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# PROMISING PRACTICES IN STATE SURVEY AGENCIES

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## *Issue Brief: Interactive Technology for Trainings and Meetings*

### **Introduction**

The use of interactive technologies to conduct meetings and trainings across multiple locations commands a growing presence in industry and education as organizations seek to improve communication and collaboration among dispersed workers. In today's economic climate, organizations are compelled to establish systems to improve communications and teamwork with reduced budgets and constrained resources (1). Business meetings and in-person employee training programs, long the hallmark of traditional business communication, are costly and time-intensive, fueling the search for technology-driven alternatives. Expensive business travel for meetings and staff development is often the first casualty of budget cuts. The emergence of the Internet and the maturation of other technologies, such as videoconferencing, have expanded the availability and affordability of technology and present a viable alternative to usual practices. Web conference users were projected to increase to 107 million worldwide users in 2005, up from 51 million users in 2002 (2). Distance education by the Internet, CD-ROM, or video enjoys widespread acceptance by training managers and is supported by a large body of literature showing strong results for learning and cost savings (3,4). Interactive technology also is a key support for businesses that use teleworking as a method to recruit and retain talented staff.

Survey agencies, given their intense demands for ongoing staff training and the dispersion of the surveyor workforce, offer an ideal environment for the application of technical approaches to employee training and meetings. This report describes the use of interactive technologies for meetings and trainings at the state survey agencies in New York, Virginia, and Wisconsin. The information presented is based on interviews

### **Glossary**

***Interactive Technology:*** Systems that allow users in different physical locations to interact.

***Webcast:*** Use of the Web to deliver live or delayed versions of sound or video broadcasts (5).

***Web Conferencing:*** The on-line complement to the common conference call. Participants log in to a restricted Web site, where they can view slide presentations, send text messages to others in the meeting, and work together on documents and spreadsheets. Some services also offer on-line white boards, where the presenter can draw diagrams as well as the ability to conduct surveys of conference participants and tally the results (6).

***Videoconferencing:*** Communication across long distances with video and audio contact that may also include graphics and data exchange (7).

***Rich Media:*** The intersection of audio-, data-, and video-related technologies and services (8).

***Streaming Media:*** Technology that allows real time or on-demand delivery of audio, video, and multimedia. Digital media (video, voice, data) is received in a simultaneous, continuous stream (7).

with agency staff and review of documentation supporting the interactive technology programs.

### **Summary of State Examples**

The key features of the three interactive technology programs, their impact, and lessons learned from the agencies' experience are summarized in this section. Detailed information for each state's program is presented in state-specific descriptions.

### ***Key Features***

The programs utilized in the three featured states differ in their duration, type of technology, and scope. New York's videoconferencing efforts have been underway for four years, while the programs in Wisconsin and Virginia have been in

place for about one year. Significant differences in the technology utilized in the three agencies reflect variations in investment, both in terms of required equipment purchases and necessary IT support. The Virginia and Wisconsin programs utilize state-of-the-art technology and are Internet based, while in New York the agency has been able to meet educational objectives with a less expensive technology requiring only telephone connections. Videoconferencing is viable for New York because all of their surveyors travel to a regional office on a regular basis. Because surveyors in Wisconsin and Virginia telework, Webcasts that deliver training directly to a home or multiple health department offices better serve the needs of these agencies. All three of the agencies leveraged their existing IT infrastructure, accessed grant funds for equipment, and offer programs for live and on-demand viewing. In addition to utilizing interactive technology programs for training purposes, Virginia currently uses the technology for meetings, and Wisconsin plans to initiate this use in the fall of 2006. In Virginia and Wisconsin, agency staff develop and present training sessions, while the New York agency contracts with the State University of New York to coordinate their program and recruit outside consultants as speakers.

The need to provide frequent, timely, and cost-effective training for geographically dispersed surveyors drove the decisions of the three agencies to invest in interactive technology approaches. With extensive telework programs in Virginia and Wisconsin and surveyors based in multiple regional offices in New York, all three agencies sought to reduce the time and costs associated with staff traveling to central physical locations for training programs. Wisconsin surveyors access the interactive Web-based training sessions directly from their home offices, while Virginia's surveyors travel to the closest health department office for viewing the training programs. New York surveyors participate in training videoconferences from the regional office in which they are based.

### ***Impact***

Staff at all three agencies report significant cost savings due to the use of technology-based training approaches. Agency staff indicate that once the initial equipment investments are made, cost per training session can be relatively modest, particularly when compared to resources expended under the past training model to support surveyor travel and the indirect cost of lost productivity due to travel time. As a result of the reduction in costs per training session, the agencies have been able to increase the overall number of training sessions provided and strengthen the consistency of information received by surveyors across all regions of the state. In all three agencies, surveyors have provided positive feedback regarding training sessions and meetings conducted via interactive technology. Although the loss of face-to-face interaction has required adjustment for some surveyors and presenters, this issue appears to be outweighed by the advantages of convenience, reduced travel, greater frequency of training, and cost savings.

### ***Lessons Learned***

Agency staff report that presenters may require an adjustment period to master teaching utilizing the new technology, especially as they adapt to and learn to capitalize on the strengths and attributes of unfamiliar media. The absence of a live audience for trainers is a notable change and adjustment. A certain amount of trial and error is reported as trainers become accustomed to the technology and gain confidence to explore the range of options it offers, especially features such as on-line polling and question-and-answer sessions that expand the amount of interaction between presenters and viewers. Although staff at all three agencies encountered technical challenges as they adapted to the new technology, they were able to quickly resolve problems and develop technical competency within their existing IT capabilities.

### ***Conclusion***

Agency staff are enthusiastic about the integration of interactive technology for conducting meetings and trainings, as a method to meet the challenge of providing timely,

consistent, and frequent training with limited resources. The agencies selected technology that has yielded financial savings and allowed improvement and expansion of their prior training capacity. The range of available technical options permits each agency to select technology based on their unique agency

features, needs, and resources. Staff from the three agencies agree that the investment in interactive technology programs has resulted in immediate and projected long-term benefits in terms of cost savings and improving or maintaining staff development and education.

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*This document is part of an issue brief on the use of interactive technology for trainings and meetings in state survey agencies. The issue brief is one of a series by the Division of Health Care Policy and Research, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, for the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) highlighting promising practices in state survey agencies. The entire series is available online at CMS' Website, <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/SurvCertPromPractProj>. The issue briefs are intended to share information about practices used in state survey agencies and are not an endorsement of any practice.*