Virtual meetings with hundreds of managers

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Virtual Meetings with Hundreds of Managers

HARRY ARKESTEIJN
Rabobank Capabel

JASPER DE ROOIJ AND MICHÈL VAN EEKHOUT
Groupsupport

MICHIEL VAN GENUCHTEN AND THEO BEMELMANS
Eindhoven University of Technology, Faculty of Technology Management, Research Group I & T, Postbox 513, 5600MB Eindhoven, The Netherlands (E-mail: m.j.i.m.van.genuchten@tm.tue.nl)

Abstract

This paper describes the use of a Group Support System (GSS) in a distributed meeting with hundreds of managers. All were managing directors of the local banks of Rabobank. The distributed meeting has contributed to reducing the lead-time of a decision of hundreds of managers from an estimated 6 months to 4 weeks while at the same time increasing the involvement of the managers. The paper discusses the processes followed, the results achieved, the feedback from the managers as collected in a survey and the lessons learned. The experience shows that large-scale virtual meetings with business managers are feasible today. The participants recognize the usefulness of the virtual meeting but also indicate the need to improve the processes followed and the IT used.

Key words: anonymity, Group Support System, process support, virtual meeting

Introduction

Virtual teams are increasingly used to meet organizational goals. Reducing lead-time and travel time are among the reasons to do so. Decision making in virtual teams is a topic of research and development. One of the tools to support decision making in virtual teams could be Group Support Systems (GSS). The potential of GSS in a distributed setting has been acknowledged for many years (Jarvenpaa et al. 1999; Nunamaker et al. 1991; Turoff et al. 1993). Examples of the actual distributed use on a large scale are less common (Maznevski et al. 2000; Rutkowski et al. 2002). This paper describes the use of a GSS in a distributed meeting with hundreds of participants, all managing directors of the local banks of Rabobank. This paper describes a field study of two virtual meetings in 2001. The paper discusses the processes followed, the results achieved, the feedback from the managers as collected in a survey and the lessons learned.

1. Context and Process Followed

The virtual meetings took place within the Rabobank in The Netherlands. Rabobank is a bank with a strong presence in The Netherlands and a global niche player in food and agribusiness. The first cooperative banks sprang out of agricultural communities in the Netherlands a century ago. Their main objective was to provide credit to members (usually farmers) at reasonable interest rates. The local Rabobanks in the Netherlands are still banks with a high level of autonomy. The managing directors of a local bank report to their own board of supervisors. All the local banks are members of the Rabobank co-operation. The Rabobank Group can be characterised as a democratic structure with local banks having a say in its domestic and international policy.

The decision making process in Rabobank needs to involve both the corporate headquarters and the 370 managing directors of the local banks. As a result, the resulting decision making processes took too long, in the opinion of both the headquarters and the managing directors of the local banks. Instead of calling all local banks together for policy and decision-making, a virtual meeting has been gathered. The goal of the process is to save lead-time, to involve managers more and to make the decision making process more transparent.

Two virtual meetings were held in 2001. The process in the first virtual meeting will be described in detail. The second followed the same process to a large extent. The topic for the first virtual meeting was a reorganization proposal for a part of the back-office operation. Before the re-organisation, the back office activity concerned was executed locally in the 370 banks. The proposal was to centralise this activity in one organisation in the Netherlands. The impact of the proposal on the local banks was significant since it meant that work was going to be done elsewhere and some of the local personnel was made redundant. The bank managers considered the topic of major importance.

The prospective participants are 370 managing directors of the local banks of the Rabobank. A managing director is typically managing a bank with hundreds of employees and thousands of customers. A general manager is bottom-line responsible for the results and reports to a supervisory board of his own bank. A banking manager in Rabobank is rather independent from the headquarters, due to the cooperative structure of the Rabobank.

The process started with a two-page proposal that outlined the proposed reorganisation of the back-office. An editorial board that played a role throughout the process wrote the proposal. The editorial board was composed of representatives of the managing directors of the local banks. An independent journalist chaired the editorial committee. The managers also received background information in the form of a clarification of the proposal and a consideration of advantages and disadvantages. The process consists of 4 activities. The first step was to brainstorm comments on the proposal. The tool used was the GSS GroupSystems. The collection of the comments was done in 20 groups of approximately 20 managers. The reason to create 20 groups was twofold: first, generating comments with hundreds people would result in a list too long to comprehend during a brainstorm. Second, the 20 managers within a group were from the same region, which meant they already knew one another and therefore would feel more committed to the group of which they were part.

A total of 1000 comments were collected in the first activity, in which 217 managers participated. An editorial committee clustered the comments before they were fed back to the participants. The second step for the managers was convergent: they were asked to prioritise their comments by selecting the most important ones. At the same time all the comments of all groups were published using GroupIntelligence (Verveen et al. 2001). This tool allows to accumulate the results of all 20 meetings in one website and provided tools to search and analyse the comments of all 20 groups. The voting results were also fed back to the participants.

