

Web Conferencing in Distance Education

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INTRODUCTION

Web conferencing is a technology that allows groups of individuals in a variety of diverse locations to communicate and share information without having to leave their desks. It provides features such as whiteboarding, screen sharing, chat, and polling. It eliminates the need to travel, reduces downtime, increases efficiency, and reduces costs. AT&T worked on proofs of concepts and prototypes for personal conferencing systems for 20 years and finally released its product in 1993 (Perey, 2003). Microsoft released NetMeeting in about 1995. Wooley now lists 95 real-time collaboration products and Web sites on his Web site, *Thinkofit.com*. The growth of real-time collaboration has grown significantly and been more successful in the last few years, as the CPUs in PCs are faster, the PCs have more memory, and more bandwidth is available and cheaper. Frost and Sullivan's 2002 report estimates that by 2008, \$2 billion will be spent on Web conferencing (as cited by Perey, 2003). This technology allows a business to conduct training simultaneously, globally creating a collaborative learning environment while keeping costs down.

Wintrob (2003) cites an example provided by Sam Mazotta, WorldCom Canada's director of product management, where it costs \$2,000 per person to fly 50 people to an in-person meeting for travel, hotel, meals, and related expenses for a total of \$100,000. For a Web conference for the same 50 people, plus an additional 100 people watching live in the same location: \$4,100 for audio-visual production, \$1,100 for signal capture, \$12,800 for streaming, \$500 for 180-day archiving, for a total of \$18,500 or \$370 per person.

This article will discuss two Web conferencing tools: Microsoft® Office Live Meeting and IBM Lotus Instant Messaging and Web Conferencing.

Microsoft purchased PlaceWare in February 2003 and developed a new business unit, the Real Time Collaboration Group. At the time of purchase, PlaceWare was offering services to 3,100 enterprise accounts (Perey, 2003). These accounts include companies such

as BASF, Computer Associates, TD Waterhouse, Siemens, HP, Cisco Systems, and Bristol-Myers Squibb Company. The 9/11 incident made travel safety issues for corporate America look into alternative solutions for training and meetings with clients and global offices. The 2003 SARS epidemic was another incident that escalated the use of Web conferencing. PlaceWare, now called Live Meeting, is a hosted Web conferencing service. It requires a telephone and a PC with a Web browser and an Internet connection.

Presenters (meeting facilitators or trainers) develop their presentations in a presentation program such as Microsoft PowerPoint, upload the slides into the application from their desktop, set up a conference call, invitations are sent via e-mail to the participants with a logon and password, and the presenter logs on as the host. Live Meeting Now appears to be a feature recently added to Microsoft® Office Live Meeting. This capability allows the presenter to schedule a meeting on the fly from either Outlook or Lotus Notes. This feature is not used in Metavante Corporation, as sufficient licenses are not available to provide this feature to the general population.

The second Web conferencing tool available to all Metavante employees is IBM Lotus Instant Messaging and Web Conferencing. This tool was released to the general public in the second quarter of 2004. The instant messaging portion of this tool was previously called Sametime, which has been available for a few years, but only available to Metavante employees for approximately one month.

LIVE MEETING

Live Meeting is available for a free 30-day trial evaluation. It is available via purchased seats at a yearly rate or at \$.35 per minute per user. It can handle groups from two to 2,500 without leaving their desks. It consists of two meeting environments: the Auditorium Place and the Web Meeting Place.

The Auditorium Place is intended for training and seminars up to 2,500 individuals. The Auditorium Place allows for multiple presenters to present simultaneously to a large group. At any time a presenter can become the active presenter without having to pass control back and forth. Text questions can be answered by any of the presenters at any time. An attendee can get a private answer, or the answer can be posted for all to see. There is a seating chart and feedback to help the presenter pace the session or to highlight a specific individual's needs. Plug-ins are not required for any of the attendees. Following are features of the Auditorium Place:

- Application and desktop sharing and viewing
- Annotation tools
- Microsoft® Outlook® integration
- Printing
- One-touch record and playback
- Attendance charts
- Web tour (Microsoft, 2004a)

The Web Meeting Place is intended for smaller collaborative groups: interactive sales, marketing, and training or learning groups. It has advanced collaboration features that can be used with these smaller groups. Presentations can be delivered, applications shared, text and whiteboard tools used interactively. A presenter remains in control at all times, but can share controls and take them back at any time. A presenter can visit the online room at any time and can add materials prior to the meeting. The specific features of the Web Meeting Place are as follows:

- The ability to show and share any application, document, graphics, or illustrations
- Annotation tools
- Integrated two-way instant messaging
- Web slides
- Whiteboards
- Web tour
- Printing and handout capabilities (in PDF format) (Microsoft, 2004a)

Both the training and marketing departments are under contract for 30 concurrent licenses. If all 60 licenses are being used, additional seats are available at \$.50 per minute. Branding is available; this means that when a client attends a training session or market-

ing presentation, the Microsoft logo is removed and replaced by the specific company's logo. The Web Meeting Place appears to be what the corporate training department uses for their training sessions.

While the primary usage of Live Meeting is to present interactive meetings and training sessions, the presentation can be recorded. These recordings can be saved and played back later, either for subsequent meetings or training sessions, or can be played back on the intranet, Web site, or CD. A PlaceWare Replay Wrapper utility is available for download to provide the audience the ability to view the recorded session. The utility requires Windows Media Player to be installed on the computer (Microsoft, 2004b).

The Conference Center is the administrator's tool for scheduling meetings. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the setup of a typical meeting. The typical time to set up a meeting, including sending presenter and attendees e-mails, is approximately 10 minutes. The administrator or someone who has scheduling privileges can generate a variety of management reports: Meeting Lists (meetings and attendance for a specified period of time), Meeting Attendance (users and roles, the browser used, time arrived, and duration of attendance), and Meeting Poll (indicates if each attendee responded to each polling slide) (Microsoft, 2004c). Figure 3 depicts the e-mail sent by the administrator to the presenter. This will include a link that can be clicked on or pasted into a Web browser for the presenter to access the meeting. Figure 4 depicts the attendees' e-mail sent to the presenter to send to the attendees.

If the meeting has been set up as a Web Meeting Place, the presenter can access the meeting at any time to prepare the meeting presentation. Once in the meeting, the presenter can upload an existing PowerPoint presentation. Web, poll, application sharing, and text slides can then be inserted into the PowerPoint presentation. The presentation can be exported as a PDF file for saving or printing if desired. While attending the meeting, the attendees also have this option. A PlaceWare Add-In for PowerPoint is available for download. This add-in gives the presenter the ability to prepare Web, poll, application sharing, and text slides in advance prior to uploading. Figure 5 shows a poll slide being created in PowerPoint using this add-in. It allows the presenter to add his/her image and name to the presentation. It allows the presenter to export PowerPoint presentations to the PlaceWare Slide Set Format (.pwp). It allows the presenter to upload slides

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