

# Computer Conferencing: The Global Connection

by Lawrence B. Brilliant

**A**S IF IN PAIN, THE HELICOPTER'S JET TURBINE engine screeched sharply, groaned once, and died. Now, silhouetted against the Himalayas, the quiet helicopter began to spiral slowly toward the ground. The passengers, a group of United Nations doctors, looked around furtively as the pilot, his jaw clenched, maneuvered the paralyzed bird down in tight circles.

Lawrence B. Brilliant is one of the original Hog Farmers, a co-founder of the WELL, and the founder of Seva, an international service organization that came about after the successful eradication of smallpox. He went to India as the Hog Farm's "Doctor Larry" in 1970, and stayed on in the Himalayan ashram of his teacher, Neem Karoli Baba, who deputed him to work for the World Health Organization's smallpox campaign. After a decade in India, he became a professor at the University of Michigan, where he first learned about the computer conferencing described in this article. He and his wife and the other founders of Seva then decided to focus their efforts on blindness in India and Nepal, where he now spends most of his time, building eye hospitals and health institutes; he recently pitched in on Wavy Gravy's Berkeley political campaign (*WER* #70), and he is currently assisting his brother with his color-business-card company, Brilliant Color. Seva (a sanskrit word meaning "service to humanity") headquarters are now in San Rafael, California. This article originally appeared in *Byte*, December 1985. —HR

illustration by Brad Hamann



After a silent eternity, the pilot brought the craft down just outside of Biratnagar in the remote terrain of Nepal.

"What's wrong?" a passenger asked.

"Nothing much," the pilot replied, "but we'll need to file a spare-parts order: 'Engine. One.'"

Under almost any other circumstances, a crippled aircraft sitting on the ground in one of the most remote places on earth would rust long before a replacement engine could be located, airlifted in, and installed. But thanks to the then-new technology of computer conferencing, a worldwide "spare-parts order" was filled swiftly, and the chopper flew out of Nepal only days later.

Here is how computer conferencing rescued that helicopter and the UN project:

The helicopter was on loan from Evergreen Helicopter Company in McMinnville, Oregon. The only "spare" jet engine was in France, at Allouette Helicopter Company. Four additional organizations were involved in orchestrating the "spare-parts order": the United Nations office in New York, the government of Nepal, the World Health Organization regional office in New Delhi, and a Michigan-based international charity, the Seva Foundation, which was funding the project.

Using a computer conferencing system to which several companies in the aerospace industry subscribe, an "electronic forum" was quickly convened. Despite the dif-

ferences in time zones and geographical locations, the participants quickly reached a consensus on who would pay for the replacement engine, how it would be shipped into Kathmandu, how customs duties might be waived on the new engine, how it could be trucked into the remote landing site, and what would be done with the damaged original engine. Telephone tag, internal organizational hierarchies, and diplomatic protocols were dealt with easily, and the meeting lasted less than a day.

This event illustrates a lesson for anyone trying to get things done in complicated organizations. When speed and effectiveness are the issue, nothing surpasses electronic forums for disseminating information to all concerned and making decisions rapidly.

Today, the computer-conferencing revolution is burgeoning, due to three factors: (1) The enormous investment made in the international telephone system in past decades has provided us all with relatively low-cost communication lines. (2) Technology has brought the cost of personal computers within the reach of virtually everyone in modern industrial societies. (3) Increasingly sophisticated software enables individuals to take part in computer conferencing at home, and gives them the option of renting time on worldwide networks.

Until now, organizational culture has been determined by a critical mass of intelligent people in proximity to each other. This has created towns, universities, and tall office buildings. It is why we have Bell Labs and Xerox PARC.

With the advent of electronic meeting technology, the thrust of civilization can now occur without the factor of proximity. The synergism and excitement of a critical mass of intelligent people will remain a factor, but now they need not live or work close to each other. For the first time, engineers in San Diego, New York, Rome, and Hong Kong, all members of a special-interest group, can meet online all year without ever seeing one another. Perhaps, with this technology, we are seeing the realization of Marshall McLuhan's "global village."

The benefits to business are obvious: decision-making is improved by bringing the best minds of a company together without restrictions of time and location; participants can productively enter a meeting after organizing ideas; they can discuss many different subjects in one meeting

without the confusion that sometimes occurs in traditional meetings; immediate printed records of the discussion are available; and spreadsheets, databases, and other productivity tools can be entered into the meeting. With wise use of this technology, the result is increased efficiency.

Computer meeting systems can make a horizontal cut through the standard vertical organizational chart. This distributed electronic organization (DEO), a horizontal stratification of personnel within a company, results in a new and higher quality of interactive group process and organizational decision-making. For the first time, through computer conferencing, we will see communication exchanged on a continuous basis between all the department managers, all the engineers, and all the supervisors, no matter where they are located.

The Seva Foundation, a nonprofit international charity, is a good example of a DEO. It uses electronic meeting systems to allocate its money and make other business decisions. The board of directors' meeting lasts all year and, as a result, the structure of the organization has changed. The executive committee, whose members once flew from various corners of the world for meetings four times a year, has been abolished. Now the entire board is involved on a day-to-day basis with operational decisions, though the members live all over the world.

The impact of these horizontal links within society is still difficult to foresee, but from this free exchange of ideas and information will come new solutions to old problems. ■



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