The editorial committee rewrote the proposal based on the prioritised comments of the 20 groups. This activity took place over the weekend. The third process step was the crucial one in the process followed and it was a combination of divergence and convergence. The participants were asked to do three things in parallel:

- The managers submitted their final comments on the revised proposal. They were asked to limit the number of comments to two. A typical comment that would be made in this round was something like: “I can agree with the proposal if an individual bank pays for the additional costs to meet their specific requirements”. The group was allowed to diverge once more, but within limits.
- The managers evaluated the sections of the proposal on a 4-point agree–disagree scale. The feedback on the sections was an early indicator of the opinion of the managers on the proposal as a whole. It also indicated where additional changes were required, according to the managers.
- The managers indicated whether they agreed that the proposal was beneficial to the Rabobank and realistic. The responses were another indication of the changes required by the managers in the proposal. Four quadrants were distinguished: (1) the managers that perceived the proposal as realistic/beneficial (the largest groups in the first virtual meeting), (2) beneficial/unrealistic (managers with questions and suggestions about the implementation), (3) not beneficial/realistic and (4) not beneficial/not realistic.

Based on the feedback from the previous round, the editorial committee rewrote the proposal for the last time. The final round consisted of one yes/no question: do you agree with the proposal or not.

A summary of the process followed with a timetable is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Process followed

Process step	Timing	Prospective participants
1. Generate comments on proposal	Week 1	370 Managers
Cluster comments	Weekend	Editorial board
2. Prioritise comments/publish results	Week 2	370 Managers
Rewrite proposal	Weekend	Editorial board
3. Final comments and poll agreement with sections	Week 3	370 Managers
Rewrite proposal	Weekend	Editorial board
4. Final vote	Week 4	370 Managers

The input from the participants was not anonymous. They were asked to make themselves known through their bank code. This means the facilitators could track whether somebody had participated or not. The information was used to send reminders to the participants who had not participated in a process step during the planned time.

A survey was held after the second virtual meeting. The survey was sent to 120 managers, 61 of which responded. A few questions were asked with regard to the extent to which the banking managers are using IT in their daily work. One question stated was: how often do you use Internet/Intranet application.

Responses to a similar question about e-mails indicated that over 90 percent uses e-mail on a daily basis.

1.1. Platform and facilitation

The first virtual meeting was hosted outside the bank. The banking managers accessed this server via the Internet. They were not able to do so from their office computers due to computer security measures in place. They typically accessed the meeting from an "Internet" PC that was available in the bank or from their PC at home. The second virtual meeting was hosted on a server within the bank's infrastructure. An advantage was that the managers could use their own PC and could access the meeting through the "managing directors" intranet site.

The facilitation consisted of three different activities:

- The content facilitation involved analysing the comments and rewriting the proposals. An editorial committee chaired by a journalist was responsible.
- A group consisting of representatives of the banking managers, the GSS facilitators and the editorial committee created the design of the meeting. GSS facilitation consisted of managing the participants and handling the information in and between activities. The amount of work should not be underestimated given the fact that 20 groups of 20 managers needed to be managed.
- The helpdesk was available during the whole process to support any questions from the managers involved.

Table 2. Internet usage by managers (n = 60)

	Percentage	Cumulative percent
Daily	80.0	80.0
Weekly	16.7	96.7
Monthly	3.3	100.0
Total	100.0	

2. Results

The results of the virtual meeting will be discussed in terms of the participation and from the perspective of the meeting owner (i.e., the management that asked for and paid for the virtual meeting) as well as the perspective of the participants.

2.1. Participation rates

Table 3 shows the number of manager directors that participated in each process step. This data is based on the connection data as logged by the GSS server.

The first virtual meeting showed a participation rate per activity of 60 percent. Many managers participated in 3 or 4 of the activities. Typical reasons cited for incomplete participation were: busy agenda's, travel and other priorities. The number of participants was lower in the second virtual meeting. The main explanation is the lower priority that was given to the subject under discussion in the second virtual meeting. Table 4 gives the average number of minutes of participation per activity, as logged by the server.

The managers participated were on average logged on to the GSS software for one and half hours.

2.2. The perspective of the meeting owner

The meeting owner within Rabobank that requested the virtual meeting was satisfied with the results. A main advantage was the reduction of the lead-time. The lead-time was reduced from an estimated 6 months to four weeks. Another key benefit was that the accept-

Table 3. Number of participants in each process step

Process step	Virtual meeting 1	Virtual meeting 2
1	217	170
2	211	154
3	220	163
4	259	198

Table 4. Average time participants were logged on the virtual meeting

Process step	Average login times in minutes
1	23
2	21
3	26
4	17
Total	87

ance increased. His impression was that the quality of the decision taken had improved as a result of the process followed and technology applied. The involvement of the participants had also increased as compared to previous decision trajectories. The Rabobank has by now accepted virtual meetings as one of the tools in policy development in its organization.

