Cut Costs and Drive Efficiency of Virtual Teams

Executive summary

Innovative technology has increased our mobility to the point that it has virtually eliminated distance, thereby drastically altering the business landscape. However, today's plentiful communication tools are not enough to ensure success in this new virtual landscape — usage strategy is key to deriving the greatest benefits.

> " Almost 60 percent of survey respondents consider Web conferencing a very important part of virtual team collaboration. "

For example, while audio conferencing can instantly connect virtual team members, how effective is it for enabling collaboration? What if audio conferencing were combined with Web conferencing? This brief examines the benefits of using such a combination to optimize team communication.

Survey results

Citrix Online recently commissioned a survey of 2,318 respondents to find out how virtual teams are utilizing audio and Web conferencing. Of those surveyed, more than half are using audio conferencing for collaboration with virtual teams. (See Figure 1.) Audio conferencing provides a good foundation for communication with virtual teams and as such, is a solid first step in the right direction. Additionally, the reported frequency of use illustrates the effectiveness of audio conferencing: More than 60 percent of those surveyed are using it at least weekly.

But, of course, audio conferencing has its limitations — most notably in its inability to push projects to completion. In fact, the lack of a visual communication actually often extends the production length of projects. It is for this very reason that Web conferencing is outpacing audio conferencing in terms of growth. The majority of survey respondents (68 percent) anticipate that their usage of Web conferencing will grow, while only 37 percent of respondents project the same for audio conferencing.
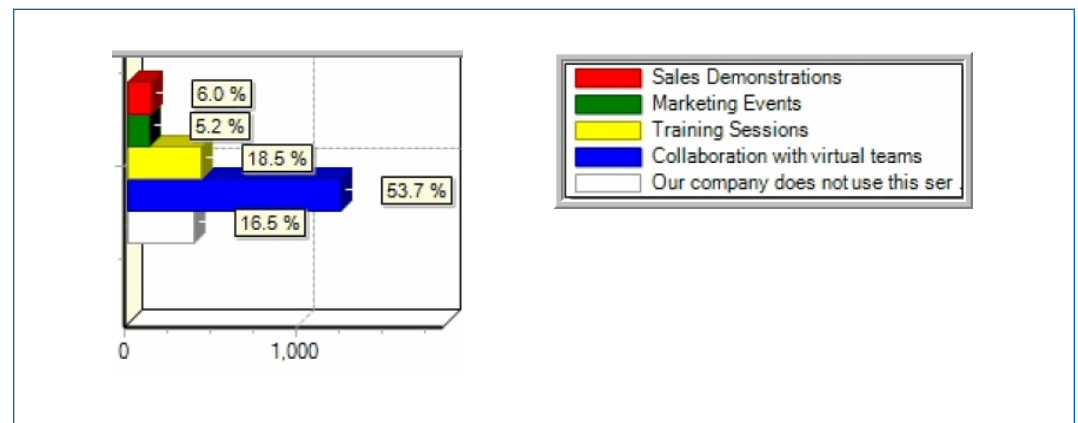

Figure 1: Audio-only conference calls for collaboration.

