

Building Organizations via Electronic Conferencing

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Computer conferencing is ideal for any organization that currently has the need for conventional meetings or conferences. It is particularly valuable where an organization's staff is located in different cities, or where staff is in field offices or constantly traveling. It overcomes the difficulties of distance that often make management and communication difficult.

With Computer Conferencing, participants are able to carry out their normal daily routine and take part at a time that best suits, or is most relevant to them. Deadlines are still met -- each participant is fully brought up to date with the activities of all other participants every time they participate.

According to an article in *Management Review* (August 1989), most companies that use computer conferencing report travel costs are cut 50-to-75 percent because of the significant reduction in the number of face-to-face meetings. Savings on project development can run as high as 90 percent.

And savings on telephone bills are often in the 10-to-35 percent range, since electronic communication is more succinct, can be done in off-peak hours and eliminates telephone tag.'

Instead of Face-to-Face Meetings

Computer Conferencing has a number of advantages over physical meetings or conference calls. Convenience is the most obvious benefit with the added bonus of huge cost savings. Examples of both include:

- No money and time spent on travel and accommodations
- No expensive venues
- No jet lag
- More time for consideration and deliberation
- Opportunity to involve more people
- A broader and more democratic process
- No coordinating of time schedules
- No time zone restrictions (phone calls)
- More time for reflecting on comments made and responses to them
- The process of writing is a powerful tool for organizing one's thoughts
- Fewer 'heat-of-the-moment' responses
- Less domination by one or more personalities
- A written record of the dialogue is created.

We don't assume computer conferencing will replace physical meetings. When the latter are required, however, Computer Conferencing can enhance meetings in several ways. For example:

Plan the agenda. Unplanned and unfacilitated meetings are usually unsatisfying, while a good agenda makes for a successful meeting. Computer conferences are ideal settings for fine-tuning agendas; they can be discussed, modified and often many issues can be resolved before the meeting has even begun!

EXAMPLE: The meeting facilitator or chair posts a proposed agenda as a new topic. Participants add comments as responses. The facilitator collects the responses and posts a revised agenda as the final response prior to the actual meeting.

Assign research projects. As a result of agenda settings, research topics often come up. Perhaps someone needs to be contacted for certain information. If this didn't come up until the meeting, much time would have been wasted.

EXAMPLE: A topic can be assigned to the person responsible, who then posts updates as responses.

Review Materials Prior to Meetings. Informed decision-making requires familiarity with a variety of materials. How often have you been at a meeting where you didn't get the materials until the last minute-- hurriedly put together and passed around at the beginning of the meeting! Sharing materials online prior to a meeting avoids expensive printing costs (and time!) and allows decision-makers and participants to familiarize themselves with relevant issues in advance.

In summary, computer conferencing can improve face-to-face meetings by providing forums for better planning and preparation.

Instead of Electronic Mail

While electronic mail has increased the pace of communications, it has limitations in that email messages are inherently unorganized and provide no structure for discussion. In addition, exchange of email among a group of people can inadvertently leave out a necessary individual. Conferencing discussions can proceed faster than email since the delay induced by a serial sequence of messages and responses does not exist. Conference information is organized by topics; new topics are easy to create, and responses can be appended to any topic. All topics and responses are available for review by any participant, and because all messages are automatically labeled with time and date, development of the discussion is easy to follow.