Beyond the Virtual Meeting

Web conferencing has changed the way learning is delivered.

By Darin Hartley

DO YOU REMEMBER your first WebEx meeting when a remote control advanced slides from a monitor screen to a movie screen? I remember my first meeting, and it was there that I started wondering how this technology could benefit workplace training and development.

This article will examine key definitions, the differences between asynchronous and synchronous learning, potential uses for web conferencing, and the web conferencing marketplace.

Key terminology

The definitions of the common terms below came from Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org). These terms are used frequently in relationship to each other and this topic, and while they are more commonplace, there are still plenty of misconceptions about them.

In the early years of the Internet, web conferencing and computer conferencing were often used to refer to group discussions conducted via posted text messages but the term has evolved to refer specifically to live meetings, while discussions via the posted message is now called a forum, message board, or bulletin board.

Synchronous learning refers to many people learning the same things at the same time. Asynchronous learning is many people learning the same content at different times using computer network technology. It incorporates learner-centric models of instruction.

Many of the web conferencing applications can deliver content synchronously and then record (or archive) these sessions for asynchronous consumption. For example, imagine that you are facilitating a web conference with a team of field-based salespeople. Six of the 30 members of your target audience can't make it to the live (synchronous) session because they are on the telephone with clients. If you know this ahead of time, you can archive this on a server and allow people to access it later or distribute the file. The only downside to this is that one of the benefits of the synchronous sessions is the ability—depending on how the session is established—to ask the facilitatorquestions, which can not occur with archived sessions.

More than one use

In the web conferencing market, adoption and usage of the applications is key for company growth. Web conferencing can be used for more than virtual meetings, including sales support systems (virtual demonstrations), technical support systems (including remote control of customer desktops), project management, workflow management, real-time work documentation, virtual orientation of new employees, virtual facilitation, and virtual coaching.

Web conferencing applications can also be used for the delivery and facilitation of training. In our post 9/11 society, many organizations sought out ways to decrease employee travel while still enabling learning. Web conferencing applications provided a solution to both of those organizational needs. Participants can connect virtually with the facilitator and other participants for employee orientation, sales training, update training, lunch and learns, motiva-tional training, and software training. Often, the ways that these applications can facilitate learning only are limited by the imagination of the individuals using them.

Web conferencing can enhance training activities with application shar-ing, virtual breakout rooms, browser sharing, polling, and question-and-answer capabilities.

The following scenario leverages web conferencing to introduce a new software product. Assume you are in charge of new software training for a high-tech software company in the Silicon Valley. You have three new products being released in two weeks, and the documentation, features, benefits, and support specifications you require are still several weeks from being created. You know that you are going to have a tight timeline between product release and training your sales and technical support personnel on the new software. Additionally, you have the new software applications in varying stages of production and you are waiting for a build freeze to create the training assets.

One of the strengths of web conferencing applications is the ability to share applications, which means that the software your organization is building can be demonstrated at any stage of the software development lifecycle.

In the aforementioned scenario, the software training can establish a core framework of content to leverage the software applications in their most current state for any of the attendees. Also, since many of the current web conferencing solutions that exist can deliver training to thousands of people, it is possible to penetrate the target audience in a very short time. Try reaching 1,000 people in a classroom setting quickly—that is not an option.

Facilitation of a web conference

For workplace learning and performance professionals, there are many differences between facilitating a learning event using with a web conference tool and facilitating a learning event in the classroom.

First of all, based on practical experiences from my days when I was driving

ASTD web seminars, it is important to note that the world's greatest face-to-face presenter has the potential to be completely overcome with the technology aspect of web conferencing. Because of this, you should conduct a practice session to learn the technology and familiarize yourself with the information that will be used for the actual session.

In some cases, the technology can become such a distraction for the speaker that he is not comfortable making the presentation. To compensate for this, designate a co-worker who can advance the slides and use the mark-up tools.

Additionally, identify the technical support contact information for the session from the web conference application team, just in case people are having login issues. It is not a bad idea to include this information in the meeting invite, so that the attendees have a source for problem resolution. Finally, if you are tasked with helping a speaker facilitate a training session, establish a communication line that will allow you to stay in contact with each other, especially if you and the speaker are in different geographical regions.

Just as there is a learning curve for web conference facilitators, there also is a learning curve for participants. The learner's experience is different from a classroom setting. It actually can take more work for the learner in a web conference session to learn the required information because learners can be easily distracted when they are out of sight of the facilitator. The learner can also easily toggle back and forth between the web conference and the other work he is doing.

To recoup the maximum amount of the company's investment and to help minimize the potential frustration of facilitators and attendees, you should train new facilitators and new learners on this software application before expecting them to participate in a web conference.

A billion-dollar industry

There are literally hundreds of companies that offer web conferencing solutions and services today. WebEx and Microsoft Live Meeting continue to be two of the largest players in this medium. Web conferencing applications are becoming commonplace, and the demand for this kind of capability will continue to grow—experts predict that the industry will take in $3 billion annually by 2010. Rather than listing hundreds of individual companies that provide this kind of service, visit http://thinkofit.com/webconf/realtime.htm to find a list of providers.

Web conferencing has evolved beyond the simple collaborative meeting with several teammates sharing a slide deck across a variety of geographical locations. Real learning is happening in real time. When used appropriately, the benefits of web conferencing can be endless.

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