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Is Virtual Conferencing Virtually the Same?

Editor

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Abstract: The article discusses the pros and cons of virtual conferencing and the optimizing of decision making in a security context.

Computer conferencing in the worlds of government and business is on the increase. Part of the increase is due to the globalization of operations and interests. Another part is due to the greater security risk inherent in globalization that may deter at least some participants from traveling to a meeting and that may lead to fewer trips. A third part seems to focus just on the convenience of saving time and money otherwise expended on travel.

The convenience alone might serve as an adequate rationale for increased computer conferencing. But this rationale—and the others—might still be suspect depending on whether there's a sacrifice in efficiency, effectiveness, satisfaction, and the like through non-face-to-face meetings.

In fact, a recent study by Thompson and Covert (2003) suggests that there might be cause for concern. The two researchers studied forty 4-person teams in either face-to-face or computer conferencing environments. The researchers' report computer conference participants having greater problems in maintaining mutual knowledge than participants in face-to-face meetings. Moreover, computer conference participants reported more confusion in discussions, less meeting satisfaction, more time in coming to a decision, and less contentment with meeting outcomes than their face-to-face counterparts.

All is not lost because Thompson and Covert also suggest that there are methods to attenuate the psychological sequelae of computer conferences. However, the efficacy of such methods needs to be cross-validated. Moreover, the still prevalent belief that computer conferences can yield consequences similar to face-to-face meetings can serve as a resistance to employing even well-validated methods—because there logically would be no perceived need for such methods.

A conclusion might be that the psychology of virtual conferencing presents a significant opportunity for researchers to help optimize decision making in matters affecting us all. (See Carletta, J., Anderson, A. H., & McEwan, R. (2000). The effects of multimedia communication technology on non-located teams: A case study. *Ergonomics*, 43, 1237-1251; Jonassen, D. H., & Kwon, H. I. (2001). Communication patterns in computer mediated versus face-to-face group problem solving. *Educational Technology Research & Development*, 49, 35-51; Rourke, L., & Anderson, T. (2002). Exploring social communication in computer conferencing. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, 13, 259-275; The political psychology of virtual reality: Scandinavian trail blazing. (July 18, 1997). *IBPP*, 2(12); Thompson, L. F., & Covert, M. D. (2003). Teamwork online: The effects of computer conferencing on perceived confusion, satisfaction and postdiscussion accuracy. *Group Dynamics*, 7, 135-151.) (Keywords: Computer Conferencing, Globalization, Security)