2.3. The perspective of the participants

The survey mentioned earlier gave insight into the perception of the participants. The survey was conducted early 2002. This was one year after the initial virtual meeting and two months after the second virtual meeting. The survey was sent to one third (120) of the participating managers. The target group of the survey was limited to prevent a survey overload to the managers. The response to the survey was 51 percent. No action was taken to increase the response.

A number of questions polled the opinion of the managers with regard to the method and technology used in the virtual meeting. Five questions and their answers will be presented (Table 5).

The survey also asked the managers for their level of trust in IT support the kind of decision-making for which it was applied in the virtual meeting. By the way, within Rabobank, the terms virtual meeting and virtual council are used as synonyms. The term virtual council was used in the questionnaire (Figure 1).

The participants were asked to rate both the concept of the virtual meeting, as well as the execution. The results are given in Figures 2 and 3.

The appreciation for the concept of a virtual meeting is higher than for its execution. Table 6 compares the evaluation by the managers.

This question allowed the respondents to name the conditions under which they would participate in the next virtual council. The conditions named multiple times were: "It depends on the relevance of the subject", "When we are not manipulated towards a conclusion", "the independence of the editorial team should be beyond any doubt" and "the meeting should planned well in advance (a month instead of one week) and there should be more time to make a contribution".

Two open-ended questions gave interesting results. The first question was: "The virtual councils have not been anonymous. Would your answers have changed if it would have been anonymous?" 44 of the 60 respondents started their answer to the open-ended ques-

Table 5. Answers to the question "Do you consider this way of virtual meeting useful?"

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	51	85.0
Don't know	2	3.3
No	7	11.7
Total	60	100.0

Figure 1. "What is the level of trust you have in supporting decision making with IT, like for example GSS technology as applied in the virtual council?" (1 is very bad, 6 is sufficient, 10 is excellent).

tion with a NO. Explanation for the answers was typically: "we require openness in these kind of discussions" and "my colleagues should know my opinions". Only one open answer gave a yes with the explanation "you may restrain yourself and you may limit yourself to acceptable answers and opinions if you know you are not anonymous."

A second open-ended question was: "What were your main reasons to participate in the virtual meeting?" 12 out of the 58 responses referred to speed or reduction of lead-time as the main reason to participate.

Figure 2. "Could you rate the concept of a virtual council on a ten-point scale" (1 is very bad, 6 is sufficient, 10 is excellent).

Figure 3. "Could you rate the execution of a virtual council on a ten point scale" (1 is very bad, 6 is sufficient, 10 is excellent).

3. Lessons Learned

Many lessons were learned in this project. This is one of the largest virtual meetings conducted with senior managers, as far as the authors are aware. The main lessons are:

Computer illiteracy among managing directors was no problem

The experience in the project and the answers to the survey shows that managing directors are willing and able to participate in virtual meeting. The managers show confidence in the use of IT for this kind of decision-making. They were also daily users of Internet/Intranet and PC applications. The helpdesk that was available during the virtual meetings was only used the first days during the first activity. After that the users were very well able to find their way in the GSS used, the published results and the intranet site.

It is key to lower the entry barriers to usage as much as possible. Managers are not likely to jump through hoops caused by insufficient integration of the IT environment. In the first virtual meeting everything was new and they may have made an exception. The second time they expect everything to work conveniently for them. Convenient may mean the interaction starts where they start their usage of IT to support their work, which is most often the Inbox of their e-mail system. The second best place to start in this case was the "managing directors" intranet site. This was the starting point of the second virtual meeting. The current GSS software needs to be better integrated in the working environment of executives to facilitate routine usage.

Large-scale virtual meetings are real

Large-scale meetings can be executed in practice. The first virtual meeting took three weeks to prepare and four weeks to execute. The amount of outside support has diminished rapidly and the Rabobank now routinely executes virtual meetings in different ways and forms.

Virtual meetings as discussed here take place multiple times a year. Also customer panels and personnel satisfaction investigations are now supported with virtual synchronous interaction using GSS technology.

Topic should be significant to the participants

The topic under discussion should be relevant for the managers involved and they should be positive about the fact that their contribution makes a difference. During the second virtual meeting two things happened that decreased the participation and negatively affected the satisfaction. First, the topic at hand was considered too far removed from the daily business of running a bank. Second, another layer of management in the bank was taking decisions in the same area. Some participants felt that the virtual meeting was a window dressing act and articulated that clearly in the virtual meeting. Motivation and participation reduced as a result.

