## **Virtual Meetings for IA Professionals**

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All of us involved in any kind of business may have to confer with our colleagues in real time, as opposed to the asynchronous communications supported by e-mail. However, it seems to me that traveling to professional meetings has become a burden, especially if the locations are far enough to warrant air travel. Airport security measures<

http://www.mekabay.com/opinion/airport\_safety.pdf > have increasingly approached Bruce Schneier's definition of security theatre< http://www.schneier.com/essay-292.html >, with recent complaints such as that of Jean Weber, whose 95-year-old, wheelchair-bound, incontinent mother "was asked to remove an adult diaper in order to complete a pat-down search."< http://www.nwfdailynews.com/articles/mother-41324-search-adult.html > Combined with the faltering world economy, the number of premium air travel (first class & last-minute bookings) declined sharply in 2011< http://www.travelpulse.com/iata-reports-sharp-decline-in-premium-air-travel.html >; but even ordinary air travel has continued to decline in recent years, leaving increasing numbers of empty seats and pushing airlines to increase their fares< http://www.marketwatch.com/story/surging-fuel-costs-hit-airline-stocks-2011-04-08 > for even stronger disincentives for business travel.

Virtual meetings using voice over Internet protocol (VoIP)<
<a href="http://voip.about.com/od/voipbasics/a/VoiceOverIP.htm">http://voip.about.com/od/voipbasics/a/VoiceOverIP.htm</a> provide options for businesses to reduce costs by eliminating physical travel. Hope Neel writes,

"Basically, there are three major types of conferencing, namely, teleconferencing or audio conferencing, video conferencing and web or internet conferencing. While audio conferencing solution is an all time hit for its not so high price and user-friendly features, web conferencing is deemed to be more interactive. All those seeking for a real time conference experience can find the solution in web conferencing call. It will enable them to access, share and exchange files as well as real time data."<
http://ezinearticles.com/?VoIP-Conference-Call-Solutions-For-Reduced-Operation-Cost-In-Your-Business&id=6097019 >

## I've used the FreeConferenceCall<

http://www.freeconferencecall.com/prodfreeconferencecall.asp > phone conference service for several years and have consistently been happy with the service. Participants simply pay for their own telephone access to an assigned phone number; if everyone is in the same country and people have unlimited national calling, the call doesn't cost anything extra to anyone. The service can accept up to 96 callers for up to six hours – and it's easy to record the conference calls. The recordings can be accessed by phoning the conference number and punching in a code – or they can be downloaded for editing and posting on a Web server.

If your organization needs people in different countries to join a conference call, FreeConferenceCall even provides a service<
<a href="http://www.freeconferencecall.com/fcci/default.aspx">http://www.freeconferencecall.com/fcci/default.aspx</a> > where participants can call different incountry numbers to avoid international long-distance calls.

Recently, the company that runs FreeConferenceCall has introduced FreeScreenSharing< <a href="http://www.freescreensharing.com/index.html?promocode=FCC\_FSS2011">http://www.freescreensharing.com/index.html?promocode=FCC\_FSS2011</a> > which runs along the same lines: up to 96 participants can meet using audio conferencing, but in addition, they can all see the computer screen of the current host – and the host can be switched among participants at any time.

Some people are experimenting with meetings in virtual worlds (immersive visual environments) such as Second Life (SL)< <a href="http://secondlife.com/">http://secondlife.com/</a>>. Wagner James, writing in *New World Notes*,< <a href="http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/">http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/</a>> which is devoted to discussions of the technology and sociology of virtual worlds, reported in 2010 on the future of business meetings in virtual worlds.</a><a href="http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2010/04/virtual-meetings.html">http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2010/04/virtual-meetings.html</a> > He cited an expert on the subject, Erica Driver<<a href="http://www.thinkbalm.com/">http://www.thinkbalm.com/</a> > who commented that it might be a while before meetings in virtual worlds would appeal to a wide range of businesses.

