

The SeyboldSM REPORT

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GDSS: The Future of Online Meetings and True Digital Collaboration?

BY RON ROSKIEWICZ

Just about everyone doing business today has had some experience with Web conferencing. In most cases, the information is pushed at participants in the form of a product demonstration, training session or PowerPoint slideshow. The return for the typical buy-as-you-go Web conferencing product is well worth the investment. But ultimately, the one-to-many approach only hints at what might be possible if a true digital replacement for meeting face to face could be emulated digitally, using online tools and media.

As more and more competitors enter the Web conferencing market, many of them are bringing along their own functional twist and marketing spin to the virtual meeting. In the process, the lines between conferencing and collaboration are deliberately being blurred. For the purpose of this article, collaboration refers to a rich interactive relationship similar to the type we experience while brainstorming. The tools we use might be the same as those provided by a typical Web conferencing suite, but the participants are involved in real time. In a broader sense, collaboration can indicate more indirect sharing of ideas and materials, and for the most part, existing tools have solved that need over the past few years.

Of the many online collaboration variations available, perhaps the most interesting is the one identified by the acronym GDSS (group decision support system). The objective here is to create a system with enough functionality and structure to overcome the problems we face with most meetings without simply amplifying those issues with an Internet megaphone. GDSS represents a collection of modules that together provide a means to integrate computer power into our attempt to identify, collect, organize and interpret the thoughts of the most important human resource each company has: its employees. Whether or not this is the ultimate solution is irrelevant at this point. It clearly is an order of magnitude more focused in its objective of bringing order and resolution to online meetings than generic communications tools, such as instant messaging and e-mail, which are part of the Web conferencing approach.

The list of developers entering the GDSS field is growing (and is provided below). The focus of this article is on GroupSystem's ThinkTank, a leading example of this type of software and one that grew out of a

research collaboration between the University of Arizona and IBM. Before reviewing ThinkTank, let's analyze the real issues at stake and why Web conferencing and current collaboration tools are not serving an obvious need.

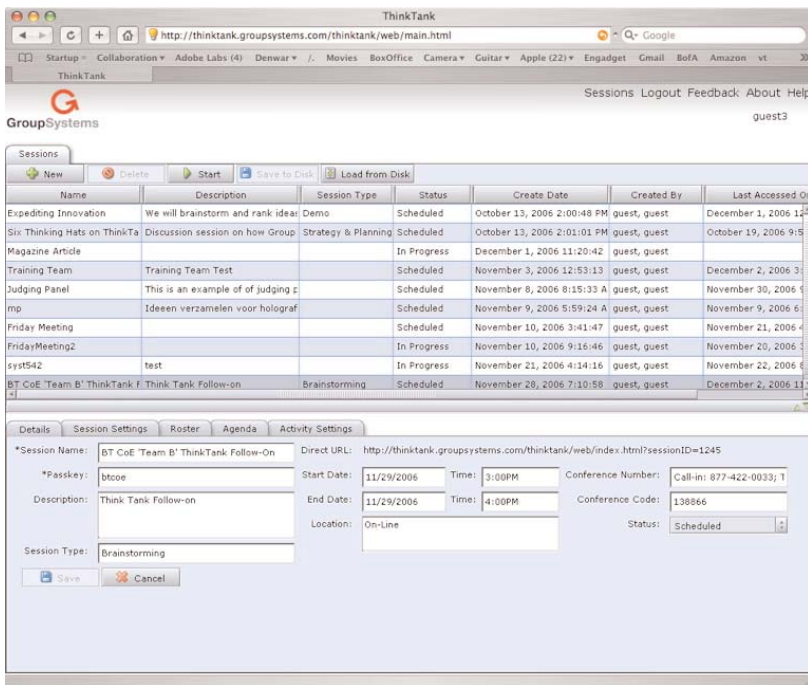
Why Good Meetings Go Bad

We've all attended meetings that wandered aimlessly, without any clear objective or stated agenda beyond a dominant alpha male or female evangelizing a point of

The objective here is to create a system with enough functionality and structure to overcome the problems we face with most meetings without simply amplifying those issues with an Internet megaphone.

view. It's no wonder many meetings end unresolved. Even in meetings where a large volume of data is disseminated, the group might be unable to mold it into useful information or better yet, knowledge.

