# Web Conferencing in Distance Education



**M. Michelle Panton**
*Bemidji State University, USA*

## 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 attendants. 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

*Figure 1. Administrator's conference center; fields required to create a meeting*