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Abstract

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Personnel Interviewing Via Videoconferencing

Don Bower
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Videoconferencing has many uses in education and management, and the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service tried a new application of the technology. In an attempt to involve as many county, district, and state staff members as possible, an interview was conducted via videoconference for the position of Field Operations Assistant Director. The results of a follow-up survey showed that interviewing candidates via videoconference can be a cost-effective alternative to face-to-face interviewing.

Introduction

As with all of higher education, current budget realities in the Cooperative Extension System are forcing constant assessments of the financial efficiency and effectiveness of virtually every organizational process. As the nation's largest nonformal education system, Extension has for more than forty years played a leading role in the use of video technology to deliver educational programming across the country (Whiting, 1988).

However, the Extension Service has been slower in adapting video technology to increase productivity in administrative matters. The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service recently chose to use videoconferencing capability to offer statewide simultaneous involvement of off-campus staff in the selection process to fill an administrative position with statewide responsibility. This article reports the success of that effort.

Don Bower is Associate State Leader-Home Economics, and chaired the search committee discussed here. Joe Courson, a long-time ACE member, is acting unit leader for Educational Support Services, which produced this videoconference. Janet Frazier works in Educational Support Services and assisted with data processing. All serve with the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service.

Other Videoconferencing Applications

A review of the literature provided little guidance in the use of videoconference technology for this application. The technology has, of course, exploded since its introduction in the early 1960s. At least one writer (Reimers, 1991) claims that videoconferencing will be to the 1990s what fax machines were to the 1980s—a once-exotic and costly technology that becomes a fixture for competitive communicators.

In most literature the term "videoconferencing" actually refers to at least two variations on the use of the technology. One refers to the telecasting of a program using a selected satellite, downlinked by anyone with a receiving dish capable of accessing that satellite, with opportunity for viewers to call in comments and questions during the telecast. This describes the process used in this study.

The second use of videoconferences refers to actual interactive video broadcasts. In this context a conference-call process provides live video pictures of all the parties involved. Coded signals are transmitted through high-speed digital lines. This technology has leaped forward since less expensive, more powerful "codocs" (coder/decoders) were developed in the late 1980s. This type of application is particularly useful in specific applications, such as law. A growing number of attorneys conduct depositions and even arraignments, for example, of far-flung clients without ever leaving the office (Reimers, 1991). To date, the public education value of this application is largely undeveloped.

As noted, the focus here is on the former definition of videoconferencing—uplinking a broadcast through a satellite to dishes almost anywhere, with audio interaction by conventional telephone. Applications of this technology in business and education are legion. National and international corporations have established networks of studio facilities at headquarters and downlink stations at all field sites. Department stores, stock brokers, package delivery services, grocery store chains—any business that relies on instant communication for efficiency is using videoconferencing for enhanced communication between the head office and field staff (Sherrid, 1986).

Because most major universities now have video production and uplink capabilities, it is a relatively simple extension of this ability to use it for administrative as well as "distance learning" educational purposes. Particularly in geographically-large states with numerous units in a university system, videoconferencing increases productivity and decreases cost by linking administrators and researchers almost instantly for quick decisions (Mangan, 1991).

No literature citations were found for the specific use of videoconferencing examined in this study. Whiting (1988) discussed Extension applications of videoconferencing, but primarily for client education, not for in-service management concerns. Hence, the present process provides a pilot example that the authors hope others will refine.

Context of the Present Study

The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service recently used videoconferencing as a tool to enhance greater participation in the selection process for a key administrative position. Videoconferencing enabled many field staff to participate simultaneously in candidate seminars without having to travel hundreds of miles to attend meetings at several locations.

The idea of interviewing via videoconference was tested for the Assistant Director of County Operations position, with the successful candidate responsible for all county programming in the largest state east of the Mississippi River. Georgia has 159 diverse counties, and (at the time of this study) is divided into four Extension administrative districts. The successful candidate will have responsibility for programming and performance of hundreds of district and county staff. Hence, tremendous interest existed among Extension faculty regarding the final candidates.

A search committee identified four finalists from a field of many qualified candidates and was charged to forward the candidates of their choice to Extension administration for further action. Historically, each finalist then provides a seminar response to standard questions from the search committee and responds to questions from the faculty present at the seminars. This process was usually repeated at several locations around the state for each finalist, allowing interchange with as many field staff as feasible. Of course, University administrators also conducted individual interviews. This process offers the advantage of face-to-face interaction, but is tremendously expensive in time and travel dollars, both for candidates and field staff.

In this case the search committee recommended to the Extension administration that it consider the feasibility of conducting the above process by videoconference. After consulting with Extension communications faculty, the search committee made the decision to proceed with a satellite broadcast of the candidates' seminars, sequentially on the same day, with a toll-free telephone number available for viewers to pose questions and see (and hear) each candidate's response on video monitors.

