



Is it progress if a meeting takes place over the web?

In 2008 £14.7Bn was spent on business travel in the UK alone. And that is only for business travel that involved an overnight stay – the figure for all business travel is much higher. On average, each senior executive spends about £20k, 34 Tonnes of CO2, and 900 hours (half of which was in their own time, away from home and family) each year in travelling.

So from a simplistic financial, ecological, and community perspective you might answer “Yes, it is progress if a meeting takes place over the web”.

But the average web-based meeting is estimated to be about 50% less effective than its physical counterpart in arriving at the right outcome and ensuring commitment to it. Those same senior executives estimate that pushing a significant proportion of their current travel to web-based meetings would incur consequential costs (in terms of errors and lost opportunities for their organisations) of three times any travel savings that might be made. So from an organisational effectiveness perspective your answer might well be “No, it is not!”

The diagram on the right illustrates the massive interdependency that now exists between international organisations. Each number represents \$Bn in goods and services that are core to an organisations work. The proportion of business transacted across national and continental boundaries is currently doubling every five years. Organisations (commercial and non-commercial alike) which rely only on local ideas, home-grown technology, and their current resources are already finding they are losing out to competitors who can select from the best and most economic that the world has to offer. Competitive options

are increasingly sourced over great distances, and these are no longer simply commodity choices – advantages in technology, specialist resources, IPR, relationship support, and markets are all possible for those who are looking for them. In many cases, the grass in the next field really is greener.

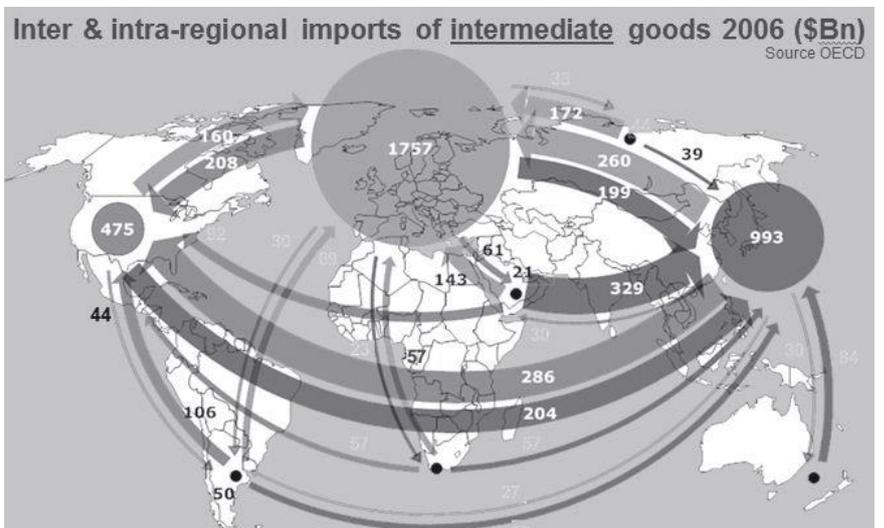
However, competing on these terms places an increased burden on your senior staff. Every year 14% more of their work will be dependent on actions and decisions that are taken a plane flight away, and there is no sign of any decline in this figure.

Conversely, there is also increasing social and ecological demand to reduce carbon footprint, and the current economic climate is putting all indirect expenditure under pressure. There is neither the heart nor the resource available to increase travel, so how is

the increase in international dependencies to be serviced when it is clear that web-based meetings are so clearly inferior to physical ones?

The question of the title was posed in a different way over 50 years ago by a Polish poet called Stanislaw Lec – he asked: “Is it progress if a cannibal uses a fork?” It is a question which calls us to examine technological developments in the light of the cultural and motivational deficiencies they may be supporting. Over recent years, this

Is it progress if a cannibal uses a fork?
Stanislaw Lec



type of question has been very evident in the “garbage in garbage out” challenge for those seeking to automate or computerise their business processes without first re-examining the efficiency and effectiveness of those processes.

Web-based meetings are clearly a ‘computerisation’, but how clearly have we examined the business process we are putting into them? Do we even see meetings as a process? And if so, what have we done to “first re-examine their efficiency and effectiveness”?

The sad truth is that many who use web-based meetings do not consciously think of meetings as a process; they have not clearly defined the outcomes, and they have not seriously reflected on the best steps to deliver those outcomes. Furthermore, most organisations fail to objectively measure or manage the effectiveness of their meetings, usually in sharp contrast to virtually every other process that they use.

But meetings are a process. The steps we take within them, and the order in which we take those steps, have a marked impact on the outcomes in terms of: the quality of the conclusions; the commitment of people to deliver them; the development of people’s skills and confidence; and the overall culture and values of the organisation. And the evidence is that currently they are very poor at delivering these things.

Part of the issue is that after many years, decades, centuries, of similar patterns of interaction we take the way that we meet for granted, and often get upset if someone questions our approach to such a fundamental and basic element of our work. Beyond basic concepts like an agenda and minutes, people are rarely questioned on the outcomes they achieved from their meetings and the process they took to deliver it. And sadly, unlike virtually every other process which has been automated in recent times, this same flawed approach has been carried directly into the web-based environment.

Furthermore, the blind-spot we have about taking meetings for granted appears to have transferred into web-based meetings to the extent that many organisations which have implemented this solution, and which are cur-

rently pushing its adoption, have done little to ensure that the people who are to use them have been trained in how to use them – it almost seems as though it has been assumed that people will simply adopt and adapt by natural means. The consequence of this is that half of those who currently set-up and run web-based meetings are oblivious to half of their functionality.

The paradox is that the computerised version of meetings – web-based meetings – have within them a rich palette of functionality and tools which provide the potential to deliver a meeting process which is actually superior to what can often be achieved in the physical environment, but we have largely ignored it. For the most part we have stuck blindly and unquestioningly to what we know, and as a result delivered something inferior.

Choosing whether to redress this situation and grasp the true potential of web-based meetings may well be the most important strategic and cultural decision you make. Far from simply being a way to save travel costs and contribute to CSR, it could transform the performance of your management team and thereby the performance of your entire organisation. It could inspire new levels of creativity; reach out to new horizons; free up your management potential; engage new partners; and transform your culture.

If web-based meetings are forks, we must now ask ourselves: To what extent have we used them to elevate our thinking and outlook beyond our current shortcomings?

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So what do you think?

Feedback in one click: 

For background on the research quoted in this article, or to understand more about the opportunities of web-based meetings and further develop your thinking in this area we would recommend the book: **Meeting by Design** ISBN: 978 0954 302146. www.MeetingByDesign.org

Tools to measure and manage meeting effectiveness can be found at Inspirometer.com



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