20 Ways Online Meetings
Are Changing the Face of Business

By David Spark

When you think about conference calls or commuting for meetings, what thoughts conjure up in your mind?

Most of us don't have romantic notions of either. Voice-only conference calls fall short in what they can communicate. You can't feed off of other people's reactions, nor have one person effectively lead the group through a document or product sketch being developed in real time. While in-person meetings are ideal, they can take up hours, if not days, of additional time, and they're extraordinarily costly.

When businesses switch to online meetings, adding video and screen sharing, most, if not all of those complications fade away. What does this new paradigm for distance communications mean to the evolution of business? We spoke with some industry leaders on how online meetings have changed their business. Here are 20 of our favorites.

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1: Dramatically reduce travel costs

Hands down, eliminating travel costs is the most cited reason for adopting online meetings. The cost of meeting software is usually a comical fraction of sending all necessary parties to a meeting.

"We used and promoted WebEx to replace travel," says Max Dufour (@maxdufour), partner—digital strategy, Harmeda. Dufour previously worked for a Fortune 500 company that instituted a travel ban for unnecessary trips.

His company actually measured the cost of the transition.

"We saved millions of dollars the first year and also dramatically improved our carbon footprint," Dufour says.

2: Speed up communications flow

"As online meeting technologies became more ubiquitous, we quickly reaped its value, trading travel time for productivity," says Scott Teger (@scottteger), VP of operations, 36 Labs.

"I'm 100 times more 'revenue' productive because I don't have to travel," claims Jeff Frankel (@docSTARsoftware), VP of marketing and principal, docSTAR.

"It was not unusual in the past for firms to fly in people for a two-hour meeting," says Ben Rothke (@benrothke), senior eGRC consultant, Nettitude Group. "By not having to travel to a meeting site, it's feasible to be on calls for eight hours a day."

"There is no need to leave too much lag time," adds Nathan Barber (@Barber_Nathan1), digital analyst, seoWorks, "Because all we have to do is click a button and request a meeting."

"Online meetings mean we spend less time preparing, traveling, and sitting around twiddling our thumbs, and more time working on what really matters," concludes Andrew Auderieth (@datarealm), CEO, Datarealm.

3: Lack of travel improves quality of work and business life

According to a study by Softchoice, 70 percent of their North American workers would consider quitting their job for a new one that offers more flexibility over work hours or greater autonomy to work from home.

With greater work flexibility, employees "have more time for other tasks since transportation time diminishes completely," says Pamela Wagner (@doapam), digital marketing specialist and founder, Ajala Digital. "That doesn't necessarily mean I have more hours from employees, but happier employees, and therefore their output and productivity is much better."

"Another benefit to online meetings is the reduction of sick days used," adds Andy Abramson (@andyabramson), CEO, Comunicano. "Nothing is worse than having someone come in to the office with a cold or flu and then getting the rest of the team sick. With online meetings they can still take part and not spread the cold or flu to others, meaning everyone's productivity is maintained versus losing more people to sick days."

4: Compete on a higher level

"Online meetings make it easier to 'dissolve borders,'" notes Elizabeth Edwards (@PR_Virtuoso), founder, president and CEO, Volume PR. "It has enabled us to serve clients worldwide, meet with media and influencers worldwide, and compete on a more global landscape."

"It's now possible for our small consulting company to be able to complete with much larger companies," adds Denny Cherry (@mrdenny), owner and principal consultant, Denny Cherry & Associates Consulting. "We can meet with clients in multiple cities per day, without having to have sales people in those physical cities each day."

"We're more competitive when it comes to bidding on projects," argues Chris Smith (@idfive), director of strategy, idfive. "We don't need to include line items for thousands of dollars in travel, lodging, and car rentals and that helps our bids stay less expensive."

5: Build customer trust

"In this ever increasing digital world, everyone expects a higher degree of connectivity and 'reachability,'" says Volume PR's Edwards.