Unfortunately, the blame is usually misplaced. People acquire a reputation for holding bad meetings, which affects the success of their projects. Shy but knowledgeable team members defer to more socially savvy but sometimes unprepared colleagues. Bad meetings can poison a team's morale and sabotage a project. Meetings are so important for distributing information to stakeholders that bad meetings can delay a product's release and result in financial harm.



List of all sessions and session details available to the authorized user.

The answer to bad meetings might be to bring structure, objective leadership and computing power to what in many cases are loosely organized, politically motivated and hybrid (analog and digital) processes. As Web conferencing moves to Web-based collaboration, it will become clear that the more structure that's incorporated into the virtual meeting, the more discipline we can bring to the interactivity and the more efficient the process will become.

Raising the Value of Collaboration Sessions to Intellectual Property

Once we bring structure and form to virtual sessions, the next step is to analyze, distribute and store the results. By this I mean that collaboration sessions are part of a company's intellectual property. IP is linked to the project that is the focus of the meeting. The ability to store, manage, search and archive session logs inevitably follows. The first value of searchable sessions might be recourse: the need to back up an

Basic Brainstorming panel.



assertion with proof that approval was given during the meeting. This might be necessary in review and approval sessions where the OK was given for a widget design.

In cases where the outcome of the meeting is a survey or poll, the results might be a report that is stored, retrievable and distributed to key players. In other cases, engineers could view a training session, product designers could review the proceedings to double-check their assumptions, or senior staff could check to see that all is well with the working group without actually attending the meeting directly.

Elevating session proceedings to intellectual property will lead to efficient ways to store, manage and retrieve the information. Like all other valuable digital assets, session proceedings will be candidates for storage in databases such as digital asset management systems. The same is true for all associated materials, such as Powerpoint slideshows. Project- and session-related metadata will help provide a way to access this data.

Pure digital meetings conducted with structure and discipline can provide a fluid and productive way to disperse information and reach consensus on important decisions.

The bottom line is that meetings, whether in-person or virtual, represent an investment in time and money. Unstructured and undisciplined meetings waste valuable human resources. Virtual meetings don't in and of themselves correct bad meeting and, in fact, might exacerbate them. Pure digital meetings conducted with structure and discipline can provide a fluid and productive way to disperse information and reach consensus on important decisions. Such meetings also provide a very important medium for capturing this information and controlling its use as a dynamic aspect of a company's intellectual property.

Elements of GDSS: Brainstorm, Organize, Prioritize

In the GDSS system, browser-based GDSS software is typically paired with Web-conferencing software, adding decision-making functionality to the interactivity functions available with Web conferencing. Web conferencing software requires some discipline with a moderator/presenter running the meeting and controlling the direction. With Web conferencing, however, only the free-form instant messaging is captured and there are no tools for decision making and reporting.

I consider the implementation of a GDSS system similar to instituting a Six Sigma or project management function in a workgroup. All of them involve the acceptance of best practices by each participant, some form of structure in the use of templates and some level of social engineering by enforcing a process. In the case of GDSS, the lead is the Facilitator, which acts as the keeper of the official rule book controlling the proceedings.

Using a GDSS system does not mean that all meetings have to follow the same protocol. That, too, would be a waste of time and resources. Many small- and midsize meetings work best as ad hoc gatherings, often in preparation for the main event. The overhead GDSS adds might be too much for such meetings and could detract from their free-form nature. Understanding the GDSS approach certainly helps, even in small meetings as the form and best practices take root in a company. Those in attendance become more aware of when a meeting loses focus and better appreciate the need to reach some form of consensus with take-away items for further work.

