CONVERGENCE MEDIA: SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIVE CONFERENCING IN GOVERNMENT

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Introduction

Collaborative conferencing includes audio conferencing, data/web conferencing and video conferencing. Many government entities have adopted various forms of collaborative conferencing to address the needs of multiple, varied audiences. The purpose of this document is to review the current state of the collaborative conferencing industry, share how some government groups are using the technologies, and emphasize what needs to be done to drive adoption of these technologies so they become second nature to users.

The Current Situation

The use of collaborative conferencing has the potential of increasing productivity and efficiency by reducing unproductive travel time, preventing meeting delays, creating shorter and more structured meetings, and providing faster exchange of information, thus allowing for greater reach of a message, since individuals can obtain information when it is convenient for them. Collaborative conferencing also allows for an increased number of participants (e.g. emergency management planning, monthly agency meetings, seminars, etc.). It is difficult to get information to everyone at the same time. With collaborative conferencing, all individuals who need data can get the data when it is easiest for them. Additionally, people who would never have obtained information in the past, can now easily do so.

Many government entities – state and federal – have deployed various types of collaborative conferencing to meet specific needs. Broad applications include the development of virtual schools for training purposes, deployment of collaborative conferencing technologies in libraries that are available to the general public, and use of collaborative conferencing in medical situations.

Because there is not one ubiquitous high-speed network that all agencies and states have adopted, the applications and deployment rates for collaborative conferencing vary across the country. Different organizations have adopted different types of technology at differing rates, resulting in some robust uses of the technologies in some areas, and little in others.

Application Examples

Navy-Marine Corps

The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps has a video teletraining program, installed and managed by Applied Global Technologies (AGT), “to provide training, education, conferencing, and quality of life opportunities to sailors and marines as close to their duty station as possible”. In 2003 they had 37,000 participants in their programs who took advantage of technology deployed at 51 shore locations, in 61 classrooms, 18 conference rooms, and on board 25 ships deployed world wide. The benefits of the program have been travel savings since 1989 of $38 M, standardized instruction, increased throughput of students, and providing unique education and quality of life opportunities.

State of South Carolina

The State of South Carolina has deployed an IP-based managed video services solution to offer services to state agencies, technical colleges, local & county government, public K-12 schools and libraries. Installed and managed by AGT, the IP H.323 video network includes the ability to schedule calls and hold point-to-point and multipoint calls, gatekeeper functionality, gateways to H.320 legacy systems, billing and reporting services, and endpoint room control & trouble ticketing service. The State agencies have the ability to use video services on a cost-per-minute basis minute/system) or for a flat rate per month.

Initial users of the IP video network include the Department of Health & Environmental Control (DHEC), State Technical colleges, and the University of South Carolina.

There are 14 health districts throughout the State who want to use IP video conferencing to conduct training and communicate with others, especially at a time of potential disease outbreak or bioterrorism threat.

At the Technical Colleges there is a shortage of professors and a desire to expand beyond the 17 colleges into rural districts. IP video will be used to offer courses to those who would not be able to travel, and to hold monthly meetings among the Colleges for the Presidents' Council and the Foundation.

The University of South Carolina is planning to expand student access to upper-division courses leading to baccalaureate degrees on its regional campuses in Allendale, Walterboro, Lancaster, Sumter, Union, and Laurens through what will be called the Palmetto College. IP video is being developed as a tool to share faculty expertise and courses across a broad geography. IP video will also strengthen the potential for faculty collaboration and service with K-12, Technical Colleges and other Universities.

Other potential applications include the use of guest lecturers for distance learning & training, medical consultations, parole board hearings, video arraignment, joint course development between multiple institutions, homeland security/disaster response, and virtual field trips.

State of Kentucky

The state of Kentucky believes that rural technology is one of the most pressing issues facing the nation today and feels that access to broadband technology is defining the nation's economic divide. By building a statewide telecommunications network, Kentucky will be able to provide high-speed Internet access throughout the state. The goal is to allow everyone access to virtual education, information from libraries, and healthcare, regardless of where one is located.

A technology taskforce has been formed to get broadband access to all parts of the state, especially to areas outside the triangle encompassing Louisville, Lexington, and Cincinnati (Ohio). Once the technology issues are addressed other, equally important issues will be tackled. These include raising awareness, developing applications, writing business plans, finding financing, and offering training. These issues are key to the successful deployment and usage of collaborative conferencing.

