

## Case Study

### Chapter 10: Teams and Teamwork

#### *'Virtually There?'*

Most people who consider using virtual-collaboration tools assume that, even at their best, they are a second-best solution. If companies had unlimited travel budgets and if teams had endless amounts of time, then face-to-face meetings would be the best way to work, right? Not so fast. A team of product developers at Texas Instruments has discovered that virtual meetings work better than their face-to-face alternative.

A case in point: TI's efforts to develop the next generation of wireless communications devices. The company's Dallas-based mobility and collaboration team recently delivered a crucial strategy presentation to employees and business partners in Europe, Japan, and the United States. The format was pretty standard: 45 minutes of PowerPoint slides followed by an extended Q&A. Not so long ago, TI would have flown in participants from all over the globe. This time, managers conducted the meeting over WebEx, the Internet-based virtual-meeting platform. Participants followed the slides using their laptops and instant-messaged their questions and comments throughout the presentation.

The virtual meeting reduced travel costs and saved time. But over the course of the session, the team discovered that the virtual presentation was also more effective at soliciting feedback from attendees than any of the face-to-face meetings that they had conducted with international participants. 'So many of our international partners are not comfortable with English,' says Evan Miller, team manager. 'On a conference call, or even in person, accents can be tricky - especially when you gather a group from Europe, Japan, and the United States. With WebEx's chat feature, we found that many people could type English better than they could speak it. It made everything so much smoother.'

Smoother, even, for meeting participants who were already in Dallas. During the same presentation, Miller's colleague Lisa Maestas was connected via WebEx from TI's South Campus, about five miles across the traffic-choked city. Says Maestas: 'I got to stay at my desk, listen in, and participate, but I could still keep an eye on my other projects.'

In fact, local group interaction is quickly becoming one of the most valuable uses of WebEx for this TI team—even among people who are sitting in the same room. Portions of both of the company's Dallas facilities are outfitted for wireless network connectivity. So these days, when Miller, Maestas, and other local members of the mobility team gather for a meeting, they bring their laptops, make their wireless connections, power up WebEx, and take a personal view of the document under discussion. 'It's usually so hard to crowd around a screen to see what people are talking about,' says Maestas. 'With four laptops, everyone can see the screen. We can share control of the screen and

annotate as we go along. At the end of the meeting, everyone has the same version of what we worked on. There's no more confusion.<sup>1</sup>

## Questions

1. What are the pros and cons of virtual meetings, where people interact electronically rather than face to face?
2. How could trust be built in this kind of virtual team?
3. How can leadership be approached in this kind of teams?

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Excerpted from A Overholt, "Virtually There?" *Fast Company*, March 2002, pp 111-112.