



online

review

Same as it ever was:

WebEx Training Center excels

by Barbara Fillicaro and Helen Gallagher

➤ *WebEx Training Center, online, 2004, Webex Communications, Inc. (877-509-3239, www.webex.com), \$4,000 set-up fee, \$225 per seat per month.*

WebEx was the upstart among virtual classroom companies. In the past seven years, it came from nowhere to profitability, the aspiration of all companies and the achievement of very few e-learning enterprises. The trajectory is more in keeping with technology companies during those glorious bubble years. WebEx has succeeded by ignoring conventional wisdom. It offers no installable software, but it does maintain a private network for transmitting meetings and training. It makes a living from a pure hosted solution and boasts the largest share of the online meeting and web conferencing service market. It is also a leading contender in the virtual classroom market.

We can't call the company an upstart anymore. It is a market leader. The interesting evolution in this market is the brutal price competition in the meeting market. A multitude of smaller providers has flooded the meeting market with low-cost solutions, putting pressure on the larger companies to stay competitive. It is no wonder that larger competitors have put an increasing emphasis on the training market, where margins are better.

Products

WebEx Communications, Inc., has built an online classroom service, the WebEx Training Center. It allows users to share presentations, documents, applications, and streaming video and communicate using voice and video, using the Windows, Macintosh, Solaris, HP-UX 11.3, Linux, and Pocket PC operating systems, all through a standard web browser. (Some features are supported only for the Windows platform.) A "network-based service," WebEx Training Center targets corporate customers who desire live training and collaboration events

over the Internet without the expense of building an internal supporting infrastructure.

The company's system architecture consists of three components: WebEx MediaTone Network, WebEx MediaTone Platform, and WebEx Interactive Communications Services.

The proprietary MediaTone technology allows WebEx to manage complex media, deliver advanced communications, support a range of devices and platforms, and provide a high level of performance. WebEx provides carrier-class services using its private global network specifically designed for live web communications.

WebEx Meeting Center provides browser-based virtual meetings, typically for ad hoc or small collaborative meetings. It has a full range of capabilities, similar to, but more limited than, WebEx Training Center, as you can see in our separate review.

WebEx supports the entire range of data, voice, and video communications to create an online environment that aspires to "the full spontaneity and productivity of face-to-face meetings." Its private network and bundle of other technologies has boosted WebEx's performance under real-world conditions. Everyone has heard the stories of virtual meetings and classes that have been scuttled by network or technology glitches. WebEx does not have a bullet-proof suite, but they have sturdy body armor that performs well under real-world conditions.

Training Center

Research shows delivery is the most expensive element of providing training. A full 70% to 90% of the total cost of training is consumed by delivery, compared to 10% to 20% for content development and 1% to 10% for maintenance and monitoring, according to an Ernst & Young study furnished by WebEx.



The delivery component is far more than the cost of the actual training product. It reflects the cost of the infrastructure to facilitate the delivery: computer hardware, networks, high-speed data lines, global network security, equipment, training facilities, travel time, and instructor time. This is where a hosted solution for training seems cost justified because it cuts out the middle level of technology required to bring trainers and students together at a fixed cost per session.

WebEx Training Center can accommodate up to 500 simultaneous users in one virtual classroom. It supports five levels of users: host, presenter, panelist, attendee, and participant. It's flexible enough to offer live and online training as well as on-demand training outside of a live session. Because WebEx is a hosted service, the client performs all administrative tasks on a designated WebEx website. When scheduling training events, the host has a range of options besides specifying the topic and creating a session password, from deciding who can attend a session to determining what their privileges are.

Training Center offers multiple roles for a co-presenter or panelist as a co-trainer and uses full duplex VOIP. Training can be schedule as a single event, a recurring event, or a multi-session course. Classes can be created from prior templates and customized with detailed registration forms and an email template for invitations, reminders, and follow-up.

As companies and nonprofits expand to wider use of online training, we expect the ability to make training a profit center will continue to grow. It not only justifies the investment, but it also allows a vehicle for expanding training and knowledge sharing to customers, partners, and the community at large. To that end, WebEx now includes integrated e-commerce support to accommodate fee-based training across the enterprise, with the ability to charge attendees a fee by using credit cards or issuing coupons.

Content creation

Moderators or instructors can create content such as PowerPoint presentations, Flash content, labs, recordings, and live or recorded video. These materials are shared with the learner audience using document sharing. Live product training can be shared using application sharing, web tours, or application viewing tools. The WebEx Universal Communications Toolkit is an add-in program for Microsoft PowerPoint that allows you to create multimedia slides for a training event.

