Tools to Assist Meeting Planning

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ABSTRACT

Meetings take up a large amount of time, especially at the upper managerial levels. To help meetings progress smoothly and reach desired goals, meeting facilitators are frequently called in. Facilitators have at their disposal a number of techniques, including thinkLets. Through the use of thinkLets, facilitators can plan the meeting beforehand, deciding which activities to perform at each point. However, even with the use of thinkLets, designing a meeting is not an easy task, in particular for novice facilitators. A number of considerations must be made when selecting activities and designing the meeting dynamics. In this paper, the authors discuss this problem and present a framework and a system to assist the design of meetings, electronic or otherwise, using thinkLets and compatibility rules. The framework implements rules to help facilitators select and link thinkLets together in an orderly fashion, designing the meeting in the process.

Keywords: Computer Science, Facilitation, Information Systems, Meetings, ThinkLets

INTRODUCTION

Meetings take up a large amount of time, especially for information workers and upper management (Andriessen, 2003). Problem resolution frequently demands exploration, discussion and decision making by groups. This means a team must work together, discuss possible alternatives, evaluate them and their tradeoffs and select the most appropriate one(s). Certain techniques have been introduced to improve meeting productivity (Kolfschoten et al., 2004). One strategy involves employing facilitators, professional meeting coordinators to assist the group. Facilitators act before, during, and after the meeting.

Prior to the meeting, facilitators design the process and meeting activities in order to ensure goals are reached, sometimes using pre-defined group dynamics patterns such as thinkLets (Vreede & Briggs, 2001). Facilitators also run the meeting, making sure the group is proceeding as expected, the necessary issues are being covered and the schedule is being followed. Thus, one of the facilitator’s roles is monitoring the meeting and correcting any deviation in group dynamics. If the facilitator notices the group is steering away from its
objectives, he or she should try to get the group back on track. We have explored this aspect of the facilitator’s activity in another project (Vivacqua et al., 2008).

Thus, the activity of planning a meeting consists of a process of choosing from a set of thinkLets, which are documented descriptions, settings and steps required to execute certain group activities, as well as guidance on how to apply them (or when not to), according to the situation. Although it greatly simplifies the development of a meeting process, this approach still poses a considerable challenge given the number of available thinkLets and the multiple combinations possible.

Designing the meeting process involves deciding which thinkLets to use and how to tie them together. Less skilled or inexperienced facilitators may find it difficult to put together a meeting, given the number of choices and variables that need to be considered. This is the problem we address: the construction of a workflow that represents the meeting process, given a set of possible activities to be linked together. This is a real life problem, faced by facilitators who adopt the thinkLets technique. They must make multiple decisions, based on their expectations of how the meeting will proceed.

A computer-based meeting support system could support the facilitator in his or her task of designing the meeting through selection of the most appropriate activities. We view this process as a design process, as it is open ended and involves several choices and tradeoffs, in the search for the best meeting dynamics.

In this paper, we discuss this problem and describe AgendaBuilder, a rule-based system designed to support this activity. With this research we tackle the problem of activity choice during meeting preparation. Our main contribution is a configurable rule-based framework and a knowledge base composed of rules to assist the facilitator during activity combination and selection. Thus, we expect to benefit practitioners, who will be able to use and expand on the system, and academics, who study meeting support and collaboration engineering, who will be able to build upon the framework and the rule set to produce new research. Our approach was to take an existing set of meeting activities, analyze and characterize them and construct correlation tables, from which the rules were derived. We then built a system to instantiate these rules and provide a proof of concept for the framework.

This paper is organized as follows: next, we introduce background theories upon which our work is based. Afterwards we present related work done by others, followed by the AgendaBuilder. Its implementation is discussed after, followed by a discussion and then the conclusion.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, we discuss the facilitator’s activities. Roughly speaking, they fall into one of three categories: pre-meeting, post-meeting and meeting execution. During the pre-meeting phase, the facilitator needs to prepare an agenda for the meeting, select participants who will contribute to the discussion, make sure all necessary resources are available and invite participants, letting them know what the agenda and meeting goals are. During the meeting, the facilitator monitors the discussions and intervenes when necessary to ensure that the meeting reaches its goals. In the post meeting phase, the facilitator should write the meeting summary and send it to participants, ensuring they are in agreement with it. In this section, we discuss facilitators’ role and tools that have been designed to assist them.

MEETING FACILITATION

The facilitator’s role is to lead a group through a process of assembly, helping it understand what should be done and achieve its goals (Viller, 1991). According to studies, this role is plays an important part in the quality of an electronic meeting, (Clawson & Bostrom, 1993). The benefits of using a facilitator in a group are recognized in both face to face
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