

Imagine a scene – it's actually one you'll know. Your executive management team, located across five countries and three time zones, is managing a European workforce close to 1000 people. Getting this team together on even a quarterly basis can be a logistical nightmare, but one most companies feel is worth the effort in order to agree strategy, review sales and define company direction. The challenge however, for any European management team, is effectively disseminating the information and strategy agreed in these quarterly meetings in a timely manner. If, for instance, you are changing your sales strategy how do you make sure everyone is quickly informed, trained and ready to go to market?

Typically, local country training is organised, but for those attending they are likely to come up against the following scenario: someone hasn't done the pre-reading, so they all end up spending day one, not learning something new, but just getting to the same starting line. In another scenario delegates spend three hours getting there for a one-hour meeting and then several more hours getting home – that same night if they're lucky.

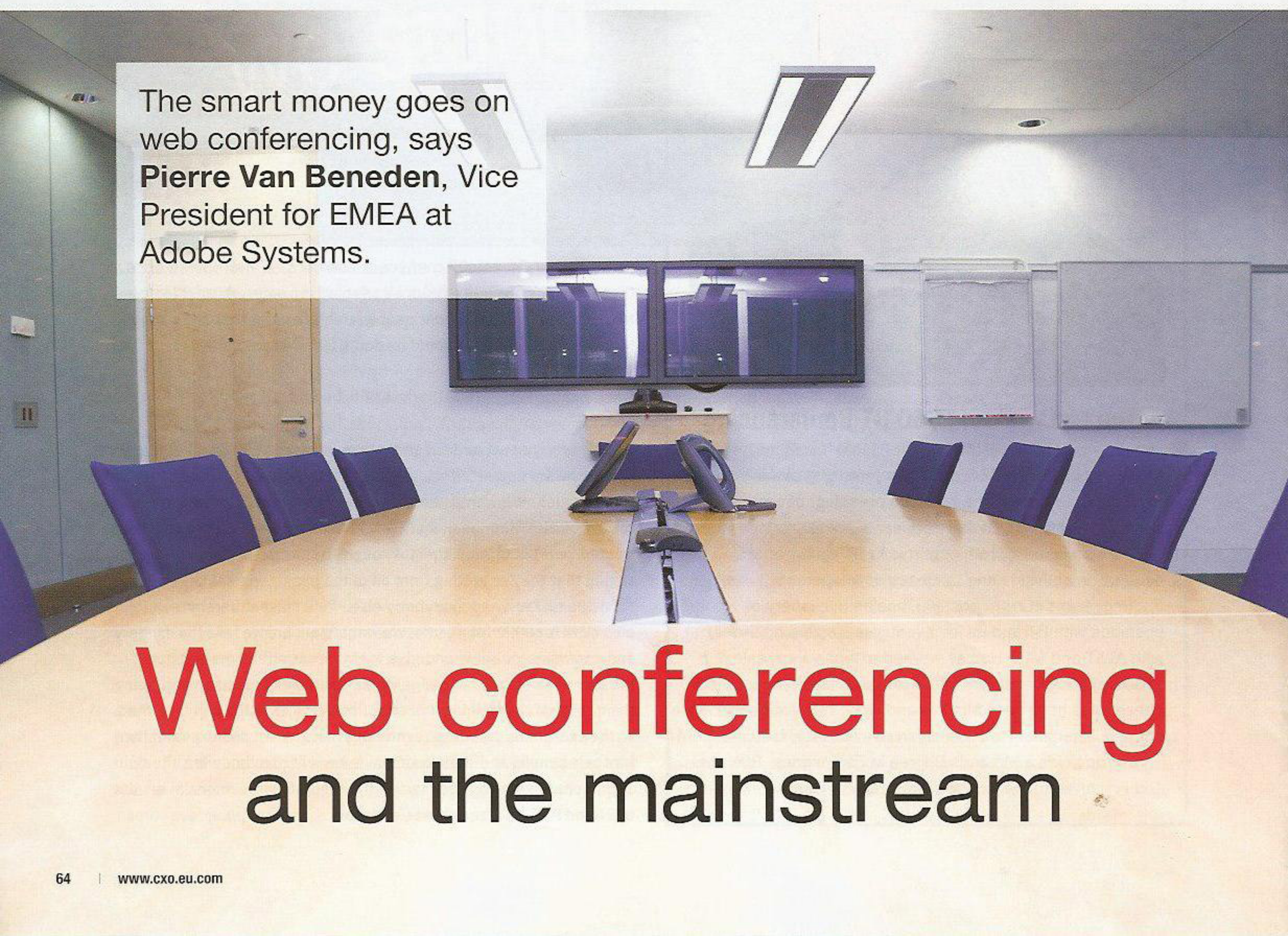
Sound familiar? It ought to be: it's a classic example of time wasting (the unproductive hours in the car, or going through material in training that you have already learnt), social irresponsibility (the