"By bringing people together, anywhere, anytime, it's allowed us as a business to respond faster to customer demands," agrees Ian Apperley (@ianapperley), writer and IT consultant, whatisitwellington. "We often bring the customer into those discussions as well, so they can see exactly what we think in real-time. This builds trust."

Cathy Tibbles (@wpbarista), founder, WordPress Barista, claims that the trust empowered by video conferencing, from clients who previously wanted her physically on site, has resulted in an estimated 30 percent increase in revenue.

Video communications allow transparency, which breeds client trust, says Christiano Ferraro (@ChristianoAFerr), managing member, Christiano Ferraro Consulting: "The prevention of misunderstanding provides a higher quality of client service."

6: Find talent worldwide

"Without the ability to have online meetings, we'd never have been able to tap into and hire some of the great folks across the globe I get to deal with every single day," says Nathan Wenzler (@thycotic), executive director of security, Thycotic. "That's really allowed us to thrive."

"We often can get a *better* team since we're no longer constrained with having to settle for locally available talent," adds Peter Gregory (@peterhgregory), executive director, office of the CISO, Optiv.

Not only can companies source talent worldwide, but they can also hold onto talent as they move.

"By eliminating the impact geography has on team members and availability, we are able to keep the same people working," explains Comunicano's Abramson. "We don't lose a person who needs to relocate to another city. They just plug in where they move, picking up from where they left off. There's no change to the business and no impact on our clients. This is a big benefit as it avoids the need to have to replace someone you've invested in over time, and the time it takes to get the new hire up to speed."

7: Iterate faster with developers

"By connecting faces, voices, and sharing screens, everyone forms closer relationships right from the start," asserts Sharon Koifman (@DistantJob), CEO, DistantJob. "This is particularly true when interviewing developers. Already having screens shared makes it easier for both sides to talk about skill sets, approaches to specific challenges, and perspectives on current or past projects."

Matt Perez (@matt_perez), COO and co-founder, Nearsoft, has a team of developers based in Mexico who are in constant communication with companies in the U.S. His team leans on online meetings with video and screen sharing for increased productivity with pair programming.

"It would be possible without the video," says Perez, "But they'd have to work harder at it."

8: Collaborate and innovate in real time

"[Online meetings] spur collaboration and innovation through active dialogue and idea-sharing," notes Holly Benson (@hh_benson), VP and organizational transformation partner, Infosys. "This allows participants to not only build on each other's ideas and work products real-time, but to do so visually."

Be forewarned that just owning an online collaboration tool doesn't instantly translate into improved collaboration and innovation.

"Many companies have already invested in collaboration tools yet people are not sure or aware of their features and functionality as it directly connects to their role," admits Erika Van Noort (@erikavannoort), senior director of strategic customer enablement, Softchoice.

The tool alone is not going to provide the answer. Instead, "look at the way people share information internally and externally as that can provide ideas for how and where tools could enhance the experience or support greater efficiencies," advises Van Noort.

9: There are new rules and etiquette for virtual work

Work in enough corporate offices and we all quickly learn there are some accepted and often unwritten rules of engagement. For example, don't disturb an employee if his or her door is closed. And if you have a sensitive issue, don't send an email. Walk over to the employee's office and have a conversation 'face to face.'

Given that virtual employees don't have doors, nor can they just walk to anyone's office, the rules for engagement are rarely if ever known. To get ahead of what would probably lead to a pile of miscommunication, Karolyn Hart (@Karolynhart), COO, InspireHUB, creates a rules and etiquette guide for all employees who use online meeting software. Here are some of her guidelines:

- If you're working hard, close your virtual door by letting people know you're busy. If the project is intense and you can't be bothered unless it's an emergency, go into 'bunker mode.'

- For sensitive and crucial conversations, don't type—upgrade to a video chat. Too much can be misinterpreted in text-only communications.

- For virtual employees, there's often one open channel for general chatter. That's great for catching up or trading jokes, but it shouldn't be used for critical business operations. In those cases, set an online meeting and invite all necessary parties so the content is captured apart from the noise.

