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Reaching and Teaching:

Using web conference software to train distributed users

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Background

The National Blood Service is a special health authority within the NHS and has centres and teams in distributed locations across England. I joined NBS in July 2005, as the first full-time member of library staff, with a remit to develop library and information resources and services for all staff groups.

Reaching nurses, donor carers and other staff at widely distributed locations whose shift and working patterns can preclude attendance of traditionally delivered training, presents particular challenges for a one-woman service!

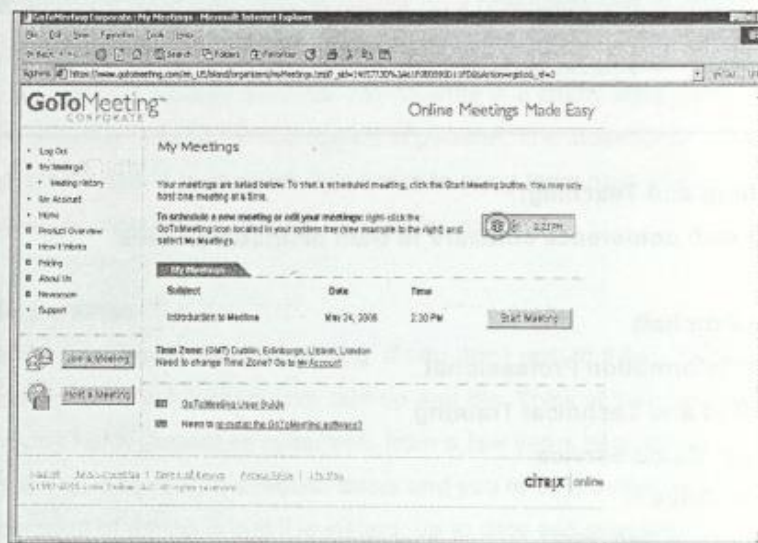


Figure 1: GoToMeeting software and BTMeetMe

GoToMeeting is a powerful application which can be used for a number of purposes. Individual training sessions or small group training sessions can be run. In addition to the training courses described here I have used the software to run impromptu meetings with distributed staff in order to answer enquiries and directly see problems and difficulties they are facing when using Windows applications, Athens accounts, etc.

The software allows students to be invited via email, giving a unique session log-in code. Once logged on, the trainer can demonstrate Windows based applications and use screen pointers or highlighters. Control of the session can be handed over to any student during training to allow hands-on experience under interactive guidance with the tutor. The software has

further modules such as teleconferencing facilities which are not currently used at NBS. NBS currently uses a BTMeetMe account, which allows several members to log into a teleconference session.

Course development

The range of information skills required across NBS is very diverse, ranging from novice IT users to highly experienced researchers.

By talking to members of staff and other members of my team key topics for information skills training were identified. A key topic, supporting research and learning for many, is the National Library for Health. Another area in which many staff wished to receive training was searching skills for Medline and other clinical databases.

An initial series of courses were conducted in a classroom environment, with members of staff from all disciplines invited to attend. Courses were promoted via email and through the Scientific and Technical Training prospectus, backed up by word-of mouth through STT trainers across England. The courses attracted staff from medical, scientific, administrative and nursing backgrounds. Courses were conducted in a number of locations, allowing staff the opportunity to attend courses near to their base locations.

Impressively, students greeted the training with such enthusiasm that they requested *'more homework'*!

From this initial series, a course handbook was developed giving detailed explanations, screen shots and instructions on accessing each resource. Exercises conducted during the courses were developed to provide hands-on experience of each key resource. Impressively, students greeted the training with such enthusiasm that they requested '*more homework*'! This led to the development of self-study exercises, posted on the organisation's Intranet site so students could download them as required. Course evaluations were collected after each session - these showed a very positive response to the training offered.