GDSS: Structure and System

There are two main environments in ThinkTank. The first is the Sessions area, where lists of saved and planned sessions are listed and summarized (Top left).

This is where stored sessions can be reviewed, session details defined and permissions assigned.

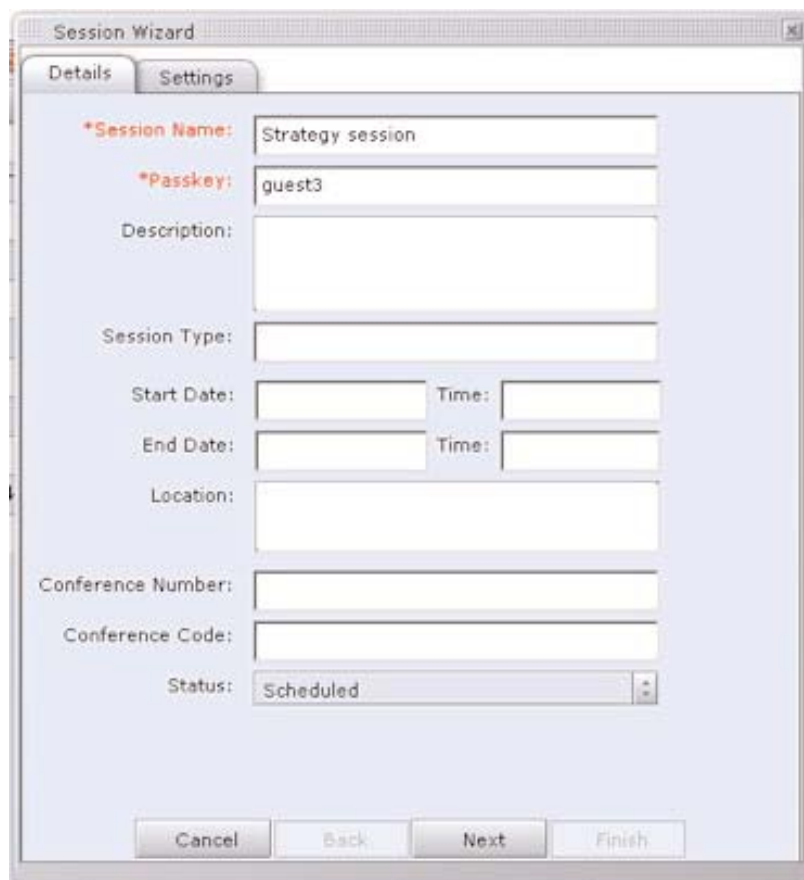
The second area is for interacting in a session.

This is where the brainstorming, idea sorting and voting takes place. For the session leader this is also where results are captured, assembled into reports and exported for use in Word, Excel or within an HTML-capable browser.

GDSS in Use: Preplanning

Defining the objectives and deliverables is a key step since it will determine the agenda and the list of attendees. GroupSystems calls this mapping the processes to activities. This essentially means setting up the process conditions so that the intended output — a decision about a product’s features, for example — will be the outcome of the meeting. In ThinkTank, the agenda is an important element and as such can be a simple path to a projected goal or a more granularly defined set of topics that themselves reflect a larger, more complicated project. ThinkTank provides a wizard for building an agenda, and all of the tools necessary for setting up a meeting are available in the Session environment. (see images on the right and at the top of page 16)

One outcome of collaborative meetings that is often overlooked is team building among stakeholders. Mindful of this, GroupSystems adheres to management expert Michael Tushman’s model that recognizes five states in the process of team building:



