How Technology Will Revolutionize Meetings

New Forms of Data Visualization Promise To Make Meetings More Interactive and Productive

by Mark Lorion, TIBCO Spotfire

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Will Dilbert always be with us? The comic strip mocking cubicle culture turned 20 last year, but hasn't aged a day. That's because the fundamental unit of "knowledge work" hasn't changed much either – we still languish in meetings. They're where decisions great and small are made, where innovation happens, or doesn't happen, and where companies settle upon grand strategies.

But despite radical changes in corporate culture and structure, competitive pressures that didn't exist when the Berlin Wall fell, and the many billions invested in information technology and the Internet, most companies remain in the thrall of meetings. The rituals remain the same: questions are asked beforehand, data collected, reports generated, and, in due course, slides and spreadsheets are publicly presented. Then someone asks a question that can't be answered, and someone else responds "That's a good question; I'll get back to you."

Hours, days, weeks go by before the process repeats itself with another unanswerable query, and what is by now a vicious cycle continues. In the meantime, the original assumptions are often rendered obsolete by some shocking development or a rival's checkmate.

Although they fly in the face of two decades' worth of management wisdom, meetings continue to set the pace of corporate metabolisms. Not even the tools have changed – with Microsoft Office turning 20 in 2008. Like Dilbert, PowerPoint and Excel will seemingly be around forever.

As we head into 2011, the question begs: will advancements in business intelligence (BI) help eliminate the need for Dilbert-like meetings? Until today, traditional BI tools have been broadly used to support decision making in companies. These industrial-strength applications typically aggregate information in data warehouses or data marts to enable mining, online analytical processing, and similar techniques, which inevitably lead to stacks of reports that are invariably presented in meetings.

The problem with this approach is that reports are both static and stale and take IT (information technology teams) to modify, leading to decision-paralysis. Rather than sifting through 100 reports, line managers would prefer to have one meeting, in which they can ask 100 questions with all of the relevant people present and quickly come to a consensus.

However, in the last couple of years, BI tools have emerged to become much easier to use for the every day business user, more predictive, and incorporating more types of data that workers use to make decisions. These innovations have fundamentally changed how meetings are being conducted. Instead of Dilbert like meetings that languish in indecision, the coming year will see new BI tools being used to conduct more "dynamic meetings," where workers can collaborate and ask questions of the data in real time, exploring options together to come to a consensus.

Advocates of this the dynamic meeting will argue that while traditional BI is well-suited to long-term functions, such as budgeting, planning, and forecasting, the model is outdated when it comes to operations, where even the questions are unknown until frontline executives begin parsing the data. Early adopters include the oil and gas industry, which is constantly crunching geological data in its hunt for new wells, and financial players, such as hedge funds, who can never have enough data fast enough.

If traditional BI is the holdover from the computing environment of 20 years ago, then data visualization tools hint at the software needed to make dynamic meetings the standard – a BI platform with enough computing power to grapple with data in real time, rather than aggregated ahead of time, and an interface that borrows its cues from the vocabulary of touch screens, video games, and similarly intuitive ways of manipulating information.

The value of dynamic meetings is premised on the notion that an "information advantage" begets a competitive one. The

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ability to filter more data, more quickly, yields more insights and a faster reaction time. These incremental advantages then slowly accrete over time into leaner, more responsive organizations. In practice, the anti-Dilbert office is a workplace shorn of a traditional higher degree of transparency. Managers must be prepared to defend, explore, and consider options with a group free to roam through the supporting evidence, rather than simply dictate their agendas via PowerPoint.

The potential upside is more collaboration, more consensus, and, in theory, more accurate decisions. Certainly, the downside is the ever-present risk of culture shock. Younger, more aggressive analysts have been quick to adopt the dynamic meeting and its supporting software, as they were practically weaned on such screens.

Veteran managers who have honed their political skills to a fine point may have proved more resistant, but many concede that the demands of leadership and competition have forced them to get their hands dirty with the data.

So, do we need another meeting? With direct access to data in meeting, it's possible to answer new questions there and then, or test scenarios. In the modern corporate environment we are all busier than ever before, so when would that next meeting be? A week, two weeks? In the meantime the rest of the world and your competitors move forward – away from you – a position that no company can afford any longer.

About the Author

Mark Lorion joined TIBCO Software Inc.in 2007 as part of TIBCO's acquisition of Spotfire, Inc. In his current role, he is responsible for product marketing, field marketing, marketing communications and overall go to market strategies for the Spotfire product line at TIBCO. Mark joined Spotfire in 2004, working in various positions in product marketing. Prior to that, he served as director of product marketing at PeerDirect Corporation, where he helped relaunch the company following its acquisition by Progress Software, established partnerships with major software vendors and identified new market opportunities. Mark earned his MBA from the Olin Graduate School of Business at Babson College and a degree in Economics from Syracuse University.

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