INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

Future Directions of the Conferencing and Collaboration Field

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the authors discuss fifteen semi-structured interviews carried out in 2010 with international industry experts and thought leaders within the conferencing and collaboration (C&C) field. The interviews focused on 5, 10, and 15-year time frames, and sought to elicit predictions on the components and services of future C&C platforms, as well as organisational issues such as the likely impacts on business value chains. The authors performed Affinity Diagramming / KJ Analysis in order to assess common themes and impose structure on the information gathered in the interviews. Themes included ease of use, improved presence/social context, formalised social networking capabilities, virtual worlds, remote interactive tools, meta-knowledge / context capture, identity and trust, and key barriers to C&C uptake across organisations. Pre-conditions for maturation of the field include the emergence of interoperability and standards, and the development of corporate education policies.

Keywords: 3D Worlds, Audio, Cloud Computing, Collaboration, Conferencing, CVE, Teleconferencing, Virtual Meetings

INTRODUCTION

This paper emanates from a series of fifteen intensive one to one interviews with conferencing and collaboration industry experts and influential thought leaders across business, education and scientific sectors. A range of issues related to the future directions of the conferencing and collaboration (C&C) field were raised, including technical, social, organisational and educational.

Our research acts as a forecast into the short and long term directions for the C&C field as predicted by current practitioners and users. It compiles information from open-ended interviews, which had no initial fixed agenda: rather than providing a set of pre-designed questions to interviewees, we merely provided high-level topics to address. We sought to avoid pre-determining or directing themes or potential outcomes. These interviews have led to the compilation of key concepts, ideas and requirements that may not have been identified if there were a more formal interview process used.

C&C is a rapidly evolving field, stemming ultimately from developments in groupware...
and the academic field of computer-supported co-operative work (CSCW) in the 1980s and 1990s. We begin our paper by briefly summarising the roots of modern C&C, as well as appraising the key platforms, technologies and businesses in this space today.

Origins

Today Conferencing and Collaboration is a generally accepted term referring to the systems that enable communication between parties located in multiple locations. Its theoretical and technical origins can be traced to the Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) developments of some 20 years ago. In a summary paper published in 1994, Grudin remarks that “CSCW started as an effort by technologists to learn from economists, social psychologists, anthropologists, organizational theorists, educators, and anyone else who could shed light on group activity” (p. 19). During the early 90s, groupware emerged and was seen as an able technology for CSCW.

The potential for Internet technologies to support the goals of CSCW was identified by the mid-90s: an in-depth technical evaluation of the Internet “as a technology for enabling development of more effective CSCW systems” is provided by Bentley et. al. (1997). Of specific note in this paper was the potential harnessing of the Web’s client-server architecture to act as a key enabling technology. At this time, stage-changing technologies receiving considerable attention included Java applets, which were supported by all major browsers by that time.

As CSCW evolved, the term Group Decision-Support Systems (GDSS) began to emerge. According to Palmer et. al. (1994), “a natural extension [of CSCW] involves Group Decision-Support Systems (GDSS) that can assist multiple groups working in different places at different times” (p. 1). The GDSS approach supports both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration of multiple groups and incorporates both WYSIWIS (what you see is what I see) and WYSINWIS (what you see is not what I see) presentation modes. In GDSS, the emphasis is not just on CSCW concepts, but also on the decision-making requirements of dispersed groups.

Stemming from interviews of 100 early-adopting organisations, Wheeler et al. (1999) produced a report on the uses, advantages and disadvantages of Web-based groupware. A key message from this research related not only to geographically dispersed teams but also to face-to-face teams: “the implication for researchers is to move beyond the study of just face-to-face teams or just distributed teams to include research of teams that work both face-to-face and distributed” (p. 9). The Wheeler et al. (1999) Groupware Framework, introduced in this paper, is an important model in the analysis of the pioneering technologies that have formed the bedrock of the C&C technologies of today.

Goossenaerts et al. (2007) provide an insight into how GDSS may be applied in an engineering context by analysing “problems of cooperative engineering as well as methods and tools for the virtual engineering of extended products” (p. 1). Goossenaerts et al. (2007) provide a deep insight into the issues in collaborative engineering at both intercompany and partner levels. They state that “the next step will be systematic, networked engineering approaches that link the expertise and knowledge of past engineering projects with new engineering tasks across interdepartmental and intercompany boundaries” (p. 15). On a similar theme, Ponti (2010) discusses interorganisational research using virtual environments, and provides a current and topical discussion on C&C environments specifically from a socio-technical aspect. Ponti states that “collaboration is not necessarily natural and straightforward but is likely to raise personal, political and professional challenges, and to put at stake identities and interests of some of the participants” (p. 33). Ponti’s work relates to the design of virtual research environments (VRE) and identifies five main socio-technical implications for the design of a VRE. It can be expected that these implications will have an ever-increasing influence on the future directions of the C&C field.
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