



Web Conferencing Brief

The concept of "web conferencing" has been around for a long time. According to Lucy Roberts, author of *History of Web Conferencing - Multifunction Conferencing Comes of Age (2004)*, the University of Illinois developed a web conferencing prototype called PLATO during the 1960s, before the internet even existed!

Today, web conferencing software is helping state deaf-blind projects increase the availability of resources and services. State deaf-blind projects are using web conferencing tools in a myriad of ways: communicating with families and providers in remote locations, conducting trainings across multiple sites, hosting advisory board meetings, and demonstrating teaching strategies to providers and family members (to name a few). When project staff are located in different locations, web conferencing can help increase communication and connectivity between offices. Because of the increasing availability and reduced costs (equipment, software, internet service), more projects are using web conferencing to communicate, meet, connect, and learn.

Web conference vs. webinar

These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but web conference is the more generic term and is defined as "a service that allows conferencing events to be shared with remote locations" (Wikipedia). Webinar is short for "web-based seminar", a presentation or lecture that is transmitted over the internet. In either case, the full power of the web conferencing software is available, from showing PowerPoint slides to conducting surveys, and desktop sharing to video conferencing.

The "tools" for web conferencing

People are able to participate in a web conference with almost any internet-connected device. Today, mobile technologies are expanding and web conference providers are building software that can accommodate smart phones, tablets, netbooks, and laptops, as well as traditional desktops. Web conferencing usually works best with high-speed internet connections, whether it is DSL, wired broadband, or broadband through mobile wireless technologies.

Sometimes participants may need to download software (free) for their device in advance, specific to the web conference vendor. In addition, webcams are commonly used with web conferences. Most internet-connected devices now have built-in cameras that permit the participant to show their webcam during a web conference, although some cell phones have a rear-facing camera only. The ability to type via a keyboard is often helpful for web conference participants, as questions or comments can be offered inside "chat" windows. Telephones are often used to connect conference participants with "audio only," when access to a computer is not available. Finally, in lieu of a telephone, participants may be able to use Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) with microphones and speakers connected to a computer.

Hosting vs. participating

It is important to note the distinctions between "hosting" a web conference and joining as a "participant". Hosts generally have more control over web conference features and functions, and are responsible for arranging the meetings. Hosts usually control the web conference "environment" (windows, pods, layouts, etc.) and can control the audio functions. Typically hosts also do traditional meeting facilitation

during web conferences (greeting, introducing, summarizing, etc.). Participants should be able to see and hear what is occurring in the web conference and are often encouraged to participate by asking questions, making comments (either by typing or speaking), etc. Participants can usually be granted 'privileges' normally reserved for hosts, such as sharing their screen, sharing a document, controlling the size of windows, etc.

Webinar planning tips

- Don't assume participants have used your meeting software (or any web conferencing software)
- Send handouts and agendas as email attachments ahead of time (the proverbial "Plan B").
- Work with your presenters ahead of time so that they are comfortable with screen sharing, muting phones, etc.
- Keep your invites to the meeting room simple. Bold or highlight the meeting url and phone number (+password)
- If you're using Adobe Connect, you can send a url that allows participants to test their computer ahead of time: http://na1cps.adobeconnect.com/common/help/en/support/meeting_test.htm

Participant etiquette tips

- Mute phone when not speaking
- Take turns
- Give your name when speaking – This is particularly helpful for closed captioned events
- Arrive early enough to work out any problems with webcam or connections.
- Remember that if the meeting is being recorded, your "chat" dialogue may be available to the public

Hosting tips

- Keep to the schedule
- Know your software and be prepared to lend assistance
- Pre-load presentation files if possible prior to meeting
- Open room 10-15 minutes early and welcome participants as they arrive
- Have a welcome message in the opening room
- Make sure participants have the connection information in advance
- Know how to manage your audio i.e.: Know how to mute participant phones (nothing sinks meetings faster than uncontrolled background noise)
- Use the "polling" feature frequently. It helps get participants involved
- Ask others to assume roles, such as: note taker, facilitator, chat room monitor, etc. Doing all jobs at once is difficult.
- Consider having music or polls for early attendees.
- Establish participant ground rules at the beginning of the session.
- Decide how to handle questions (chat pod? phone? during? after?)
- If possible, allow participants to scroll the "share pod" independently. Participants generally do not like having others control scrolling
- Encourage the use of webcams, but recognize it may not be pragmatic depending on the number of participants or purpose of meeting.
- Know when to use webcams and when not to: they are best for small gatherings.

- Use recording feature, if available, for those unable to attend.
- Identify a back-up host, in case you are unavailable or disconnected.

Web conference vendors

State deaf-blind projects are part of a larger network of OSEP TA&D providers. The network is encouraged to partner and share costs, when possible. While NCDB does not endorse any particular vendor, The Technical Assistance Coordination Center (TACC) does offer TA&D network partners the use of Adobe Connect web conference rooms, as part of TACC's Adobe Connect account. For more information about acquiring an Adobe Connect room for your project, please contact Nolan Simon at: nsimon@fhi360.org or 202.884.8884.

There are a multitude of companies that offer web conference software. Choosing one will depend on budget and desired features. Questions to ask when evaluating a web conference service:

- Do I need an integrated phone connection with my existing web conference provider?
- Do I need to record meetings for later playback?
- Do I want the option of converting recordings to a stand-alone video file?
- How long will recordings remain available for streaming from the vendor's website?
- Do I need integrated closed captions (as opposed to viewing in a separate browser window)?
- Does my teleconference provider offer web conferencing (many do)?
- What is the largest number of participants I expect to have online at one time (this can change your software costs significantly)?
- Do you need to allow participants to access your meeting room with their smart phone or tablet?
- Do you need integrated registration for participants?

A few web conferencing vendors

- Adobe Connect (free trial) <http://www.adobe.com/products/adobeconnect.html>
- WebEx (free version available) <http://www.webex.com/>
- GoToMeeting (30 day trial) <http://www.gotomeeting.com/fec/>
- PGI GlobalMeet (30 day trial) <http://www.pgi.com/us/en/conferencing/video-conferencing/>
- AnyMeeting (free) <http://anymeeting.com/>
- InterCall <http://www.intercall.com/>

Accessibility

For state deaf-blind projects (and NCDB), accessibility is a critical consideration when making decisions about web conferencing services. Consider the ability of the vendor to provide these web conference features:

- Real time captioning
- Screen reader support
- Keyboard shortcuts
- Built in text to speech
- Text size and control features
- Menu and tab navigation

Finally, there are third-party vendors who can provide additional accessibility features in conjunction with most web conferencing systems. A few examples are “Accessible Event” <http://accessibleevent.com/> and “Talking Communities” <http://www.talkingcommunities.com/accessibility.htm>

NCDB 2.0 encourages state deaf-blind projects to explore web conferencing options and use these versatile tools to expand their projects' availability and impact. Please let us know how you are using web conferencing to expand your project's reach to families and children!

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(800) 438-9376 Voice (800) 854-7013 TTY info@nationaldb.org www.nationaldb.org



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