Does Green Have to be Grey?

How do you get face-to-face clarity without stepping on that plane?

You probably realise that your 'Carbon Footprint' is measured in 'Tonnes of Carbon', but have you ever paused to wonder what a 'Tonne of Carbon' is?

Every year, the average manager's travel to and from business meetings produces 34 tonnes of carbon dioxide, and while tonnes of carbon dioxide is a metric we are increasingly familiar with, many of us do not actually know what it actually means, or what it looks like.

At sea level, each tonne of carbon dioxide would occupy a sphere 10 metres in diameter and, every year, the average manager's business travel adds a further 34 of these spheres to the air - that is one sphere like the one shown on the right added by every manager, every ten days.

That thought may be worrying enough when we think about those spheres growing

10m Diameter Ball

one tonne of carbon dioxide

Source: carbonquilt.org

and spreading into the life-giving bubble we call the atmosphere, but research has shown that most people's perception of the atmosphere is actually wrong. Many of us would tend to think of the proportions of the atmosphere as being like the husk around a chestnut, or the thick peel around an orange, but in reality the proportions would be better represented by a thin layer of emulsion paint on top of the peel of the orange - our atmosphere is that shallow!

To represent this more visually, please take a look at the image on the right, which is a representation of all of the air on the planet gathered into one place. We actually have frighteningly little atmosphere to work with, and yet it is the source of all of our protection, irrigation, insulation and respiration, and has been for millions of years (and needs to be for millions of years).

However, people do not undertake business travel lightly. Apart from the carbon implications of business travel,

there are also cost implications (c. £20k per annum per manager) and time consumption (c. 900 hours away from work and/or home per annum) and with the level of international business doubling every five years, it is no wonder that individuals and organisations are looking for ways to reduce such travel, particularly by increased use of web-based meetings.

But the figures quoted in the previous paragraph are recent figures (2011) and occur despite the availability of web-based meeting technology, so the question needs to be asked: "Why don't people use web-based meetings more and travel less?"

The answer to this question lies in the perceived effectiveness of web-based meetings. The average web-based meeting is considered to be only half as effective as its physical counterpart in understanding the problem, in creating a solution, and in building commitment to the outcomes. And where the meeting is concerned with an important opportunity, or a key relationship, or a risky problem, most managers feel that they need all the understanding, creativity and commitment that they can muster, and they are concerned that using a web-based

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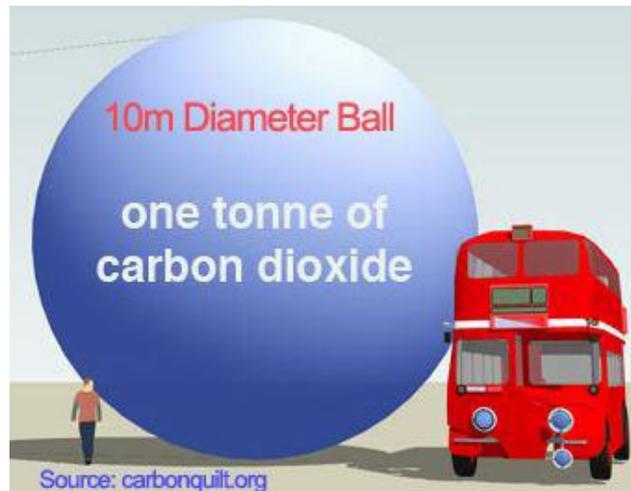
meeting is more likely to put the outcomes at risk. Even though all meetings leave some element of uncertainty, of 'greyness' over the conclusions and people's perceptions of them, they feel that this 'greyness' is increased significantly when the meeting is web-based.

To address this, organisations have been working hard to set limits on travel budgets. But the leaders of those same organisations also admit that they tend to hire senior people who have the ability to do what is best for the business rather than slavishly follow the rules, and the opinion of most of those senior people is that if they were forced to move a significant portion of their current travel to web-based, then the consequences of increased levels of issues and loss (based on the probabilities involved) would outweigh any travel savings achieved by a factor of three.

And so the contention builds: on the one hand savings and reduced carbon footprint; and on the other clarity and business results - the underlying assumption is that becoming more green in the process makes us more grey in the outcomes, and that we need to find a good balance between these.

But in all of this, nobody looks at the meeting itself. Nobody asks the question: "Why are web-based meetings only half as effective as their physical counterparts in understanding the problem, in creating a solution, and in building commitment to the outcomes?" It is almost as though we take for granted that web-based meetings are inferior to physical meetings - that the limitations of conducting meetings over the web inevitably undermines their effectiveness. But this is only looking at one half of the equation; only looking at the limitations. What about all of the ways in which a web-based meeting has possibilities which do not exist in the physical environment? Surely they provide opportunities to increase the effectiveness? And the answer to this is that they do, but the vast majority of managers do not know this because they have only looked at the limitations - they have approached web-based meetings from within their physical meeting paradigm.

You can see this by looking at which aspects of the wide array of functionality available in web-based meetings is actually utilised by the managers who run them. By far the most commonly used tools are those for presentation

(including screen sharing) and audio debate/discussion - these are used in the vast majority of meetings. Conversely, the wide range of tools that exist for concurrent participation, creativity and consensus are used so rarely that the majority of people attending web-based meetings are totally unaware of their existence. And yet these tools are crucial to achieving the understanding of the problem, the creativity in the solutions, and the commitment to the outcomes that managers seek and need.
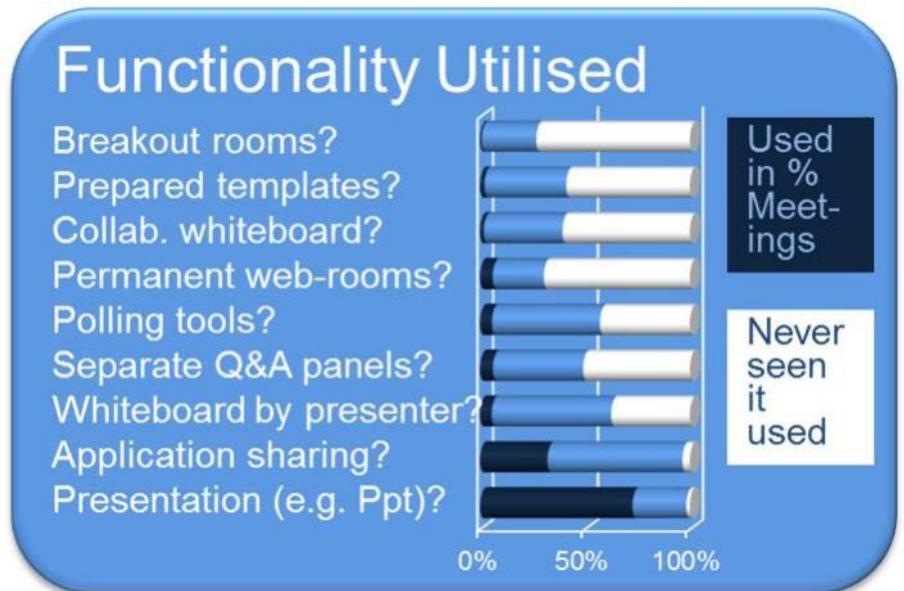
Green does not have to be grey. Quite the opposite. But for web-based meetings to achieve their full potential, we need to help management to see them as something different to physical meetings and not simply a pale and inferior reflection of them. Only then will they begin to move beyond the limitations they have set for themselves, and to (quite literally) reach for the skies.

So what do you think?

Feedback in one click: 😠 😟 😐 😑 😊 ⭐

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