



WhitePaperTM

Advantages of Electronic Participation in Workshops and Other Meetings IIA CSA Conference Presentation

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Forward

Electronic participation processes require substantial up-front planning and detailed execution. I think the payoffs are worth it. This paper explores some of the reasons.

Over the years, Option Technologies has developed and used a variety of electronic participation technologies. They range from OptionFinder (a commercial-grade keypad system) to virtual meetings occurring over LANS, WANS and the Internet.

Most of our experience comes from users of OptionFinder, where a large part of our business is helping our clients to successfully use keypad systems in their face-to-face meetings. Since a minor segment of these clients are in CSA/RSA, we see many innovative uses and processes that come from other disciplines. Many of the lessons presented here come from other disciplines.

In the face-to-face meetings that I design, facilitate, or coach others on, electronic participation is blended with traditional techniques. In fact, it is important to position the electronic portion as a “useful tool,” rather than the dominant method. This is largely because the affects are so powerful. I have many stories about how electronic participation affects groups, and this paper attempts to summarize some of the salient points.



I don't like to hear a vendor sales pitch at a conference, and I will be disappointed if I come off that way in this paper. I want to give you “food for thought” to give you something of a theoretical framework for making decisions about the use of electronic participation. It is not right every time and not right for every organization...but it is right for some.

What is the CSA/RSA Movement Really Trying to Accomplish?

Sometimes it is easy to get so involved in implementation that one loses track of the big picture. The ideal end result of your CSA/RSA efforts would be that the people you

involve begin to think like an internal auditor...that they think about organizational goals, risks to achieving them, and controls that will reduce the risks. As one general auditor put it only somewhat facetiously, "Of course we have to do this (CSA); we have more billion dollar companies than we have internal auditors. We need to move responsibility for risk reduction out of the IA office. We cannot have people thinking that controlling risk is someone else's job!"

But how can we help the troops to understand complex control models, risk frameworks, etc? How can we help them to care about risk and its control?

How can we understand the strengths and weaknesses of the control environment in the field? And, once we do understand, how can we get management attention? How can we tap into the wisdom that exists in the people who actually do the work in our company? They usually know what is going on...even how to fix it, but they won't tell us.

We have thousands of people out there who know what impropriety is. But they watch it happen and don't tell us. How can we change that?

Enter Paul Makosz and CSA. He shifted the paradigm.

What Does Management Like about CSA/RSA?

I have been attending CSA conferences for many years, and many of the sessions I attended were co-presented by IA practitioners and organizational line managers. When the manager spoke, they went on and on praising the benefits of the CSA process. But not once did I ever hear them talk in terms of risk and control.

When the line managers sing praises to CSA they invariably talk about the changes they see in the work cultures and employee attitudes that flow from the workshops. They report that workgroups who participate in the workshops come away eager to participate in making their work unit and business processes better. The candid workshop discussions of what is right and not right seem to carry over into the day-to-day work life of the unit. Information and ideas seem to flow more freely.

In short, the CSA workshops produce residual effects that contribute to the continuous improvement of the business unit and business processes.

All of a sudden, IA is their ally in improving their business unit...and you get invited back!

What Do Workshop Participants Like about CSA/RSA?

Whether we like it or not, the days of top-down management and top-to-bottom communication are still very much with us. Many, if not most, of our organizations rarely

systematically ask the workforce for their input and it seems to the workforce that their input is ignored anyway.

Yet, the business management literature is full of success stories about “empowered” employees who contribute regularly and significantly to the continuous improvement of the enterprise. It is also full of failure stories about empty suggestion boxes, management versus labor, and disenfranchised unhappy employees.

The evidence is pretty clear that involved, empowered employees add tremendous value to the enterprise, and that disenfranchised “don’t ask me, I just work here” employees are an indicator of bad times ahead.



It is also clear that the cumulative wisdom of the workforce is huge and very valuable if properly tapped. And the way to tap it is to show respect and truly listen to what they have to say.

So, along comes CSA. Important, skilled people (auditors) really believe the troops have something valuable to contribute. They treat the troops with respect, listen to and document their opinions, and work in confidence. And the troops eagerly respond.

What Do CSA Professionals Like about CSA/RSA?

We regularly ask our CSA/RSA clients where they see the value in OptionFinder® polling in the workshops. Their responses are quite consistent and fairly utilitarian:

By far, they see the biggest benefit to be what the electronics do to the group dynamics. Whether it is electronic polling or simply recording comments while projecting them for all to see, the effects are dramatic. Immediately displaying the results of polling, in particular, make it far easier to facilitate honest, in-depth, and focused discussion.

Ultimately they will have to create a report that combines the results of several workshops. Electronic participation structures the form of the data before it is collected in ways that make it reasonably consistent across workshops. In short, it makes writing the report easier.

