



WHITEPAPER

Enabling Efficient, High Output Teams through Web Conferencing

**Discovering the Value of
Visually-Enabled
Collaborative Meetings**

Andy Nilssen & Alan Greenberg

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Executive Summary

Web conferencing has been changing the way many people work for over a decade. While the technology has several applications – general business meetings, Web seminars, and on-line training to name a few – one that is often overlooked is the team meeting. By nature, team meetings are collaborative affairs where a repetitive group of participants present data, introduce their ideas and perspectives, wrangle and reach consensus, and then often produce some sort of deliverable. Almost all teams are facing increased time pressure, heavier workloads, and tight operating cost constraints. As the globalized economy continues to evolve, the need to involve team members independent of their location is also increasing.

With all of the pressures being faced by teams, has the role of Web conferencing changed? What are the values that teams are realizing – and can they be quantified? To find out, Wainhouse Research conducted a series of a dozen in-depth interviews with individuals who use Web conferencing as a member of a team. While the traditional values are once again mentioned, we were pleased to find a number of new values are being realized as well – many of which indicate a “maturation” in the role that Web conferencing plays to enable and catalyze the team meeting process.

In particular, the interviews reveal the following “hard dollar” returns that certain respondents attempted to quantify:

- Reduction in travel costs
- Helping to meet or improve on schedule deadlines
- Shortened duration of meetings by keeping all participants “on the same page”

Perhaps as compelling are the following “soft dollar” returns that, while they cannot be easily quantified, indicate Web conferencing is achieving a new level of value:

- Improving on quality and accuracy of information transfer by using visuals
- Driving interactivity among meeting participants
- Reducing the need to email documents and avoid file version confusion
- Making it easier to get experts and management involved
- Increasing team member satisfaction

All of those interviewed either stopped or never have calculated a formal return on investment (ROI) for their use of Web conferencing, but instead believe it has become a “necessity” for their teams. In addition, a set of specific requirements were identified to be a priority. The ideal Web conferencing platform for team use is reliable, easy to use, starts quickly, has the ability to share desktops and applications, and works with existing applications and workflows (e.g., Outlook email / scheduling, etc).

We encourage those interested in this topic to read the full white paper that follows, as it contains direct quotations from the interview respondents – many of whom articulate in their own words the evolving value Web conferencing is bringing to their teams.

Overview: The State of Virtual Team Meetings

Web conferencing made its debut over a decade ago. At the time the Internet and the World Wide Web already were beginning to transform the delivery of visual information. Audio conferencing services were also on an upswing as organizations everywhere were discovering how to use conferencing to bridge distances and bring people together. These two trends set the stage for the next natural step: the ability to show and collaborate on visual information during conference calls. Since then web conferencing has been adopted at a robust pace, as its value continues to be proven not only for making meetings-at-a-distance happen, but for enabling the virtualization of many business processes.

During this time, a fundamental business process – the ability for teams to meet, share and collaborate on information, and produce results – has come under increasing external pressures. The Internet age and several economic disruptions of this past decade have forced an increased focus on increasing productivity while decreasing costs. The transition to a worldwide economy has brought the prospect of new opportunities – and the reality of new competitors. More than ever, teams must be more responsive and complete projects faster – all while working with members who can be located anywhere on the globe, and with geographically dispersed partners and outside resources. A global economy also has ushered in the 24-hour workday, as teams increasingly grapple with the need to hold meetings at odd hours to accommodate differences in time zones. Add this need for flexible work hours with an increasing desire to telecommute, and it becomes evident that team members increasingly need to get together at anytime without being constrained by where they happen to be at the time.

These factors help build a powerful hypothetical case for the value of Web conferencing for teams – but how effective has the technology proven to be in practice? Can its value be articulated by team members who actually use it? Can the benefits be measured? After a decade of use, has Web conferencing lived up to its promise of catalyzing collaboration in what may very well be the most intimate meeting environment – the team? To gain an up-to-date perspective, Wainhouse Research conducted a number of interviews with individuals from a diverse set of organizations who all have one thing in common – they are members of teams that hold meetings using Web conferencing.

