

Online Meetings Weather a Record-Breaking Snowstorm

Cisco team helps ensure business continuity despite bad weather with quick implementation of web meeting applications

Executive Summary

Challenge:

- Hold customer-facing training sessions despite London's worst snowstorm in 18 years

Solution:

- Deliver two days of online training in real time using combination of Cisco WebEx Meeting Center and WebEx Training Center

Results:

- Stay in contact with customers and maintain productivity levels in record-breaking snowstorm
- Help ensure business continuity even as majority of London's businesses lost US\$4 billion due to weather
- Provide flexibility necessary to plan and execute events in collaboration with Cisco specialists scattered across globe

Challenge

Steve Simlo knows how to bring people together. In 2009, as session group coordinator for the IP/MPLS (Internet Protocol/Multiprotocol Label Switching) track at Cisco® Networkers Europe, he knew which Cisco specialists would be gathering in Barcelona for the annual January conference. He then took best advantage of their limited availability by organizing a number of follow-up speaking engagements in London during the week after the conference. In the weeks leading up to these events, Simlo and his team found a venue, registered attendees, arranged for catered lunches, and lined up travel arrangements. But then they ran into something they could not control: the weather.

On February 2, 2009, London awoke to its worst snowstorm in 18 years. Most flights to Heathrow Airport were cancelled. City busses stopped running. Even the subway shut down. As a result, an estimated 6 million Londoners did not go to work, costing businesses over US\$4 billion in lost productivity.

That same day, Simlo and his team had reserved a conference room for up to 100 attendees, many of whom were scheduled to fly into London that morning. Six specialists were expected to speak about the latest developments in Cisco technology. Lunches had already been ordered. But in a city paralyzed by impassable streets, it was clear that very few people would be able to attend the session in person. Simlo and his team needed a quick fix so that their stranded specialists could deliver presentations to a large group of remote attendees in real time. Fortunately, they had Cisco WebEx™ meeting applications on hand.

Solution

Simlo had planned a two-day conference: the first day was for an internal audience, while the second day was aimed at customers. He and his team developed an agenda based on specialists' availability. By the morning of February 2, over 60 Cisco employees and 80 customers had registered for the event.

When Simlo went to bed the night before the conference, he took one look at the heavily falling snow and knew that transportation might be an issue in the morning. "It was pretty clear to me that public transport would be my only option," he says. "But it never occurred to me that even that wouldn't be able to help." The overnight accumulation of snowfall stopped the city's transportation system in its tracks. Stranded at home, with other coordinators and speakers stranded at hotels or at airports, Simlo immediately notified attendees that the event would be delivered via Cisco WebEx Meeting Center™. "WebEx became our Plan B," he says. "By the time the session started, we already had nearly 60 Cisco staff on the call. That number rose to 75 at the peak. We had presenters speaking from Hamburg, Brussels, and San Jose. And in the end, we finished only 20 minutes later than our anticipated end time. WebEx literally saved the day."

However, Day One was the easy part. The real challenge came with the customer-facing session on Day Two. “Our team had never managed a WebEx training session with customers,” says Simlo. “We couldn’t approach it like an internal meeting. We needed to create an environment that felt like a classroom or symposium. That’s when we decided to experiment with Cisco WebEx Training Center.”

During the first day of the snowstorm, Simlo emailed a WebEx meeting invitation to customers. Then he and his team spent the evening in rehearsals until everyone felt confident with the WebEx Training Center interface. “It’s a good thing that WebEx is so intuitive,” he says. “Our presenters were able to adapt to it very easily, and by the time we went to bed we all felt comfortable with the technology. The only question remaining was whether or not we could pull off a live session.”

The next morning brought a deep freeze to the streets of London and still no subway service. “I remained stranded at my house,” says Simlo. “By the time I joined the WebEx session at 8:30 in the morning, we already had 50 customers in the virtual environment. That number peaked at 79 later in the day.”

WebEx Training Center offered the right combination of features for facilitating a comfortable classroom environment for remote participants. For instance, when attendees want to ask a question, they type it into the Q&A field, and a moderator decides which questions should go to the presenters. “With the Q&A feature, attendees can ask a question without revealing it to the entire group,” says Simlo. “That anonymity eliminates many people’s tendency toward shyness in a new environment, and I think it heightens participants’ willingness to interact.”

“WebEx gave us the tools that we needed to stay one step ahead of Mother Nature and avoid a major business loss. That level of responsiveness gives any company a competitive edge in uncertain times.”

— Steve Simlo, Session Group Coordinator, Cisco Networkers Europe, Cisco

Results

Despite the challenges posed by the snowstorm, the entire experience went smoothly for attendees and presenters alike. “Our speakers had only one night of WebEx Training Center experience under their belts, but this technology is so easy to use that they already looked like seasoned pros,” says Simlo. “If you didn’t know about the weather, you would’ve thought we were planning to do this all along.”

The feedback from attendees was excellent, with WebEx earning average ratings of 4.1 on a 5-point satisfaction scale. “I think that customers really appreciated that we were able to respond to these unusual circumstances with so much agility,” says Simlo. “WebEx technology gave us the ability to remain in contact with our customers even in a terrible snowstorm, and it gave our customers the chance to maintain their productivity levels even though many of them were stuck at home. It was really a win-win all around.”

With WebEx technology, Simlo and his team were able to maintain business continuity even while the majority of London’s businesses lost billions of dollars due to the weather. “WebEx gave us the tools that we needed to stay one step ahead of Mother Nature and avoid a major business loss,”

says Simlo. "That's no small thing in the current economic environment. And ultimately, that level of responsiveness gives any company a competitive edge in uncertain times."

WebEx gives Simlo and his team the flexibility that they need to plan and execute events in collaboration with Cisco specialists who are scattered across the globe. "So many companies are minimizing travel costs while struggling to maintain contact with customers and partners around the world," he says. "WebEx seems like a cost-effective way for any global enterprise to enable fast, reliable communication and collaboration with key stakeholders anywhere, and in any weather."

Next Steps

Not surprisingly, Simlo sees WebEx as a key component in planning next year's events. "One of the best ways to maintain the stability of any business is to help ensure that you have the ability to respond to changing circumstances," he says. "WebEx helped us overcome some major logistical hurdles in no time, and with great results. We'll definitely be relying on it in the future."

For More Information

To find out more about Cisco WebEx, go to <http://www.cisco.com/web/products/webex/index.html>.

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