Although the courses were very popular, with growing waiting lists, uptake by staff not based in major centres, including nursing staff and donor carers was comparatively low. The needs of these staff were revisited and a wider range of courses was developed such as a specialist course on CINAHL for nurses and using of the organisation's 'new' Intranet portal - for locating official documents, personal contact information, organisational structures, using discussion forums etc. Many staff said they were unable to attend classroom sessions due to time and financial restrictions. As with many other NHS organisations there is also a general need to minimise travel and subsistence costs.

Developing web conference courses

Due to a very restricted financial environment, coupled with the distributed nature of staff across England an innovative method of course delivery was sought.

In 2005/6 a new suite of web conferencing software (GoToMeeting) was purchased by IT. All departments wishing to purchase a licence were able to have this software installed (appx. £250 per user). A licence was purchased for the Library Resource Programme, with the purpose of delivering training via this method. The department already had access to teleconferencing facilities via a BTMeetMe account. This needed to be used instead of the teleconferencing facility on GoToMeeting because this part of the licence has not currently been purchased by NBS IT.

Methods of promotion

Proformas for the range of new courses were written, with each course being mapped to KSF levels. Pre-requisites for attending courses were also detailed in the proformas, such as the need for students to register for an Athens account, Internet access or the downloading of course handbooks and literature from the Intranet site. This information was included in the Scientific and Technical Training prospectus and also posted on the Library Resource Programme website with a full list of planned dates. A promotional leaflet was also produced and posted on the Intranet site. The leaflet was distributed to every centre library, all learning representatives, all directors, STT trainers, team leaders etc. I was invited to give lectures at lunchtime sessions across England and to present to KSF Champions meetings. These also presented opportunities to tell staff about the courses and to ask them to tell others about these opportunities. The courses and dates are also being featured in the monthly Library Resource Programme newsletter – distributed widely across the organisation via email and in hard copy.

Experience in delivering web conference courses

In the new financial year, the teleconference/web courses commenced.

Some unanticipated technical difficulties were experienced during the first sessions - one member of staff 'attended' the course from home, using a dial-up connection which could not cope with the necessary speed and volume of information and disconnected the user. Following this, further pre-requisite instructions were added to proformas and communicated in promotions, telling staff that they must log onto the sessions from an NBS computer - which could be at their local work base. On a further session it was not possible 'hand over control' of the screen to a student during a session when hands-on experience was offered. The students coped well with these difficulties and their evaluations were still positive despite these problems.

Limitations

GoToMeeting is a very powerful tool and can be used successfully to deliver training to distributed users. There are, however, limitations: the trainer is unable to see students' reactions to particular elements of courses. At the commencement of sessions it is best to stress that students should ask questions. Remembering who is logged in, and asking students in turn to take control of the screen can help overcome this to a certain extent - and also offers guided hands-on experience for students.

This method of training delivery is not suitable for large group work - a maximum of 6 students is the limit which I allow per course, but this is being monitored as experience is gained. The logistics of running a session

for a larger group, including engagement with individual students becomes very difficult to manage

Other factors include the consideration that students are often at their work desks. This can lead to noise on the telephone line for all participants! – Some basic 'ground rules' should be worked out prior to undertaking this form of training and the trainer needs to manage the virtual environment more closely than a classroom environment, where certain environmental elements are generally accepted and controlled. Clear instructions and requirements should be given before the course commences.

Sessions should not be too long – a maximum of 2 hours, with a short break mid-way has been found to be most successful. It is difficult for students to maintain concentration beyond 2 hours, and the telephone pressed against an ear can become quite uncomfortable for very long periods. Longer sessions should allow students to get up from the desk or take a short comfort-stop. Managing this pro-actively ensures everyone is able to concentrate during teaching. Course plans should take this into account – with sessions being broken into smaller parts rather than trying to deliver a course which will last more than 2 hours.

As with classroom sessions, it is good practice to tell students at the start of the session what is expected and what will be covered, encourage questions and manage these elements at the start of teaching.
