

Where the Wired Things Are

By Christine Sevilla and Timothy D. Wells

Meetings, that's where. It's no surprise that many companies are leaving behind the traditional meeting. They're moving to electronic conferences for important reasons—faster, more effective decisions and more efficient information sharing.

Yet, there's far more to electronic meetings than learning to push the right buttons. Clearly, adequate training is critical; everyone must be comfortable with using the system and maintaining meeting information. Teams must be able to control their online conference meetings. Conference leaders, whose roles become facilitative, need facilitation training.

Your organization's technical resources for other network applications should provide similar support for an electronic conferencing system. In order to start, you need

- a reliable network
- the software you will use, installed

- a system security mechanism
- regular system backups
- a maintenance commitment from technical support staff.

For most organizations, installing new technology and training managers on how to use conferencing software aren't enough. Managers, supervisors, and executives find that they must deal with decidedly nontechnical issues to make electronic conferencing pay off. After analyzing the benefits and managing the basic technical issues, participants have to deal with such complex issues as motivation, fear, and power.

Beyond basics

Learning how to use the conferencing software is important, but participation, consensus gathering, and decision making are not functions of the technology. They are the responsibility of an organization and its people. No amount of technical preparedness can make up for a lack of organizational and behavioral readiness.

Participants must know the electronic conferencing ground rules. They need to know what information is relevant and where it is and what they are expected to contribute. As the training professional, you have to know how to set up an electronic conference, involve people, and prevent information overload. Set it up. You must establish an electronic space in order to create a forum. The first contributions to a new online conference are input categories and objectives. An invitation should go out asking people to contribute information, their ideas, results they've experienced, and so forth.

Involve people. A conference leader should send email to prospective participants to announce initial posted information. Conference leaders should also watch for input from key participants and note who may not be taking part. Off line, managers should be ready to coach and guide staff as they identify needs or when a conference leader requests help.

Is It Working?

Level	What Happens in a Training Evaluation	What Happens in an Electronic Conference Evaluation
1	Administer post-training reaction sheets.	Survey participants informally after a brief period of use (from a few weeks to a month). Ask what they like about electronic conferencing and what they don't like.
2	Test for knowledge or competency.	Deliver a self-assessment tool within the first month for participants to assess their competencies and skills.
3	Determine whether the training has transferred to workplace behavior.	Administer a formal survey to assess usage. Ask: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> How many conferences did you participate in? <input type="checkbox"/> Did you lead any conferences? <input type="checkbox"/> Were the online meetings well-conducted? <input type="checkbox"/> Was the amount of participation appropriate? <input type="checkbox"/> Overall, do you feel the adaptation to electronic conferencing has been successful for your work group?
4	Has the training had an impact on the bottom line?	Use a formal survey to determine time savings in hours per month spent in meetings—pre- and post-electronic conferencing. The dollars and time savings should make the fiscal people happy that they finance the project. Ask these important qualitative questions to learn whether other bottom-line improvements took place: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Are you better able to take advantage of opportunities now that less time is spent in meetings? What value do the new opportunities add? <input type="checkbox"/> Do you spend less time sifting through information in the course of daily work? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you gained new alliances that have brought new insight to problems? Give an example. <input type="checkbox"/> As a result of the electronic conference, do you see new forms of collaboration in people around you? Describe.

Prevent information overload. The conference leader should maintain a clear structure by posting discussion summaries or directing attention to important contributions. He or she may have to redirect discussions that have gone off on a tangent. In addition, everyone must archive old information at agreed-upon intervals. No one wants to slog through vast numbers of outdated files.

Electronic conferencing isn't a panacea, to be sure. It doesn't work well with sensitive HR issues, for example. Human, face-to-face interactions are still the best bet when written words can't convey an entire message; voice inflection and volume translate poorly to the written page. If elements of your job involve people issues—and few of us would say our work doesn't—then you must have variety in your communications.

When it doesn't work

Just as there's unproductive behavior in physical meetings, electronic conferencing has its own set of problems. As more companies gain experience in online conferencing, patterns emerge. What do you do if a person who is important to a decision doesn't participate? How do you overcome people's reluctance to express their ideas in a recorded media? How do you deal with the perceived loss of power? Participation. Groups that don't ordinarily work together may need a kickoff assignment. For example, a group can use an electronic conference to suggest ideas for cost reduction. You can establish a reward for the best suggestion or have the teams pick the winner.

If participation is likely to be an issue, agree on ground rules at the first meeting. Does the topic require checking the conference daily? You may want to require that. Agree at the start how groups will deal with members who don't participate. Typically, people are part of a conference discussion because they are stakeholders or experts, or have some guidance to offer. Make sure expectations are clear, and give participants some choices about what they may be expected to contribute.

Fear. In face-to-face meetings, it's understood that people's memories may not be entirely accurate. If someone makes a point that's later determined to be inaccurate, you can always suggest that the original comment was misunderstood. But in an electronic conference, the original comment is on record. To

paraphrase Mark Twain, "It is sometimes better to remain silent and appear ignorant than to write something to the conference and remove all doubt."

Still, participants must feel that their contributions will be received with trust and forgiveness. A conference leader is in the best position to regulate constructive and destructive behavior. If a "dumb" comment is made during an electronic conference and another participant responds with a rude personal remark, the conference leader can post a reply that all sincere contributions are valuable. He or she can restate the original point in a helpful tone and admonish the second reply as less than helpful. It's critical to set a tone of honest exploration and constructive give-and-take.

Power. Some people have spent their careers developing techniques (sometimes known as manipulating, bullying, and dominating) for managing meeting arenas. The move to electronic conferencing levels the playing field. A constructive response to the "power factor" is to find positive ways for people to be influential, such as asking them to present important information or post key background information. The goal is to shift the source of power and influence—from monopolized information to a clear analysis and innovative application of people's experience.

A successful electronic conference needs sustained support from several quarters. You will want to be able to prove to sponsors or financial staff that an electronic meeting system has qualitative and quantitative benefits. Soon after implementation, you should be able to demonstrate the benefits. You can adapt the Kirkpatrick model for training evaluation to evaluate electronic conferences (see the box, *Is It Working?*). Once people are accustomed to using electronic meeting conferencing, sponsors will likely be satisfied with the results.

Christine Sevilla is president of *lumin guild*, 4 Springwood Lane, Pittsford, NY 14534; 716.586.6085; cs@luminguild.com. Timothy D. Wells is an assistant professor of information technology at the Rochester Institute of Technology, 102 Lomb Memorial Drive, Rochester, NY 14623-5608; 716.475.7136; tdw@it.rit.edu.

Email comments, queries, and questions to ttalk@astd.org.