
Web Conferencing: the Next Evolution

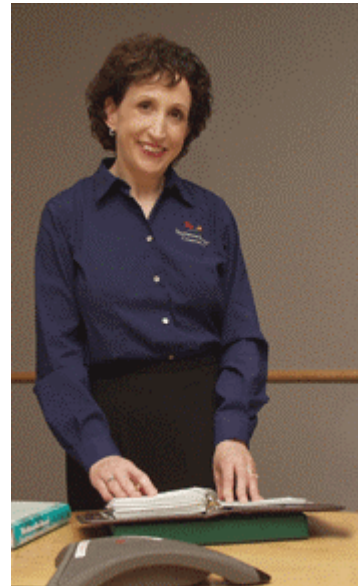
Valerie Taylor, manager of national cooperative's distance learning programs, decided that a video, voice and data conferencing solution could address the logistical issues of physical meetings and provide the means for instantaneous feedback.

When Valerie Taylor of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) in Washington sought to organize a training program for more than 900 organization members dispersed across 47 states, single-location gatherings presented challenges. While such association-wide meetings provided unique opportunities for membership networking and idea sharing, the costs and time associated with attending multiple conferences proved burdensome for many in NRECA's sprawling membership.

Consequently, if NRECA continued offering training through only in-person meetings, the organization ran the risk of limited reach for the critical information disseminated at these events. To overcome this hurdle and better serve the requirements of all members, the association membership passed a resolution to investigate advanced technologies that could reduce training costs and improve the information exchange.

“With our membership spread throughout the country, conventional training sessions did not provide the necessary attendance levels to make them as effective as they could be,” explains Taylor.

Further, from an association-management perspective, NRECA faced a challenge obtaining feedback from its dispersed membership base. While the organization utilized multiple methods to communicate with its members—including an organization magazine, e-mail newsletters and direct mailings—none of these methods provided NRECA with a mechanism to garner, or members with a tool to provide, specific feedback on how information was being received or whether communications achieved their desired impact. To stay true to the organization's



Web conferencing allows Valerie Taylor, manager of NRECA's distance learning programs, to communicate with members across the country, minimizing the travel costs associated with, and increasing the effectiveness of, skills-based training sessions.

goal to provide members with the most up-to-date, relevant industry information available, it needed to identify an alternate mechanism by which to obtain member feedback.

NRECA, serving as the prime information repository and clearinghouse for its nationwide membership of electric cooperatives, supports regulatory and legislative advocacy for its members, thus requiring constant, open communications channels for immediate response.

After careful consideration, Taylor, and Herb Wolff, senior technologist at NRECA, decided that a video, voice and data conferencing solution could address the logistical issues of physical meetings and provide the means for instantaneous feedback on communication. Membership feedback and recommendations confirmed this approach.

CONFERENCING SERVICE SELECTED

Taylor and Wolff identified Web conferencing as the technology that offered the ability to meet all three communications requirements. They decided that this technology implementation would fundamentally change and improve the way NRECA communicated with its members and its members communicated with NRECA.

Current bandwidth met only internal requirements and initial exploration of upgrades seemed overly costly. As such, NRECA sought a Web conferencing service provider located external from the established infrastructure. This approach enabled the business communications changes without excessive infrastructure expenditures. Given this outsourced approach, the vendor research and selection process was deemed a critical component to the overall success of the project.

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After initial attempts to independently identify and evaluate the myriad Web conferencing providers, Wolff and Taylor realized the requirement for outside expertise to evaluate NRECA's requirements and service options. They called on NetGain Communications, a communications consulting firm with which NRECA had built a successful relationship.

"We found it nearly impossible to navigate the sea of Web conferencing service providers in such a highly volatile technical marketplace," says Wolff. "NetGain helped us to cut through the clutter and introduced us to InterCall."

InterCall, a well-established provider of multiple Web conferencing solutions, offered several options that met NRECA's requirements.

"NetGain's analysis of our network environment and communications needs pointed to InterCall's Mshow as the best-fit platform," says Taylor. "Mshow features an easy-to-use interface that supports such features as video streaming and application sharing, which we hope to use in the future. Mshow also features the ability to accommodate thousands of participants—an added benefit as our membership base, and associated training programs and meetings continue to grow."

As a network-based tool, Mshow offered a straightforward back-end implementation and simple end-user access. End-users need only confirm hardware compatibility and download Web conference software to their local machine—both requirements easily accomplished via the Internet.

VARIETY OF ACCESS IMPORTANT

Another benefit to the InterCall offering was its ability to accommodate all possible Internet access types, including T-1, DSL, cable, satellite and dial-up—a critical requirement for NRECA, as many of its members work in rural areas where broadband Internet access remains unavailable.