A date was reserved, a format was determined, and field staff were advised. Fewer than 10 percent of Georgia Extension county offices have satellite downlink capability on-site, but nearly all can access a dish locally. Typical sites include schools, Farm Bureau offices, libraries, electrical membership cooperatives, local businesses and corporations, and similar sites. Field staff participation was entirely voluntary, and if they chose to tune in, they were encouraged to minimize expenses by using local facilities whenever possible.

Communications staff had several satellites from which to choose for this transmission. ASC-1 was first selected because of its lower costs, but a problem soon became evident. Because ASC-1 is relatively low on the horizon (for Georgia), several viewing sites could not receive it. Arrangements were made to switch to the Galaxy 2 satellite, which is widely used and accessible throughout Georgia. The approximate cost for two hours of satellite time was \$500. Other direct costs, such as studio time, were contributed.

Each candidate was provided four questions from the search committee to address during his or her seminar time. These questions and other downlink details were provided to all Extension staff before the broadcast. Staff based in Athens (site of the uplink) and surrounding counties were invited to participate in the process as a live studio audience.

The order of candidate presentations was chosen at random. Candidates were prevented from hearing or viewing others' presentations. Each candidate was allotted 15 minutes to respond to four standard questions in a seminar format, followed by 10 minutes of response to questions from the studio audience (comprised largely of state staff members) and remote sites. All questions were written on index cards and passed along to the program moderator, who posed them verbally to each candidate on camera. The entire process, including brief introductory comments from the Extension Director and the search committee chair, was conducted from 10:00-12:00 on a weekday morning.

Evaluation Process and Outcomes

A one-page survey was mailed approximately one week after the broadcast to all Extension faculty. The survey sought feedback on videoconferences as a tool to interview future candidates for state-wide Extension administrative positions.

Informal estimates suggest that approximately 250 Extension professionals (50% of total) viewed the videoconference at an estimated 50 sites. Forty usable surveys were returned, a response rate

of approximately 16%. Overall, two out of three people responding identified themselves as county staff, an additional 25% claimed state staff affiliation, and the remaining 8% described themselves as district staff.

Obviously, such a low response rate limits the conclusions that can be drawn. No follow-up effort was undertaken to increase the response or to assess nonresponders' reasons.

Two out of three (68%) respondents said they participated in the videoconference "inside their county or locally," with the remaining 32% participating outside their county. Regional viewing sites were available at the major off-campus facilities at Tifton, Fort Valley, and Statesboro, as well as on campus at Athens.

Respondents were asked two questions to gauge **comparative ease** of interaction and **comparative quality** of interaction using a 5-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Results (Table 1) showed strong support for videoconferencing. Interestingly, however, about a quarter of respondents to both questions said that videoconferencing was neither easier nor did it provide better quality of interaction than traditional live area seminars.

Table 1: Comparative Ease and Quality of Interaction
(Missing data deleted; some cells collapsed)

	Easier	Better Quality
Agree	22 (63)	19 (53)
Neutral	5 (14)	9 (25)
Disagree	8 (23)	8 (22)
	35(100)	36 (100)
	Mean = 3.81	Mean = 3.57

In order to determine if job type was related to the dissenting responses, results were broken down according to whether respondents were county, district, or state staff (Table 2). Notable differences did emerge. District and state staff were generally evenly divided between positive and negative responses, but county staff overwhelmingly agreed that videoconferencing improved their ease and quality of interaction.

Table 2: Comparative Ease and Quality of Interaction by Job Type (Missing data deleted; some cells collapsed)

	Easier			Better Quality		
	County	District	State	County	District	State
Agree	18 (72)	1 (50)	3 (33)	14 (64)	1 (50)	4 (44)
Neutral	3 (12)	0	3 (33)	3 (14)	1 (50)	2 (22)
Disagree	4 (16)	1 (50)	3 (33)	5 (23)	0	3 (33)
	25	2	9	22	2	9

Another statement gauged the relative cost/benefit of using videoconferencing: "Considering time, cost, and quality of interaction, I prefer videoconferencing to traditional area meetings for interviewing statewide candidates..." More than eight out of ten of the people responding (81%) agreed with the statement, 8% disagreed, with the remainder neutral (Table 3). Breakdown by job type showed continued strong support by county staff and much stronger support by district and state staff for this statement.

Table 3: Preference for Videoconferencing Over Area Meetings by Job Type (Missing data deleted; some cells collapsed)

	County	District	State	Total
Agree	20 (83)	2 (66)	8 (80)	30 (81)
Neutral	3 (13)	1 (33)	0 (0)	4 (11)
Disagree	1 (4)	0 (0)	2 (20)	3 (8)
	24	3	10	37
	Mean = 4.18			

The authors wondered if these trends might be affected by whether respondents viewed the videoconference locally or chose to travel to a regional viewing site. Results to this variable generally mirrored the support detailed above.

