



Boiling It Down

Fleetwood keypads, Option Technology software speed up training planning process.

Earlier this year, HDR Inc., an architectural engineering, planning and consulting firm in Omaha, Neb., discovered a gap in its recruitment and retention processes as well as in its professional development of key employees. So the senior management team in the engineering division met in June to determine how to remedy the situation.

"These individuals make strategic decisions for the organization that will have an impact several years into the future," explains Ralph Lassiter, director of training and organizational development at HDR.

"They have strong opinions and are very comfortable expressing them. So when you bring them together as a team, you're challenged to manage their energy, capture their wisdom and move the group to achieve a consensus decision."

As the meeting facilitator, Lassiter turned to a technology-based solution that offers a new approach to learning and management planning--hand-held radio frequency wireless keypads manufactured by Fleetwood Group Inc. of Holland, Mich., and OptionFinder, a software developed by Option Technologies Inc. in Ogden, Utah.

The technology was used to help team members identify organizational barriers, poll opinions, prioritize activities and develop a specific action plan.

To introduce the technology at the outset of the meeting, people were given a hands-on demonstration, which required them to use the keypads to respond to sample questions.

The software was loaded in a laptop computer and visually displayed the keypad responses on a large screen. "it didn't take long before people understood that they could gather the collective opinions of the

group in a matter of seconds," says Lassiter.

"What was interesting and valuable was that we could display the information in a number of different graphical formats," he says. "We were not only looking at solutions but the priority in which these solutions should be implemented."

Since the technology enables people to respond anonymously, it created an open environment that fostered candid feedback and responses that weren't influenced by the opinions of more vocal or powerful individuals. As an example, Lassiter points to three people attending the meeting who were not members of the team. He believes that while there was potential for them to be intimidated by others, they had the freedom to "vote" according to their own beliefs.

To Lassiter's surprise, the technology even added a bit of excitement to the seven-hour meeting. He says if there was a stalemate on a decision, the group eagerly used the system to reach consensus or rank priorities, then moved on to the next step.

In fact, without the tools, he believes the team would have required at least twice the amount of time to produce the same outcomes.

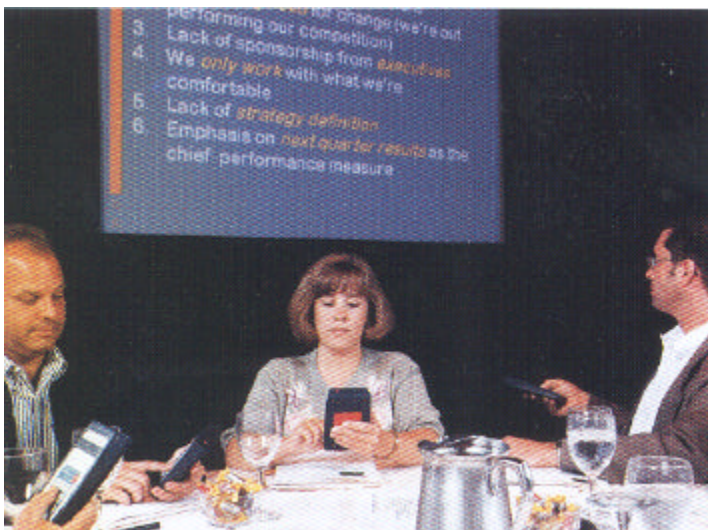
"The technology allowed existing facilitation processes to be used much more efficiently and effectively," he says. "It allowed me to move quickly through the process of initial brainstorming from this group, helping the members express their opinions and reducing a large list of possibilities down to a specific plan of action."

As facilitator, Lassiter was also able to focus on the dynamics of the group--such as mitigating through discussion disagreements between individuals. This was possible since he had less concern about saving time for more labor intensive tasks such as manually collecting and tallying individual responses.

By the time the meeting ended, not only did the team develop a specific action plan, but it also identified different business applications for the technology.

Lassiter says this technology will prove very useful during public forums where the firm presents its results on environmental studies. Likewise, during design projects, which typically involve a number of client representatives, this tool will enable them to quickly review options and help the firm gather their preferences.

"It's our organization's desire to be the service provider of choice," says Lassiter. "in order to do so, we need to provide our clients with a full range of services that meet and anticipate their needs. We see this technology as being integral in our being able to accomplish this."



Keypad responses show up immediately on screen.

OptionFinder is a registered trademark of Option Technologies Inc.