

# Meetings in the UK

*A study of trends, costs, and attitudes  
toward business travel and teleconferencing,  
and their impact on productivity*

An MCI WorldCom Conferencing White Paper

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### *1.1 We Have To Stop Meeting Like This*

Meetings dominate business life in the UK today, with the typical manager spending up to one-third of each business day absorbed in meetings. In addition, full-time employees are working longer hours than they used to. According to the Office for National Statistics' Labour Force Survey, the average manager or administrator now works over 45 hours a week. Time spent organising, travelling to and attending meetings accounts for an increasingly large proportion of the working day.

Meetings come in all shapes and sizes and are held for an infinite variety of reasons: to brainstorm, sell, negotiate, inform, brief, collaborate, and strategize - just to name a few. They take place in the office, across town, across the country, and around the globe - whether in person, by phone, or by teleconference.

Travelling to business meetings is a necessity often taken for granted by employees and employers. But with business travel costs continually on the rise, increasing pressure to reduce corporate expenses, and the changing dynamics of today's work force, it's time for UK businesses to take a hard look at the costs of its meetings. These costs encompass more than just the transport, hotel, and meals appearing on the typical expenses claim. The price of travelling to meeting after meeting is also paid in the currencies of lost productivity, wasted time, unattended-to work in the office, and time away from home and family - not to mention the stress and frustration involved in the travel itself.

MCI WorldCom Conferencing believes organisations must reassess the methods by which business meetings are conducted to make them more effective and less costly. This white paper, based on a study commissioned by MCI WorldCom Conferencing and conducted by The Research Business *International*, provides a snapshot of business meetings in the UK today - their costs, characteristics, content, and impact on a typical organisation.



## 2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

MCI WorldCom Conferencing commissioned the “Meetings in the UK” study to gain a better understanding of meeting trends and the needs of businesses across the UK. Some of the most important findings are:

- Busy professionals attend nearly 60 meetings a month. As a result of the huge demands put on their time, nearly half say they are forced to miss some meetings they are asked to attend.
- The cost of the average six-person face-to-face meeting involving travel is over £1,600 when taking into account all the time required for preparation, travel and attendance. Per-person savings of up to 92 percent have been achieved in the US using audio or videoconferencing.
- As the amount of travel involved in attending these meetings shows little sign of decreasing, companies are under pressure to keep costs down. Over three-quarters of professionals interviewed said they felt pressure to watch their budgets.
- UK business professionals travel frequently, with 43 percent having attended meetings abroad in the past year. France and Germany are the most common destinations.
- In addition to the monetary costs incurred, business travel can have a strong impact on employee stress and well-being. Half of the busy professionals interviewed say they worry about work piling up at the office during their absence, and many (42%) find it stressful to spend time away from their families.
- Fifty-two percent of busy professionals have worked from home using technology to stay connected to the office. Nearly half of those who have ‘telecommuted’ say they do so because it is more productive.
- An overwhelming majority of meeting attendees (92%) value meetings as providing an opportunity to contribute - indicating that successful meetings may be a contributory factor in ensuring employee job satisfaction.
- Preparation prior to meetings is a critical component of productivity. The average amount of time spent on preparation for meetings described as ‘very or extremely productive’ is just over 51 minutes, which is significantly more than the preparation time for a meeting which is ‘not very or not at all’ productive (37 minutes).



- Four out of five professionals admit to daydreaming during meetings, while nearly a quarter have dozed off!