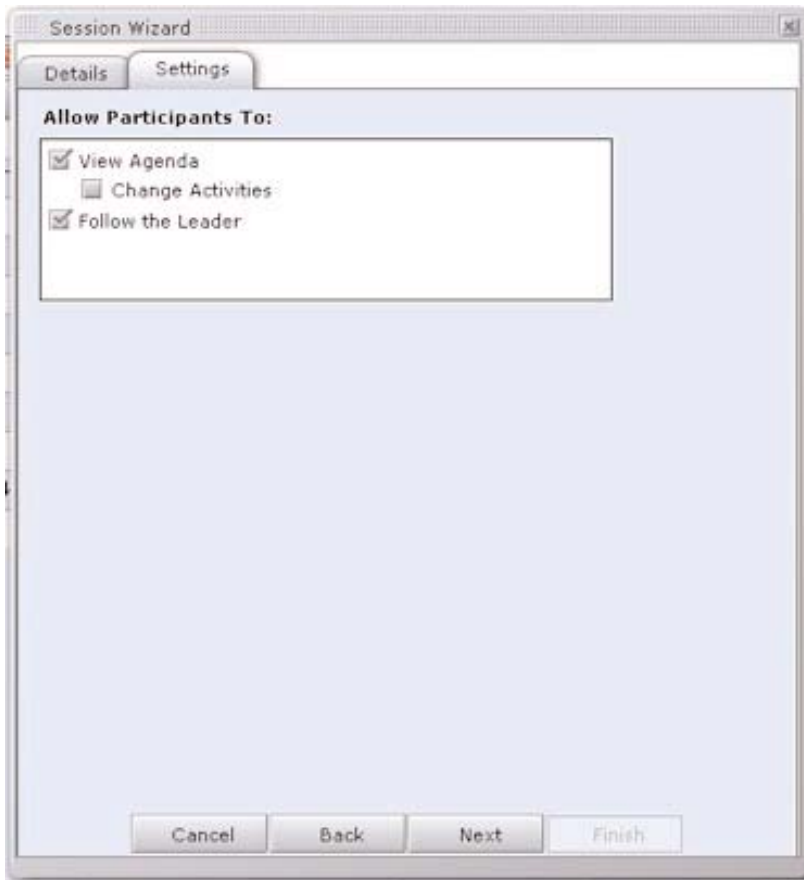
The first panel used to define a session agenda.

- **Forming.** ThinkTank is a tool that can assist a group headed toward a clearly defined goal by helping maintain the path and developing the clear definition.
- **Storming.** ThinkTank provides the structure of the process and defines the roles of the participants.
- **Norming.** Everyone is kept on track by the nature of the process.
- **Performing.** Because ThinkTank allows simultaneous entry from participants and participant anonymity, sessions are more fluid and productive.
- **Adjourning.** There is a lot of flexibility on how the meeting is resolved. The range of deliverables range from a short opinion survey to a complete record of the session.

ThinkTank provides a lot of options for setting up a session. Users have access to previous related sessions through the dashboard they face when they are in

Human psychology is a very important element of the foundation of ThinkTank and it infuses every menu item and environment.

ThinkTank and sessions can be exported to disk, where they are saved in GroupSystem’s .gsmf format (a variant of .XML).



Participant preferences included with agenda.

Users involved in a ThinkTank session rely on privileges assigned by the administrator for access to different areas in the application. The administrator also determines what information they can view.

Depending on the objectives of the meeting, it is sometimes better to keep the group focused on the presentation at hand and on a linear path to the meeting's objectives. Once these are defined, the agenda is set and an invitation can be sent out to all guests. The invitation can include location, other participants, the agenda and a link to the meeting.

Meeting Leader dashboard for managing voting, categorization, reporting and the overall management of data.

GDSS In Use: Brainstorm. Human psychology is a very important element of the foundation of ThinkTank and it infuses every menu item and environment. Web conferencing tools allow participants to interact and present their points of view. Most participants are

connected not just through the online view, but also through an audio conference call. The video conference is a less common alternative way to communicate in this scenario.

