

Take a Meeting ONLINE

THE INDEPENDENT GUIDE TO TECHNOLOGY

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The new generation of Web conferencing services beats long lines at the airport any day.

Business travel has taken a beating in the past few years from the 1-2-3-4 punch of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the recession, the SARS epidemic, and the war in Iraq. The number of business trips Americans took fell almost 7 percent from 2001 to 2002 and dropped a further 4 percent in 2003, according to the Travel Industry Association of America. Not only have companies slashed travel budgets, even for travel-dependent departments such as sales and marketing, but people have also become less enthusiastic about spending time aboard airplanes.

Yet we live in a global economy, and people in far-flung locations still need to meet. Increasingly, they're doing so via Web conferencing services, which let both small and large groups of people share presentations and documents in real time over the Web. The services also deliver handy tools for collaboration, including chat rooms, whiteboards, document annotation, application sharing, Web polls, and Web tours. With most of the services, the audio portion of the conference is handled via standard phone conferencing.

Given the cost savings that Web conferencing can deliver, the market is positioned to take off in the next few years, growing from \$544 million in 2003 to \$2.2 billion by 2007, predicts the Radicati Group, a consulting and market research firm.

"Web conferencing emerged as a renegade application," says Andy Nilssen, senior analyst for Wainhouse Research. "Anyone with a browser, an Internet connection, and a credit card could fire up a Web conference without special equipment or the blessing of senior management." Increasingly, however, companies are embracing the technology not only to reduce travel expenses but also to speed up decision making by allowing the right people to collaborate instantly, no matter where they happen to be.

Web seminars, or *Webinars*, are also taking off for everywhere from sales events to education. The conferencing vendors are responding with tighter security, including SSL encryption, management tools for administrators, and installed

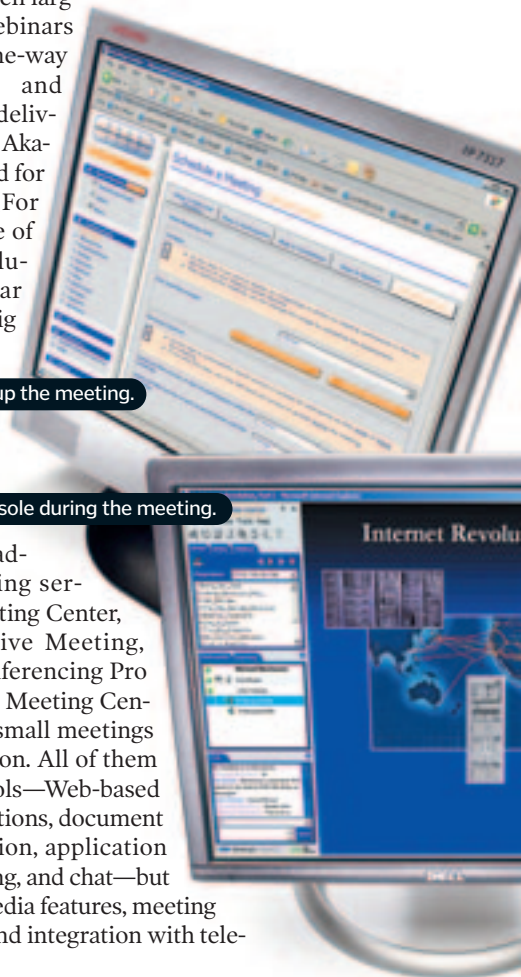
solutions that can be set up behind a corporate firewall. *Webcasting* reaches an even larger audience than *Webinars* by broadcasting a one-way Web presentation and often using content delivery networks such as Akamai and Digital Island for faster throughput. (For descriptions of some of these high-end solutions, see the sidebar "Conferencing for Big Business.")

a. The presenter sets up the meeting.

b. The presenter's console during the meeting.

We tested four leading Web conferencing services—Genesys Meeting Center, Microsoft Office Live Meeting, Raindance Web Conferencing Pro Seminar, and WebEx Meeting Center—as vehicles for small meetings and team collaboration. All of them offer the standard tools—Web-based PowerPoint presentations, document sharing and annotation, application sharing, whiteboarding, and chat—but they differ in multimedia features, meeting management tools, and integration with telephone conferencing.

Only Genesys and WebEx could show slide transitions, play the audio and video integrated with our test PowerPoint slide presentation, and conduct live videoconferencing.



