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Air Liquide facilitates international collaboration and communication with WebEx.



INDUSTRY

Industrial

WEBEX APPLICATIONS

Meeting Center

SUMMARY

Air Liquide improved collaboration within its varied business lines, and gained fast ROI through more effective selling and reduced travel and IT costs.

ABOUT AIR LIQUIDE

Line of Business

Supply gases such as oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen

Headquarters

Paris, France

Number of Employees

30,800

WebEx Customer Since 2002

Founded in 1902, Air Liquide is the world leader in industrial and medical gases and related services. Today, the company combines the resources and expertise of a global enterprise with a powerful local presence, with 130 subsidiaries in 65 countries. The company is constantly on the cutting-edge of innovation with more than 6,300 registered patents and 1,800 inventions. It provides oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen and other gases as well as services to most industrial sectors, including steel, oil refining, chemicals, glass, electronics, healthcare, food processing, metallurgy, paper, and aerospace. In 2002, the company posted revenues of 7.9 billion euros with 30,800 employees

The Challenge

Air Liquide traditionally conferred autonomy on its subsidiaries and guaranteed top-notch client service while seeking out innovative technology to ensure international collaboration among its teams. "In a decentralized group like ours, we quickly realized web technologies were a way to improve the way we worked, while reducing the impact of geographic distances," explained Jean-Francois Petrignani, Intranet/Internet Project e-Business Manager for Air Liquide. "But, our decentralized model also presented challenges. In this case, it left room for a proliferation of different initiatives—Intranets and discussion forums—in addition to portals and videoconferences. They became major inconveniences because we didn't unify our approach. We ended up being counterproductive."

In 2000, Air Liquide assembled a team—reporting to the executive committee—to consolidate the company's e-business initiatives. "E-learning was one of our first points of attack, but we soon realized that we needed a collaborative tool that everybody could use," explained Petrignani. Following September 11, the search for a solution accelerated as increased security measures following the attacks made travel more difficult. The e-business team realized it needed to deploy a permanent, online meeting solution that would overcome the new travel-related constraints. The eventual solution needed to facilitate communication throughout the organization, regardless of geography; increase interactivity among the teams; be easy to use, eliminating virtual meeting room reservations; provide full security and fast information flow; and, be quickly deployed for the entire company.

The Solution

Liquide reviewed five suppliers and in mid-2002, selected WebEx. Petrignani explained: "WebEx provided a complete and secure solution with multiple technical and operational advantages. First, the WebEx platform is independent of the user's operating system and didn't require client software installation. This meant that we could extend the solution to individuals outside the company. For example, clients and suppliers could participate in an online meeting as long as they had a phone line and an Internet connection." Other important features included: an unlimited number of users and spontaneous shar-

ing of all types of documents without prior downloading.

Air Liquide piloted the WebEx solution from July 2002 to February 2003. In addition to validating the solution on a functional level, the company tested its acceptance by focusing on key users: members of the e-business team, their local counterparts and their headquarters-based colleagues who needed to “push” information to a geographically dispersed audience. “With the first users in the pilot project, we launched and began relying on web-based meetings as a new way of working. During the pilot phase, not a single participant had a criticism about the new service and the number of meetings and number of participants regularly increased. This high level of acceptance was indispensable for moving to the next phase of the project,” explained Pettrignani.

The meeting services were implemented in March 2003, with a global contract. “100 people, with or without a WebEx account, could simultaneously participate in WebEx online meetings wherever they were in the world”, explains Pettrignani. The IT teams were set up to ensure first-level user support. To promote the service, the e-business team began a widespread communications campaign geared toward building interest, informing and shaping the target audience and in a second wave, creating a loyal user base.