Anonymity may have a different impact in virtual meetings

A lot of research has been done to understand the impact of anonymity in face-to-face meetings (e.g., Nunamaker et al. 1991, 1997). The virtual meeting discussed here was not anonymous; the participation of individuals was tracked and they were reminded in case of lack of participation. The content they submitted was never used against the individual. The participants' feedback in a survey suggests that they did not consider anonymity important. The research of anonymity in the meeting room has shown that especially the participants themselves often underestimate the impact of anonymity. The same explanation could apply here. Another explanation could be that anonymity in a virtual team may work differently. Future research and experience will learn more about the impact of anonymity in virtual teams.

The Process and the Up-Front Planning is Key

A specific and well-designed process is crucial for the success of a large-scale virtual meeting as discussed here. The facilitator in the meeting room may be able to improvise. Even the facilitator of a small virtual team may be able to stop and restart participants in case of an ill-defined activity or instruction. In a large-scale virtual meeting, there is only one chance to do it right. The interaction between the owner of a meeting, the content owners and the GSS facilitators was key in this case.

Expect lower grades in virtual teams as compared to face-to-face meetings

The appreciation of the participants for the concept and execution of the virtual meeting was rated on a ten-point scale. The resulting average scores were 6.6 and 6.2 on a 10 points scale, respectively. This is far removed from the very positive feedback GSS usage in the meeting room typically gets from participants in many parts of the world (Nunamaker et al. 1997; Vogel et al. 1990; Vreede 2000).

An explanation may be that a virtual meeting is less exciting than a face-to-face meeting. Working alone from one's desk in a virtual meeting is less stimulating than having the typical GSS meeting with many participants, lots of computers and excitement. In our case the participants were more excited about the results they achieved than about the process

in which they achieved it. One result is that they returned for more virtual meetings. Maybe GSS should settle for less enthusiasm in the meeting and more appreciation for the results. This will in the long turn be beneficial for the sustained usage of GSS technology.

4. Next Steps and Issues for Future Research

A couple of next steps have already been taken: the infrastructure to run virtual meetings is now operational within the Rabobank. This has lowered the entry barriers to execute virtual meetings. The usage has increased. Two virtual meetings were held in 2001. In 2002 five virtual meetings have been held. Currently the application of large-scale virtual meetings to other organizations is being investigated. The first target organizations are large organizations with a decentralised power structure. One can think of co-operations or conglomerates in the private sector. In the public sector examples are ministries, organizations of states or non-governmental organizations.

The virtual meeting described here was not started as a research study. It was started to solve a business problem. We have nevertheless come across some issue we would like to suggest for future research. Three will be named:

Anonymity in large scale virtual meetings

Many participants indicated that anonymity in this virtual meeting would not have been appreciated. The use of GSS in the meeting room (Nunamaker et al. 1997) has shown that participants can underestimate the importance of anonymity. This could also apply to participants in virtual meetings which could explain these survey results. Another explanation could be that anonymity in a virtual team works differently. In the meeting room the anonymous electronic input is often supplemented by a less anonymous verbal explanation or discussion. This is not possible in a distributed setting and therefore there may be more need for less anonymous input in virtual teams. Future research is required on anonymity in virtual teams.

Feeding back the results to the participants

GSS meetings are known to generate a lot of information. A large-scale virtual meeting increases the importance of proper feedback to the participants. Providing the participants with a list of, for example, 1000 comments will not do the job. Presentation on a website with a search engine, in combination with role specific summaries may be a step in the right direction. Special attention requires the workload for the facilitators. Their handling of the data between activities should not become the bottleneck in the virtual team process.

For which processes can a virtual meeting be applied?

Another step undertaken right now is to see whether large-scale virtual meetings can also be applied to other processes and tasks. The current task can be characterised as an analysis task where many people suggest small revisions to an existing document. GSS has proven to be able to support these kinds of processes before (Genuchten et al. 2001). It leaves to be determined whether similar virtual meetings can contribute to tasks that are more of a constructive nature, such as writing a document or designing an artefact.

Conclusions

Large-scale virtual meetings with business managers are feasible today. The example discussed here has contributed to reducing the lead-time of a decision of hundreds of managers from an estimated 6 months to four weeks while at the same time increasing the involvement of the managers. The participants recognize the usefulness of the virtual meeting. There is a lot of room for improvement, both in the process followed, the context in which the virtual meeting took place, as well as in the software and infrastructure used. The motivation of the managers to participate in future virtual meetings is high.

Important questions for future research that this study triggered are dealing with anonymity in virtual meetings and proper support for specific processes. It is interesting to see which extent large-scale virtual meetings can play a role in more constructive processes than the case discussed here. The question is not anymore whether large-scale virtual meetings can be done in practice but rather for which processes they can be beneficial and how they should be executed.

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