It's More Than A Technology Issue

To get users to adopt collaborative conferencing technologies and utilize them on a daily basis we must stop confusing them by pushing technology and buzz words at them that they don't understand. They need to know which technology to select for which situation. And surprisingly, many organizations fail to educate end users that new technology has been installed for their use. Education is vital and nothing should be assumed.

Simply put, users (not those implementing the technologies) don't care about the buzzwords, but want technology to be transparent to allow them to conduct business. If the technology can help them be more strategic and competitive, that is even better. One way of looking at collaborative conferencing usage is to equate it to a personal computer. When PCs first entered the marketplace no one was expected to immediately sit down and use a PC to solve all business problems. Instead, most users found a learning curve associated with the hardware and with each software package. And, as we all now know, few of us use all the packages loaded on our PCs.

The same holds true for collaborative conferencing. Users look at a set of technologies that will improve productivity, increase access to subject matter experts, and allow meetings to be held when needed. These are all factors that are difficult to quantify and place a dollar value on. Yet many users have discovered that collaborative conferencing provides many advantages. The problem is that few users, or vendors for that matter, understand how to make collaborative conferencing something wanted by everyone.

How We Got This Way

When videoconferencing was first commercially introduced in 1982 by CLI and NEC, as an industry we made the mistake of telling everyone that videoconferencing looked like a television and sounded like a telephone.

As a result, users felt that a videoconferencing unit would last 20 years before needing replacement and calls would complete like telephone calls. We all know that videoconferencing systems are really computers that need software updating with regularity and, if you haven't been told let me tell you that the carriers have NEVER established a call completion rate for video calls over ISDN as has been done for audio calls. Further, you need to realize that IP is an evolutionary process that will take 10 years to complete. (We are in about year 4 of that process.)

Let's not leave audioconferencing out of this equation. Although we have done much better with audioconferencing, there are still an awful lot of offices and conference rooms without conference phones. In fact, there are still conference rooms without telephones!

Clearly, the use of data and web conferencing has grown. However, technology is not the only issue to be concerned with regarding data and web conferencing. People resist change and find nothing wrong with their current work style. They need to be shown the value of the technologies. Fortunately, the SEC ruling regarding the dissemination of information has greatly helped the growth of data and web conferencing. But users don't know where the responsibility for these technologies belongs within their organization and they don't know which technology to request for a particular situation. Confusion reigns.

So what needs to be done to drive adoption? The answer is to start small and grow. The answer is to provide strategic promotions and training. The answer is to be sure equipment is updated and procedures are in place across an organization. The answer is for vendors to advertise and place public relations articles in general business publications, not just technology magazines.

User Recommendations

TRI recently conducted a study of 100 end user organizations asking them for recommendations on what they do to successfully adopt audio, web, and video conferencing within their organizations. While their responses sound logical and intuitive, when further study was done to determine how well their recommendations were put into practice it was sad to see that many forget the obvious. Following are the recommendations made by these users:

Audioconferencing

- Make it easy to use
- Quantify cost savings
- Better describe internal PBX capabilities
- Provide training & case study experiences
- Purchase good quality equipment
- Trial usage, create awareness
- Adopt self service reservationless model
- Promote, promote, promote

Webconferencing

- Do a business case and promote it
- Use it and see how it works
- Remember that not everyone is web friendly
- Provide training & case study experiences
- Advertise and don't restrict use
- Explore all products & standardize on one
- Make it easy to use

Videoconferencing

- Make it easy to use
- Provide open house demonstrations
- Quantify cost savings
- Provide training
- Provide a user competency test
- Pick up charges under general overhead to promote usage
- Get senior management endorsement
- Make it part of the corporate culture that everyone be trained & required to use the technology
- Promote, promote, promote
- Hire a consultant

Given all the suggestions presented above, the next obvious question is how do you get started?

Driving Adoption – Getting Started

The following advice, which has been paid for many times and therefore has value, is based on 22 years of consulting within the conferencing industry. The recommendations offered are not magic and may seem very simple. What is amazing is the number of organizations who do not consider these suggestions when implementing collaborative conferencing or decide to overlook these recommendations. Answering the following four questions will make your adoption of collaborative conferencing easier and more worthwhile to your organization.

