

Changing Culture with Virtual Meetings

Ponnadurai Ramasami, University of Mauritius, Senior lecturer

Telephone number: 00 230 4541041 (Extn: 1467); Fax number: 00 230 4656928

E-mail: p.ramasami@uom.ac.mu

Abstract

A meeting involves gathering of people to discuss and sometimes decide on matters. Meetings are of different types and are meant for different purposes, but they all have a common aim to bring people on a single platform. Before the development of the Internet, although there was “telephone meeting”, meetings were usually conducted by conveying people on site. Although face-to-face meetings remain popular, information and communications technologies provide valuable tools to enhance meetings. Virtual meetings have been used to eliminate distance and are becoming increasingly popular. However virtual meetings must not substitute on site meetings, as the social and cultural aspects of the hosting country cannot be experienced. This work reports an overview of face-to-face meetings and then illustrates how these meetings can be enhanced with virtual meetings. Thus information and communications technologies lead to a change in culture giving rise to e-society.

Keywords

Face-to-face, ICTs, e-society

Introduction

A meeting involves gathering of people and together they discuss, debate or decide on matters. Meetings may be of different types such as annual meetings, conferences, workshops, seminars, brainstorming sessions, interviews and medical consultations. Meetings can be formal or informal, large or small, and long or short. Meetings are meant for different purposes but they can be used for conveying information, discussions and exchanging of views and ideas, analysing and solving problems, sorting conflicts, getting feedback, opinion and training. However although meetings are meant for different purposes, they all have a common aim of bringing people and stakeholders on a single platform. For the proper running of any organization, meetings are very important.

Traditionally meetings are conducted by having participants around a table and such meetings are termed as face-to-face meetings. Before the development of the Internet, telephone meetings were sometimes done. It was realized that telephone meetings could be conducted no matter where people are, provided there is a telephone and no other special device is required. Telephone meetings are also convenient for disabled and old persons. Further telephone meetings can be used to cut down the cost of travel and more important time waste in displacement. Although there are advantages with telephone meetings, there are disadvantages such as people involved in meetings may not know each other and this may be a barrier for discussions. In the past, during telephone meetings nothing can be seen and they are not appropriate for deaf participants.

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) is a term used to refer to a wide range of services (e.g telephony, fax, internet), applications (e.g distance education and management information systems) and technologies (e.g television and cellular phones), using various types of equipment and software running over networks (Martínez-Frías 2003). The ICT revolution is affecting the way information is shared and it brings leverage in time and distance. These translate into efficiency and cost. Thus with the development in information and communications technologies (ICTs), the world is condensing to a global village and there has been a revolution in the way meetings can be enhanced. In fact organizations have started convening people from corners of the world using ICTs and the traditional face-to-face meetings are being enhanced and sometimes substituted by virtual meetings (Arnfolk and Kogg 2003).

This paper illustrates concepts of face-to face meetings and then describes some of the problems, which are associated with these meetings. While trying to find solutions to the problems with face-to-face meetings, ICTs come to the rescue and virtual meetings are described. However virtual meetings should not substitute face-to-face meetings as there are certain aspects of these meetings, which so far, cannot be benefited with virtual meetings. Virtual meetings can be used to sensitize and mobilize the people to engage in research, policy analysis, and design programs of action to solve major problems faced by small island developing states; and raise global public awareness on issues of small island developing states and developing countries (Martínez-Frías 2003) through research, education, and dissemination of new knowledge.

Face-to-face meetings

For the proper running of an organization, meetings are very important but meetings need to have a purpose and cannot be held just because people need and have to meet. For meetings to be successful, it is important that (Fletcher 1983; Hindle 1998; Renton 2000 Chapman 2003; Micale 2004):

- There is an agenda or purpose
- Many members can attend
- There is someone who can take the lead or chair
- Decisions are taken as a group
- Decisions and actions are monitored

Organizations have always been conducting face-to-face meetings and these meetings have promoted their development and allow them to be more competitive. The most positive aspect of face-to face meeting is the physical presence of people on site where the meeting is to be held. It is believed that when people meet there is interaction which can be focused as well as unfocussed. Face-to-face meetings allow people to gather, notice each other, communicate with each other and the latter is responsible for the exchange of information, which is vital for meetings. When people meet each other, this can be a starting point for future collaborations. However although face-to face meetings still remain popular, there are various problems associated with them.

Organizing face-to-face meetings can be costly particularly when they are international. Since face-to-face meetings require physical presence of individuals, people need to travel. However traveling is becoming costly and time is also a factor not to be neglected. In many cases example knowledge meetings, organizers depend on the number of registered participants. Thus it is a challenging task for the organizers to motivate participants to attend face-to-face meetings. In some cases, participants are sponsored but it is evident that it is impossible to sponsor everyone and every time. As with telephone meetings, face-to-face meetings can be beneficial to only a certain number of participants and of course, people with disabilities find it very difficult to attend. Apart from these, it is difficult for students to participate in face-to-face knowledge meetings due to cost implications.

Virtual meetings

Some of the problems with face-to-face meetings may be sorted out by using virtual meetings. In fact due to globalization, progress in technology and economic conditions, there is a change in the way that people work, communicate and interact. Recently improvements in ICTs have increased interactions between geographically separated individuals. Statistics have shown that Internet reaches over 150 countries, is used by 30 million people and is growing at the rate of one million users per year (Graham and Marvin 1996). Thus these are providing opportunities for clustering people giving rise to global village and virtual communities. There are three modes of virtual meetings and these are audio conferencing, videoconferencing and web conferencing. Audio conferencing uses telephone technology to conduct meetings via conference calls. Videoconferencing uses video technology to conduct meetings but it has complex

equipment requirements, such as meetings rooms set up as studios. Web conferencing uses Internet and sometimes video technology to conduct online meetings.

