

Staying Connected Using Technology to Connect Multiple Sites

Nonprofit Technology Conference
Philadelphia, PA
3.26.04

Handout Includes

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Overview of Web Conferencing from a Nonprofit Perspective

From the January, 2003 issue of The Sophist, which explores Web conferencing and synchronous training in the nonprofit sector. http://www.isophinstitute.com/sophist_no5.aspx

Face-to-face, on-the-ground meetings are a staple of organizational life. But today organizations are increasingly using Web conferencing to offer online seminars, training, and one-to-one technical assistance. Innovative organizations are also hosting presentations for advocates and volunteers, providing briefings for field staff, and leading interactive team meetings via Web conferencing. Although economics (no need to travel) and convenience (all you need is a Internet-connected computer) are certainly drivers, Web conferencing offers another benefit not as often touted.

Unlike other technologies used to replace face-to-face meetings (telephone and e-mail, for example), Web conferencing allows for layered communication, combining the visual, the vocal, the aural, and the participatory. The different layers and forms of communication enabled by Web conferencing can appeal to different learning styles and promote more effective knowledge-sharing than other means of communication, like telephone or e-mail, that rely narrowly on a single type of interaction.

Because of its layered nature and the fact that it is a synchronous form of communication, Web conferencing offers organizations the ability to do much of what they could previously do only in face-to-face meetings.

How Does Web Conferencing Work?

Participants join a conference set up by the meeting leader or presenter. While in the conference, participants can see a presenter's PowerPoint slides, participate in Web tours and polls, and interact using the white board. Additional interactive features allow participants to raise hands, ask questions, and vote yes or no. Most importantly, a high-speed Internet connection is not needed for many Web conferencing services.

Also common are application-sharing features that allow trainers to provide one-to-one help on software and other applications. Some services offer voice-over-IP and video (talk and send video through the Internet), but many Web conferencing sessions are accompanied by an audio conference call.

Typical Web Conferencing Features

- **Slides and pictures**
Present a slide show directly from a PowerPoint file, or load a folder of slides and images.

- **Whiteboard**
Use drawing tools to mark up slides and pictures or to sketch out new ideas. Presenters can use a remote mouse pointer to guide the audience.
- **Web tour**
The presenter guides participants on a Web tour and can ensure that all participants see the same Web pages at the same time.
- **Screen-casting and application-sharing**
Presenters can broadcast any software application running on their PC (such as a proprietary database), complete with mouse movements. They can also share or take control of another person's application or desktop to provide assistance or work jointly on a spreadsheet. Features like these are great for small group training or one-to-one training.
- **Recording for playback**
Record a meeting or training for future playback
- **Text chat**
A group text chat board for text which is displayed to all participants and private chat, which enables users to communicate verbally or textually with the host or another participant.

Three Examples of Nonprofits Using Web Conferencing

Just like face-to-face meetings, Web conferencing is a very flexible communication tool that organizations can use in a variety of ways.

- An advocacy organization is coordinating volunteers to host house parties in 12 different locations. The campaign coordinator holds a session to coach volunteers on key messages in their slide presentations, show maps to explain issues, and demonstrate the new advocacy section on the Web site.
- A human services consortium needs to train staff on the new homeless information system. Using a combination of Web tours and application sharing, staff persons throughout the county are trained on a timely basis--without travel.
- Instead of flying trainers across the country, a national nonprofit management organization leads online workshops to improve the way nonprofit and for-profit organizations work together. Presenters show PowerPoint slides, share Web pages, and lead exercises entirely over the Web to groups of distributed learners. In between conferencing sessions, participants use threaded discussions for further reflection and dialog.

The Cost

Web conferencing can be affordable for all types of organizations, and there are numerous options for buying conferencing services. Using an application service provider allows an organization to set up a conference or training session on the spot, on a pay-per-use basis. Larger organizations can consider options that facilitate the use and control of conferencing across organizational departments and among numerous staff persons. Most corporate Web conference providers also offer a subscription model, where an organization must purchase an annual contract and license a set number of seats to use at any time (for \$50 to \$100 per license per month). Nonprofits that provide workshops or services to the public may wish to purchase a custom-branded conferencing site and integrate with additional features such as discussion boards, surveys, and user tracking. Finally, organizations with a dedicated technical staff can buy and install their own Web conferencing software and servers (not recommended unless you have a very strong infrastructure to support the application).

