

Web-Based Conferencing Tools for the Athletic Training Educator

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The options for web conferencing solutions are vast. In this column I will provide an overview of web conferencing, a synopsis of the most popular web conferencing tools, and a discussion of best practices for selecting and hosting your first web conference.

THE PROBLEM

A Clinical Education Coordinator from a small mid-western liberal arts institution is challenged with bringing together 15 approved clinical instructors (ACIs) from 10 clinical sites. The ACIs are spread over a 70 mile radius and have little time to travel to campus for the bi-annual recertification workshop and it is not feasible for the Clinical Education Coordinator to visit with the ACIs individually. The Clinical Education Coordinator must find a low-cost solution to meet with the ACIs or face being in non-compliance with their accrediting agency.

WEB-BASED CONFERENCING 101

Web-based conferencing tools are computer programs that allow the user to connect synchronously using either a web browser or standalone computer application. Users are able to meet via conference call using either a dial-in number or through voice-over-IP (VoIP). Video conference calls (presenter only or all attendees) are also an option when broadband Internet is available. Collaborative tools such as document sharing, white board, polling and desktop sharing are standard features. There are numerous free and fee-for-service web-based conferencing tools available to the athletic training educator to address the aforementioned problem. A review of the most popular web conferencing tools follows.

WEB-BASED CONFERENCING TOOLS

Dimdim (www.dimdim.com) is a browser-based web conferencing tool. Users access the web conference by directing their browser to a URL. There are four levels of service available ranging from free for 10 person meetings to \$65 per month for meetings up to 1000 users. Dimdim supports up to four video cameras. Dimdim's level of technical support and reliability increases with paid versions of the program. Dimdim works on Mac and PC.

Skype (www.skype.com) is a free popular instant messaging program, most known for high quality VoIP phone calls. To use Skype you must download an application to your computer. Most people use it for instant text messaging and low cost phone calls; however, Skype also can function as a web conferencing tool. To do so, select the Share Selection or Share Full Screen option from the tool bar. This will allow you to share documents with your attendees directly from your desktop. The advantage of Skype over other products is its ease of use. In less than 5 clicks of the mouse you can launch a meeting with up to 25 users. Skype works on Mac and PC.

Yugma (www.yugma.com) is a web conferencing solution that is available in free and paid versions. In order to use Yugma, you must download and install an application to your computer. Yugma works on Mac and PC. The free version of the program allows you to conference with up to 25 users. Paid versions of the program are scalable up to 500 users.

ooVoo (www.oovoo.com) is an excellent alternative if you are interested in using video web conferencing. ooVoo's free version supports 2-way video conferencing, whereas the paid options

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support up to 6-way video conferencing. To run ooVoo you must download and install an application on your computer. ooVoo automatically recognizes your webcam upon launching the application.

GoToMeeting (www.gotomeeting.com) is a popular fee for service web conferencing tool. GoToMeeting requires that you download and install an application to your computer. Video conferencing is not currently available for GoToMeeting. Attendees are able to access audio by dialing into a conference call number or may use VoIP. GoToMeeting supports up to 1000 users. Unfortunately, GoToMeeting does not offer a free version; however, there is a fully functional 30-day trial available. If archiving your web conference is a required feature GoToMeeting is the best choice. GoToMeeting works on Mac and PC.

BEST PRACTICES FOR WEB BASED CONFERENCING TOOLS

- ▶ Insist that each attendee complete the setup process at least 48 hours in advance. This will give you at least 48 hours to resolve any technical issues.
- ▶ Disseminate all documents that will be used during the web conference ahead of time.
- ▶ If attendance is being recorded, try to acknowledge each attendee by asking them to raise a virtual hand during the meeting.
- ▶ Practice makes perfect. Do not wait until the day of the conference call to try out a new system. Practice using all of the tools that you will use during the web conferencing ahead of time.
- ▶ Open the web conference at least 30 minutes prior to the time you would like to start your conference. This will give you plenty of time to resolve any last minute technical issues.
- ▶ When all else fails revert to using the audio conference call only.
- ▶ Archive your meeting for playback.
- ▶ For the fee-for-service web conferencing tools, use the free trial for at least 30 days prior to making your final decision.

OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

There are many web conferencing solutions available on the market today. In order to determine which solution will work best for you, consider the following questions.

- ▶ Do you want to record/archive your meeting?
- ▶ Do you have a budget?
- ▶ Do you want to offer toll-free audio?
- ▶ Do you want to use video conferencing?
- ▶ Do you sharing documents?
- ▶ Do you want interaction on screen
- ▶ Are your attendees computer savvy?
- ▶ Do you want to collaborate in real time on a document?
- ▶ Are your users allowed to install software on their computer?

Answering these questions will help you determine which web conferencing solution is right for you. I strongly recommend you try out at least three of the applications prior to making your final decision.