Let's face it. Not many people want to be the "whistle blower." In fact, despite recently enacted laws, most employees figure blowing the whistle on impropriety to be, at best, a career-limiting move. Anonymous polling however, allows people to safely say that something is wrong. Then, when the results show that many believe that something is wrong, it is far easier for them to "explain the results" (*why* we believe something is wrong), than it is for them to individually "blow the whistle" on wrongdoing.

Quantitative data (e.g., self-assessment profiles) make nice charts that seem to get management attention and action. Electronic participation makes this much.

Electronic Participation – What is it?

Group Decision Support Systems include all electronically mediated tools to help people work together effectively. A multi-party teleconference or an internet-mediated discussion are included in a broad definition of the genre. IBM's Lotus Notes and Microsoft's NetMeeting are significant software platform contributions attempting to shift the way in which groups work together. And let's not overlook the dramatic impact email has had as a workgroup tool!

All GDSS tools strive for several benefits:

- Produce better decisions, better information, or otherwise better outcomes from the process
- Allow more people to provide input to the process
- Produce efficiency by saving time
- Let the computers document the process and outcomes

New tools are available every day, but consider this: We have yet to master the effective use of teleconferencing (been in on one lately?), or email (what do I do with 75 new messages this morning?), or team authoring/editing (who made that change and why?), etc, etc, etc.

It takes time, energy and focus to use these tools effectively. They are not natural to us humans. Nor can we absorb the new "tool of the month."

My advice to all who are heading into GDSS (which is nearly all of us) is fundamentally "the simpler the better."

How is Electronic Participation Different from other forms of Participation?

.There are plenty who rightly argue that electronic participation is not much different than more traditional methods of participation. For example, in a CSA/RSA workshop they will argue that flip charts, index cards, sticky walls, and good old listening and facilitation skills can deliver similar outcomes. In fact, they may argue that the electronics actually *get in the way*, that they *intrude* into the natural information generation process. As a facilitator myself, I often make just this argument and frequently design and facilitate processes using only traditional methods.

•On the other hand, there are plenty who argue that electronic participation is tremendously different from traditional methods...and I make that argument too. Which way I go has to do with the needs of the process.

Electronic participation is a good fit for the CSA process for many reasons, but among them:

- It is easier to facilitate getting important information
- It is easier to create a process that is consistent across facilitators and situations
- Richer information can be generated and captured in less time
- It is easier to produce the report
- The quantitative aspects of polling data help get the right message to management, and to stimulate management to act

View #1: Electronic Participation is to Collect Information

People who use electronic participation methods often think the purpose of their activities is to collect information. Certainly that is the case with most CSA practitioners as evidenced by their workshop designs and reports.

When we facilitators ask for input we naturally distinguish between factual information (“such and such *is* happening in our department”) and opinion (“*I think* this is what we should do”). Either way, the primary outcome of the process is to collect information and we don’t often think of the difference between fact and opinion.

However, participants do appreciate the difference. Participants in the workshops are not particularly surprised when asked about the facts. Indeed, they know that you know that they are probably the *only* place you can get the facts about what is really going on.

However, they are really surprised (and delighted) that you also care about their opinion. It is your examination of their opinion that leads to view #2...

View #2: Electronic Participation is to Mobilize Change

View #2 holds that most organizations could benefit from *truly involving* the troops in almost any aspect of improving the business. And there are several good ways to get them involved:

First, if they are involved in identifying and recognizing the need for change, they develop the desire to see the change happen. Some will become champions, and others eager followers. But in any case, the odds that change will actually happen increase dramatically because the people *want* to see change rather than have it forced upon them.

Once the need for change is recognized and the desire for something different is established, getting from here to there still needs to be planned by someone. Again, involving the troops in *what to do* to achieve the change makes a huge and positive difference when it comes time to implement.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, when people dig deeply into some aspect of what it takes to make the business run, they become educated about it, perhaps for the first time. A good understanding of the business process makes it easy for them to understand why some actions make sense and others don't.

This is very different from the legacy Taylor's scientific management has left us: That employees should only be told *what* to do, never *why* it makes sense to do it.

So, What Does All this Mean – View #1

You internal auditors see that the electronics in the workshop make it easier and more efficient to generate, record and manage good information.

Your participants feel more comfortable talking about sensitive issues when they can see (from data) that others feel the way they do.

When your participants see their words typed into the record while projected on the public screen, they know they have been heard. And when they see the results of their assessment or prioritizing polling projected, they know the opinion displayed is theirs, that it has not been "fudged" or watered down or sweetened in some way (this turns out to be a real problem when data is collected and a long time period occur between data collection and reporting).

So, What Does All this Mean – View #2

High levels of trust and candor develop in CSA/RSA workshops, which get the participants involved at an emotional level. It is the emotional side, rather than the

intellectual side, that generates the desire, passion, and champions necessary to make change happen.