Some of the professional groups who have been experimenting with professional meetings in virtual worlds include scientists. For example, William Sims Bainbridge wrote an article entitled, "The Scientific Research Potential of Virtual Worlds" <a href="http://www.sciencemag.org/content/317/5837/472.abstract">http://www.sciencemag.org/content/317/5837/472.abstract</a> > (membership or fee required for full text) in *Science* in July 2007. He pointed out that virtual worlds could provide a locus for collaboration among scientists and for acquisition of scientific knowledge:

"Virtual worlds such as SL provide environments and tools that facilitate creating online laboratories that can automatically recruit potentially thousands of research subjects, over a period of months, at low cost.... SL offers scripting and graphics tools that allow anyone to build a virtual laboratory building, functioning equipment to run the experiment, and incentives to motivate participation, such as giving each research subject a virtual helicopter to fly around SL .... It would be quite feasible to have advanced students replicate classic experiments inside SL, adding to our confidence in older results while giving young people valuable skills. Creative scientists may also be able to design experiments that are feasible in virtual worlds but were never possible before. For example, experiments can be done comparing the socioeconomic consequences of alternative government regulations, something next to impossible in society at large ..., perhaps taking advantage of the fact that issues of environmental pollution already loom large in WoW [World of Warcraft< <a href="http://us.battle.net/wow/en/">http://us.battle.net/wow/en/</a> | quests."

John Bohannon urged scientists to get involved in virtual worlds in his article, "Scientists, We Need Your Swords," < <a href="http://www.sciencemag.org/content/320/5874/312.2.full">http://www.sciencemag.org/content/320/5874/312.2.full</a> > in which he urged participation in "Convergence of the Real and the Virtual: The First Scientific Conference in the World of Warcraft 9-11 May" <

http://convergentsystems.pbworks.com/w/page/16444397/May%202008%20Conference > 2008. He reported< http://www.sciencemag.org/content/320/5883/1592.3.full > on the conference with some glee, since at one participant was torn apart by a pack of hyenas – well, virtual hyenas – in the virtual world:

"Thus began the first scientific conference held in Azeroth, the online universe inhabited by millions of people playing World of Warcraft. Anyone who has been part of a conference's organizing committee knows that some glitches and mishaps are just unavoidable. And as usual, the problems that actually did occur were unforeseen. It was a success nonetheless. By the end of the third day, a real scientific exchange took place, I

married one of the conference participants, and within an hour of the wedding, we were all dead."

Merck Research Laboratories have been using a private world<
<a href="http://www.cio.com/article/638163/Online">http://www.cio.com/article/638163/Online</a> Collaboration How Merck Uses Virtual Worlds for Global Meetings > for business meetings using ProtoSphere<<a href="http://www.protonmedia.com/">http://www.protonmedia.com/</a> > starting in 2009. The organizers found that more than four-fifths of the 54 scientists at the first "virtual poster session in July 2009" were pleased with the experience. Some even commented that they were "more comfortable approaching senior scientists using their avatars than they would have been face-to-face." Writing about the findings, Stephanie Overby noted, "Other benefits included reduced travel costs, time savings and 'quick access to busy thought leaders who may not have otherwise been able to participate.""

A January 7, 2011 article in *Science* by John Bohannon entitled "Meeting for Peer Review at A Resort That's Virtually Free" http://www.sciencemag.org/content/331/6013/27.full.pdf > reported encouraging progress in the use of SL for National Science Foundation (NSF) http://nsf.gov/ > grant reviews – a process that requires "More than 19,000 scientists [to] travel to NSF headquarters each year to take part in grant evaluation panels." For the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) http://nih.gov/ >, Bohannon writes, "17,000 reviewers evaluated 61,000 proposals...." In the NSF trials, the scientists generally reported positive responses – and "all of the work was completed on time." The NSF pays Linden Lab http://lindenlab.com/ > (creators of SL) only \$3,600 as a yearly rental fee for an "island" reserved for the NSF in SL; however, the virtual meetings "can save as much as \$10,000 per panel" – and there are thousands of review panels a year!

There are issues to consider, however, when organizing professional virtual meetings. James Shimabukuro< <a href="http://technologysource.org/author/james\_shimabukuro/">http://technologysource.org/author/james\_shimabukuro/</a> > wrote an excellent overview< <a href="http://technologysource.org/article/evolving\_virtual\_conference/">http://technologysource.org/article/evolving\_virtual\_conference/</a> > of concerns that must be addressed in planning and executing virtual meetings. One of the key problems that participants and organizers may encounter is that many participants may think that they don't have to reserve time for the meeting – unlike the sequestration that is common in physical "away" meetings – and find themselves being distracted by the quotidian demands of their normal work. Participating in virtual meetings may require self-discipline and the collaboration of colleagues. One of my colleagues who works in an office where there are no doors on the cubicles has a sign on her desk that she can prop up; it reads, "THE DOOR IS CLOSED."

Given that information assurance (IA) practitioners are usually at the forefront of technological change, I think it is time that our professional associations started experimenting with virtual worlds for our professional meetings.

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