10: Clear up confusion face-to-face, even when it's virtual

Email is prone to misinterpretation. It's void of inflection and subtext. Elevate that same conversation to an online meeting, where you can see and talk to the person, and any confusion that existed before, evaporates.

For example, when Leo Welder (@CW_LeoW), CEO, ChooseWhat.com, made the decision to shift his critical conversations from email and instant messaging to video-based engagements, productivity jumped dramatically saving him thousands of dollars.

"Hearing and seeing each other's tone, body language, facial expressions, and hand signals, caused a dramatic improvement in our effectiveness," admit Welder.

That's because having 'in the moment' visual and verbal responses empowers businesses to react in real time.

"[With online meetings] I can see my audience react to our dialogue which allows for pivoting," explains docSTAR's Frankel.

11: Enable the sales team

"Once we started relying more heavily on online meetings, we were able to effectively push prospects through the sales funnel, tightening sales cycle gaps and keeping us very busy," says 36 Labs' Teger.

"Online meetings are a force multiplier," adds John Rood (@nextstepprep), president, Next Step Test Preparation. "Instead of spending time educating individuals about what we have to offer we organize events to engage large groups all at once. These online meetings almost always generate immediate sales."

With just one webinar, Nick Hedges (@velocify), CEO and president, Velocify, can now simultaneously present to, and collaborate with, every individual involved in the buying decision.

"This process used to take weeks of coordination and multiple business trips to meet with key decision makers in different offices," admits Hedges. "Virtual meetings also allow for a more consultative sales approach, which typically involves bringing in more internal experts during the sales process."

"We are in a high touch business and that 'face to face,' even if it's virtual, is key to building enough trust with a prospect to move closer to the sale," concluded Nearsoft's Perez.

12: Simplify the complex

"[Communicating] digital marketing information over the phone can be extremely challenging," admits Jason Parks (@themediacaptain), president, The Media Captain. "Clients can have trouble following along."

"Putting that much information into a prospect's ear often means they're unable to really process the volume of information or fully understand how each feature connects with other features to generate ROI," says Rick Rutledge (@CAbrandbassador), sales account executive, ConsumerAffairs for Brands. "Describing our platform is like turning on a fire hose. Visualizing the platform is like using a water fountain."

"If you're in the marketing business, you're in the story-telling business. Therefore, it's crucial that when you're telling the story, you control what people see," says David Burk (@burkburk), CEO, The Electron Shop. "The words and the visuals must go together."

13: It's now possible to manage multiple conversations simultaneously

Online meetings aren't all about video chat and screen sharing. Steve Prentice (@stevenprentice), senior writer, CloudTweaks, engages in multiple disjointed text-based conversations and therefore values their delayed responses.

"In a live conversation, this would be chaos," admits Prentice. "But when you factor in the delay that comes from a keyboard-based multi-person meeting, it actually turns into a very creative way of keeping meetings short and productive."

So that others can capture the value, Prentice will teach clients and team members how to stream their thinking process simultaneously across three or four topic items.

14: Effective and protected remote support

"Online meetings allow us to connect with customers while running diagnostics, doing maintenance and repair, or setting up new installations," says Tim Mullahy (@LibertyCenter1), managing director, Liberty Center One. "It speeds up implementation and reduces the need for follow up calls and emails."

In some situations, direct access to a remote computer is exactly what you want, and other times, for security reasons, it's exactly what you don't want.

"In critical infrastructures, you don't have to provide a vendor direct access to your sensitive systems but you can share a view of your screen and they can advise based on what they see," says Patrick C. Miller (@patrickcmiller), critical infrastructure cybersecurity and regulatory advisor.

"We hold an online meeting with screen share on and programmers we hire tell us what to adjust and how to adjust it," explains AJ Saleem (@SuprexLearning), academic director, Suprex Private Tutoring. "Works like a charm and it keeps us safe."

15: Lean on recordings for extended learning

Once recorded, meetings can have a second life as training materials.

