

Web Conferencing Amplifies Dysfunctional Meeting Practices

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Without effective meeting discipline, Web conferencing can waste more people's time across a broader geographic range than before. Group decision support tools can cure much of the dysfunction. Act now — don't wait for the feature mergers we expect to see in the next three years.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

We believe that intense competition for market share will drive Web-conferencing vendors to integrate GDSS capabilities into their Web-conferencing products by the end of 2008. If you can tolerate sitting through unproductive meetings for the next two to three years, there may be no need to invest in GDSS training and tools. Otherwise, we believe most organizations will benefit from combining GDSS training and GDSS and Web-conferencing technologies to enhance meeting performance and to reduce the number of dysfunctional meetings, regardless of the type of meeting.

STRATEGIC PLANNING ASSUMPTION(S)

By 2008, at least two major Web-conferencing vendors will offer GDSS-like capabilities (0.7 probability).

By 2009, at least two major collaboration vendors will also offer GDSS-like capabilities as part of their shared work space or integrated collaboration products (0.7 probability).

ANALYSIS

Dysfunctional meeting processes are a major drain on workplace productivity and employee effectiveness. Web conferencing does not make meetings worse, but it can amplify the problem by increasing the number of people involved in dysfunctional meetings and by making these bad meetings accessible from anywhere in the world. The notion of dysfunctional meetings is well-embedded in Western culture, forming the basis for comedy television (for example, "The Office") and comic strips (for example, Dilbert). Exploring the results of a few quick Google searches for terms like "meeting management" (which generated 730,000 hits), "effective meetings" (which generated 589,000 hits), "managing meetings" (which generated 96,900 hits) and "facilitating meetings" (which generated 95,900 hits) suggests that the notion of effective (and ineffective) meetings isn't limited to comedy. Indeed, many of us have lived through too many bad meetings, meetings with:

- No agenda or objectives — or worse, hidden and political agendas
- No time management or respect for the other calendar commitments of attendees
- Domination by loud speakers or speakers who are physically present in the meeting room
- Ramrod collaboration (where decisions are jammed through as consensus findings)
- Judgmental brainstorming
- No conclusions, actions or follow-up

Web conferencing has certainly created business efficiencies, speeding up the process of organizing meetings and cutting travel expenses. But there's still room for improvement, and Web conferencing can amplify dysfunctional meeting practices. Although there are tools that can improve the quality of meetings, no tool can resolve all the problems that crop up in meetings and meeting practices. (Dilbert need not fear being unemployed.) But various tools can improve on meeting effectiveness. They can add value to Web conferencing and other forms of meetings. This research explores one such tool from GroupSystems, because we believe that it — or some of its competitors (see Note 1) — might provide a much more effective way to run participatory

meetings. In the end, we believe that Web conferencing and meeting facilitation tools will merge — but not before tens of thousands of dysfunctional meetings are amplified by simple Web-conferencing tools.

This research is important if you have something to do with supporting, facilitating or running participatory meetings (or you are present during participatory meetings broadcast over Web conferencing and would like to know what to suggest to improve your own work environment).

Meeting Facilitation Tools — Also Known as Group Decision Support Systems (GDSSs)

There are several different meeting facilitation tools in the marketplace.

GroupSystems (www.groupsystems.com), formerly known as Ventana (see Note 2):

- Is the progenitor of the GDSS product category
- Has been the subject of the most academic research
- Is the one best known to us based on client inquiries, case studies and operational usage
- Appears to meet or exceed all the capabilities of its competitors

This is not an endorsement of GroupSystems' product, but it serves as the best "exemplar" of the GDSS product category. GroupSystems (and competitors) offers the following services and capabilities:

- Trains meeting facilitators to run effective meetings (and guides them during the meeting)
- Provides real-time tools to facilitate agenda-setting, brainstorming, discussion, organizing, surveying, priority setting, decision making and other tasks that are routinely performed (or should be routinely performed) in meetings (see Note 3)
- Helps create written meeting outputs consisting of content created by the meeting participants during the course of the meeting
- Augments performance among people meeting face-to-face as well as spread across the LAN or the Internet
- Provides tailored process templates

Although Web-conferencing tools are typically designed as unidirectional tools (from speaker to audience), many also offer basic bidirectional or multidimensional communication tools (such as voting, chat, instant messaging, whiteboards, video feed(s) and feedback to the presenter who can share a presentation or the display from an application on his or her desktop). Nonetheless, the design center for Web conferencing is primarily a one-to-many communication session.

