IBM dives into Second Life

Meeting, collaborating, and brainstorming in a virtual world

Shruti Gandhi

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Check out Global Innovation Outlooks' first-of-a-kind roundtable in Second Life, diving into conducting a collaborative, open innovation meeting in Second Life. The author also discusses tools to use for brainstorming and best practices to consider during planning.

Global Innovation Outlook at IBM dives into Second Life

"Our USC participants were impressed by the interactive nature of the GIO Conference. The tools and approach inspired us to re-examine how we use our own Second Life environment," Jerry Whitfield, associate director, Marshall School of Business, said.

Virtual worlds are good for many things. They are great places to escape from reality for a while, wear outrageous clothes, or meet a complete stranger from around the world. But as IBM's Global Innovation Outlook (GIO) team (see Related topics) found out last month, virtual worlds are also a great place to host a very real-world, business-oriented roundtable discussion.

The GIO roundtable in Second Life explored the current GIO topic of Smarter Cities with a group of students and faculty at University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business. The meeting had four goals:

• Gain insight from influencers related to smarter cities
• Explore the effectiveness of virtual space for external collaboration
• Distinguish IBM® as a leader in collaborative innovation
• Extend relationships building on an existing IBM partnership

For the meeting to achieve all of the above goals, it would require a great deal of preparation. We held a "meet-and-greet" activity at the Marshall School's island in Second Life (see Related topics). The purpose was to introduce the topic, test some of the tools that would be used in the meeting, and generally break the ice. Each participant — six IBMers and 11 from USC) had different levels of familiarity with Second Life, so the meet-and-greet was a useful way to put all participants at ease and on a level playing field.

This session was primarily used to overcome technical difficulties, tone setting, and introductions. Technical difficulties were addressed before the roundtable so we could use the roundtable for a
productive insight-gathering session. This is when we provided a protocol for use of gestures, local chat, and general Second Life meeting etiquette. Tone setting was important, so the participants had an idea of the level of insights we were looking as it easy to lose time with non-meeting related issues in Second Life. For introductions, we used the "BrainBoard," which was also the tool we were going to use at the roundtable, so it served two purposes.

The actual roundtable took place a week later on IBM’s own Systems EduCenter Island (see Related topics). The GIO team facilitated a conversation on Smarter Cities with subtopics that included public safety, transportation, education, social services, energy and utilities, and healthcare. And we used unique, custom-made brainstorming tools to aid in the discussions.

**Figure 1. Part 1 of the roundtable in a meeting room**

The roundtable was divided into three parts: First was a general discussion on Smarter Cities in a formal meeting room; second was a discussion on subsystems of smarter cities using the "Opinionator" behind the meeting room; and third was about education, for which we used the "BrainBoard." The meeting room was built to be formal with a U-shaped table with chairs around them and snacks in the corner. The facilitator could stand in the middle of the table to run the meeting. Setting and questions were scripted in preparation of the actual meeting to engage the participants in an interactive conversation.
The "Opinionator" is a virtual area broken up into sections. Each section was labeled as one of the six urban subtopics listed above. We asked participants different questions, such as "If you were the mayor of Los Angeles, which urban system would you make a priority?" We had participants "vote with their feet" and walk into the different sections as a form of response to the questions.

This kind of interactive polling was informative and entertaining. For example, the results to the above question were as follows: The results? transportation: 30 percent; energy: 30 percent; education: 30 percent; safety: 10 percent; and healthcare: 0 percent.
Figure 3. Part 3 of the meeting room around the "BrainBoard"

The last part of the meeting was using the "BrainBoard," where we asked participants to answer questions related to education and answer the question by putting a sticky note on the board. Later, the facilitator organized the answers into four sections. Insights in education were heavily focused on integration of technology in classrooms.

The conversation yielded other insights, as well, including the idea that if neighboring cities could be connected by high-speed public transportation systems, like magnetic levitation trains, each city would not need to be all things to all people. Los Angeles could focus on industry, while San Diego became a healthcare center, and San Francisco an education center. There was also a good amount of discussion about the role mobile technology could play in not only speeding urban transactions but in engaging citizens more tightly with each other and city government.

What did we learn about hosting meetings in virtual worlds?

Along with learning about the Smarter Cities topic, the GIO team learned a number of valuable lessons about what it takes to host a meeting in Second Life:

- Use simple virtual world-specific tools and objects to engage participants and take advantage of the 3-D nature of the environment. The "Opinionator" worked really well. It was simple and easy to understand, even for people who had never been in a virtual environment. Other tools, however, like the BrainBoard, were too complicated and unwieldy. It required too many steps for participants to complete the relatively simple task of typing a thought on a note and tacking it to a virtual bulletin board.
- Consider the audience and balance the real world with the virtual space. For example, if your audience is new to virtual places, some real-world "handles" will help them feel more at ease. The GIO meeting was divided into three parts — first in a simulated real-life meeting room to ease into the meeting with some familiar objects; second, using the Opinionator; and third, using the BrainBoard. We improvised the use of gestures, questions, and timing allocated for each section in each practice session.
• Understand your influencers' background to get best participation. As with any meeting, you want to know your participants well. But this is especially important with virtual meetings because it is so easy for participants to tune out.
• Create a detailed script to help the meeting stay on track. You can easily get lost by flying and teleporting in a virtual world if it isn't thought through.
• Finally, consult with the wider Virtual Universe Community inside IBM for a wealth of knowledge, help, experience and enthusiasm.

Figure 4. Final Pose with USC participants and IBM team
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