Research Methodology

Using the results of a screening questionnaire sent via email to Wainhouse Research's [WebMetrics](#) panel of Web conferencing users, 12 individuals were selected for in-depth interviews based on how they described their usage of Web conferencing in teams. The interviews were conducted by WR in February 2010 via telephone. The demographics of those interviewed are as follows:

Type of Organization	# of Employees	# Locations	Title
Professional Development (not-for-profit)	13	4	Director of Professional Development Services
Legal Services (not-for-profit)	100	5	Paralegal
Software Development	150	4	Web Technology Specialist
Healthcare Provider	200	5	Sr. Technical Business Analyst

Type of Organization	# of Employees	# Locations	Title
Healthcare Alliance	250	400	Web Resources Sr. Specialist
Insurance Provider	750	7	Assist. to Chair of Board
Software Development	1,500	5	Technical Support Manager
Pharmaceutical Manufacturer	11,000	105	Customer Service Director
Software Development	15,000	40	Sr. Telecommunications Eng.
Building Supplies Manufacturer	19,000	200	Lead, Multi-Media Operations
Consumer Goods Manufacturer	52,000	"Hundreds"	IT, Systems Engineer
Large Consulting Firm	55,000	"Hundreds"	Assistant Director, IT

Here are some examples of the types of teams in which the interviewees participate and their associated use of Web conferencing:

We have five offices in two of the largest counties in the country [U.S.A.]. They are over 100 miles away from each other. Our teams are based on levels of practice and expertise, and expected to meet quarterly. Plus we meet ad hoc based on court activities or legal update needs. If we can do a conference call or Web conference, it saves us much needed funds. We try to do it at the lowest possible cost. -- Legal Services

I work with the tech team. On the business requirements side, we're business analysts, so we're constantly eliciting or validating written requirements. We need a real-time way to show documents, annotate, and reflect people's comments as they make them. It's also widely used throughout the company, no matter whom we work with, because we are physically distributed. – Healthcare Provider

(We) communicate with "back office" development in India, some in North America, 2-3 times a day. – Large Consulting Firm

Every week with outsourced teams - Bulgaria, India, we all go over the same Excel files at the same sites, we're all able to communicate in real time. We also use it to go over customer cases. – Software Development

As another indication of the depth of their usage, 11 of the 12 respondents engage in a combination of scheduled and ad hoc Web conferences, while the 12th uses ad hoc web conferences exclusively. WR believes the level of ad hoc usage of any conferencing technology by a particular group is an indication of how deeply the technology has been accepted by the group's meeting culture – and thus is an indication that this group is fairly advanced in its use of Web conferencing.

“Hard Dollar” Returns for Teams

The return on most technology investments can usually be placed into one of two categories. Returns that can be readily associated with quantifiable cost savings can be called “hard dollar” returns; and returns that are not easy to quantify can be called “soft dollar” returns. This section identifies the “hard dollar” returns that interviewees were able to associate with either specific cost savings or other quantifiable gains.

Reduced travel costs

Travel cost savings is traditionally the easiest “hard dollar” return to consider when justifying the cost of Web conferencing because it’s easy to identify and calculate. Reducing the number of times that a team needs to physically get together can amount to a huge cost savings. For example, one interviewee did a simple calculation showing that his organization saves thousands of dollars per month for just one team by using Web conferencing:

If we did the travel [as in the past], it would be once a month ... [at a cost of] \$18K per monthly meeting, global team. – Pharmaceutical Manufacturer

Another states savings of \$2,000 per trip:

When the economy went down, the first thing cut was travel with our members. Face-to-face visits cost \$2,000 or so...these are now done in a 2-3 hour Web conference. – Healthcare Alliance

Others observe a substantial decrease in the overall amount of travel by team members:

We had a travel expense reduction... 50% - 60% reduction, maybe more. I'm a middle manager, and I don't travel anymore. I used to travel 50% of my time. We really don't need to do that anymore. – Large Consulting Firm

The use of Web conferencing probably cuts down on 25-50% of our travel. – Legal Services

I do know that it saves quite a few business trips. Business travel has gone down. – Healthcare Alliance

We used to get all software engineers together once a quarter - now we only gather once a year. – Software Development

While the cost of travel can be easily identified, a less obvious but possibly more substantial cost savings factor is based on the ability to regain the time saved by team members when they do not have to travel. The hours recovered by not having to drive across a state or shuttle to airports or be in flight – plus the reduction in travel fatigue – can add up to significantly boost team productivity.