Live WebEx events can be recorded. The host who creates the WebEx Training Center event can choose to automatically record at the beginning of the session or can record only specific portions. Recorded sessions are accessible at a client's portal web page hosted by WebEx, locally on an Intranet, or by email.

Previously recorded WebEx sessions can be edited and played back as part of a live session or can be viewed as a stand-alone program. Users can build libraries of live sessions; this powerful capability is not unique to WebEx but should be considered in relation to the product's other functions and features.

Beyond standard content delivery, WebEx Training Center offers a full arsenal of training features, seamlessly controlled from the presenter's desktop, including Breakout Sessions, Hands-on Lab, Testing, Polling, Video, and Chat.

WebEx supports SCORM but not AICC. (Note: there is no formal process for certifying SCORM compliance, however, as there is for the AICC standards.) For a discussion of standards compliance, please refer to the WebEx Communications, Inc. website (www.webex.com). WebEx claims they "easily integrate learning management systems with support for interoperability standards and transfer session data" capability, although we didn't test that ability.

Content delivery

WebEx allows the sharing and annotation of multiple documents and presentations, whiteboard, applications, desktops, and graphics without uploading them to a server. It uses file and document sharing to achieve these tasks. Participants cannot change the actual document, however. Live documents are delivered directly to participant desktops using a simple web browser. Document files are not stored or archived on an external server.

If you use telephone bridges, you incur additional telephone charges. To satisfy the interactive communications requirements of a broad range of websites worldwide, WebEx supports industry standards, including instant messaging and presence protocol (IMPP), XML, H.323, and T.120.

WebEx supports several languages for both Meeting Center and Training Center including Chinese, French, German, and Japanese as well as English.

Reports

Managers can track participant success without ever leaving their desks. Reports are available on every recorded session, including registration and attendance, labs, testing, and a range of administrator reports. Reports can be automated to gather standard data such as test results and attendance.

User experience

Our challenge in using powerful tools is to create effective meetings and training, not just to annotate PowerPoint slides and allow chat among users. So how well does WebEx deliver?

The email invitation process is pretty standard and supports Outlook, Netscape, Lotus, and other common mail programs. The training facilitator can customize registration and automate it for trainers, subject matter experts, labs, and pre- and post-testing.

The WebEx administrative interface is clean and simple without being rudimentary. The host creates event parameters by using the Host Training menu options. Management functions available through this screen include:

- Event creation and display control,
- Event notification by email, and
- Enrollment controls such as start date, attendee listing, and enrollment number.

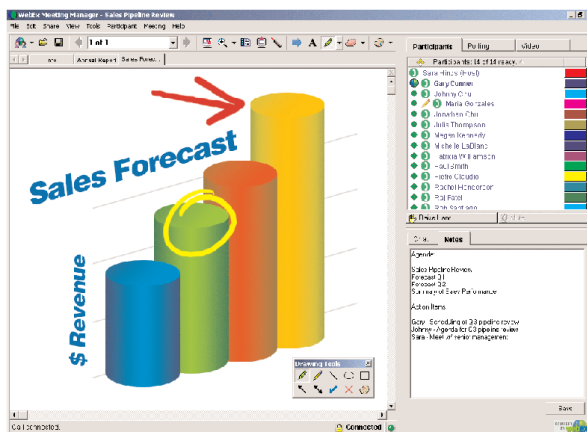
The interface also allows assignment of role privileges (e.g., presenter or participant), participant privileges, and the level of security. Online technical assistance is available by using the Assistance menu options. Technology being what it is, I had an opportunity to use WebEx's telephone support. It was an excellent experience but one I hope you won't need. It's worth noting, as with any complex software built to run on various hardware combinations, that your IT personnel might want to coach users through installation to get past any problems with initial launch. The problem I experienced might be relevant to the small number of users who connect with ultra portable notebook computers. Currently, WebEx expects a print driver in order to launch Word and Excel files, and small laptops without an LPT port might balk at displaying such documents, as mine did.

Participant

The participant's screen has a simple division. The largest area is the presentation viewer where documents, whiteboard, and other content are displayed. Above it is the browser menu bar with commands and whiteboard tools. On the right side of the participant screen is the collaboration and video viewing area: tests, polling questions, video, chat dialog panel (when activated), and the listing of attendees. Presenters can see which attendee wishes to ask a question and can allow document sharing.

Moderator

The moderator interface grid is divided into four areas. The largest is the presentation viewer for display of documents, the whiteboard, and other materials. A floating palette offers the standard set of slide markup tools.