wrecking of your work/home balance and the enormous carbon footprint of your trudge across the country) and a total waste of money (the hire of the room/tutor for the training, the opportunity cost of the drive-time, the cost of transport, etc). So why do we do it? It's about time businesses took a new and hard look at web conferencing.

Web conferencing today embraces a reliable and powerful set of tools covering all the areas from one-on-one meetings to online seminars and conferences. They allow businesses to take advantage of technologies such as voice-over-IP and fast internet connections, and combine them with cheap commodity products such as webcams and microphone headsets in order to achieve a businesses communication medium that is rivalled for rich, effective interactivity only by being there in person.

Being there (even when you're not)

Today, with the increasing emphasis on pan-European teams, 'being there' isn't always an option – there are just too many demands on our time and resources and spending a day in the air to attend a one-hour meeting cannot be justified. Whilst web conferencing can't meet the requirements of every situation, it can certainly enhance the 'real' meeting once you actually get there, allowing you to do



The smart money goes on web conferencing, says **Pierre Van Beneden**, Vice President for EMEA at Adobe Systems.

Web conferencing and the mainstream

a lot more interactive, personal meetings in a day than would be otherwise possible.

If we look at modern business today, training plays a huge part – be it changes in laws, changes in prices, products change and even branding changes. This raises the question of how to train everyone. How do we make sure all the 2000 people we employ across all reaches of Europe actually get the information on time and accurately? How do you track and monitor that?

Welcome to a sweet spot of web conferencing. Our overworked businessperson creates an online room and populates this with the presentations, graphics and documents that they will (or may) need for the meeting, then they invite the recipients to the meeting – taking advantage, perhaps, of the integration with Microsoft's Outlook meetings wizard. The recipient clicks on the URL from the e-mail and gets taken straight into the meeting room where the host is waiting with their webcam on, ready to get the ball rolling.

There are also web conferencing systems out there that don't require you to install any software in order to take part – so you can literally have a meeting with anyone who has an internet connection, without having to check their operating system or how powerful their PC is. Once a meeting is underway, the host can move between different pieces of content – asking questions and sharing material as they talk and appear on camera, giving you most of the benefits of a 'real' meeting (except the biscuits!) and without any of the travel and expense. For businesses, this means that a single trained person is able to train more people, faster.

Some web conferencing systems offer a wide range of collaborative capabilities as well, so if you needed to whiteboard out a solution for a particular person, or share some files or provide a demonstration of 'the new system', then this is all possible. Costs are reduced drastically, and the employee's work-time is much more productively spent.