Schedule gains, ability to meet deadlines

Several of the interviewees indicated that Web conferencing enables teams to accelerate the delivery of their projects and avoid costly delays. High value is placed on the ability to display visual information, which accelerates the comprehension of materials, and conduct visual reviews, which helps avoid mistakes and reduces surprises:

We follow typical IT processes - proposal and approval. There can be misunderstandings with our development group in India - so we are constantly in touch. We literally see what they have done – it makes us comfortable and lets us keep checking progress - no surprises. Now we can't live without it. Mistakes could cost thousands of dollars - and a schedule slip as well. Typically we have projects that are in the millions of dollars ... so slip-ups can cost maybe \$100k or more. – Large Consulting Firm

One time the customer requirements were not well understood. We had to do a whole software project to fix [a problem], so the mistake cost \$25,000. Web conferencing wasn't used that time, and for sure it's part of why we now get requirements right. – Healthcare Provider

We have a lot of technical decisions that need to be made quickly on the fly. Before Web conferencing you had to visualize, and it could be costly. – Healthcare Alliance

The use of Web conferencing can also drive faster overall consensus, which saves time for all involved:

We would need four months to accomplish what we now can do in two months because it's quicker and everyone will be comfortable with the solution. People can manage / participate from home, desk, or someone else's desk, so it's very flexible for the participant. It's really interactive, to share an Excel file or PowerPoint or an application. We can show where we need more information, make decisions immediately, get agreement faster, and it's done. – Pharmaceutical Manufacturer.

Faster meeting process, with all participants “on the same page”

Interviewees also point to the ability to actually shorten the length of their meetings by using Web conferencing. If people can spend less time in meetings, it can add up to quantifiable savings very quickly. For example, if a hypothetical staff consists of six people with an annual salary of \$80,000 each, reducing a weekly meeting by 10 minutes would result in saving \$2,000 per year in salary. Perhaps more important: each person would gain a full day of productive time per year. Here are some observations as to how Web conferencing accelerates the meeting process:

It absolutely gets us through a meeting faster. In many instances we would have talked for hours - but by exchanging screens we are done within a half hour. It's very useful and value is added. – Large Consulting Firm

Meetings are much more efficient - because you can do changes immediately - this results in shorter meetings. – Consumer Goods Manufacturer

Where a conference call took 30 minutes, it now can be accomplished in less than ten.
– Healthcare Alliance

We have a goal around here to cut 15% of our meetings. We also want to shorten our meetings. Web conferencing is helping us do this. – Insurance Provider

“Soft Dollar” Returns for Teams

The following group of value returns were not as easy for the respondents to quantify – but could also amount to substantial gains.

Higher quality communication by using visual materials

Many topics lend themselves to visuals – organization charts, process plans, tables and graphs, photographs, an application’s user interface. Visual materials can also better suit the working / perceptual styles of many knowledge workers:

It is easier to talk about something when you see it. – Consumer Goods Manufacturer

Many people work on a visual basis. They completely understand (based on visuals) instead of verbally talking. – Healthcare Alliance

Voice alone is not sufficient because you can't see figures, etc.
– Consumer Goods Manufacturer

One person builds a document and everyone contributes, can see it, and point out that “that sentence doesn't make sense.” Our legal group has a council that has put together many documents that same way. – Healthcare Alliance

Adding the visual component can increase of the quality of materials that are prepared before a meeting:

The collaborative effort increases the quality - when everyone is expected to show their materials, it raises the bar of the materials that everyone contributes. They come to the meeting more prepared. – Insurance Provider

Increased interactivity, less focus on the "Presenter"

Because visual materials can help participants assimilate facts and get up to speed faster, their ability to contribute and interact increases – which raises the quality of the meeting output:

Speaking for me: Things are better understood, I get better input, and there's more involvement of a high value nature from participants, [than would be possible] meeting without Web conferencing. -- Healthcare Provider

Participant attitudes become more collaborative; there is no longer one person driving the meeting. Web conferencing fosters better input and participation.
– Software Development

Web conferencing makes team meetings more interactive.
– Consumer Goods Manufacturer

In some organizations, the gathering and use of visual information has raised the expectation that all team members should participate:

Our meetings are "gather and share." These are serious meetings – have all information ready to share -- and everyone is expected to participate. – Insurance Provider

Reduced email attachment clutter and version control confusion

The visual aspect of Web conferences contributes to meeting efficiency by enabling the team to update documents as a group – which keeps focus on the task at hand during the meeting and eliminates the need to update and circulate materials after the meeting:

