

Businesses cashing in on virtual meetings

Technology offers companies alternatives to costly 'road shows'

By Mike Dempster - Business Edge

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Stephen McWilliam has endured more than his share of cross-country 'road shows' - weeks of hop scotching from his Mississauga office to major cities scattered across the West Coast and the Prairies.

In a word, the trips are exhausting, says McWilliam, a vice-president with Fusepoint Managed Services Inc., an IT business services company.

"Anyone who has done a road show knows how exhausting it is. You've got hours of unproductive travel time for that one-hour audience and then you're back on the road again."

Two years ago, he and his team reduced their travel time dramatically. Instead of grueling two-week trips, they opted for virtual meetings using technology supplied by Genesys Conferencing, a provider of multimedia business services.

Fusepoint's Stephen McWilliam says productivity at his firm has 'gone through the roof' using a multimedia approach.

Its flagship product, the Genesys Meeting Center, lets users integrate a combination of web, audio and desktop video-conferencing services available on demand.

"Now I literally log in a couple minutes beforehand, present for an hour and log out," McWilliam says. "Productivity just goes through the roof for my product managers, myself and my guys."

Although some companies resist - preferring a culture that demands face-to-face meetings - the bulk of his partners have been won over by the technology.

Those partners, or "channels," are managers in various high-tech companies with hundreds of sales people who pitch Fusepoint's own brand of IT business services.

Typically, McWilliam will hold a Friday morning meeting using audio and Web conferencing, and his partners and their sales personnel can log in on their computers and dial in on their telephones.

"I have my audience online watching a PowerPoint presentation or some other application while I or someone on my team is presenting by audio," he explains.

His audience can raise questions or each member can use an instant-messaging function to chat with him personally and pose a question they might not ask in front of the group.

McWilliam says that in no way do virtual meetings replace face-to-face discussions. They do, however, clear the path for more strategic and tactical sessions that should be held in person. His bias, he adds, is to hold many short and effective virtual meetings.

Tricia Heinrich, vice-president of corporate and internal communications with Genesys Conferencing, believes businesses are beginning to understand the benefits technology can provide.

The company's results in 2004, measured in terms of minutes sold, grew by 15 per cent over the previous year to 1.5 billion minutes. This year, second-quarter results indicate the publicly traded company is on track to hit two billion minutes, Heinrich explains.

"In the first two quarters of 2005 we've seen a dramatic increase in demand."

While business leaders are most excited about the return on investment, Heinrich says individual users appreciate the ability to improve efficiency and communication, regardless of the size of their business or their varied geographic locations.

Notably, virtual meetings can be a great equalizer for smaller companies, she explains, because in a web conference every company appears to be the same.

"You eliminate the trappings, the plush carpet, the large conference room.

A small company can more easily compete with a larger company because of tools like this."

Heinrich acknowledges virtual meetings can have their challenges. In anonymity, participants' eyes can easily wander to e-mail or any other distraction.

As part of its service, Genesys counsels presenters and viewers on protocol. For example, the technology provides a polling feature. Throughout the virtual training session the trainer can ask questions or give quizzes (results are processed in real time) to keep participants on their toes.

Trainers can also survey to see what the virtual class thinks and adjust the presentation appropriately.

And because participants are virtual, or feel less inhibited, the answers they give are often more honest, Heinrich says.

Like McWilliam, she stresses multi-media conferencing can't completely replace travel.

A company involved in sales might conduct an initial meeting using the technology, but would meet in person to close the deal, she says. Research also shows that face-to-face meetings promote team building and that in turn helps facilitate effective future virtual meetings.

Al-Karim Moloo, a division manager for Robert Half Management Resources in Calgary, says travel time is being cut and replaced by virtual meetings as companies become more fiscally responsible.

In a survey released by Robert Half earlier this summer, nearly half (48 per cent) of 972 U.S. professionals polled said they travel for work less frequently compared to five years ago.

"People are traveling less here, too (in Canada)," Moloo says.

"Less travel is probably good for the bottom line."

And today's employees are also placing a higher value on maintaining a work-life balance.

"The bad thing is that it can take away from the personal interaction that provides a forum to communicate critical issues.

"Face-to-face meetings let you pick up on the non-verbal cues from people, and build rapport and business relations more quickly."

Ron Tabachnick, senior facilitator with Toronto-based RT Planning Strategies, believes organizations haven't yet grasped the benefits that virtual-meeting technology provides.

"I thought more companies would be running to the table to do this, but they haven't.

One time I would have been able to save a company \$30,000 that wanted to get 15 people together, but they wanted the face-to-face contact."

Tabachnick has leased three software programs to facilitate virtual meetings more than a dozen times in recent years.

"When everyone is sitting in front of their computer screens across the country and they've dialed in, it's like we're in one big boardroom," he says.

"We can put up a presentation and everyone can offer their opinions, which are typed on to the screen in real time.

"The software allows us to manipulate the text in real time down to a very narrow, focused approach ... to ultimately create an action plan that everyone agrees to ... and then we get them to sign on the dotted line so they are accountable."

As a facilitator, Tabachnick notes one of the great benefits of virtual meetings is that he works with sharper minds - as opposed to having to physically bring people together from across time zones.

"Psychologically, they're much better off. They save a lot of energy, not having to travel," he says.

Fusepoint's McWilliam agrees completely.

Professionally and personally, he couldn't be happier since embracing the technology two years ago.

"Anything that lets me spend more time at home is a boon. I have two young children (eight and 10) who love to see dad come home for dinner."

But he concedes not all corporate clients understand that virtual meetings can be a key way to productively conduct their business. "I can't understand, for the life of me, why."

Web Watch: www.fusepoint.com

www.genesys.com

www.rtplanningstrategies.com

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THE SPEED MEETING

"Long, boring meetings are about the most unpopular thing in life. People would rather mop the kitchen floor or go to the dentist."

- Tricia Heinrich, Genesys Conferencing.

In order to run effective meetings, Genesys Conferencing developed strategies to maximize use of its technology and help modify individual work styles that enhance a person's effectiveness. The following are some suggestions:

** Everyone resents repeating discussions already held. The facilitator should review previous meeting notes and electronic archives to make sure each meeting acknowledges earlier discussions and builds on them.*

** Meeting agendas often can be pared down if people give input in advance. The facilitator should post an agenda 24-48 hours in advance and request attendee input by a given deadline. Attendees should offer how to make the agenda more focused.*

** Support the presenter's voice by using web-based visuals and text that will more than double audience attention and retention. But keep visuals short and snappy.*

** A system with integrated phone and web functions displays on screen all attendees and indicates who is talking over the phone line. A good moderator keeps tabs on who has spoken up and calls upon those who haven't to keep all members engaged and contributing.*

** Always start meetings on time. Latecomers will quickly become more punctual or lose team respect.*

** Speed-time the speaker. Normal speaking time is about two words per second. So a focused, 50-word, five-sentence contribution should take just under 30 seconds. Ask attendees to watch their computer clock and keep input to 30 seconds each. It's a fun exercise, teaches brevity and greatly speeds up the meeting.*

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