Brainstorming involves a combination of presenting ideas and entering them into the record of the proceeding. After these notes are added to the Ideas panel, they will be categorized as supporting information in the categories.

GDSS in Use

The session leader can see the Leader Toolbar, which includes Brainstorm, Organize, Comment, Report and Transfer Data. Brainstorm, Organize and Comment are available to participants if the session leader gives them the permission to access them. Only the leader can generate reports for the session or transfer data to disk, to an existing activity or to a new activity.

How and when categories are determined can also be set by the administrator. Although the ability to add, delete, edit, reorder and move can be assigned to all members, it's not always beneficial to the objectives of the meeting. This is also true of whether or not participants can manipulate ballot items and comments.

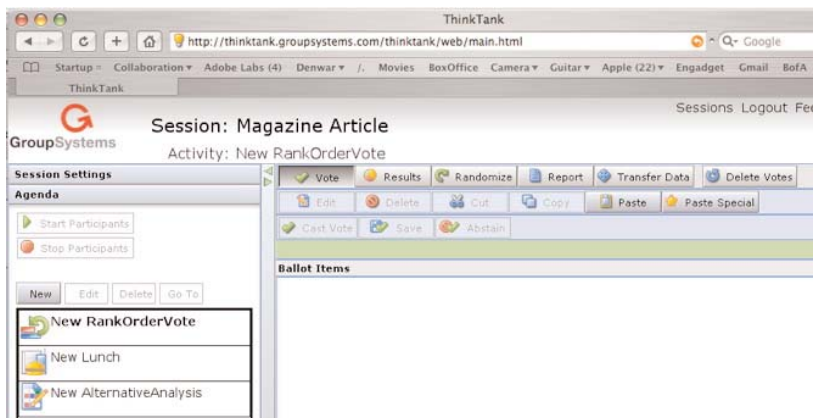
The dashboard includes the Categorizer when the program is in Organizer mode. There are three distinct Categorizer modes: Brainstorm, Organize and Comment. In Brainstorming, which is the default view, ideas are contributed simultaneously and anonymously on a topic defined by the session leader. The brainstorming activity is much like a group outlining session. Depending on the permissions allowed by the administrator, the ability to place, indent and out-dent an idea in Categorizer is inherently a group activity.

In Categorizer: Organize mode virtual "buckets" for depositing ideas are established and users can, if given permission, deposit ideas into one or more of the buckets. Since it's expected that the group will identify more ideas than are needed, the application provides the leader with voting tools to help the group narrow down the list. (bottom left)

In Categorizer: Comment Categorizer displays Categorizer, Ideas and Comments. The Comment mode includes all comments attached to an idea during the session. Unread comments are displayed in bold.

GDSS In Use — Prioritize: ThinkTank is extremely flexible in how much control the leader has over the session and how much control participants have over the organization and categorization of ideas. As ideas are defined and added to the Brainstorming panel, selected users can prioritize them and organize them into the Category buckets they decide. (top, page 17) If you need to narrow down a list, cast a ballot. If you need more information from another session, open that session, review the material and act. The leader has this kind of control throughout the session.

Narrowing the field from an overabundance of good ideas can be done by voting. Criteria for voting



can be any one of six distinct types from a sliding scale (middle, page 17) to a simple yes or no. Even the sliding scale can be set for custom high and low values. The facilitator decides which method to use. It's even possible to abstain from a vote. And as mentioned earlier, all votes are anonymous. Once the votes are cast they can be viewed in a number of ways. Options include: Score, Voting spread, Total, Average and Standard Deviation. It's up to the leader to decide

Few other meeting solutions, from printable white boards to interactive Web conferences, offer the immediacy and accuracy of ThinkTank's Reporting function.