### 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this research study and MCI WorldCom Conferencing's extensive experience as a global conferencing provider, the following recommendations are offered:

- *Analyse the ways and means by which you and your organisation conduct meetings; map out a plan to reduce costs and improve productivity.* More than 41 percent of business meetings analysed in this research were deemed either fairly productive or not productive (and many of these involved costly travel). For each meeting, consider if travel is absolutely necessary to conduct the business at hand.
- *Recognise that meetings have both hard and soft costs and consider both costs when making decisions on how and where to meet.* When meeting with a new or prospective client, nothing can replace the value of meeting face-to-face to build rapport and establish what will hopefully be a long-lasting relationship. However, in-person meetings can be nine times as costly as audio or videoconferencing, and have far greater costs associated with them in terms of time spent away from home and added stress. Conference calls (whether by telephone, video, or the Internet) are a smart, convenient and productive way to replace some of the meetings that would otherwise require travel.
- *Take advantage of today's technology to conduct more effective meetings.* To supplement audio and videoconferencing, there are services available that enable meetings to be recorded and accessed via a freephone call so no one has to waste time briefing others who could not attend. In addition, the Internet holds enormous potential to improve the productivity of meetings including the ability to view, present, and edit documents with hundreds of meeting participants.
- *Improve the effectiveness of every meeting – whether in-person or virtual – by following these guidelines:*
  - Set clear objectives for each meeting based on the type of meeting being held.
  - Focus meetings on substantive topics, e.g. problem identification, progress toward quantitative goals, new ideas for improvement, lessons learned, etc.



- Always prepare and publish an agenda.
- During the meeting, periodically summarise the discussion.
- Reinforce oral communications with written/published documents.
- Conclude with a summary of decisions and action items.
- Understand that the meeting dynamics differ for in-person meetings vs. those conducted by audio or videoconferencing.

#### 4. THE COST OF MEETINGS

##### ***4.1 An Average Six-Person Face-To-Face Meeting Costs A Staggering £1,645***

Meetings are a significant cost for UK businesses. Our analysis looks at two types of costs: “hard” costs, associated with direct out-of-pocket expenditures such as travel, food and hotels (but excluding the cost of meeting facilities), and “soft” costs, including the personnel costs of the meeting participants. Soft cost calculations are based on the average hourly wage determined by the Office of National Statistics’ “Labour Force” survey.

The vast majority of business meetings conducted in the UK are face-to-face. Our study shows that whilst a quarter of business professionals have used videoconferencing in the past, very few do so on a regular basis. Less than three percent of the meetings conducted in the two-week diary portion of this research were conducted by audio or videoconference. Our study showed that the cost of the average six-person meeting, conducted face-to-face with five attendees travelling 50 miles or more, is a staggering £1,645. If participants were to travel to the meeting by plane, the overall cost would be nearer to £3,000.

Figures based on MCI WorldCom Conferencing’s extensive experience as a conferencing provider in the more mature US market (where nearly a quarter of meetings are conducted by audio / videoconference<sup>1</sup>), are an indication that there is a huge opportunity to make considerable savings in the UK market. The data from MCI WorldCom Conferencing’s “Meetings in America” (June 1998) research found the per-

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<sup>1</sup> Source: “Meetings in America” conducted by MCI WorldCom Conferencing (1998)



person costs of an audio or videoconference meeting represent savings of 92 percent and 76 percent respectively when compared to a face-to-face meeting travelled to by plane<sup>2</sup>.

The meeting scenario in table 1, based on figures from “Meetings in America”, shows the costs incurred for a meeting involving six people in the US differ significantly depending on the method by which the meeting is conducted.

Table 1: Meeting Costs by Method of Attendance “Meetings in America” study<sup>3</sup>

	<b>Attend Face-to-face Travel by Plane</b>	<b>Attend via Audioconference</b>	<b>Attend via Videoconference</b>
Meeting length	2 hours	2 hours	2 hours
Number of Attendees	6 people	6 people	6 people
Number Travelling to Attend	5 people	0 people	0 people
TOTAL TIME	64 hours, 59 mins.	20 hours, 04 mins.	19 hours, 38 mins.
TOTAL SOFT COST <sup>4</sup>	£904	£279	£273
TOTAL HARD COST <sup>5</sup>	£2,985	£217	£954
<b>TOTAL MEETING COST</b>	<b>£3,889</b>	<b>£496</b>	<b>£1,227</b>

