their team roles, greatly improving the information flow of a meeting.

Whiteboard capabilities—The Cisco Unified MeetingPlace whiteboard feature is useful in product visualizations where real-time collaboration is vital. “Visual objects convey information four times as effectively as spoken communications,” says Inn. “This information is much more quickly internalized than information presented in plain text.”

Faster time to market—Cisco Unified MeetingPlace helps speed time to market—particularly in terms of fixing bugs. It provides the visual information necessary to process each identified bug, a significant advantage when the Cisco Technical Assistance Center (TAC) is unable to replicate a problem. “When a new version of the product is released,” says Paunet, “we use Cisco Unified MeetingPlace to train support personnel quickly and efficiently. It works so much better than our normal method of training. The team is a strong advocate of this product—not only because we’ve developed it but also because it works so well.”

The Cisco Unified MeetingPlace for Lotus Notes team recently completed a survey that validates this anecdotal evidence. The team was asked questions such as:

- Approximately how many scheduled meetings do you attend per week?
- What percentage of those meetings involves remote participants?
- How often do you use each conferencing tool when attending scheduled meetings?
- On average, how many business trips do you take per quarter? [NOTE: responses to this question are not mentioned in the following bullet list]
- What percentage of your business travel could be avoided by using rich media conferencing?
- Aggregated results included the following information:
 - Each team member typically attends nearly 10 scheduled meetings a week.
 - More than 80 percent of the meetings involve one or more remote participant.
 - Close to 90 percent of the meetings use audio and Web conferencing.
 - Respondents who travel for business estimated that they could avoid close to 75 percent of their travel requirements by using rich media communications tools.
 - On a large Cisco campus, transit time between meetings consumes about 50 minutes a week.
 - Respondents estimated that they could avoid close to 80 percent of their on-campus travel through the use of rich media communications tools.

NEXT STEPS

With the growing success of rich media conferences, the Rich Media Communications and Rich Media Solutions teams are continuing to promote Cisco Unified MeetingPlace. As end users become comfortable with the application's voice and Web features, the teams are shifting focus to deploying its video capabilities. Though some users are still somewhat self-conscious about using video, many see the value of the visual dynamic in enhancing communications and of further reducing travel.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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