GDSSs combine a many-to-many communication paradigm with a one-to-many facilitator role. GDSSs are structured around meetings — not presentations — where people participate (instead of passively listening) and contribute to the process (instead of watching someone else's material show up on screen).

The various activities (behaviors) augmented by a GDSS fit reasonably well with the five different classes of nonroutine behavior that deliver the real competitive impact companies need to be vital and growing long term (see "High-Performance Workplaces Promote Revenue Growth and Productivity"). GDSSs generally fit better than most Web-conferencing tools (see Table 1).

Table 1. GDSSs vs. Web Conferencing

Nonroutine Behavior Category	Sample Purpose	GDSS Function	Web-Conferencing Feature or Comparison
Discovery	Finding threats and opportunities	Brainstorming, surveys and other features	Poorly suited for discovery. Provides chat, whiteboard, screen/application sharing and voting only
Innovation	Developing or adapting new process or product (goods or services)	Organizing and priority setting	Poorly suited
Teaming	Expertise location (finding the right people to help convert the innovative idea into an action plan); assembling the people and running a process to develop the plan	No expertise locator; discussion, decision making and other functions contribute to effective teaming	No expertise locator capability; main features (chat, whiteboard, screen/application sharing) not oriented toward persistent teams
Leading	Tracking action plan status, providing leadership and management skills	Plans can carry across from meeting to meeting, but little by way of integration with other planning tools and processes; Other tools (such as project management) may be better	No specific functionality, but screen/application sharing can be useful with some project review tools
Learning	Extracting lessons learned and passing them along	GDSS functions seem to be quite useful, collectively, for conducting "postmortem" examinations, extracting learning and planning training	Not very effective at involving the audience

Source: Gartner (March 2006)

Although a GDSS seems better suited to participatory meetings than Web-conferencing tools, neither is integrated with the other, neither provides continuity across meetings and neither actively fosters the systematic collection of a body of knowledge of best practices for future use. There is a natural complementarity between Web-conferencing tools and GDSS methodology and structure, if not technology. In addition, there is complementarity between GDSSs and persistent collaboration environments. Shared work spaces can provide context to a GDSS session, as well as functioning as a persistent repository for GDSS session agendas, inputs and outputs, Web conference logs, and other key interaction artifacts. GDSS facilitation techniques and tools for structuring, focusing and driving participant interactions toward conclusions can be used asynchronously as well. The complementarity between GDSS techniques and asynchronous collaboration opens up another opportunity. By 2009, at least two major collaboration vendors will also offer GDSS-like capabilities as part of their shared work space or integrated collaboration products (0.7 probability).

An investment in a GDSS isn't necessary to gain some of the benefits of a GDSS. GDSS vendors (and channel partners) train people on how to facilitate effective meetings. Training people on how to run effective participatory meetings is a good start, but a GDSS toolset can add

incremental value. All other things being equal, a meeting orchestrated by someone trained in good meeting facilitation techniques, and using GDSS tools, is likely to be far more satisfying and productive than a participatory meeting conducted by someone with good facilitator skills but using Web-conferencing tools.

The cause of this goes beyond facilitator-training effects. The GDSS provides a context within which the meeting process leader (the facilitator) can work. This framework, which begins with agenda setting and includes all the various process elements from brainstorming through final decision making and automatic publication of (limited) minutes, provides far more structure than one will find in a Web-conferencing tool.