Even more significant is the fact that Web conferencing is now considered to be a very important part of virtual team collaboration: 59.7 percent for audio plus Web conferencing compared to 38.5 percent for audio conferencing alone. (See Figure 2.)
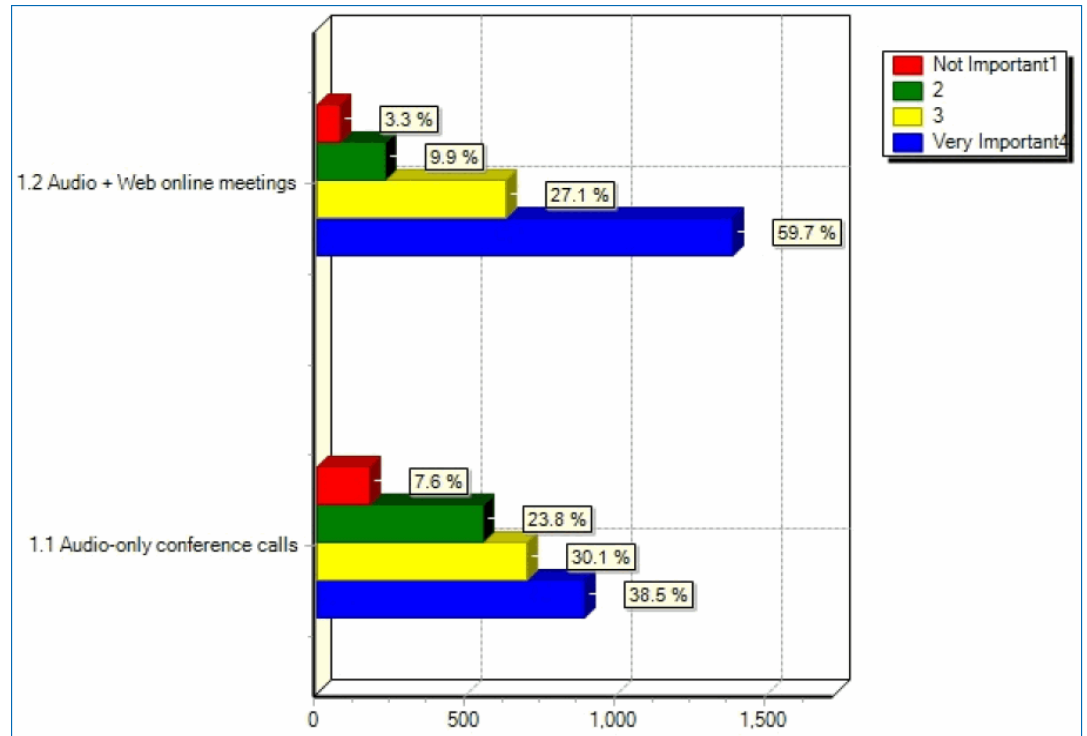

Figure 2: Audio and Web conferencing combo for collaboration.

Conferencing trends and uses

According to OSHA, "Studies by educational researchers suggest that approximately 83 percent of human learning occurs visually."[1] That's what makes Web conferencing such a critical tool in a virtual team's communication kit. Web conferencing provides the visual component that significantly increases comprehension, data absorption and audience engagement, all of which serve to enhance decision-making abilities, shorten meetings and vastly increase productivity. Conversely, communication with audio conferencing only is significantly impeded by its inherent limitations — information is solely exchanged audibly, making it too easy for team members to misinterpret or even miss critical information.

To fully appreciate the benefits of bundling Web and audio conferencing, let's compare the strengths of both types of communication in a few professional scenarios.

Situation: Delivering Weekly Updates
A manager delivers regular updates to her virtual team outlining team objectives for the week. She easily accomplishes this via audio conferencing because the virtual team can passively listen to goals over the phone. In this situation, audio conferencing alone enables the delivery of simple team updates that do not require additional visual information.

Situation: Updating Contracts in Real Time
Sales team members are in the process of updating contracts in real time while working from remote offices. Making revisions to shared documents is most efficiently accomplished when team members can view each other's screens and share mouse and keyboard control. Web conferencing enables full collaboration so revisions can be made instantly to time-sensitive contracts.

Situation: Sharing Quarterly Results
A director needs to present first-quarter results to his distributed team. To do this, he employs Web conferencing to share his PowerPoint presentation with the entire team, visually communicating results, statistics, charts and projections that would be difficult to convey with audio conferencing alone.

Situation: Building a Product
An engineering team is working on a complex software product. Instead of bringing the entire team to one location, the engineers use Web conferencing to effectively collaborate on the code behind the software. Visual communication in this scenario is critical for success.

Cutting costs

Audio conferencing is often charged per minute, per user. This pricing structure can quickly become a budget killer for many businesses, particularly smaller organizations. There are, however, vendors that offer Web and audio conferencing bundled together for a flat rate. This comprehensive collaboration toolkit enables organizations to realize the benefits of Web conferencing while eliminating unnecessary costs. Moreover, a single solution that provides the benefits of both conferencing tools means that organizations don't need to manage multiple vendors.

Conclusion

If you manage virtual employees, consider the productivity, cost and efficiency advantages of adding Web conferencing to your communication toolkit. Not only will your virtual teams more effectively collaborate and complete projects faster, you'll also cut costs and shorten meeting and production time. Give your employees the collaboration tools they need to get their jobs done faster, better — together.

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1 "Presenting Effective Presentations with Visual Aids," Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA).

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