: How can video conferencing provide enhanced decision support?

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In some situations, video conferencing can provide enhanced decision support. The major issue facing managers and technologists is how to insure that video technology is an enabler for better decision making and not a barrier or impediment. Video conferencing just brings together a group of physically distributed decision makers. Seeing images of other decision makers who are remotely located using a synchronous video conferencing environment by itself does **not** provide much decision support and may **not** enhance decision making.

Decision makers participate in many decision meetings, both face-to-face and using technology like video conferencing. Some meetings enhance decision making and others actually slow down decisions and in a worst case lead to poor compromises and political rather than rational, fact-based decisions. Why? Can anything be done to avoid these undesirable outcomes in a technologically support meeting environment?

Bad meetings lead to bad decisions. A video conference can make a bad meeting worse. A meeting may be unfocused with no agenda, a few members may dominate the discussion, facts may not be incorporated into discussions, poor records or minutes of a meeting hinder continuity from one meeting to the next, poorly trained meeting facilitators or team leaders create process problems. The whys of poor meetings and bad decisions is a long list. Many of these problems can be addressed. Adding remote participants in a video conference does **not** solve these problems, rather it brings into the discussion other interested parties and adds the problem of the technology to the mix of problems in meetings.

Organizations have an increasing number of remote employees, but these employees often want the communications richness of a face-to-face meeting. When that is not possible video conferencing systems may provide a substitute meeting environment. Lester Wanninger, Jr. noted in the Blackwell Encyclopedia of Management (1999) "Video conferencing adds the important common capability of 'looking the other person in the eye,' and thus offers the potential to significantly change the way we work, become educated, and conduct transactions (p. 153)."

Technologies like video conferencing can be enablers or impediments to better decision making. Structured meeting processes and training of the team leader and members and perhaps combining video conferencing with other technology-based tools like whiteboards and screen sharing can potentially reduce or avoid the negative consequences associated with ineffective team decision making meetings. Prior research has shown that discussions during video conferences tends to be less social and more task-oriented than face-to-face discussions, cf., McLeod, 1992. That general

finding suggests both positive and negative consequences for group decision making, i.e., faster decisions, but perhaps lower commitment of decision makers to the decision.

In a related column (2009), I noted "Communications-driven decision support systems can remedy a number of problems associated with group communication and group decision making." Providing only video conferencing does **not** provide communications-driven decision support. It does broaden participation, but video conferencing creates the potential for technology related problems.

Most companies have conference room solutions, but mobile and point to point solutions are becoming more common. Video conferencing technologies continue to improve. Leading providers include Polycom, Microsoft Skype and Lifesize, a division of Logitech.

Polycom (http://www.polycom.com/) video conferencing provides collaborative technology to help people work together over geographic distances to supposedly increase productivity and reduce travel costs. Cisco claims "Video places people at the center of the collaboration experience. It empowers them to work together in new ways to transform business, accelerate innovation, and do more with less. It's next-generation interaction, where everyone, everywhere can be face-to-face and more effective. (cf., http://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/solutions/collaboration/index.html)".

Find out more about Microsoft Skype at URL http://www.skype.com/en/ and about Lifesize at URL http://www.lifesize.com/. Skype for business is integrated with Microsoft Office applications and supports meetings of 250 concurrent users or sites. Lifesize is a high definition cloud-based or on-premises service.

Videoconferencing is changing. Telepresence refers to both a concept and an emerging set of technologies. The concept of telepresence is that a person can feel present even though at a distance. All of the participants could potentially be at a distance but meeting together using a telepresence technology. Current technologies are only able to create a limited appearance of remote participants sharing the same physical space. Advances in technology may result in faster, cost effective, high quality decision making.

This brief update indicates that communications-driven collaboration is improving. People anywhere can meet virtually and in real-time to share information, discuss, debate, and decide. Telepresence provides the promise of an immersive experience that adds a new dimension to meetings. Decision support involves much more than seeing and hearing each other. The decision support goal remains to create an environment for effective collaboration and decision making.

References

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