When I just sent off documents to people to discuss on the call, it was less of a real conversation. Web conferencing puts us on the same page, literally and figuratively. For us, it improves the requirements definition process and final product, and makes production more efficient. – Healthcare Provider

We used to manually update an Excel file and sent it out for everyone to update and review – (it was) really difficult to collaborate and keep everyone on the same page before. Now we actually work on the same page. – Software Development

Time can be gained by drastically reducing or totally eliminating revision cycles, and the confusion caused by emailing documents for review - which can add up to significant times savings:

We get things done 50% faster...it's a lot easier than emailing back and forth, plus you don't have to take the time cleaning out email clutter. – Professional Development

We are now more responsive - especially reducing the need to cycle documents for input and review. – Software Development

With web conferencing we can craft how communication is worded, how an org chart looks - and there is no version tracking – Software Development

This value can be compounded in a global enterprise or when dealing with a global economy:

Web conferencing brings a big gain in efficiency. With teams around the world, we would need to wait for each work shift - 24 hours total. It saves lots of time to get everyone together at one point. Can save days a week. – Software Development

Higher quality output due to expert involvement

Experts and senior staff are more inclined to join a meeting if they believe the discussion can be held effectively and efficiently – which is exactly how Web conferencing can help. Those with situational knowledge or valued opinions can be added easily at any time to an in-session meeting. Not only does their involvement improve the quality of the decisions, but it can save an approval / revision cycle since they are already involved in the result:

Some of the execs will come in, give a comment, and leave - they'll do it if they know the meeting will not take up a lot of their time. – Software Development

Senior directors now join us via Web conferencing – we make concise, decisive decisions very quickly. – Healthcare Alliance

*We can tap very specific people with expertise to match the task at hand.
– Software Development*

Greater team member satisfaction

Team members appreciate attending efficient meetings where they can quickly contribute, interact, receive instant feedback, and get closure:

Meetings are more efficient and more satisfying for those involved. – Healthcare Provider

The engineers feel more elated - happier. They instantly know their work is right, they get the interaction – this is much more satisfying than waiting for a formal review process.

– Software Development

Why very few organizations formally track ROI

When asked if their organization conducts any formal return on investment (ROI) calculation on Web conferencing, the vast majority of those interviewed responded that the technology has already attained “necessity” status:

We thought about doing [an ROI calculation], but just the use itself covers the cost. It's not that expensive to use. Look at the MasterCard “priceless” commercial: Doing a Web conference is priceless! We get so much accomplished. – Healthcare Alliance

We view Web conferencing as really more of “an enabler” for teams – it gives them more collaboration tools. We believe in this so much that we used to use videoconferencing - but Web conferencing is cheaper and easier. – Software Development

Earlier on we had a lot of discussion of cost savings and travel avoidance - but that was long ago. No one cares about cost justification any more. Web conferencing is an accepted way of working. We recently had some reliability issues with (our platform) and got a lot of pressure because teams were delayed - this proves Web conferencing has become an integral part of how they work. – Consumer Goods Manufacturer

(Do you do an ROI calculation?) No not really - the value is taken for granted.
– Large Consulting Firm

What to look for in a Web conferencing solution for teams

While one might think that teams generally require the same Web conferencing capabilities as everyday users, those we interviewed articulated a set of specific requirements as a priority for teaming. The ideal Web conferencing platform for teaming is reliable, easy to use, starts quickly, has the ability to share desktops and applications, and works with existing applications and workflows (Outlook email / scheduling, etc). Some also find recording helpful for time shifting (much like a DVR), and the ability to invite a colleague in on-the-fly:

Reliability - if it fails or has problems people will not use it. It needs to integrate into Outlook - just "fire off" the meeting link. Ease-of-use is also key.
– Software Development

The key point is [that] the tool must be easy to use. I have used different tools. Some are not friendly. In real life, if you want to go to meeting, you go into the room, open the door, that's it. Web conferencing should have the same ease of use. A simple link and click, I'm in the meeting. – Pharmaceutical Manufacturer

One-click conferencing that takes microseconds to start. – Software Development

Definitely desktop sharing. The other thing, the ability to annotate – is fabulous! When looking at an Excel sheet, 2,000 lines long, column B, row 199. Now we can highlight, blow up, and it's easy to see what one is referring to. – Healthcare Alliance