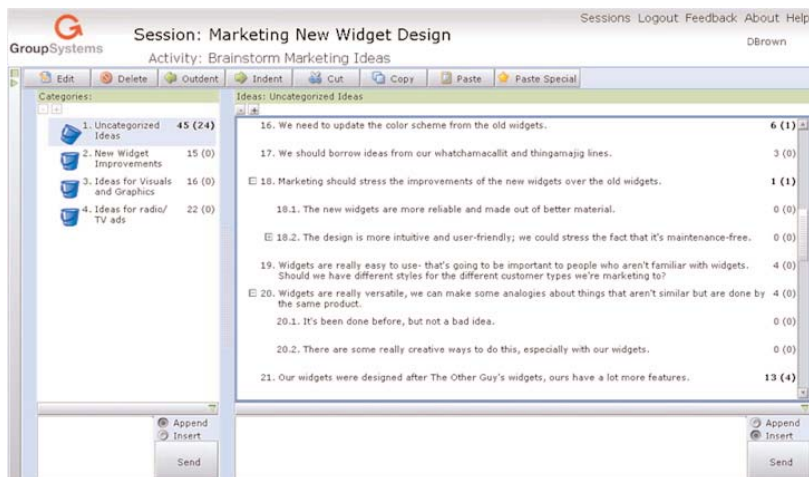
which voting method is the most appropriate and revealing for the issue voted on. (bottom, page 17)

GDSS Reports

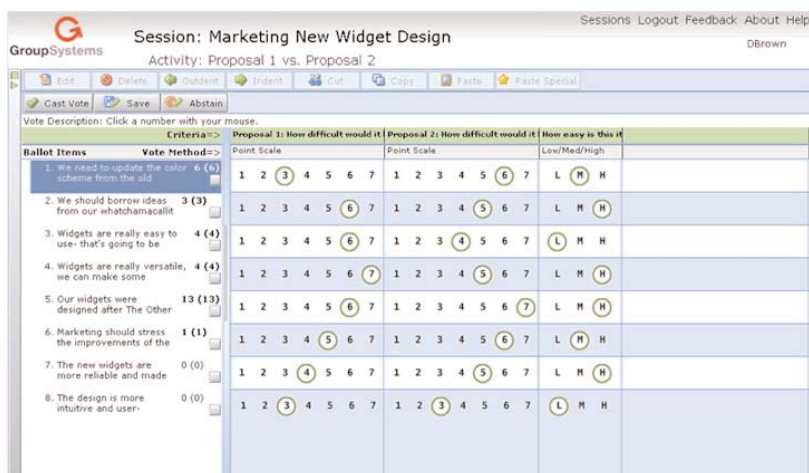
Perhaps the best way to capture the results of a meeting and prolong the positive experience is by distributing reports of the proceedings at the end, when action items have been determined and a consensus has been reached. Few other meeting solutions, from printable white boards to interactive Web conferences, offer the immediacy and accuracy of ThinkTank's Reporting function. In ThinkTank there are a few ways to distribute this information. Once it's been decided what information to include in the reports, the Wizard offers the choice of Microsoft Word and Excel format, or HTML for browsers that support it. Remote participants can feel like part of the activities by immediately getting an e-mail report or viewing the report online from their browser. Any of these reports is much better than simply receiving a memo at a later time filled with paraphrased notes and interpreted results. The sense of inclusion in the ThinkTank process is strong and team and project are for it.

Conclusion

The Web conferencing industry is undergoing a period of transition as it moves from a generic mechanism for pushing information out from one to many to a mechanism for the interaction of many to many and to a more application-specific focus. A few clues as to the eventual shape of mechanisms for collaboration that will emerge at the end of this transition are coming into focus. For one, the pricing is not the answer nor is the ubiquity of video conferencing. Users are quite satisfied that it seems to leave bandwidth-hogging video out of the equation — especially those remote users attending meetings in pjs. **TSR**



Dragging Uncategorized Ideas into logical buckets (Categories) is an important sorting activity.



Point type voting ballot.

Bar graph view of voting results.