With the explosive growth of ICTs, face-to-face meetings can be enhanced with virtual meetings. It is now possible to have people who are not physically present to participate in face-to-face meetings just like those who are on site. Human interactions are complex and for efficient communications, visual cues such as body language, eye contact and flow in conversation are important. It is known that electronic communications are deficient in one or more of these areas. However, systems have been designed to give participants the feeling of physical presence even though they are remote. In certain cases it is believed that meeting virtually is preferred by disabled persons, because others cannot form an impression about their disability. In cyberspace everyone is equal. It is known that huge amount of money may be required for organizing face-to-face meetings and these meetings are beneficial to hundreds of people. But the same amount of money invested in ICTs can be benefited by hundred thousands of people across the world.

Virtual meetings are on the rise and they are facilitated by developments in ICTs. They are becoming increasingly popular after the 9/11 terrorist attack in the United States and many questions are raised regarding the safety of long-distance travel (Spielman and Winfield 2003). Participants involved in virtual meetings can share files, real time communicate through audio and video, real time discussions, share applications and desktop sharing. In this era of electronic democracy, there are advantages of virtual meetings. First of all the question, where is conference to be held?, is not applicable and people from corners of the world may participate so long that there is Internet connection with good band width. There is also no question of time, discussions can be done through e-mails and participants have more time to think and react to various issues. Further each and every aspect of meetings are on record and can be accessed at any time.

In order to have successful virtual meetings, there are various issues which need to be addressed (Spielman and Winfield 2003; Converse 2004). These are video and audio support, standards, user support, technological aspects. Since audio and video support is vital for virtual meetings, cameras and microphones should be arranged to provide electronic eyes and ears so that it is possible to simulate face-to-face meetings. Standards should be verified in terms of topics for discussions, time restrictions, sponsorship and plagiarism. Organisers should be available to answer queries from participants and be able to provide remote assistance. Today if something goes wrong, it has to be with technology. Therefore organizers and participants must be on the wavelength in terms of software compatibility among other factors. It is also important that there is proper management so that for example, there is security and privacy. Participants may not be happy if their details get into public domains and some issues being debated should remain within a circle.

Another interesting aspect of virtual meetings is that it is suitable for late comers. Very often people get late into a meeting and then are lost in the discussions although they are briefed. Virtual meetings may be recorded and proceedings can be updated and accessed easily for reference. In case of face-to-face meetings some participants like to meet

informally and this is taken care in virtual meetings where special environments for recreation and entertainment are provided such as playing games on line.

Conclusions

There is a great potential for using ICTs to enhance face-to-face meetings by having virtual meetings and those who are unable to attend an off-site meeting in person still get some of the benefits. This gives rise to a change in culture leading to e-society because in the past meetings mean being physically present, taking notes of paper and then voicing ideas. However today people are in front of their desktops and meetings are still taking place. Virtual meetings bring geographically dispersed participants on a single platform and this result in time and cost saving, decreased travel requirements, more brains involved for decisions taking. Even people in the same buildings face the difficulty of finding time to meet and virtual meetings can be used efficiently. In order for virtual meetings to be successful, an effort is required (Spielman and Winfield 2003) in order to gain maximum benefits. In case there is no planning this may give rise to digital division that is a gap between those with access to information technology and those without. However this does not mean that there should not be face-to face meetings. Virtual meetings emerging from the benefits of ICTs should be used to enhance face-to-face meetings. It should be noted that human interactions in face-to-face meetings are still among the challenges of virtual meetings. Further international meetings give the opportunity for people from different countries to meet and people discover the social and cultural aspects of the hosting country. However this experience cannot be obtained form virtual meetings. In future all decisions made in different fields such as science and technology, economics and business developments will be based upon information that has been generated electronically. Thus growth in the ICTs sector should be ensured in order that access to information is not privileged particularly for developing countries (Martínez-Frías 2003).

References

Arnalk, P. and Kogg, B. (2003), "Service transformation: managing a shift from business travel to virtual meetings", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, vol 11, pp. 859-72

Chapman, B. (2003), "The best damn guide to meeting technology period", *Successful Meetings*, vol 52, no. 6, pp. 39-14

Converse, L. (2004), "Make most of online meetings", *Pharmaceutical Executive.*, April, p. 42

Graham, S. and Marvin, S. (1996), *Telecommunications and the city: Electronic Spaces, Urban Places*. Routledge, London

Fletcher, W. (1983), *Meetings, meetings: how to manipulate them and have more fun*, Michael Joseph, London

Hindle, T. (1998), *Managing meetings*, Dorling Kindersley, London

Martínez-Frías J. (2003), "The importance of ICTs for developing countries", *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, vol 28, no. 1, pp. 10-14

Micale, F. A. (2004), *Great meetings: a practical guide to motivate and engage your people*, Entrepreneur Media, New York

Renton, N. (2000), *Guide for meetings and organisations*, LBC Information, Sydney

Spielman, S. and Winfield, L. (2003), *The web conferencing handbook: understanding the technology, choose the right vendors, software and equipment, start saving time and money today!*. Amacom, New York