



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Planning a virtual conference is rather like planning a journey: before traveling you need to make choices about when and how to travel (by plane, car, train ...) based on available time, funds, weight of luggage, etc. Likewise, when planning a virtual meeting, you need to make the proper choices...

The need to communicate has always been there. At first, communication was possible only through direct physical contact and presence. To meet the need to communicate at distance, such methods as drums, smoke signals, carrier pigeons and human messengers were used for centuries. Most methods did not allow communication in real time and practically all of them only allowed communication between two distinct places: to include several "participants" you had to multiply the number of pigeons or human messengers. Reliability and feedback was yet another problem to overcome. It was hard to know if the addressee has actually received the message or not.

Finally in the second half of the 20th century came the overwhelming success of the Internet. It was all about communications and making geographical distances disappear. Most of the limits existing for centuries were eliminated. Distance and time were not a problem anymore. But it did not stop there. New unforeseen communication methods came into existence. New terms like "virtual" were developed and with surprising speed became part of the vocabulary of not only scientists or a limited number of specialist but of the public. These new applications and services met new needs and triggered new communication methods, fostering new kinds of interactive patterns. Today's younger generations are using different tools, building different communication skills and even a different communication culture. Language itself can not withstand these changes - just look at the special SMS

language and all the meta-communication methods used in e-Mail and Chat.

Today, instead of the lack of different communication methods, the problem becomes the increasing number of different tools. These change our life at work too and require a change in our working methods and working culture.

Which Tools?

Today, you can chose between electronic mail, telephone conferencing, video conferencing, instant messaging, chat, distribution lists, mailing lists, forums and Discussion groups, Web conferencing, Webinars, streaming media, Webcast, Podcast, Wikis, Blogs... and the list is growing.



How can we find our way? How can we choose? What are the differences? What are the advantages

and disadvantages of each? What is available at UNESCO?

Of course there is no single answer, because there is no "one size fits all" solution.

First you identify the type and "direction" of the interaction required. Is it mainly a one-way interaction like in presentations, training or a senior manager addressing the staff? These "one-to-many" meetings, especially with a relatively big audience can be best addressed through **webcasts** if we have only a speech or other oral presentation; or using **web conferencing** if the oral presentation is accompanied by data presentation too (PowerPoint).

Virtual Conferencing

Virtual Conferencing

If the number of participants is less and two way interaction – more interactivity – is required **webinars** could be the solution if data or presentation are involved and simple telephone or video conference when only verbal information suffice.

If the real-time nature of a live conference is less important and no interactivity required than **Mailing/Distribution list** or **Newsletters** can be the way to communicate; this is the best in case you

cases telephone conferencing could come to a remedy.

The number of audience or participating users can have an important effect on the quality of the conference or it may simply not be practical if there are too many participants in a telephone or video conference.

New Trends

The latest trend to emerge is in the field of

Mission or Virtual Conference?

UNESCO by its very nature requires traveling. Over the last 20 months, some 28 million USD was spent on travel: approximately half of it spent on staff travel and the other half for non-staff travel. There are several thousand missions in a biennium, adding up to almost 48 years of cumulative travel time, with the main destinations are in Europe.

What are the alternatives? Virtual conferencing tools can in certain situations reduce the number of travels especially into countries where the telecommunications infrastructure is well developed, easily available and reliable. Sometimes a combination of travel and Virtual Conference (where some participants are physically and some others are virtually present) could prove to be the best solution.

have a huge audience too. On the other hand **Discussion Groups** can serve well if two-way communication – like in brainstorming, idea collection or discussions – is required. Recently new tools like **Wikis** and **Blogs** are complementing these type of communications.

Identifying used Media types can help to choose the appropriate tool as well. Text only communications can be well served with **e-Mail** and **Mailing Lists**. If audio and/or video is required than **webcasting** is the way to go or **telephone** or **video conferencing** in case real-time interactivity is essential.

The quality and capacity of available telecommunications infrastructure may determine as well what type of conferencing tool we can use. In developing countries quite often webcasts and video conferencing may have a disappointing result or may not be usable at all. In these

web conferencing and some other tools that already exist in the public domain and are slowly making their way into the enterprise environment too (like chat, blogs). This pattern of initial public use, followed by enterprise use, is raising a new challenge: people's expectations are raised when they see how effective a tool can be in private use and expect to find it also in the workplace.

But in an Enterprise environment capacity, security, reliability have different, generally much more strict meanings than at home. Even if the technology is similar behind, enterprise grade applications differ a lot from personal use. Something that works perfectly in a home or even SOHO environment may not fulfill enterprise requirements where the technology should fit into an existing and often complex IT environment; where interoperability and continuous service must be assured; where security has an important role.