Finally, respondents had the opportunity to provide open-ended comments regarding the use of videoconferencing for this purpose. No negative comments were received. A sampling of the written comments includes:

"[I] would prefer videoconferencing for more Extension programs. [It is] a great way to communicate with county staff in all regions of the state."

"I felt involved in the process and gained insight into each candidate's philosophy. [It is] very good to be able to phone in questions. However, questions were not read completely as asked and answers had different meanings."

"[Videoconferencing is] very time efficient. It is rarely practical to hear several different candidates on different days. Having them all at one time makes this possible. Arrangements can be made to make a tape if you have a conflict. I taped it and watched them all at home."

"I do not know what it cost, but the videoconference allowed more people access to the presentations. I would have liked to have seen some questions [asked] directly from the live audience."

"Time, cost, quality justified [the] videoconference. A real success! A farmer friend has a satellite dish, and we watched the whole thing."

"[The search committee should] send questions prior to interviews as well as during live interviews [and] give a brief written response by each candidate to the same questions and make [the responses] available on request."

"This [videoconference] worked well because all the candidates already are Georgia CES employees. Had there been out-of-state candidates, perhaps there would be value in getting them out of Athens for part of the selection process."

Implications

This method of personnel interviewing seems to be most effective for positions with statewide responsibilities because videoconferencing can reach a huge audience simultaneously and provide the opportunity for more faculty to interact with the candidates. Simultaneous communication statewide is an important benefit of this process, avoiding "contamination" of viewers' assessments of candidates by rumor or by seeing the third or fourth repetition of a seminar.

Results indicated that the process was rated more positively by field staff than by district or state staff. This discrepancy was expected because field faculty usually find it most difficult to travel to regional live interview sites. District and state staff are more accustomed to participating in live candidate seminars because they are generally located in regional or statewide sites. In some cases that involve district and state staff, the ease and quality of interaction with candidates probably suffered when compared to traditional personal interaction.

The authors suspect that greater involvement of field staff in the search process will result in at least two positive outcomes for organizational morale: greater empowerment of field staff in

organizational decision-making and enhanced support for the successful candidate by field staff. Extension administrators specifically requested input from all faculty following the videoconference, and response was substantial.

A logistical question for future efforts of this type involves how local downlink sites are selected, and who should be responsible for this decision. In situations such as Georgia's, in which a systematic satellite downlink system does not exist, the authors recommend that field staff make these decisions. Such staff are generally familiar with available local downlink sites. Communications personnel with statewide responsibilities cannot maintain current lists of all potential viewing sites because of the proliferation of satellite-receiving equipment. Some agents watched the videoconference from their homes or the homes of friends. One agent participated at her board of education office.

Technical details of downlinking the broadcast should be distributed well in advance and in lay terminology to the extent possible. These details should include a telephone number for any technical questions that may arise, right up to and including the time of the broadcast. Despite the fact that all these precautions were used in the process reported here, some field staff experienced downlink problems or were unaware altogether that they could access the broadcast through virtually any satellite dish. The broadcast was recorded on VHS-format videotape for distribution on request to any faculty member unable to participate in the live videoconference. Fewer than five requests were received at the state office for this tape. Of course, most downlink sites could also record the broadcast and some sharing occurred at that level.

When selecting a suitable satellite, consider issues of accessibility as well as cost. As noted above, the satellite originally chosen for this videoconference was not suitable for some downlink sites. Ensure that a system is in place to confirm that all potential downlink sites can receive the satellite selected.

The four candidates for the position discussed in this study were informally interviewed after the videoconference for their reaction to its use. All reported feeling significant anxiety before the broadcast. Candidate anxieties as listed here with organizer responses:

- How would the order of presentation be decided? (Randomly.)
- Would candidates presenting later be able to view candidates presenting earlier? (No.)
- Would a candidate's "on-camera skills" bias viewer's assessment of his/her qualifications for the position? (Not measured here, although some viewers commented that the

successful candidate should be comfortable on camera because of the nature of the job.)

- Would a candidate's ability to respond to unrehearsed questions bias viewers' assessment of her qualifications for the position? (Not measured here, but see above.)
- Would someone screen viewer questions? (The moderator, who was also the search committee chair, received all questions on index cards on stage, reviewed them for redundancy, and posed them verbally either verbatim or paraphrased to each candidate.)

Just as all candidates reported feeling anxiety before the broadcast, all commented afterwards that it was not as bad as they feared, that time on-camera went more quickly than they expected, and that overall the process was a positive addition to the interview process.

In summary, the use of videoconferencing to involve large numbers of widespread staff holds considerable promise. The disadvantage of limited face-to-face contact is outweighed by the advantages of permitting much wider participation at a greatly reduced cost. The low rate of return and number of respondents in this study limited generalization, but the authors consider this a pilot effort with significant implications that await further testing.

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Illustration by Ian Breheny

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