Above the presentation viewer area is the browser menu bar. From here, the presenter can share documents, presentations, applications, whiteboard, web pages, web content, and remote computers. It takes just one click to initiate a teleconference or Internet phone connection, to view breakout sessions, testing and polling, and video, or record a training session.

At the top of the righthand column, a box lists the types and number of participants. Icons indicate who is currently speaking and who has raised a hand to ask a question. The box has a variety of control functions that include assigning speaking and document privileges. The final area at the bottom of the righthand column is the question-and-answer and chat display. In addition, there are controls for breakout sessions, chat, Q&A, and feedback. Q&A can be threaded by



topic, visible to the instructor and panelist in the Training Center and made available for all attendees.

Hands-on Lab

WebEx extends the reach of Training Center with the Hands-on Lab, increasing the effectiveness of training by integrating your physical training facility with live, online, or on-demand sessions. This powerful feature means learners and trainers don't need to go to a computer lab, and administrators can manage labs and applications remotely. Hands-on Lab works with any number of lab computers behind your firewall and across an entire enterprise without boundaries.

Hands-On Lab can be used to deliver highly structured training, even to certify competencies for a staff. Yet, the computers can be located anywhere and your co-trainers can participate from anywhere. Sessions can be tracked and viewed by the instructor to evaluate student performance. Classes posted to the lab can be made available to all or a select group of users, can require registration to use, and can be copied to a person's private folder for offline participation. The moderator can divide participants into smaller groups for team or individual lab exercises.

Testing and evaluation

You can create two types of multiple choice questions and short answer questions. Learner responses can be shared with attendees as poll results or, in the case of tests, the correct answer and the individual participant's grade.

The assessment tool allows the moderator to ask a question at any time during the presentation. Polls must have a question and at least one answer. The presenter can choose to display polling and survey results to participants within the session. Participants are invited to take a poll when a dialog box appears on the screen with a button to click.

With online training, my experience has been that the testing and evaluation process gets lost and is not accessed—out of sight, out of mind. The testing and grading tools in WebEx Training Center are powerful and have a simple interface to manage and share tests. With easy access for attendees to take tests and view their results, this important benchmarking tool may receive more use. Managers can view personal profiles to verify and track attendance, measure

skill and comprehension levels, and enable certification programs to meet compliance standards.

At the end of a class, you can close the session by popping users to a specific URL for a survey, test or, to learn more about the topic, perhaps linking to an Intranet site. This is a powerful way to reinforce a message or provide closure at the completion of training.

Pricing

WebEx charges a one-time setup fee of \$4,000 and \$225 per month per seat for its hosted-only service for Training Center.

Recommendation

For me, there is always the risk of "feature awe" when immersed in such a robust product family as virtual meetings and training, but the awe in using WebEx is the ease of use and the wealth of features offered for effective meetings and training. WebEx is not just a good product. It is an excellent product. Several things differentiate it from the competition:

- The product is strictly a hosted solution, which reduces complexity of implementation, overall cost, and risk to the customer. The tradeoffs are the degree of customization possible, security, and control.
- The company maintains a private network for web meetings and training events. In theory this should result in more reliable performance, and, indeed, the system performed well in our tests.
- The product has three ways to connect to an event for voice communication: Voice-over-IP (Internet), integrated telephone conferencing (up to 50 users per event), or third-party telephone conferencing. Hosts can use a mix of the three for the same event. The flexibility can be invaluable in providing participants with optimum audio quality. We note, though, that the telephone charges can add significant cost to virtual events. Voice-over-IP is cheaper, but the network has to be able to support it.
- Test drives of the system show the product is capable of consistently superior performance. Both application



sharing and document sharing are fast and trouble free. Many variables are involved in Internet performance, but WebEx's consistency is evidence of quality software and a solid network.

The price of WebEx can offer an alternative to products that start around \$20,000. Quickly recouping program cost, paying only for what you need, and the ability to rollout quickly mean the investment will begin paying for itself after just a few sessions.

It takes skill to learn to manage a large meeting or training event, as presenters are controlling both the delivery and content. I recommend taking advantage of the many resources at WebEx for documentation, self-paced training classes, and live sessions where you can learn by being an active participant. And by all means, involve your IT department to ensure the initial setup goes smoothly for users with your specific hardware configuration.

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WebEx Training Center product rating

Interface	★★★ 1/2
Production quality	★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★
Value for the money	★★★ 1/2
Documentation/Help	★★★★
Overall rating	★★★★

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Outstanding	★★★★	Above average	★★★ 1/2	Poor	★
Very good	★★★ 1/2	Average	★★	NA	Not applicable
Good	★★★	Below Average	★ 1/2	NR	Not rated (usually not enough information)