As the table shows, face-to-face meetings requiring plane travel are considerably more time-consuming and expensive than meetings held via audio or videoconferencing. Whilst face-to-face meetings tend to require more preparation time and last longer in duration, the most significant component of the total time involved in these meetings is the time spent in transit. Business professionals are losing valuable time caught up in traffic jams, flight or train delays and strikes while more work piles up on their desks. In

<sup>2</sup> Costs for face-to-face meeting include travel and accommodation, time spent preparing for, travelling to, attending meeting and follow-up. Costs for audio / videoconference include time spent preparing for, attending meeting and follow-up, plus telecommunications costs. Employee costs based on Office of National Statistics’ Labour Force survey (Summer 1998) for managerial and professional occupations (£12.28).

<sup>3</sup> Source: Figures based on per person costs taken from “Meetings in America”. Exchange rate £1=\$1.66

<sup>4</sup> Soft cost includes time for preparation, travel, meeting and follow-up

<sup>5</sup> Hard cost includes transportation, hotel and meals, and telecommunications costs



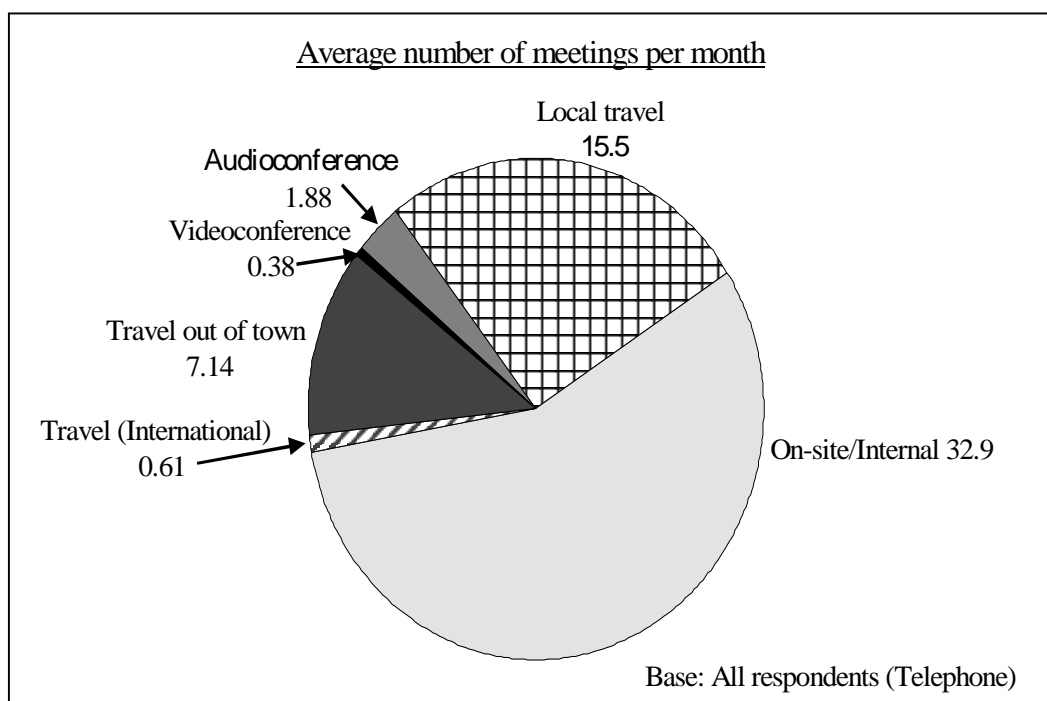
contrast, those who take advantage of technology are able to remain productive at the office and avoid the stress and cost often associated with business travel.