A poster was distributed to all subsidiaries via the communication managers to relay the message: “Tomorrow, invite 100 people to your office.” The information was also distributed via the e-business intranet and the internal webzine. Users could access the service through the company’s

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portal accompanied by the online user guide. It required getting people informed about the new service and convincing them it was simple and practical. “Air Liquide has about 10,000 potential WebEx users, but we had certain priorities: we wanted to reach those who were often the most difficult or most costly to reach, eliminating telephone surcharges; the “big users” – those who traveled frequently and/or had a lot of information to “push”; the trainers; and finally, the “influencers”, executives and, more importantly, their assistants, who were often the ones organizing the meetings.”

In one year, the number of open and active accounts has tripled and surpassed 600 at the end of December 2003. Since implementing the service, users have organized more than 1000 online meetings. While it all started with 3 to 4 person meetings, there are more and more “push” meetings that include 30 to 40 individuals. “We’ve had up to 74 people and we’re sure that the WebEx technology can go even further!” explained Pettrignani. “We have also awarded a “Best User” prize to the person responsible for managing executives’ travel.”

The Benefits

Users are discovering more and more uses for WebEx e-meetings. The friendly and spontaneous aspect is attractive. Pettrignani describes his experience: “WebEx is as easy as making a phone

call, but much more efficient in that you are able to add the visual dimension! You no longer have to plan your meetings in advance. While having a phone conversation, you can easily get your colleague to open a session to invite others or simply work together on a document. This is how we worked with the agency that created the posters for the internal WebEx promotional campaign. Personally, it’s become a reflex.”

Another benefit relates to the level of preparedness. Meetings planned in advance are generally better prepared and shorter than “physical” meetings, providing additional productivity gains, improving efficiency from the comfort of our office. By finding the most convenient time, there is no constraint to holding a meeting with colleagues sitting in Europe, Japan and the US.

While the solution was implemented to help improve internal operations, WebEx has also proven itself with clients. For example, a France-based Air Liquide expert was called on to assist a client in Australia. There was no way possible for him to physically arrive in time to help. Instead, the local team went to the client’s office, opened a WebEx session with the French expert, with the same efficiency as if he had been in Australia himself. The client was impressed! WebEx functional and contractual flexibility is another asset for Air Liquide since the company doesn’t use



all of the WebEx functionality. "Because of bandwidth and internal refraction, we don't currently have the need for the Voice over IP option. While we don't encourage the use of webcams, I often resort to them in the first minutes of a meeting to give my colleagues the chance to put a face to my name. The meeting then continues without the camera. We also appreciate the fact that we can quickly increase the number of users, even for a limited amount of time, and make our service more profitable by taking advantage of the different time zones to use them 24/7."

Return on Investment

"According to the feedback we spontaneously get from users about their WebEx experience and the time and money savings allowed by online meetings, we already know that we are reaching a substantial ROI," says Petrignani. "However, we want to measure this return on investment in a more systematic way. This is the reason why the e-business team is currently working on a set of measurements and indicators. We will also integrate a questionnaire where participants will be asked to rate their satisfaction with the tool at the end of each session."

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The Future

Aside from the implementation of an ROI measurement tool, the Air Liquide e-business team continues to promote the use of WebEx, with the support of convinced users – the current “ambassadors” for the solution. “Our objective is for e-meetings to become a reflex and that we increase its uses and applications, primarily for training. WebEx has a specific solution but we are starting tests with our current set-up, particularly for certain sales trainings. I’m sure that we are going to see an increase due in part to the corporate mandate to reduce expenses. Secondly, those who have used WebEx are sure to tell those around them of its efficiency and their satisfaction. I also know that WebEx will easily support this increase because of the flexibility and performance of its worldwide platform,” concluded Petrignani.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Air Liquide selected WebEx over five other vendors, for its ease of set up and use, platform independence, and security.
- The company increased WebEx usage by evangelizing the solution to trainers, frequent travelers, as well as executive influencers and their assistants.
- The ability to use WebEx to connect to subject matter experts around the world, has created an impression on Air Liquide clients—directly affecting company revenues.