Upon confirmation of InterCall as the service provider of choice, NetGain negotiated a customized agreement between NRECA and InterCall. “Since our members’ receptiveness to Web conferencing was unknown, we were not interested in licensing fees or long-term minimum commitments,” says Wolff. “NetGain helped us to limit our business risk by selecting a usage-only-based model.”

Taylor notes that, “When you consider the overall value of the program, as well as value-added assistance and flawless conferencing, the expenditure justifies itself.”

System usage is equally as user friendly as the initial implementation, with the ability to upload presentation materials to the system in advance of a session, Taylor says. With this feature, presenters are able to rehearse the session using the actual Web conferencing interface—reducing the likelihood for user error during the event itself.

InterCall provided training and support, as well as an event manager for the first event who assisted in coordination of the Web conference, provided training for session leaders and monitored the conference to address any unforeseen issues.

“Including a representative from InterCall in the learning stage was critical to the program’s success,” says Taylor. “Our members needed the reassurance provided about the investment and new process; their first exposure to the Web conferencing tool had to be a flawless experience.

“Now, with several successful Web conferences under our belt, we have standards for scripting, setup, slide development and speaker training. The entire process is truly professional and seamless,” says Taylor. “Plus, attendees are thrilled with the ease-of-use and rapid issue resolution. In the few circumstances when a session participant has experienced a problem, InterCall quickly resolved the situation without disruption to the broader event.”

DIFFERENT TRAINING NEEDS

Today, NRECA leverages Mshow for knowledge-based and skills-based training. For knowledge-based training, the interactive nature of Web conferencing allows for extensive creativity and interactivity. For example, the pause and audio features allow the presenter to field questions and wait for the remote participants to work out problems. NRECA also reserves significant time in each Web-based training session for group brainstorming and problem solving.

Skills-based training takes a slightly different approach, but maintains the participant interaction seen in the knowledge-based approach. Visual features, such as demonstrations and Web tours, play a significant role. Additionally, in the skills-based training sessions, participant interaction focuses mainly on questions and answers, rather than problem solving and collaborative activities, as in the knowledge-based ones.

NRECA learned that the anonymous nature of Web conferencing actually encouraged greater participation, as the solution allows attendees to ask questions they may be uncomfortable asking in a public, in-person setting.

With Mshow, NRECA realized its original goals to ease costs associated with single-site meetings and increase participation levels of members. Beyond these achievements, however, NRECA continues to realize additional uses for the technology, including:

- two-way communications related to customer care, human resources and business development training—functions with similar requirements and limitations to the training arena;
- dissemination of information surrounding NRECA services—critical to driving awareness;
- delivery of information from partner organizations, including NRECA's insurance and financial services group, which leverage the system to

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- communicate details on issues such as the Health Insurance Privacy and Portability Act, insurance product changes, and new financial products; and
 - dissemination of association research results and impact to members.

According to Taylor, strong presentation content holds the key to driving a strong turnout. “We focus on ‘need to know’ issues,” she adds. “When we offer a conference on a topic that is critical to the success of our members, we get a large audience.”

PARTICIPATION LEVELS INCREASE

Web conferences focused on regulatory developments, customer care strategies and benefit changes also drive high attendance. NRECA archives and stores each session for future viewing, allowing interested parties unable to attend the live session to experience the training in a similar fashion to the live format.

Since implementing the solution, NRECA training session average participation levels continually range between 50 and 125 cooperatives, with multiple persons at each cooperative—a vast improvement from previous training sessions.

NRECA leverages Mshow’s built-in polling feature during every Web conference to obtain participant feedback regarding session content and flow. Further, NRECA utilizes this feedback mechanism to stay abreast of member praise or concern regarding the Web conferencing system itself.

While the level of experience with Web-based applications varies among NRECA member staff, few have experienced challenges accessing the service or understanding how to navigate the application. According to Taylor, “Mshow has a high rating in ease of use among our users. Members frequently note that the conferencing system offers easy access and is fun to use. Session leaders enjoy the polling and other interactive features, like Web touring and application sharing.” Only a year after implementation, with more than 2,000 participants thus far, Web conferencing has become an important tool within NRECA for all types of member communications, Taylor adds. Lifting the service from concept to wide acceptance, however, required detailed research, rigorous product evaluations and a keen eye toward the experience.

Today, NRECA conducts two to three Web conferencing programs per month and foresees doubling that number over the next year. “As NRECA continues to refine and expand its use of Web conferencing, I am confident the service will become an integral, indispensable part of our member service and communications platform,” says Taylor.

To NRECA, the Web conferencing initiative offers a formula for success that the organization can expand upon and leverage to other business areas.

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