## 5. TIME FAMINE

### 5.1 *'Sorry, They're In A Meeting' - Busy Professionals Average Nearly 60 Meetings A Month*

Our study shows business meetings continue to dominate the working day. On average, busy professionals attend 10 meetings a month involving travel out of town or an audioconference / videoconference. In addition there are a further 48 internal or local face-to-face meetings a month - making a total of nearly 60 meetings a month! Senior level executives spend the most time in meetings with an estimated 64 a month.

Figure 1:



One significant result of the demand to attend an abundance of meetings is an increase in missed meetings. Nearly half of busy professionals say they miss at least one meeting a week - more amongst the heaviest meeting goers (average 1.6 a week).

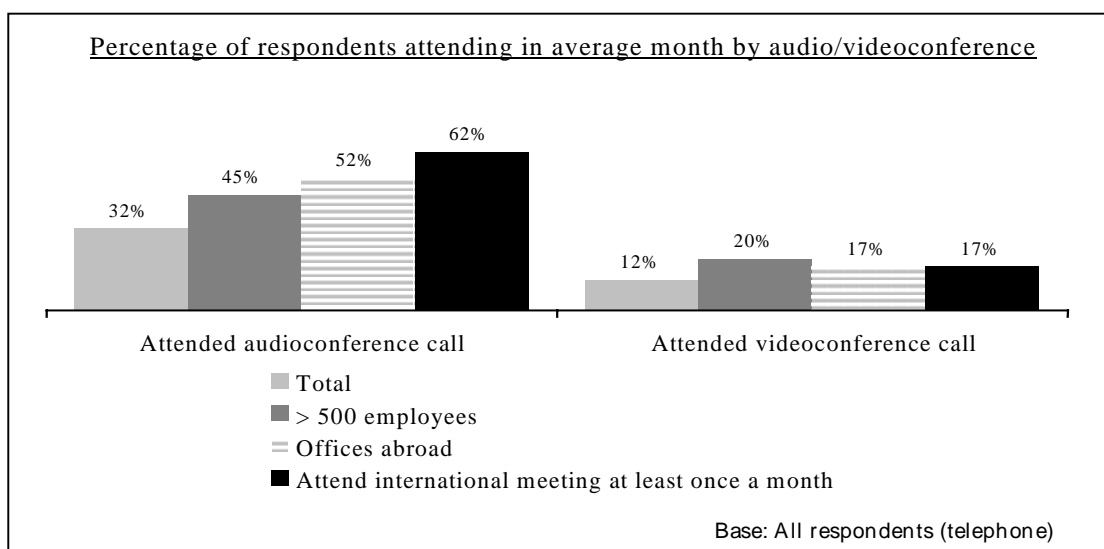
A large number of meetings involve situations where the respondent normally needs to travel out of town, conduct a meeting by audio or videoconference, or have someone else travel to meet them. The average business professional interviewed attended 17 such





meetings each month (higher amongst senior executives and other professionals such as engineers, lawyers or bankers). The majority of these were conducted face-to-face, although larger companies and those with offices abroad used audio and videoconferencing facilities more frequently.

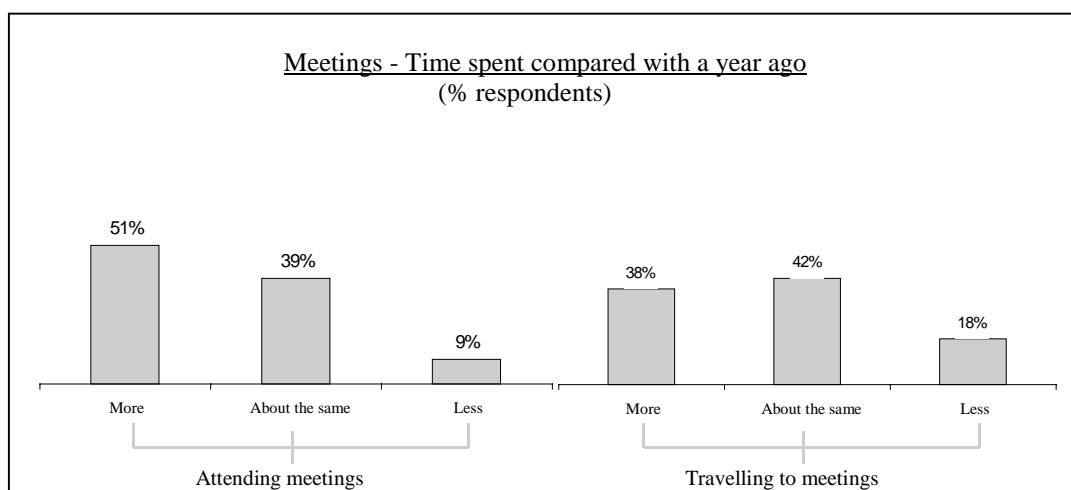
Figure 2:



