: What are the best Second Life resources for communications-driven decision support?

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Second Life (secondlife.com) from Linden Labs is a powerful multi-user visual simulation. Since May 20, 2007, my goal has been to explore if and how Second Life can be used to support management decision-making. This column is the second in a three-part series summarizing my findings and conclusions.

On approximately 15 occasions, I have participated in meetings and conferences using Second Life. These have been both small and large group meetings and two "meetups" have involved voice, one with a shout caster and the other with the new voice client.

All of the tools needed for holding decision-making meetings, brainstorming conferences and planning meetings are in place and ready to use in Second Life. Exploiting Second Life effectively remains a challenge. My goal in this column is to summarize the valuable resources for holding meetings, conferences and even small conventions that I have found in Second Life.

On Friday, July 15, 2007, Manpower Inc. launched Manpower Island with a panel discussion on virtual work. Manpower executives think that "virtual work has become a powerful way to connect skills and demand, regardless of the distance between them" and that Second Life is a way to support virtual work. Manpower joins a list of important companies like IBM, Cisco and Intel with a significant commitment to Second Life.

During the past 2 months, I have made some new friends and business associates in Second Life. Six of them are very involved with using SL to provide communications-driven decision support. Collectively the seven of us have formed the the Second Life Meeting and Convention Bureau (SLMCB). The purpose and charter of SLMCB is to promote "the effective use of Second Life for team meetings and larger gatherings,

conferences and facilitated sessions. We help make virtual meetings a success." Member of SLMC include me, Leinad Meriman (owner), TonyEMS Heying, Samson Francis, PaulC Beck, Emil Weissenberger, BadWolf Bracken, and Jay Clarke. I belong to three other groups in SL related to supporting meetings, TechTalk@SL owned by Emil Weissenberger, the SL Meeting group owned by Chime Bellman and the Meetings & Events Meetup group owned by don Babcock. So far I have not met or IMd with either Chime Bellman or don Babcock. Emil Stoyanov (aka avatar Emil Weissenberger) and I have become friends. You can read more about TechTalk@SL below.

So what are the best SL resources?

In Second Life, Alpine Executive Center is currently the best overall environment for meeting support. It is owned and operated by Anthony R. Adams (avatar TonyEMS Heying). For information on Tony and his company check www.groupvision.ch and www.meetingsupport.com . The island is a quaint alpine ski village surrounded by snow-covered mountains with skiing and ice skating. Inside the mountain is a sophisticated meeting facility. At the executive center, real-world activities can take place in a virtual environment, supported by expert facilitation, powerpoint slides and voice technologies. Tony Adams believes Alpine Executive Center "is a place where a sense of fun and adventure is created at the same time as building team spirit and a sense of community within the visiting groups. All this while real work is being done. Participants will log off their computers feeling like they were indeed 'there', leaving a mental image of the event as a future reference point." During a day long retreat delegates often have time to explore, play, go ice skating or just have fun together riding the chair lift and using the timed downhill and slalom ski runs. Following the event a visit to the disco and lounge in the lower level of the mountain complex is a great way to network and unwind. Participants receive a personalized name tag so others know who you really are and can see your real-life name. Name tags eliminate some of the confusion associated with avatar names.

Tom Samson (aka Samson Francis) is President and CEO Teamwork Dynamics. He operates innovative meeting labs in Second Life. Teamwork Dynamics works with the executive leaders of organizations in the development of real life infrastructure and teams. Check www.teamworkdynamics.com. According to Tom Samson, "In our Second Life home office we are developing team tools and processes that maximize

the capabilities offered by this virtual environment. We believe that Second Life provides an excellent environment for teams that must develop skills and processes that allow them to engage in the vigorous debate that leads to powerful action plans developed through collaboration, individual commitments and personal accountability." Tom is "excited about the potential of this technology platform that allows teams to work effectively in a virtual world and extend their efforts to enhance their RL team results. We believe this virtual world is the beginning of a new era in organizational communications, collaboration, and teamwork that will be the basis for our future global economy and lives."

Hyperstring.net is a major full-service provider of facilities and services in Second Life. This group has excellent meeting capabilities and they provide SL development and building/object construction, SL marketing, SL video creation, Custom Avatars, Land Security, E-commerce Stores, hosting of private Islands, custom scripting, connecting websites to Second LIfe, and office rentals. My friend Paul Clevett (aka PaulC Beck) is CTO of Hyperstring.net . Hyperstring sells SL whiteboards, operates a shoutcast server and has hosted a convention in SL with over 1500 participants in a 24 hour period. Hyperstring Island also includes some recreation for meeting goers. The mountain has a nice hiking path and once you reach the top you can parachute to the airfield below. The airfield has a wide variety of historic aircraft. The island also includes an art gallery and office space in addition to various sized meeting spaces.