The self-assessment model itself is a brilliant method for creating the desire for change because it clearly lays out where improvement (change) is needed.

As participants progress through a self-assessment poll they are rating elements that you (IA) think are important to the success of the business. For example, they may see that you value open flow of information or honest discussion of problems; and it may be the first time they realize that someone really cares about whether or not things really work this way.

Many CSA workshops also include a segment where the participants generate solutions to various weaknesses. But a long “laundry list” of suggested changes is *not* what most managers need. By having the participants prioritize the solutions according to some payoff criteria, two good things happen: First, management is likely to implement the top few. Second, the participants see that their best ideas were listened to. Implementation is much easier when it happens to the people who thought it up.

Most importantly, all of this helps the troops to think in terms of business success, the risks to achieving it, and what they could or should do about it. You are recruiting allies.

The Downside (Traps)

High levels of preparation are required to create successful applications of electronic participation.

Every step of the process used in the workshop must be carefully considered. A good facilitator in a traditional workshop (no electronics) can usually “wing it” fairly successfully. Even an excellent facilitator will stumble if the process is poor when electronics are involved.

The single biggest risk CSA/RSA poses to the enterprise is what we psychologists call “the illegitimate violation of legitimate expectations.” Participants in a well-conducted workshop with electronic participation tell it like it is...they drop their defenses, bare their souls, take personal risks, and tell you the truth as they see it. And it isn’t just their own opinion, it is the collective wisdom of the whole group in the workshop.

So, this develops a reasonable expectation that they will see some positive changes in exchange.

If they see something positive happen because of their input, they become empowered and will contribute even more to the enterprise.

On the other hand, if nothing happens, you have violated their reasonable expectations. They chalk it up to one more waste of time. They become cynical and reluctant to contribute more than their 40 hours.

And if they see any fallout that looks even remotely like retribution, you have violated their trust, and you will probably never get it back. And the grapevine will carry it far and wide.

For a detailed discussion of how to develop effective workshop processes, using electronic participation or not, see *Genius Comes from Asking the Right Questions*, the paper I presented at the 1998 CSA meeting in Chicago.

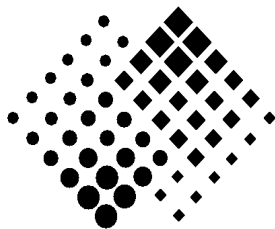
For a detailed discussion of the value of keypad polling systems, see *Good things come in small packages*, a chapter published in a book about GDSS.

Both papers are available at www.optionfinder.com

About the Author

Kimbal L. Wheatley is founder and Chairman of Option Technologies. He is directly responsible for the conceptual development of OTI's keypad EMS -- OptionFinder. Mr. Wheatley has been a scientist, college professor, academic administrator, hospital administrator, consultant, marketer and entrepreneur. His ability to switch from concentrated detailed analysis to highly creative brainstorming has permitted him to work effectively with many different kinds of people in a variety of settings.

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Risk Self-Assessment: Increasing speed, quality, and focus in the Audit Planning Process. *Review and clarify the business strategy, identify and prioritize the risks to the company, benefits of the Self-Assessment approach.*

CSA Design and Facilitation Using Keypad Technology: Presented at IIA CSA Conference, 1997. *Reliable methods, KISS mantra, staying focused on desired outcomes, participants interpretation of polling data, rehearsal for facilitators.*

The Genius Comes from Asking the Right Question: Presented at IIA CSA Conference, 1998. *Keypads change the group dynamic, an outcome oriented way to design workshops, the Art of Asking the Right Question, Using Scales, what to do with the responses to those questions.*

Advantages of Electronic Participation in Workshops and Other Meetings: Presented at IIA CSA Conference, 1999. *What is the CSA/RSA movement trying to accomplish, What do management, participants think of CSA/RSA, what do CSA professionals like about electronic participation, how is electronic participation different from other forms of participation.*

Complying with Medicare Guidelines: Lessons from the Auditors: Lessons from the audit community, the self-assessment workshop, introduction of real-time, anonymous polling, CSA methods and healthcare compliance, changing the culture begins in the workshops and continues in a cycle of improvement and risk reduction, assessment data serves as evidence of due care, benefits felt throughout the organization.

Good Things Come in Small Packages: Facilitated Meetings Using the OptionFinder System. *Benefits of keypads in meetings, designing the OptionFinder System into a meeting process, facilitating with the OptionFinder System.* Original publication reference: Flexner, William A. & Wheatley, Kimbal L. (1997). When You Really Must Have Them; Face-to-Face Meetings Using Keypad Electronic Meeting Systems. In David Coleman (Ed.) , Groupware (pp.193-205). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Enhancing Your Presentations with the OptionFinder Audience Polling System. *Understanding the technology, designing effective questions, timing of questions, characteristics of good questions, formatting questions, suggestions for preparing, asking, and discussing questions.*