The research also confirms what many have noted anecdotally: professionals are attending more and more meetings. Just over half of respondents (more women than men) feel they are attending more meetings than they did a year ago, compared to only nine percent who feel they are attending fewer.

Alongside this, time spent travelling shows little sign of decreasing, with four out of five respondents saying they are spending more or the same amount of time getting to and from meetings compared with a year ago.

Figure 3:



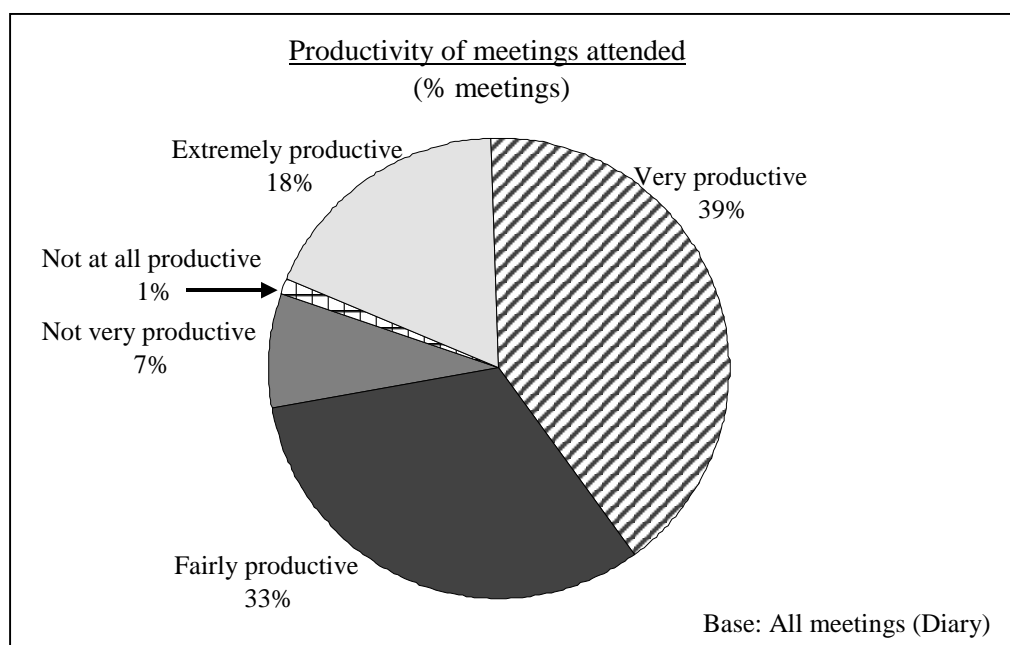


## 6. PRODUCTIVITY

### 6.1 *Room For Improvement?*

Whilst professionals tended to express a fairly negative point of view when asked about their overall attitudes toward meeting productivity, they were more likely to judge individual meetings in a more positive light. Over half (57%) of the meetings attended were judged to be extremely or very productive. A further third (33%) were ‘fairly productive’ and eight percent were either ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ productive.