TechTalk@SL focuses on technology talks, workshops, and spontaneous tech chats. Emil Stoyanov, a Ph.D. student and independent IT consultant focusing on Software Architectures, Technology Reviews and Prototyping, operates the facility and group. TechTalk@SL is a beautiful venue with both an indoor and an outdoor meeting area. Emil schedules regular discussions, talks, presentations and demos related to technical topics including general IT, computer science, virtual reality, communications, software engineering and system integration. For notification about events, please join the TechTalk@SL group - it is open and free of charge. The archive of chat logs and additional information is at http://www.opentechtalk.org .

Finally, IBM Kearney Theatre Complex is an impressive facility in Second Life that straddles 4 islands so that 300 avatars can attend a single meeting/event. I can't create an SLurl given the permission

setting, but teleport to IBM 1 coordinates 117,4,23. You can also find meeting facilities for rent at Liventura Island and Silicon Island.
Jay Clarke is our IBM contact.

So the resources are available and are useful, but problems must be overcome. An anonymous reviewer at TIME magazine online recently called Second Life (SL) one of the "5 Worst Websites" on the Internet. Of course SL is not a website, but the critique pointed out some real problems with SL and neglected some others. Sadly the author clearly does not see the potential of multiuser visual simulations for decision support. The SL client software is sometimes slow to load, sometimes there is lag when too many avatars are in the same region, there is a steep learning curve for new users, and there are some "crazy people" who sometimes disrupt meetings. Second Life also has virtual sex, slavery, gambling and violence. Some changes are needed and Linden Labs seems to be responding. More than 150 new servers are being added weekly to handle the increasing load, the number of concurrent users is often above 40,000. New versions of the client are regularly released that fix bugs and improve performance. The Help Island tutorials for newcomers are now available for all users and the tutorials have improved.

To fix the other major problems, the solution is to further segment Second Life. Linden Labs has already created Teen Second Life and it is now time for Linden Labs to either open source the simulation engine server software or create both a Business Second Life and an Education Second Life. Both of these new worlds need user verification and authentication and avatars should have the actual first and last name of the user. Business Second Life or my DecisionSupportWorld.com can provide a venue for managers to work, interact, collaborate and transact real world business in a more controlled, secure environment. The TIME reviewer of SL writes "The corporate world's embrace of the place as a venue for staff meetings and training sessions does seem to lend Second Life a layer of legitimacy. But maybe it's a case of some CEOs trying too hard to be hip." A Business Second Life will be a powerful tool for real life business activities and decision support. Help make Business Second Life a reality.

Managers can benefit from using a multiuser, visual simulation for decision support, but big players in SL like IBM and Cisco need to pressure Linden Labs to either open source the sim engine or create a Business Second Life. As always your comments, questions and feedback

are welcomed.

SLurl links

SLurls provide direct teleport links to locations in Second Life. If you have Second Life installed, clicking on the link in a web browser will automatically teleport you to that location in-world. DecisionSupportWorld.com will have the best SLurl links soon.

Alpine Executive Center,
http://slurl.com/secondlife/MeetingSupport/124/42/21

Hyperstring.net Island,
http://slurl.com/secondlife/Hyperstring%20Island%201/83/183/26

Liventura Island,
http://slurl.com/secondlife/liventura%20Island/70/104/27

OnlineMeetingRooms.com,
http://slurl.com/secondlife/Silicon%20Island/225/91/30

Teamwork Dynamics Leadership Center,
http://slurl.com/secondlife/JONES%20BEACH/214/227/22

TechTalk@SL, http://slurl.com/secondlife/Norfolk/75/204/23

References

Linden, Torley, "I, for one, welcome our new avatar overlords," July 12, 2007, URL http://blog.secondlife.com/2007/07/12/i-for-one-welcome-our-new-avatar-overlords/.

Business & Education page, Second Life, URL http://secondlife.com/businesseducation/ .

Sites to Avoid: Second Life, TIME.com, URL http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804, 1638344_1638341_1633628,00.html

Power, D., "Can multi-user visual simulations provide real world decision support?" DSS News, Vol. 8, No. 13, July 1, 2007, URL http://dssresources.com/newsletters/193.php .

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