Multi-team Facilitation of Very Large-scale Distributed Meetings

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Abstract. Distributed work teams routinely use virtual meetings to support their collaborative work. In this paper, we present a case study of the facilitation that was provided for a very large-scale distributed meeting. Small teams of facilitators were recruited, trained, and assigned to each of six discussion forums of ManagerJam, a 48 hour meeting of over 8,000 managers in a large global technology company. Through examination of pre-Jam records, analysis of the Jam conversation archive, and post-event interviews with over 20 facilitators, we describe the planning and training efforts, and assess the impact of the facilitation teams on the meeting’s effectiveness. Guidelines for effective team facilitation of very large-scale meetings are provided, and design implications for meeting support systems are described.

Introduction

Computer-supported meetings have been the focus of considerable research for some time. Early work on group support systems (GSS), used to augment face-to-face meetings, focused on productivity gains that arose from such systems (see, for example Dennis, Nunamaker, & Vogel, 1990; Grohowski, McGoff, Vogel, Martz & Nunamaker, 1990; Turoff, Hiltz, Bahgat, & Rana, 1993). Several researchers have identified the importance of facilitation in the effectiveness of a GSS (Bostrum, Anson, & Clawson, 1993; Clawson, Bostrom, 1993a; Kelley, & Bostrum, 1995; Limayen, Lee-Partiridge, Dickson, & DeSanctis 1993; Nunamaker, Applegate, Kosynski, 1987). For example, it has been shown that facilitation may be necessary to help participants with use of the tool as well as
with assistance with the meeting’s process (Fuller & Trower, 1994). Others have found that facilitation is important through encouragement of effective task behavior (Bostrum et al., 1993). Early work with GSS, concluded that “although the technology has matured to the point where it is very easy to use by almost anyone, our experience continues to confirm that the quality of the group session is predominantly dependent on the facilitator.” McGoff and Ambrose (1991) identified several important characteristics of successful facilitators. First, they need excellent communication and group interaction skills. Second, they need to be skilled in the use of the GSS and in general group facilitation techniques.

Other GSS researchers have investigated the roles that facilitators take on during a meeting (Clawson & Bostrom, 1993b). Fuller and Trower (1994) identified eighteen roles for facilitators, including opinion seeker, elaborator, evaluator, compromiser, recorder, and standard setter. A second team of researchers identified over one thousand different characteristics of effective and ineffective behaviors of facilitators. These characteristics were grouped into 16 main role dimensions, including: appropriate, selects and prepares technology, creates comfort with and promotes understanding of the technology and technology outputs, actively builds rapport and relationships, and manages conflict and negative emotions constructively. Another team of researchers observed that various facilitation roles, such as technology facilitator and process/agenda facilitator emerge over time (Mark, Grudin, and Poltrock, 1999).

The facilitation of distributed group support systems has become increasingly important as economic and environmental concerns have motivated more and more virtual team interaction and collaboration. One recent empirical study reported that the facilitation challenges using a distributed GSS are different, and in some cases are greater than that of a face-to-face GSS (Romano, Nunamaker, Briggs, & Mittleman, 1999). For example, there were significant challenges with the technology, a greater need to establish and maintain focus on the meeting goals, and an increased difficulty attaining desired levels of participation.

Other research on distributed facilitation found that distance may increase necessary technology support due to heterogeneous technology infrastructures, and may pose additional challenges on planning activities for a remote leadership team Niederman, Beise, & Beranek (1993). The need for small groups of facilitators, or a hierarchy of facilitators was foreseen as the capacity of the distributed GSS increased.

One way to think about the challenges inherent in meeting facilitation is to consider various combinations of meeting place (same or different) and number of facilitators (individual or a team). In Figure 1, we show four quadrants of the resulting two by two matrix. The upper left quadrant illustrates the traditional GSS environment; a single facilitator in a shared physical meeting room. The “distributed GSS” environment (members of the meeting are in different places) is shown in lower left quadrant. In the upper right cell, we find a multi-person