Figure 4:



### 6.2 *The Initiator Is A Key Determinant Of Productivity*

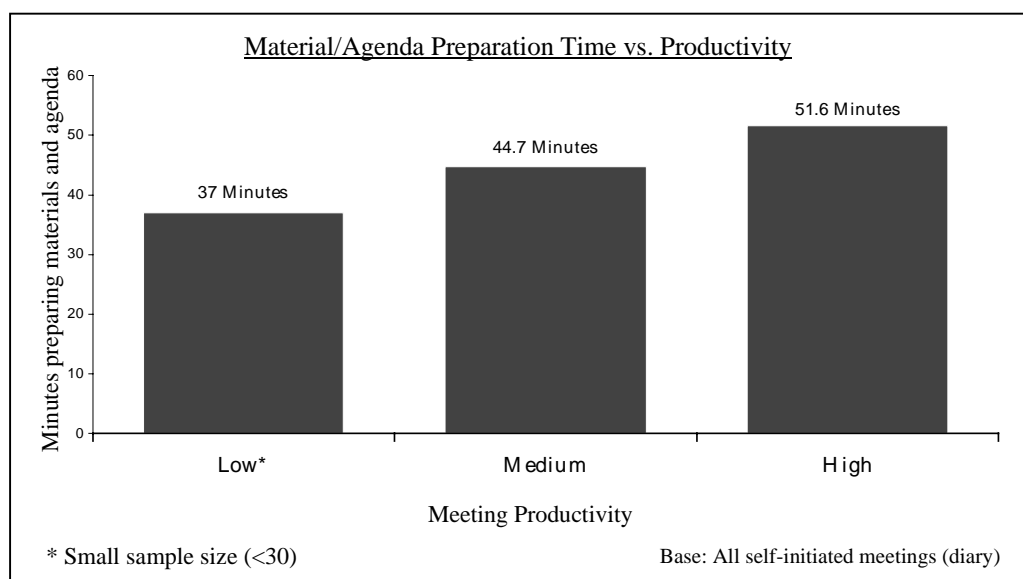
Meeting productivity varied according to who initiated the meeting. Not surprisingly, meetings initiated by the respondent and also by management were more likely to be evaluated as extremely or very productive (67% and 64% respectively). Interestingly, meetings set up by subordinates were thought to be most worthwhile (71%). In contrast, meetings initiated by customers (60%), peers (54%), prospective customers (46%), and suppliers (36%) were less likely to be judged positively.



### 6.3 *Preparation Is The Key*

The study shows a direct correlation between preparation time and meeting productivity, specifically in terms of the preparation of materials and agenda.

Figure 5:



The more administrative tasks such as co-ordinating participants and setting up meeting locations did not correlate as strongly with high meeting productivity.

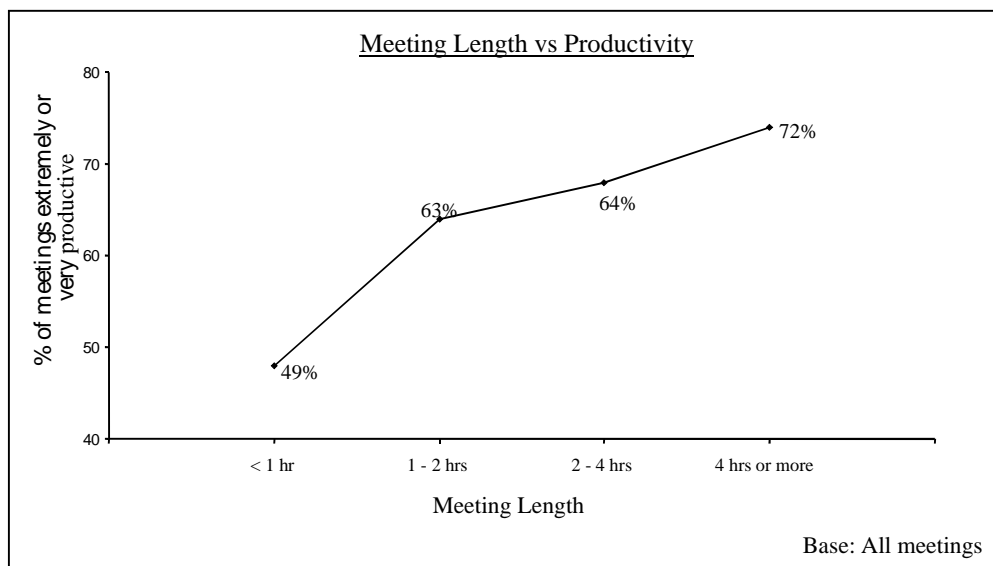
Meetings involving document review were also seen to be more productive (71%) than those designed to take the shape of an open discussion (56%) or presentation (57%).

