CURRENT TOPIC

Telephone conferencing

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Meetings are a necessary part of our lives, but travelling to meetings is time consuming, tedious, and expensive. In the UK we have been rather slow to make full use of modern telecommunications technology. This short paper describes the experience of members of the British Paediatric Association (BPA) with teleconferencing.

How it works

Three way conference calls are possible with some domestic telephone contracts. For larger numbers of participants, British Telecom (BT) provide a conference call service. The date and time are arranged in advance as with any other meeting. Because no travel is involved, it is often much easier to find a mutually convenient time and evening conferences are more likely to be acceptable.

Details of the participants are notified to the BT coordinator in advance and, at the agreed time, each is called in turn. The chairperson is called last. Various additional options are available, such as voting, tape recording (using standard full size cassettes), translation, and interpreting. Electronic 'hand-raising' is possible and can be very useful in large conferences to enable management of question and answer sessions or voting. Using the telephone keypad, a participant who wishes to contribute or ask a question can signal this to the BT conference coordinator who is in constant communication with the chairperson.

Participants often find that a hands-free phone is an advantage, making it easier to handle papers, make notes, etc. If several people are together at one site, a specialised audioconference terminal such as BT's AC4600 is invaluable. This is similar to a hands-free telephone but with much improved loud-speaker and pickup facilities, enabling someone to join in a conversation over the telephone. They can hear those present at the meeting and be heard clearly themselves. Sound quality is good provided that people do not speak close to the microphones, which is unnecessary as the device is designed to pick up ordinary conversation from several feet away.

Conducting the conference

Teleconferencing, like chairing conventional meetings, requires careful preparation and planning, and there are some new skills to be

learnt. Preliminary planning is vital to establish the objectives of the meeting. This usually means that the chairperson must prepare a briefing paper which goes beyond the usual agenda and sets out the points that need to be considered and resolved. The result of this necessary discipline (which is equally valuable with conventional meetings) is often a shorter meeting and quicker resolution of the issues.

The chairperson needs to conduct a quick roll call as soon as the BT operator has notified him/her that all the participants are on the line and must be more careful than is usual in a face-to-face meeting about ensuring that each participant in turn has the chance to speak. This turns out to be easier than one expects, because people are very disciplined about not interrupting, knowing that there would always be an opportunity to comment before moving on to the next topic. The chairperson should ask for final comments after offering each individual in turn the chance to speak. A pleasing and unexpected observation is that participants are also more disciplined about what they say and resist the temptation to deviate from the issue or indulge in irrelevant gossip!

It is as difficult to take minutes during a teleconference as during a conventional meeting. There are two solutions: either an assistant takes notes during the conference or the tape recording facility is used. Transcription of the tape requires a machine able to play full size cassettes and adds to the cost. However, it provides a complete record and has the advantage that, if the transcript is provided to the chairperson on disk, an account of the meeting complete with direct quotes can easily be prepared as a further discussion document.

When to use it

Teleconferencing is unlikely to work well when brainstorming a major new topic or commencing a new working party, particularly when the participants do not know each other very well. In these situations, at least one face-to-face meeting is usually necessary. The group size is important. So far, experience shows that meetings of up to 16 people can be managed successfully. A meeting designed primarily to disseminate information could of course involve many more. Calls with up to 100 participants are becoming increasingly common in the commercial sector.

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Table 1 The three elements comprising teleconferencing costs

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- A small flat rate set-up (or booking) charge
 - A conference charge per minute, per participant for the duration of the conference call. (The charges vary according to whether you choose for your call to be 'attended' by a BT coordinator or 'unattended', with an automated password entry system. Charges also vary for 'dial-in' and 'dial-out' options. 'Dial-in' is where all the participants call in to a prearranged number, 'dial-out' is where BT calls out to everyone on your behalf)
 - The normal call charge, which is paid via the standard telephone bill if you 'dial-in' or which is charged on your BT conference call invoice if the 'dial-out' option is chosen
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With increasing experience and confidence, the indications for teleconferencing will doubtless increase, but already experience shows that in the following situations it is very valuable:

- When an individual wishes to make a particular point, report, submission, or expert contribution to a committee or working party but is not involved with the rest of the agenda;
- If a conference about one particular issue, particularly when it has arisen unexpectedly or a crisis has occurred, and no formal committee meeting is due for some time;
- For a regular team or committee meeting where there is very little new business to discuss or where it is legally necessary to convene solely in order to ratify actions or policies;
- For resolution of remaining issues in a project team or working party, for example amending or finalising a report.

Teleconferencing also has potential for teaching. Distance learning and training applications are emerging for both audio and video

conferencing. One BPA member reports that on a visit to Australia he used it effectively for a continuing education session covering the whole of Queensland.

What does it cost?

Teleconferencing is not cheap (see table 1). Nevertheless, the BPA experience to date shows that on average a teleconference probably costs between a third and a half of an equivalent meeting in London, based purely on the travel and catering costs for participants. If face-to-face meetings were in addition to be costed on the basis of the participants' time, the savings in the costs of travel time would of course be enormous.

In conclusion

With further experience and advancing technology, the possibilities of telecommunications will increase. Over the next few years, audio and videoconferencing, in combination with the creative use of fax and e-mail, will save a great many hours of expensive travel. These methods may also increase the scope for truly democratic discussion and debate within large organisations.

I thank BT Conference Call Centre and the anonymous referee for advice; Drs Keith Dodd and Harry Baumer, and Professor Euan Ross for helpful comments. I have no personal financial interest in telecommunications.

For further information on teleconferencing, contact BT on 0800 515 550: to book a conference call ring freephone 0800 778877.