- **What is our benchmark for success?**
- **Why are we implementing these technologies?**
- **What are they going to do for us?**
- **What will we do with the technologies once they are installed?**

Recommendation 1: Determine Your Benchmark For Success

Generally, someone within an organization gets the idea it is time to install one or more collaborative conferencing technologies. Usually, they approach a telecom or computer person and ask them to implement the technology. Before any steps are taken, the following question should be posed of the person making the request: "What is your benchmark for success?" In other words, how will you know if you have accomplished your job? Too often no one bothers to ask this question. As a result, technology is installed without any thought to how it will positively impact the bottom line of the organization. Collaborative conferencing is not a telephone. It is not an intuitive instrument everyone needs to use. Rather, it is more like those telephones with all the fancy features that no one understands how or why to use. It is time to make collaborative conferencing a necessity. Not only must it be easy to use, but people need to know why they should bother using it at all. One way to start the process is to establish a benchmark for success at the beginning.

Examples of benchmarks include:

- Increasing communication with non-corporate sites by holding conferences once a month
- Getting a specific product to market more quickly using conferencing technologies to shorten the manufacturing cycle
- Training a larger number of end users, who are scattered at multiple sites, in a shorter timeframe.

Recommendation 2: Assess Your Needs

Assess the needs of your organization. Doing so in a structured way allows you to (a) select the right technology to meet specific user needs, (b) identify individuals who will champion the project because they have a need, (c) cost justify the project, and (d) provide data for growth in all areas of collaborative conferencing. Many people, especially those selling you equipment, shy away from conducting a needs assessment. They wrongly believe that the process takes a long time, costs too much, and may convince you to buy someone else's equipment. In reality, a needs assessment can be accomplished, on average, in a 2-4 week period. The value of the data in selecting the right technology and ensuring its usage far outweighs the cost to the user and the vendor. In fact, in many instances those

who conduct a needs assessment are better prepared to purchase more equipment in a shorter timeframe than those who did not conduct a needs assessment.
A needs assessment also helps you uncover unique applications for the use of collaborative conferencing technologies (i.e. using conferencing for review of legal documents, interviews for potential employees prior to having them fly in for a meeting, marketing campaign for a new course or service, etc.).

Recommendation 3: Return On Investment

Understanding the value obtained by implementing collaborative conferencing technologies helps users understand why the technologies should be viewed as a necessity, not just a nicety. While many view the benefits of these technologies to be measured with soft dollars, in reality those who have identified useful applications have had no trouble developing a return on investment to justify both their initial capital expenditures and their ongoing recurring costs. By calculating a return on investment, it is easier for users to see the value of collaborative conferencing and, thus, understand the need to continue growing the usage of the technology. Without understanding this value, what often happens is that when one champion of the technology departs another is not easy to find. When value is understood, everyone wishes to claim the deployment and usage of collaborative conferencing as their idea. Types of ROI calculations for collaborative conferencing include travel cost savings, increased productivity, and time efficiency. As an example, one organization found they achieved a return on their investment after only 67 days because they paid for their equipment by not traveling. Another group increased productivity to enable them to get a service to market three months sooner, thus saving millions of dollars.

Recommendation 4: Applications Development

To ensure successful, ongoing usage of collaborative conferencing technologies it is important to have a variety of applications in mind and others waiting to be tried. In addition to wanting to find champions for the systems, it is important to develop and report on applications for the technologies so others learn and can generate their own uses for collaborative conferencing. As mentioned by the 100 organizations interviewed, writing case study experiences and sharing them with others is key to ongoing success with these technologies. Examples of successful applications include getting product to market more quickly, responding to disaster situations in a timely manner, and educating people at a distance who would not have received the training without the use of collaborative conferencing.

Summary

The future for collaborative conferencing is bright. Dynamic changes in the global communications environment – decreasing network and equipment costs and the need for businesses to compete in a global economy – will propel the adoption of collaborative conferencing at a rapid rate. It will be important for organizations to develop a plan to efficiently and effectively adopt collaborative conferencing technologies and ensure their successful and ongoing usage. This can be done through attention to detail including establishing a benchmark, assessing your needs, determining a realistic return on investment, and developing a variety of applications. Users need to get the benefit of quality technology that works flawlessly, is easy for them to use, and designed to meet their ongoing needs.

About TRI

Telemanagement Resources International Inc. (TRI) is a 22 year old management consulting firm specializing in marketing, communications, and training with an emphasis on design, assessment, project management, promotions, and training for collaborative conferencing systems. More information about TRI can be obtained at www.TRIInc.com.

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S. Ann Earon has been a researcher and consultant in multimedia communications for 22 years. She holds a Masters in instructional technology and educational administration from Northeastern University, and a Ph.D. from Boston College in business, speech & communications, and education. Dr. Earon currently chairs the Interactive Multimedia & Collaborative Communications Alliance (IMCCA), the non-profit industry association for conferencing & collaborative communications. She can be reached at AnnEaron@aol.com.