

# Utilizing Web Meeting Tools as an Operational Advantage



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## Introduction

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Web conferencing has long been the province of marketing departments which stage presentations or Webinars to groups of people. The software has typically been expensive to buy and burdensome for the internal information technology (IT) departments to install, support and maintain. Other firms choose instead to use a hosted service from a traditional teleconferencing company. Of course, that means paying the high per-minute costs associated with the support of a legacy telecommunications network. Either option has drawbacks since they are both not only costly, but they require companies to limit access only to key personnel.

## Web Meetings as Operational Fabric

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Thanks to the combination of low cost, high-speed access to Internet services (whether at the corporate level or for telecommuters) and the willingness of a company to use software to handle its key operational functions (like customer relationship management) that company can present a truly meshed and integrated view of itself.

Services like these offer great potential to businesses, by allowing them to implement systems that are otherwise too expensive for small and mid-size firms to afford. They are beginning to understand that, regardless of their size, they can use the same tools and software that large corporations use, without having to own and install the programs on their company computers.

This trend has caused many companies to re-examine how they communicate and collaborate, both internally and with external partners. As firms seek ways to reduce the cost of doing business, increasing the efficiency of IT seems to be an area of concern.

One specific focus is revamping the way meetings are conducted, possibly eliminating some of the need for travel and therefore saving expense and redeeming time that would otherwise be lost. Some companies try to solve communication problems with technology such as Palm Pilots, Blackberries, and wireless connected laptops, in effect tethering the employee to the company network at all times.

An alternative to the standard face-to-face meeting is the use of web meetings for some functions. Newer, more user-friendly technology, and significantly reduced per-user cost makes this a viable solution to an old problem.

Many business meetings have a common theme, such as the PowerPoint presentation, sharing a document for review, training, or examination of a balance sheet. These are all tasks that can be done remotely, thus saving significant time and money.

For companies that have remote locations, requiring employees to travel across town from one office to the next to attend training sessions can easily mean one to two hours of lost time sitting in traffic, for each employee. Multiply that by several employees and the cost to the company escalates quickly over the course of a year.

Or, companies can make use of a web collaboration tool, like BizConference, that carries out these meetings without employees leaving their offices. Spur-of-the-moment ad hoc meetings can be called and instantly initiated, allowing for improved communication within all business functions. The cost per month can conceivably be less than the amount spent on a single business commute.

## What is a Web Meeting?

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At its simplest level, a web meeting allows a presenter to share whatever is being viewed on a computer screen with another person or persons at a remote location (see sidebar for details about how a web meeting works). Web meetings are not only useful for live presentations, but they can also be recorded for repeated use for such things as training courses and new-

hire orientations. As a Macromedia Flash file, these meetings can be saved and placed on an intranet available to employees (in the case of a training course) or on an external Web site for such things as sales presentations or product training.

With the low cost of this type of service, it's easy to see how web meetings can become a vital business communication tool, facilitating communication with remote offices, training of multiple staff, sales presentations to clients and prospects, support of a staff member in another location, or collaboration on a document, spreadsheet or artwork.

Traditionally web meeting software or services have been the province of IT companies which are accustomed to implementing new and complex technologies. Now, with the advent of services such as BizConference the potential for use becomes available to almost any type or size of company.

Here are some examples of how BizConference is currently being used by clients:

- A realtor has the ability to search and display multiple home details in real time, while on the phone with a potential client. Using this technology, the realtor can simultaneously pull up community Web sites and statistics on the neighborhoods, all at the time of the call. This represents a vast improvement in the quality of service the realtor can offer compared to the traditional way that required trying to set up face-to-face meetings which were not only inconvenient, but inadvertently gave the client time to "shop around."
- An accountant who is reviewing a client's tax return, or assisting clients with their use of a software program such as QuickBooks™ is able to handle these tasks more quickly without either party having to travel, adding convenience at both ends.
- An e-mail newsletter company, with a completely virtual office is able to handle all business functions remotely. This includes new and renewal sales demonstrations, customer support, training, internal collaboration, company and staff meetings. Over

the course of a few months BizConference has become woven into the fabric of the company's business interactions.

## Cost Savings

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It's easy to see how immense cost savings are possible by eliminating many, if not all of the travel costs, lost production time, and the creation of a more 'real time' company. The traditional approach of the sales call is to make an appointment, and at the time of that appointment, the salesperson presents the product. With a web meeting, the sales person is able to present the product during the initial phone call, speeding the sales process.

Using a hosted software as a service model with a fixed monthly fee, the overhead on an internal IT department is eliminated, which frees the department to focus on business essential functions. In addition, there is no "down time" or annual maintenance fee. Companies can expect a known monthly expense (possibly as little as \$20 per month) with no hidden costs, making it easier to budget and to analyze the return on investment.

## Security Considerations

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Due to the BizConference model of using just a browser for the attendee to view a meeting (with no application or applet to download) there are no security concerns raised by the clients who wish to participate. This has not always been the case. Traditional solutions required that clients download applications without a system administrator. If the client's security policy prohibited the download, the meeting failed or was delayed while the attendees called in IT staff to solve the technology issues.

Other companies have tried using a one-to-one or peer-to-peer type of software solution, supported in house. This suffers from the same drawback, in that many companies do not

allow such a connection from outside the company. While this may seem draconian to some, it's a good blueprint for an efficient security profile.

BizConference, takes a different approach to hosting web meetings, only requiring a client's use of a standard Internet browser, guaranteeing the ability of the client to attend every meeting, every time, and the ability of a presenter to successfully initiate a meeting whenever desired without any doubt that the meeting will take place.

To some organizations, a hosted service presents additional security concerns in communicating with people outside of their organization's firewall, or to remote staff over public networks. In these cases, the presenter can initiate the meeting for authentication and for the period of the meeting using standard and trusted environments such as SSL by means of an https:// connection.

Other organizations can use BizConference to address compliance issues, such as Sarbanes-Oxley or corporate governance, through a flexible approach to business process and the ability to record meetings for archival purposes.

## Conclusion

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As the needs of today's businesses evolve, it's clear that time is one of the most valuable components of employee productivity. That's where the advantage of managing meetings and business functions remotely can result in significant savings of time and money.

Advances in the design, implementation and management of solutions such as BizConference present forward-thinking organizations the ability to streamline and increase efficiency without placing any additional overhead on already stretched departments.

The ease of use, high availability to staff and low cost create a compelling case to examine business efficiency for as little as \$20 per month.

## About weBranding

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weBranding is a small marketing and interactive virtual consulting firm based outside St. Louis, MO. Our primary focus is helping small to mid-sized organizations harness the Internet and emerging technologies to generate leads and build brand awareness. Feel free to contact Tommy Young at 618-566-0034 or via email with any questions or to set-up a short initial "sourcing" meeting to talk about your requirements and how we'd approach meeting your needs on time and on budget.