Training, quickly

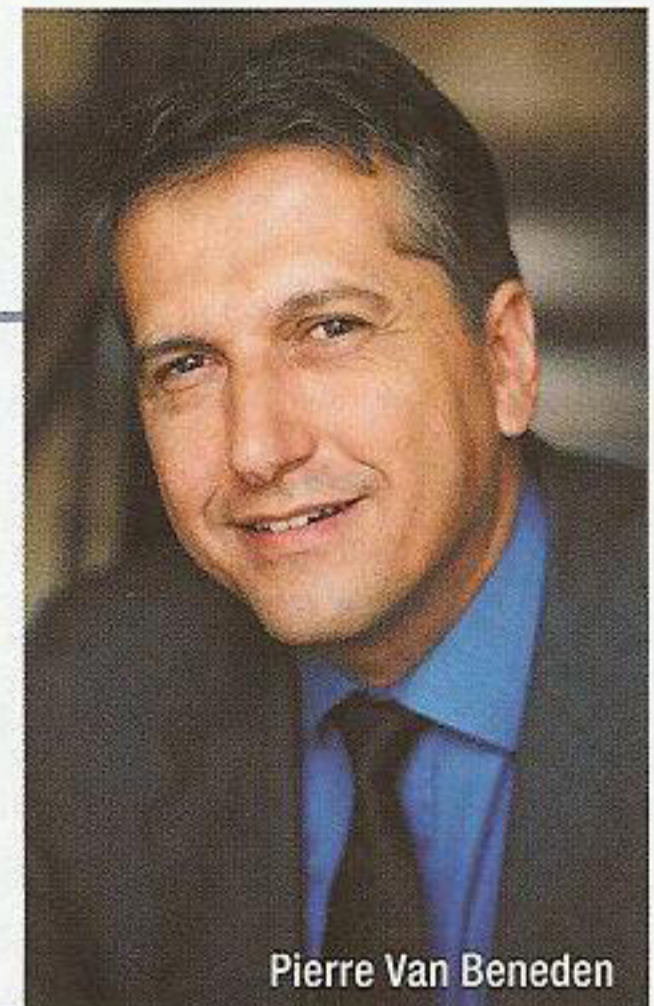
This type of rapid training is used by an increasing number of companies to manage the knowledge levels of their staff, partners and indeed the wider community of analysts, customers and other bodies. It is ideal for the hundreds of updates, news tit-bits or items of procedural change that all businesses are subject too – providing a fast, cheap and auditable communication medium. All of this helps to drive profitability. If your workforce can get a product out to market faster than your competitors, then you have a competitive advantage. If your channel is educated about your new offerings or price and can start to sell it immediately upon your instigation of the plan, again, you have advantage.

Of course, rapid training is only one area where businesses are gaining advantage. Another is simple decision-making. Most businesses today have their intelligence strung out over their whole area of operation. Getting these brains together for skills transfer or project development is difficult. Obviously we don't want to take these people off work and out of operation for a conference, but what if they

could do a 'face-to-face' every week (at least). Using web conferencing we can do just that – create virtual teams that can chat (using chat facilities) and talk (using VoIP) in real-time: collaborating on projects, sharing ideas and information across the ether.

Previously, the main problem with this was that it lacked a personal aspect: conversing with a computer screen just isn't the same as talking to a real person. However, the quality and efficiency of webcams and real-time audio video in web conferencing means that actually, you can have a working relation-

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ship with real people using this medium. That makes for better communication and thus better business. Being able to supplement real face-to-face meetings with virtual, but still personal and real-time meetings, means that relationships once made, can continue wherever the individuals may find themselves.

And much more

Increasingly, it's not just for this kind of virtual project or team based activities – if you have the infrastructure for that, then it naturally follows that you can talk to your own legal team, from your hotel, after a meeting and so respond back to clients far faster than previously. You can talk to your own reportees to schedule meetings and issues without having to pick dates far into the future when you're both in the same city or country. Again, not every situation fits these uses of web conferencing, and you certainly wouldn't do important, personal meetings this way (such as an appraisal), but all the meetings before that, when you talk about what will be covered and the type of question you need to prepare for are ideal for doing over the web. It's fast, still fairly personal, real-time and fully interactive.

Many businesses are now starting to recognise that web conferencing is not a fad, it's a vital piece of modern business communication. It reduces costs, enables you to continue personal relationships and have real-time talks to the people that matter – wherever they are. Web conferencing, when allied with rapid training, allows you to conduct more training, more often, more interactively than we could previously – whilst allowing you to claim green credentials from not having everyone fly/drive to your conference centre for the meeting!

The days when video killed networks are gone. It's not about infrastructure now, it's about changing your business practices to take advantage of people, whenever and wherever you need them. Isn't it time to take that long hard look at your real-time communications? ■