Genesys and WebEx were also the only services that could connect the names of Web participants with the telephone numbers they used to dial into the audio conference, easily allowing presenters to mute, unmute, and dismiss callers through a Web console.

We also found variations in the meeting management tools used to assign moderators, presenters, and attendees, and to grant individual rights to annotation and application sharing during the conference. In these capabilities, **WebEx stood out as the most complete service.**

Microsoft's acquisition of PlaceWare and the addition of *Office* to the name of its Live Meeting service signals the company's strategy of integrating Web conferencing with other desktop Office applications. But **WebEx offers the best integration** right now, with a download that lets you start a Web conference and share documents directly from Office applications, such as Excel or PowerPoint, or by right-clicking on a document file. All but Raindance can integrate scheduling and conference initiation with Microsoft Outlook. And both Genesys and WebEx let you start a Web conference from your instant-messaging window.

Eventually, Web conferencing may become just another feature within other productivity applications. But if you want to meet on the Web today, you need one of the services we review here.

WEBEX MEETING CENTER

Thanks to its tight integration with Microsoft Office and other desktop applications, as well as its advanced Web-based call control, **WebEx Meeting Center stands above the pack.** Its videoconferencing and extensive array of tools for meeting management and collaboration sweeten the package.



Despite WebEx's clear superiority, other services had some strong points. Genesys Meeting Center is a very competent service with nice phone integration, multimedia, and collaboration features. We like Microsoft Office Live Meeting's slick Windows client and its excellent administrative features for large enterprises. And while RainDance Web Conferencing Pro Seminar is adequate for basic Web conferencing, we're looking forward to the release of RainDance's upcoming K2 product, which should take the service several steps beyond where it is today.

WebEx Meeting Center

Standard version, \$100 per seat per month; Pro version, \$200 per seat per month. WebEx Communications Inc., www.webex.com. ●●●●●



Owning over 60 percent of the market, WebEx is the Web conferencing service to beat. **The new version of WebEx Meeting Center is fully loaded and earns our Editors' Choice hands down.** For more targeted needs, WebEx also offers Training Center for education, Support Center for customer support, and Event Center for large Webcasts.

Of all the services we evaluated, it offers the best integration with Microsoft Office. A special download adds a drop-down menu to all your Office applications, so you can crank up an instant conference that shares whatever document and application you're working in. You can also start a conference to share any file in any application by right-clicking on the filename and choosing *Share in WebEx Meeting*, or start a *One Click Meeting* using a desktop icon.

WebEx allows multipoint videoconferencing with up to four cameras concurrently (you can change who is shown during the meeting). And it's the only one, aside from Genesys, that could play the video and audio integrated into our test PowerPoint presentation.

HOLDING A MEETING

- The Web presenter **UPLOADS A SLIDE SHOW, IMAGE FILES**, and any other files to be shared during the meeting to the Web conferencing service. He or she also completes the invitee list, schedules the meeting, and creates any polls or quizzes. An e-mail with a Web page link and telephone number is automatically sent out to all participants.
- The Web conference presenter **CONTROLS WHAT APPEARS ON PARTICIPANTS' SCREENS** (usually a slide show presentation or an application demo), has a list of who's attending (sometimes showing phone numbers), sees feedback from the participants such as "hand raising," and can sometimes dial out through the software to start a meeting.
- PARTICIPANTS CAN VIEW** presentations, speak over a telephone conferencing system, raise their hands with an on-screen icon, and sometimes urge the presenter to speed up or slow down. They can also engage in chat, whiteboarding, and polls.

c. The participant's view of the meeting.

PARTICIPANTS CAN BE ANYWHERE in the world, and some services let them transmit live video of themselves and receive live video of the presenter.

To play audio and video this way, you have to download and install a special toolkit that plugs into PowerPoint and adds menus for inserting videos and other items into presentations. If you insert video and audio in the normal PowerPoint way, they won't show up in WebEx, since WebEx translates everything into its own Universal Communications Format. In the late prerelease version of WebEx Meeting Center we reviewed, integrated video was a bit erratic, but WebEx reps claim it will work consistently in the final release. Like Genesys, WebEx was able to show our slide transitions.

WebEx has pulled ahead of Genesys in teleconferencing integration. WebEx effortlessly linked our Web conferees with their phone numbers and allowed us to mute, unmute, or dismiss participants over the Web simply by right-clicking on their names in the participant box.

