Is web conferencing right for you?
by Herbert Ochtman

Since the events of September 11th, web conferences have significantly gained in popularity as the next best alternative to face-to-face meetings. Much to the delight of the market leaders in online conferencing, Webex and PlaceWare, many businesses have come to consider web conferences as an excellent complement to meetings.

The technology has become extremely simple to use, and even the most non-technical people can now set up and manage meetings online with ease. For the uninitiated, a web conference is simply a traditional teleconference call with a visual component added to it. The visual component is not about seeing a strangely animated and blurry webcam video of the other meeting participants, but rather about all meeting participants being able to see with perfect clarity on their computers exactly what the meeting host has on his or her computer screen.

The host initiates a web conference by scheduling it with his web conference supplier, listing all of his meeting participants and their email addresses. The web conferencing service provider will then send out invitation emails to each of those participants with directions on how to log into the meeting, and indicating the meeting password. If desired, the web conference service provider will also indicate the teleconference toll free number that participants should dial into for the voice call.

This makes web conferencing ideal for any situation where you want to demonstrate software, share a PowerPoint presentation, or train your meeting participants on a software application. In fact, today the web conferencing offerings have evolved so that just about any application can be shared with your meeting participants over the web, including fast moving audiovisual presentations. Key to making it all work is that each meeting participant must have a computer with broadband internet access, and a phone line.

In our company we sell healthcare data analytics and reporting services using a dynamic, drill-down analytics user interface, and we contracted with the market leader Webex from day one to emphasize to our prospective clients how simple, quick and intuitive access to their data could be. We often use web conferencing to give an introductory presentation of our company to prospective clients, using a PowerPoint presentation, and then we may actually take the meeting participants through a demonstration of how our analytics interface actually works for the user. Web conferencing allows us to talk our prospect through detailed views of our application while it is running live. We can answer questions by showing them real time how we would resolve issues they may raise.

In our line of business we have found web conferencing to be an extremely effective means of initiating a first contact with a prospect, as it allows both parties to gain an extremely good understanding of the other's capabilities and requirements in about an hour, without the commitments in time and costs associated with travel to a face-to-face meeting.

If more than 2 or 3 persons are participating from a single location, we ask them to set up in a conference or meeting room with a projector displaying the computer image on a large screen.

We are also using web conferencing to run very successful training sessions for users of our analytics applications, either one-to-one or even one to many. Since the application allows the meeting host to turn control of his or her computer over to any one of his meeting participants, the trainee can manipulate the application with the trainer virtually 'looking over his shoulder'.

In the last year or two, many new players have entered into the fray, and the choice of web conferencing services is now quite diverse. The two market leaders, Webex and PlaceWare, still command some 70 to 80% of the market, but with the flurry of new entrants offering similar services at much lower prices, the market dynamics will probably change quite rapidly. Traditionally the cost of making web conferencing part of your business arsenal was a flat fee from $400 - $600 per month on up, depending on the number of simultaneous meeting participants, regardless of how much you used the service. This made it rather uneconomic for the business that might only occasionally host a meeting. However, these days excellent service can be had for much less. There are many alternatives to Webex and Placeware, and there are even consolidators, such that you can use the popular Webex, Placeware or Raindance and pay per minute, rather than by paying the monthly flat fees. This allows you to get your toes in the water without making a big commitment.

There are excellent resources on the web to help you make your decision on which type of service might be most applicable to your usage. If you're interested in seeing how using web conferencing in your business, I would recommend starting out by visiting some of the sites listed below.

If you think you'll be using web conferencing frequently, you should contract with a web conference supplier and pay the monthly flat fees of some $200 to $1,000, I would recommend:
www.webex.com , www.placeware.com , www.raindance.com , www.netspoke.com

If you only need to host a web conference occasionally, and pay per minute, visit:
www.webconferencingwarehouse.com or www.theconferencedepot.com

And if you want to do some further research on the world of web conferencing, you'll find useful links to the majority of web conferencing service providers here:

http://thinkofit.com/webconf/realtime.htm#general

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