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Remote control

Online and video meetings have come a long way from shaky, fish-eyed video and clunky software. So how do you know if they are right for you?

Washington Business Journal - by [Jennifer Nycz-Conner](#) Staff Reporter

When Fox Relocation Management Corp. was getting ready to change its name to Fox RPM Corp. in April, the company decided to change its meeting style as well. Management wanted to make sure all five Fox offices were engaged in the announcement but didn't want to blow the budget sending everyone to its headquarters in Boston.

The company decided to give virtual meeting technology a whirl. It rented a high-end system, and on the evening of April 15 the dozen District employees saw their Boston colleagues appear on the large screens before them. "And it was wonderful," says Marta Garcia Arnold, Fox RPM principal in the Washington office, adding that the company is now looking into purchasing a system of its own.

Online meeting technology first appeared about a decade ago when Microsoft Corp.'s NetMeeting, a screen-sharing tool, shipped for free as part of Windows 98, says Andy Nilssen, senior analyst and partner at Wainhouse Research LLC

Since then, the technology has rapidly evolved to include instant messaging, teleconferencing, Web conferencing and screen sharing. Virtual meetings' upper echelon, the videoconference, also has come a long way beyond fish-eyed faces and stop-and-go audio, thanks to the rise of the Internet and increased bandwidth.

Online and video-based meetings have not reached the ease of use enjoyed by George and Jane Jetson, but they are getting there, and quickly. According to Wainhouse Research, nearly 80 percent of companies that use teleworking list Web conferencing as the most important component, followed by instant messaging, mobile computing and voice over Internet protocol. With skyrocketing gas prices and environmental concerns, businesses are eager to find new ways to spare a buck and save a tree. But not at the expense of their client relationships.

Learning the landscape

When Adam Segal launched The 2050 Group LLC, a D.C. public relations and advertising company two years ago, he knew a certain degree of face time was required to keep his client-based business running smoothly. But with clients in multiple locations, travel

expenses could jump. "That's really where I see the value of online meetings in my business," Segal says.

Segal has a client he works very closely with in San Antonio, sometimes traveling there once a month. However, there are times when he and the client want brief stints of face time that don't require a full trip.

In one instance, "they really needed to see me," Segal says. "And yet, it wasn't the type of daylong meeting that really justified the expense of traveling there."

That client was already using Mac computers, whose iChat software and internal cameras made setting up both one-on-one and group online meetings simple. It wasn't perfect -- there were a few blips when someone would get disconnected -- but for the group's purposes, it worked quite nicely, Segal says.

The phrase "online meetings" now covers a range of technologies including the use of meeting application packages that allow you take control of users' desktops, high-end video conferences and the old-fashioned conference call.

The sheer bulk of options can feel a little overwhelming. Some of them you have to purchase or license, but you may already have a few basic options waiting on your computer.

Why you should do it

There are the financial savings, to be sure, but moving the agenda online has other less obvious pluses.

For starters, clients often appreciate it.

Jill Kurtz of Web strategy company Balance Technology Group Inc. is veteran of long hours in conference rooms from her previous life at a school system and finds herself amazed at how well online meetings work and how quickly clients become fans.

Her company kicks off new projects with face-to-face gatherings and then uses **www.freeconferencecall.com** from there. Phone-based conferences may be the old-school version of online meetings, but even such a basic use of technology shows that anything that saves time and energy has value.

"I find that most clients appreciate the ability to schedule a call as less cumbersome on their times as scheduling a face-to-face meeting," Kurtz says.

Then there is the green angle. Online meeting company WebEx Communications Inc. touts its ability to reduce carbon emissions by getting people together at their desks. Two business partners who would normally travel from Chicago to San Francisco to pitch new business

can save almost 5,000 pounds of carbon dioxide if they meet online, according to WebEx's Web site.

The company offers a carbon calculator to figure out what your individual trips may cost you and the environment.

The savings in time and frustration may be even more valuable than the cash saved.

Marco Ciavolino, senior executive of consulting company Enktesis LLC in Forest Hills, Md., has been working with online meeting tools for 10 years. When helping a New York client design some awards recently, he avoided travel by using desktop sharing tool GoToMeeting to work collaboratively on the same Photoshop file on his computer. "It saved at least two hours of time," Ciavolino says.

In deciding whether to use online video or meet face to face, Jerry Glass, president of D.C. human resources consulting company F&H Solutions Group LLC and former vice president of human resources at USAirways Inc., asks himself three questions: How critical is it to have a face-to-face discussion? When you factor in the cost of time and travel, will the meeting likely be as successful online as it would be in person? Finally, how easy will it be to do the meeting online and will the technology be easily used by everyone?

Not for every situation

The best time to talk online rather than in-person is when the topic and the tools work for everyone involved.

"The greatest disadvantage is it's very difficult to have side conversations or to have preparatory meetings right before you walk into a meeting," Segal says. He once landed a significant piece of business by having a side conversation with an organization leader before a meeting that could have very easily been held as a videoconference.

Sometimes people just need to be with other people. Fox RPM still has a big party in Boston once a year, and when new staffers come aboard in the D.C. office, they spend two days in Boston meeting everyone.

"The videoconferencing just cements those relationships," Garcia Arnold says. "I think it makes it seamless."

Beyond all the bells and whistles, a meeting is a collaboration of minds. Don't lose that among the gizmos.

"I think the point really is I want to be available to clients essentially face to face, whether that be in person or online," Segal says. "Having these new technologies allows me to do that."

Meeting expectations

If you are new to the world of online meetings, take a few tips from the experts on ways to make the technology work for you:

- Get to know whatever tool you choose. Marco Ciavolino, senior executive at Enktesis LLC, suggests doing presentations for yourself while watching another computer, logged in as a participant so you know what your colleagues are seeing.
- Prep your equipment. Close other software applications, such as e-mail and chat, Ciavolino urges, and clean up your desktop. Only have on there what you are comfortable with participants seeing.
- During the meeting, explain to participants that "you should be seeing my screen or this window," Ciavolino says. "Make sure they are up to speed." User connection speeds vary, and it is your responsibility to make sure everyone is on the same virtual page.
- If using video, "lighting is a huge factor," says Adam Segal of The 2050 Group. Don't be afraid to light up the room with everything at your disposal, from overhead lights to windows to additional lamps. People not only see you, but also your environment, and you want it make the setting appear as a professional as possible. You are an element of your environment, so don't skimp on the easy details that can improve your total presentation.
- Also on the video front, your days of hiding behind the speakerphone in your pajamas are over. Dress as you would for any in-person preparation. Guys, be sure to shave -- Segal points out that poor lighting can make it more obvious that you haven't.
- Above all, remember that the software is nothing more than a tool, one you need to master. The normal supplements to meetings, such as body language and visual participation, are absent online. And that requires you to be 10 times better than you are in person, Ciavolino says. "If they notice the process, they will miss the message."

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