

Web Conferencing Tool Evaluation

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This note describes an evaluation of ESNet's MeetingPlace and EDial used at CERN. We have had some experience with a commercial tool, WEBEX, which has been well received, but requires a monthly licensing fee.

Desired Features

Based on user needs and our experience with web conferences, we are interested in the following features:

- 1) Multiplatform/multibrowser support
 - a. Windows, Linux, Mac OS X
 - b. Explorer, Mozilla, Firefox, Safari
- 2) Support for 100 attendees (and the capability of adding more)
- 3) Integrated video
 - a. Support for multiple video connections
- 4) Ease of use for attendees
 - a. List of participants
 - b. Chat capability
 - c. Identify who is speaking
 - d. Local window management
- 5) Application sharing
 - a. Browser
 - b. Shell windows
 - c. PowerPoint
- 6) Desktop sharing
- 7) Whiteboarding and annotation
 - a. Identification of whiteboarding individual
 - b. Laser pointing
 - c. Font changes
- 8) Integrated note taking
 - a. Reviewable during meeting
 - b. Notes specific to slides
- 9) Closed captioning
- 10) Capturing documents that were not posted to a document database
- 11) Host tools
- 12) Security

Test Configuration

We set up a three participant conference under ESNET with the following configurations:

- Windows running Internet Explorer
- Windows running Firefox
- Linux running Firefox

And tried to test

- Sharing a web browser
- Sharing shell windows
- Sharing PowerPoint applications
- Sharing a whiteboard

MeetingPlace Results

Serious drawbacks/bugs

- Only Internet Explorer users can see the list of participants.
 - Others cannot tell who is attending
 - Others cannot tell who has control
- Linux users cannot share applications
- The display window goes into an infinite loop when sharing a web browser, since MeetingPlace is also in a web browser
- There is no moderator control of the meeting. Any participant can start controlling the display (even unknowingly). This is very confusing and messy.
 - E.g., Any user can interfere with the meeting by changing to whiteboard (for example) or annotating
 - Ease of use for new people is difficult

Minor difficulties/Inconveniences

- Pop-up blocker interferes with MeetingPlace window starting up
- Can only chat with people who have opened a chat window (for non-Explorer users).
- No integrated video.
- MeetingPlace allows sharing of multiple applications by multiple users, but this can be confusing.
- If user wants to share one an application, all files in that application are shared. E.g., if I select a particular Firefox window (or Word document) to share, all Firefox windows (or Word documents) are shared. This is not only confusing when looking at the display window, but also requires more work for the presenter in understanding if all material under that application is appropriate to share.
- No integrated notes
- Can't invite a new participant from within the meeting

EDial Results

All participants, not just presenters, needed an EDial account. This was considered unacceptable and no further evaluation was completed.

Summary

While we can see that MeetingPlace may evolve to become a useful tool, it isn't there yet. There are several serious drawbacks when holding a meeting with a large number of participants, mixed platform base, or inexperienced users.