



# Tangible value in a virtual world

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Professor Peter James  
Department of Environmental Science  
University of Bradford

## Key facts

- In 2008, conferencing eliminated 717,000 face-to-face BT meetings, removing the need for some 1.4 million return journeys and saving 53,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>
- In 2008, the financial advantage to BT of using its own conferencing products and services was some £180 million
- Of BT virtual meetings, 70 per cent last for less than one hour, while only one virtual meeting in 20 lasts for more than two hours
- Of BT people, 80 per cent state that conferencing is an essential aspect of their job, and 82 per cent report increased use of conferencing over the past two years

## University study provides the proof that conferencing makes BT a faster, more focused and environmentally sound organisation

### Independent evidence

It's not for nothing that BT ranked top in its sector in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index for the eighth successive year in 2008. Central to that success are two unarguable facts.

First, as one of the world's largest conferencing service providers – supplying two-thirds of FTSE 100 companies – BT resolutely practices what it preaches. In a recent independent study, Professor Peter James of the Department of Environmental Science at the University of Bradford<sup>1</sup> reaches this conclusion: “In 2008 the financial advantage to BT – in avoided travel and subsistence costs, and associated time savings – of using its own conferencing products and services was some £180 million. That finding is exclusive of less tangible benefits such as positive environmental effects, more effective decision-making, and better work life balance.”

Second, BT recognises the simple corporate truth that most of what's good for the environment also happens to be good for the bottom line. Donna Young, Head of Climate Change and Programme Development at BT, explains: “The communications sector will play an increasingly important role in delivering the low carbon economy. Conferencing is one solution that is already paying dividends, both financially and environmentally.”

This case study seeks to inspect the BT experience more closely, largely through the lens of the University of Bradford study. It also draws out the key learning points for other major organisations, irrespective of sector or geography.

### Newfound agility

It's important first to touch upon the necessary cultural shifts. Aaron McCormack, CEO of BT Conferencing, looks back: “The way that companies used to do business was inflexible and expensive – and that included BT. People constantly on the move between face-to-face meetings wasted time and money; and that travel had a cost to the environment. Furthermore, like all global businesses, BT needed to be a lot more agile and make decisions across time zones and geographies.”

The ubiquitous use of conferencing was crucial to achieving that agility: lending the freedom to make decisions on the basis of business need rather than organisational nicety; and also enabling the adoption of more collaborative ways of working right across the globe. That experience means BT knows a thing or two about making yesterday's barriers of time and distance simply vanish.

Testament to that is the fact that the University of Bradford study (which surveyed a statistically valid 10 per cent of the BT global workforce) calculates that conferencing eliminated 717,000 face-to-face BT meetings in 2008. In so doing, some 1.4 million return journeys – varying from around the corner to many thousands of miles – were avoided. As a direct result, BT saved 53,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> in 2008 (a net figure that takes account of the electricity used in the conferencing equipment itself).

Equally telling is that 70 per cent of BT people note that virtual meetings last for less than one hour, while only five per cent are said to last for more than two hours. Typically, people at five different global locations take part in each.

<sup>1</sup> May 2009: CONFERENCING AT BT – Results of a Survey on its Economic, Environmental, and Social Benefits

# Case study

## BT Conferencing

**“Conferencing and collaboration tools are providing BT with substantial business benefits, helping it to help the environment, and improving its people’s work life balance. We have the skills to show customers how to build robust conferencing programmes that will not only add to the bottom line but also improve their corporate image.”**

Aaron McCormack  
CEO  
BT Conferencing

“The Bradford report shows that nearly 75 per cent of those virtual meetings were said to have completely met their objectives,” adds Aaron McCormack. “A clear picture emerges of a company that’s using conferencing and collaboration tools to drive up the speed, focus, and quality of its decision-making processes.”

### Unified communications

That conferencing-led transformation has helped BT become a far more proactive organisation. In fact, its people cite conferencing as a critical success factor in areas as diverse as attracting and retaining the best people and improving time to market.

Aaron McCormack observes: “Today’s business graduates are used to using web conferencing, email, instant messaging, and so on – all at the same time. They expect such new media tools to be integrated and right there at their fingertips. We use conferencing and collaboration to keep our people and partners up-to-date with rapidly changing markets and services, without spending a fortune in time and travel. That’s truly critical for us in staying ahead of the game.”

### Offices worldwide

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Looking at the virtual technologies that are contributing to this remarkable story, within a four-week period 90 per cent of BT people reported using audioconferencing, two-thirds reported using web-supported conferencing, and five per cent reported using videoconferencing [for service definitions visit: [www.btconferencing.com](http://www.btconferencing.com)]. That variety enables BT to match the medium to the meeting – to optimise the chance of attaining its objectives – within a unified communications architecture. It’s not just about internal stuff either. BT is now using conferencing and unified communications to federate with key customers and suppliers.

In fact, as unified communications grows and develops it is playing an increasingly important role on the BT collaborative agenda. For example, integration with Microsoft Outlook means that virtual meetings can be organised in an instant without needing the intervention of secretaries and assistants. Increasing adoption of presence functionality flags the mode in which someone is operating and their preferred method of communication on a minute-to-minute basis.

Aaron McCormack brings that to life: “This means, for instance, that people can be brought into virtual meetings at a single click. Similarly an instant messaging exchange can be promptly escalated to an audioconference if circumstances dictate.”

### Flexible working

Conferencing and collaboration are key to the BT flexible working strategy that, among other things, encourages staff to work at home where operationally expedient. The full facilities of the BT unified communications architecture are extended to their residences. Some 14,500 BT people are now teleworkers, with thousands more working from home on an ad hoc basis.

Donna Young says: “Agile working, made possible through conferencing and other unified communications services has enabled us to cut our accommodation needs by some 48 per cent, which means reductions in both energy consumption and carbon emissions.” Reducing physical office space has yielded global savings of £100 million per annum for BT, with 42 per cent of that coming from London alone. One-off capital receipts from 4,000 building disposals were £500 million.

In fact, the University of Bradford study observes that 34 per cent of conference participants actually do so from home, while 47 per cent of the people surveyed note that conferencing has allowed them to work normally when prevented from reaching their destinations through transport disruption or otherwise – underlining the role of conferencing in the success of the BT flexible working programme.

### Behavioural change

So how right has BT got it so far? The University of Bradford study records that 80 per cent of BT people state that conferencing is an essential aspect of their job, and 82 per cent have increased conferencing usage over the course of the past two years (nearly half of those by a considerable amount).

In any organisation there will always be a substantial minority of people in jobs where conferencing is not a crucial requirement. For the rest, behavioural change is as much a critical factor as having the right technology, which is why internal communication programmes are so important. Every extra person who learns conferencing behaviours is money in the bank and more benefit to the planet. Donna Young adds: “Creating an organisational culture where individuals understand and embrace the principles of agile working is critical and that’s when employee engagement programmes really come into their own.”

BT is putting to good use its experience in finding ways to work with internal stakeholders to encourage the use of conferencing. Not only does it assist its customers to understand how to make savings by replacing face-to-face meetings with conferences, but also it provides specialised end user adoption and ongoing education and training programmes. These have helped numerous FTSE 100 companies introduce conferencing without additional pressure on internal resources.

Aaron McCormack concludes: “Conferencing and collaboration tools are providing BT with substantial business benefits, helping it to help the environment, and improving its people’s work life balance. We have the skills to show customers how to build robust conferencing programmes that will not only add to the bottom line but also improve their corporate image.”