Jessica Albon (@thriveyourtribe), digital storyteller, Thrive Your Tribe, often has to disseminate a lot of technical information in a single meeting. Instead of repeating a meeting, she'll share the recording with her clients. The decision has become a boon for her clients and her business. Her clients use the recordings to train new staff or simply watch again if they found something confusing. She claims the recordings alone have increased her closing rate by 20 percent.

Trevor Hatfield (@trevorhatfield), CEO, Inturact, has an archive of recorded sales calls to train new recruits and to hone the talents of his existing sales professionals. His team will often listen to the recordings in monthly sprint meetings and collectively discuss how they can better their process.

Recorded meetings are also a great asset for anyone who wasn't able to attend the meeting.

"The person who can't make the meeting can catch up, on their own time, by listening to the recording as opposed to needing to have someone else 'catch them up,'" says Comunicano's Abramson.

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16: Live meetings enforce discipline

When Binny Mathews (@binnytm), co-founder and CEO of the online job-skills platform DeZyre, shifted his company's model from a self-paced recorded class to a real-time webinar format, completion rates jumped from a measly 5 percent to an outstanding 75 percent.

Because students are motivated to participate and the liveness of a webinar enforces a sense of discipline, Mathews argues that students simply learn more effectively through online meetings. The interactive nature of live meetings also means students can ask questions, allowing them to clear up any doubts immediately.

17: Lead cost-effective focus groups

For idfive, online meetings have been a great alternative for in-person focus groups and usability testing. They claim they've been able to achieve the same results virtually.

When you conduct a focus group in an online meeting, says idfive's Smith, you save on travel, location rental fees, food, shipping equipment, and labor.

18: Break the hierarchical structure of in-person meetings

"On-site meetings have more of a hierarchal structured feel to it. This vertical up and down type of conversation hampers brainstorming ideas and creativity because the presentation and data is usually coming from one source," says seoWorks' Barber. "During online meetings, the structure is more horizontal and open. I have noticed that there is less of the intimidation factor to speak up when conversing online. We are able to have a more open conversation which sparks ideas."

19: Maintain internal culture virtually

"The ability to have weekly meetings to touch-base are key in maintaining interpersonal relationships in a way the phone or email would not achieve," says John Starmer (@john_starmer), director of education, Kumulus Technologies.

"We've made more and more use of online meeting tools to facilitate not just weekly staff meetings or brainstorming sessions for upcoming product releases, but we've used them to keep connected for corporate events and parties, town hall meetings, informal lunch meetings, and even the occasional employee game night," says Thycotic's Wenzler who argues that all this soft communication has been critical to maintaining the company's internal culture.

20: Remote employees must be proactive for successful adaptation

Erika Petrelli (@ErikaPetrelli1), SVP of leadership development, The Leadership Program, is often the only remote employee to call into her company meetings. Being so displaced, she realizes she has to be proactive in her role, making sure the organizer remembers that she's a participant. Given there's technology and a lot more coordination necessary for a remote employee, online meetings require a lot more care and foresight.

For others in similar situations, Petrelli recommends:

- Remind the organizer to send all relevant materials before the meeting.

- Make sure everyone in the conference room is positioned in front of the camera.

- Have the organizer position the remote person's screen so he/she is visible to those in the conference room.

- Call in 10 minutes beforehand to deal with any technical issues.

- If the remote person is leading the meeting, assign a champion in the conference room who can distribute materials and write stuff on the board.

Conclusion: Invest in communications. It's fundamental to all businesses.

Whenever a new communication tool is introduced, it's up to the users to see how it will work in their environment. Tools will sometimes disappear if they're ineffective, or be supplanted by a better tool.

While online meeting technologies have gone through several iterations, their core features, voice, video, and screen sharing, have become indispensable for companies looking to communicate outside their four walls.

"Online meetings increase both flexibility and quality in which a business communicates directly correlating with opportunity. By affordably and simultaneously making a business internationally reachable and client accessible, you increase both customer satisfaction and business opportunities globally," says Christiano Ferraro. "This makes online meetings a no-brainer and one to embrace."