Conclusion

Consider the ways in which your organization uses technologies like conference calls or discussion boards, and think about what you are trying to achieve. If you are trying to get across an important message or share critical knowledge, you may want to consider Web conferencing and the layered approach to communication and learning it offers.

Resources on Web-based Conferencing

A great all-around resource for reviewing many of the most popular Web conferencing applications is “Robin Good's Collection of FREE Web Conferencing Try-outs,” available at <http://www.masternewmedia.org/reports/webconferencing/download.htm>.

The collection features a brief report on 16 different Web conference offerings that are either free or offer a free trial period.

In addition, Robin Good offers a much more extensive review of Web conferencing applications in its “Robin Good's Official Guide to Web Conferencing and Live Presentation Tools,” which is available on a subscription basis at <http://www.masternewmedia.org/reports/webconferencing/index.htm>.

Other good resources include:

- Thinkofit’s “Real-time Conferencing: An Independent Guide to Software and Services Enabling Real-time Communication,” available at <http://www.thinkofit.com/webconf/realtime.htm>
- The Web conferencing BlogSpot at <http://webconferencing.blogspot.com/>
- The Isoph Institute’s *Tips and Resources for Successful Web Seminars and Meetings* available at <http://www.isophinstitute.com/tips.aspx>
- The January, 2003 issue of *The Sophist* explores Web conferencing and synchronous training in the nonprofit sector. Access *The Sophist* at: http://www.isophinstitute.com/sophist_no5.aspx

Resources on Remote Access

TechSoup offers the two-part “Remote Access Guide for Nonprofits.” Part one (<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=340>) focuses on the big picture, helping you determine if remote access is something you need. (note, 2001 publication date)

Geared to those who’ve determined they do need remote access, part two (<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=341>) explores the range of solution options available, from e-mail to remote access software to database replication schemes. (note, 2001 publication date)

For a comparative review of four of the top remote access tools, see David Coursey’s “Four Great Ways to Access Your PC from Afar” at http://reviews-zdnet.com.com/4520-7296_16-5090985.html.

Remote Access Tools

GoToMyPC

Maker: Expertcity

Product URL: <http://www.gotomypc.com>

Review: http://reviews-zdnet.com.com/Expertcity_GoToMyPC_4_0/4505-3514_16-30430274.html

Cost: \$19.95 a month or \$179.40 a year

pcAnywhere

Maker: Symantec

Product URL: <http://www.symantec.com/pcanywhere>

Review: http://reviews-zdnet.com.com/Symantec_pcAnywhere_11_0/Host_Remote/4505-3514_16-30425807.html

Cost: \$199.95

LapLink Everywhere

Maker: Laplink Software

Product URL: <http://www.laplink.com/products/lle>

Review: http://reviews-zdnet.com.com/LapLink_Everywhere_1_5/4505-3514_16-20687185.html

Cost: \$9.95 a month, \$24.95 a quarter, or \$89.95 a year

Timbuktu

Maker: Netopia

Product URL: <http://www.netopia.com/software/products/tb2/>

Review: <http://www.macworld.com/2002/03/reviews/tmbuktu/>

Cost: \$94.95 and up

Access Remote PC

Maker: access-remote-pc.com

Product URL: <http://www.access-remote-pc.com>

Cost: \$10 a month or \$99 a year for Internet service; \$39.95 flat rate for LAN license

Access Remote PC

Maker: AT&T Laboratories Cambridge

Product URL: <http://download.com.com/3000-7240-10187948.html> (download and user ratings)

Cost: free

VNCThing

Maker: Purple Shark Software

Product URL: <http://www.macupdate.com/info.php/id/11993> (download and user ratings)

Review: http://www.everythinghurts.com/usefulmac/2003/09/vncthing_by_pur.html

Cost: free