WebEx had the best Outlook integration of any service we tested, allowing us to add a short registration from within Outlook and to

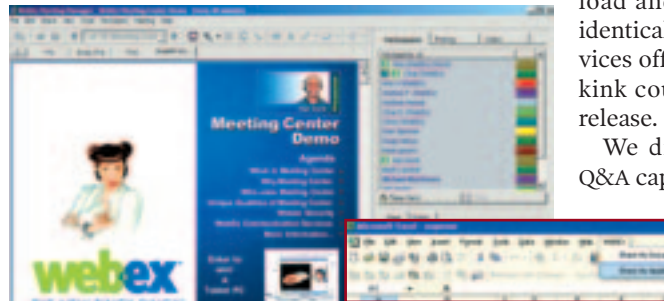
distribute a full meeting transcript—including the agenda, a participant list, meeting notes, the presentation, and all chatting and polling information—after the meeting. You can also record meetings and download the recordings, though it's not easy to post recordings to a Web site. The company's Training Center and Event Center services let you do this more readily. We had quick success at creating recordings in WebEx that included everything from presentations to chat, application sharing, and Web tours.

The WebEx interface isn't as effortless as Live Meeting's, but it's more powerful. Assigning rights to participants and

making them presenters or hosts is a simple matter of right-clicking on their names in the Participant window and selecting the desired attributes. During a meeting, you can easily open and run presentations, conduct polls and Web tours, and share applications, though there's little capability for premeeting preparation. WebEx has two options for haring Web content. One lets you share a single Web page, and another lets you take participants on a tour.

The service makes great use of its advanced switched network, but the quality of streaming video was erratic at best. Sometimes it worked exceptionally well; other times it took a long time to load and then froze. But we had the identical experience with the other services offering video. This performance kink could be ironed out in the final release.

We did miss a formal Web-based Q&A capability and an easy way to post recordings to our WebEx Web site. Despite these quibbles, WebEx Meeting Center offers the best combination of features and ease of use among all the four services we tested. ☰



ONLY WEBEX offers a downloadable add-in that lets you strike up a Web conference from inside a Microsoft Office application.

SHARING MOMENTS AT KODAK



Global travel expenses are never a pretty picture, especially for a company like Eastman Kodak. With headquarters in Rochester, New York, and product developers located in Gifu, Japan, a business trip for just one person can cost thousands of dollars.

Given its widespread workforce of almost 70,000 employees, coupled with a global customer base, Kodak was a natural fit for Web conferencing services. After a few years of hiring independent contractors to run training and other large Web events—and using NetMeeting on occasion—Kodak realized that its scattershot approach was not only adding unnecessary expenses but also complicating its IT infrastructure.

So in January 2000 the photography giant settled on WebEx, and it has been pleased with the results. This year Kodak saved over \$1 million in travel expenses, enjoying a total return on investment of over 200 percent. Kodak uses three WebEx services: Meeting Center, Support Center, and Event Center. With these tools, Kodak makes company-wide announcements and updates employees on changes in benefits. Its human resources department recently conducted a series of meetings concerning a new benefits package.

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The company also holds virtual meetings with global clients and provides remote customer support for photo finishers. "Customers can contact the service technicians and get computer-related problems solved on the spot," says Ronald Auble, technology manager of Kodak. "In the past, it required an expensive and time-consuming service call to get the same result." Other employees are using WebEx to educate retailers about imaging products.

The initial rollout of WebEx limited meetings to only 30 participants. Today, Kodak can host an unlimited number of participants in Web conferences. Of course the solution isn't perfect. In events with around 2,500 connections, important visual clues such as body language are missing. And while Kodak plans to evaluate the use of streaming video, the broadband-hogging technology will most likely be reserved for troubleshooting equipment problems.

Despite these minor drawbacks, WebEx has been an easy-to-use solution for Kodak. "For those new to virtual meetings, a computer-savvy person is comfortable hosting meetings within an hour," says Auble. "And in 2 or 3 hours, computer-phobic people are hosting meetings."

Kodak now holds about 1,400 meetings per month, and the number is growing. Employees have become more comfortable with Web conferencing and are even developing new ways to use it. Talk about turning around a negative situation!—*Jennifer Harsany*

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