Application sharing. That as well as audio being integrated, being able to talk through and see at same time. – Professional Development

Compatibility / integration with Microsoft applications & workflow, reliability. How easy it is to use and deploy. – Insurance Provider

Recording features are great; they help teams because if not there live, they can see a recording. – Building Supplies Manufacturer

Closing Thoughts

Web conferencing is now mainstreamed as a technology, almost as central to productivity as the telephone or email. Though most organizations do not formally track ROI, the hard and soft benefits have become obvious, as the technology can help organizations:

- Cut travel costs
- Meet or improve on schedule deadlines
- Shorten the duration of meetings by keeping all participants “on the same page”
- Improve on quality and accuracy of information transfer by using visuals
- Drive interactivity among meeting participants
- Reduce the need to email documents and avoid file version confusion

- Make it easier to get experts and management involved
- Increase team member satisfaction

While travel savings have traditionally been the shorthand fallback for justifying its use, this very diverse set of users is more articulate in the various ways in which they benefit from using Web conferencing. Several respondents believe Web conferencing has become essential as a tool in their organizations for teaming:

If I told any of my team members it was going away, they would cry. Web conferencing has become one of the most reliable things our company has. We started with 20 conferences one year, and conducted over 1,500 last year. – Healthcare Alliance

We've come to find it's really important for teamwork. It enhances everyday conversations. – Healthcare Provider

We really have become reliant on web conferencing. – Software Development

Worth noting is that this group of respondents comes from large and small organizations, ranging from large public corporations and small businesses to small not-for-profits. Across the board, they reveal a consistent set of behaviors, and – even if the scale or dollar savings vary – a consistent set of Web conferencing team benefits.

About the Authors

Andrew H. Nilssen is a Senior Analyst & Partner at Wainhouse Research, where he leads the WR Web conferencing and IM & Presence practice. Andy is a co-author of WR's recent Unified Communications Products report which sized the entire UC market space, and WR's bi-annual WebMetrics study, which tracks Web conferencing usage and user preferences. Earlier in his career, Andy managed the planning and launch of PictureTel's second-generation group videoconferencing systems. Andy has over 30 years of experience in high-technology product marketing and market research, earned his MBA and BSEE degrees from the University of New Hampshire, and holds two ease-of-use related patents. Andy can be reached at andyn@wainhouse.com

Alan D. Greenberg is Senior Analyst & Partner at Wainhouse Research, where he leads the WR Distance Education and e-Learning practice. Alan has worked in the telecommunications, videoconferencing, software and services, and multimedia arenas for more than 25 years, holding marketing positions with Texas Instruments and several other technology companies. He has conducted research into dozens of distance learning and e-Learning products and programs and covers Web conferencing, lecture capture, video, and adjacent technologies as they are applied for education and e-Learning. He is co-lead analyst on the Wainhouse Research WebMetrics research program, and authored the three-volume *Distance Education and e-Learning Landscape* series. Alan holds an M.A. from the University of Texas at Austin and a B.A. from Hampshire College. He can be reached at agreenberg@wainhouse.com.

About Wainhouse Research

Wainhouse Research, www.wainhouse.com, is an independent market research firm that focuses on critical issues in the Unified Communications and rich media conferencing fields, including applications like distance education. The company conducts multi-client and custom research studies, consults with end users on key implementation issues, publishes white papers and market statistics, and delivers public and private seminars as well as speaker presentations at industry group meetings. Wainhouse Research publishes a variety of reports that cover all aspects of rich media conferencing, and the free newsletter, *The Wainhouse Research Bulletin*.

About Citrix Online

Citrix Online, a division of Citrix Systems, Inc., is a leading provider of easy-to-use, on-demand applications for Web conferencing and collaboration. Its award-winning services include GoToMeeting Corporate, a complete collaboration solution that satisfies all Web conferencing needs ranging from large Webinars to small online meetings. With GoToMeeting Corporate, organizations of any size can use GoToWebinar for do-it-yourself Web events and GoToMeeting for smaller, more interactive online meetings. GoToMeeting Corporate allows users to easily present, demonstrate and provide training online to anyone, anywhere in the world. GoToMeeting Corporate can make businesses of any size more productive by reducing travel time and costs and enhancing communication, ultimately leading to faster decision making and more efficient workers. For a free evaluation of GoToMeeting Corporate, please visit www.gotomeeting.com/s/WReval.