GDSS-facilitated meetings will be more productive, and the meetings will (typically) feel more effective and efficient to participants because GDSS tools facilitate brainstorming, discussion, organizing, priority setting, decision making and reporting. (GDSS tools, such as GroupSystems' technology, can be — and are — used independently of Web conferencing. In fact, the best practices suggested by and facilitated by GroupSystems can and should be applied to most meetings, regardless of meeting modality. Overuse — particularly of technology — should be avoided.)

Issues

There are drawbacks to GDSS tools. The biggest is an over-reliance on the features. We know one user who cut back its GDSS usage because sometimes meeting attendees didn't want the facilitator driving the meetings — they just wanted to share findings and best practices without any of the flavoring this tool provides (such as organization, structure, prioritization or voting). GDSSs like GroupSystems do not force structure all the time. A GDSS can be used to engage in unconstrained brainstorming. However, if the group only wants to do open brainstorming, a GDSS may feel like overkill to some users.

GDSS tools aren't needed in every meeting, and some meeting processes can benefit from occasionally avoiding the use of the technology.

GroupSystems and its competitors lack the conferencing facilities that Web-conferencing tools provide. To get the best of both worlds, users would have to run a GDSS tool and a Web-conferencing tool during meetings. We believe that competition among Web-conferencing vendors will lead to them either buying a GDSS tool vendor or building their own into their Web-conferencing technology. The first such marriage may occur this year. By 2008, at least two major Web-conferencing vendors will offer GDSS-like capabilities (0.7 probability).

Roadblocks

The GDSS business has been hampered by an ineffective business model.

- GDSS tools are usually bought by and used by "specialty" departments that deliver meeting facilitation services elsewhere in the organization. The GDSS vendor community has not figured out how to thrive on making small amounts of money from each of the many (potential) users.
- Success with GDSS is typically dependent on training the facilitator how to run an effective meeting. This is a nontrivial task which slows uptake and accounts, in part, for user organizations relying on in-house meeting experts instead of just buying the software themselves.
- User purchases are also slowed because the unit price for GDSS products tends to be relatively high, optimizing revenue from the specialty departments whose mission is

running meetings at the expense of broader sales to the community of meeting goers everywhere.

GDSS vendors could address this gap by buying a Web-conferencing vendor. However, all the GDSS vendors appear too small to pull off such a deal with any of the established Web-conferencing vendors (such as those profiled in "Magic Quadrant for Web Conferencing, 2005").

Other Barriers to GDSS Deployment

Most users we have talked with report high degrees of satisfaction with GDSS tools — but most of the benefits are "soft." For example, it's easier to identify travel savings associated with Web conferencing. Measuring the economic impact of more-effective meetings is far more difficult. Although improved brainstorming doesn't cut expenses, it can, for example, speed time to market or increase sales close rates. These downstream consequences of better practices facilitated by GDSS tools provide real advantages but are much harder to measure.

Most people think they know how to run meetings and are not inclined to take the time to be trained on meeting facilitation skills. Most of the successes we've seen with GDSS tools occur when organizations assign (or hire from the outside) dedicated meeting facilitation personnel. That may not be necessary for success, but it is a best practice that raises the likelihood of maximum and sustained benefits.

In some organizations, meetings are not viewed as "participatory." They are top-down communication sessions. GDSS tools are of little value for these types of meetings.

Note 1

GDSS Packages

- GroupSystems (www.groupsystems.com)
- Facilitate (www.facilitate.com)
- WebIQ (www.webiq.net/)
- Meetingworks (www.entsol.com/index.html)
- Grouputer Solutions (www.grouputer.com)

Note 2

Background

GroupSystems emerged in the late 1980s from research by Dr. J.F. Nunamaker, Jr. (and others) at the University of Arizona. Early versions of its tools required dedicated machines tied together to support a meeting occurring in a single location. Newer versions are no longer limited to one location, nor do they require a dedicated machine. Installation can be as simple as pointing a Web browser at a particular Web address.

Note 3

Other Selected Attributes

- Few computer skills required
- Brainstorming (anonymous or not)

- Gathering detailed input — not just brainstorming
- Group outliner lets multiple people add content simultaneously

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