### 6.4 *A Surprise: Longer Meetings Are More Productive*

The “Meetings in America” study found a definite link between meeting length and productivity in the US. Similarly in the UK, it appears that although longer meetings use up a significant proportion of the attendees’ day, they are generally thought to be more useful (particularly those more than four hours in length).



Figure 6:



### 6.5 *Why We Meet: An Opportunity To Contribute*

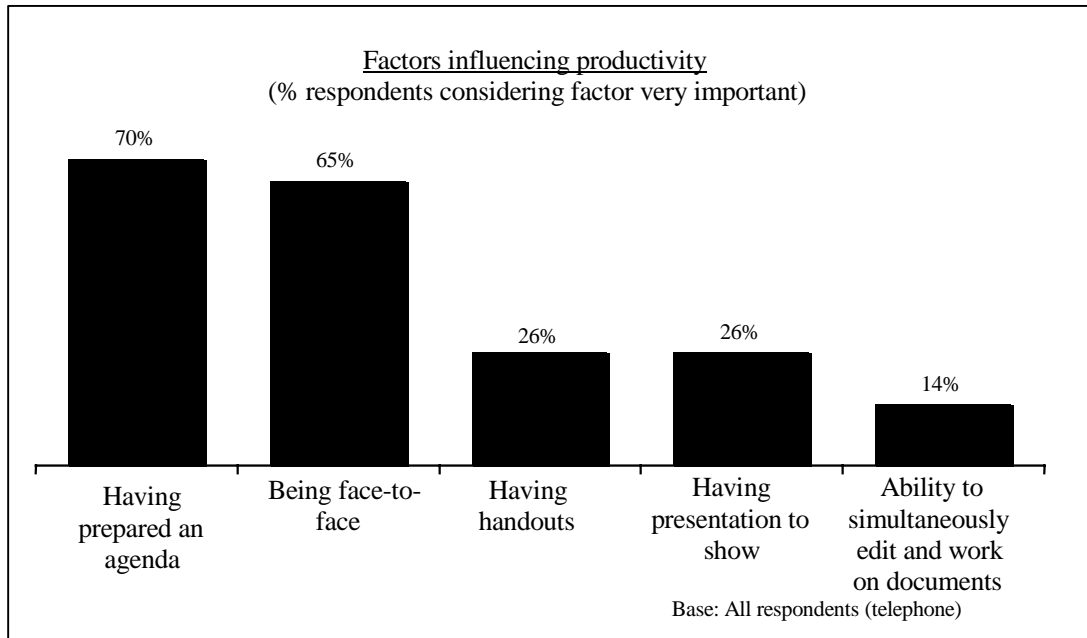
Whilst the response to meetings was not always favourable - just over half (57%) of respondents agreed that 'Meetings are always a good use of my time', most respondents (92%) were united in their opinion that meetings gave them an opportunity to contribute their ideas.

### 6.6 *Keys To Productivity*

To determine the importance of other factors influencing productivity, busy professionals were asked what they thought were the keys to productive meetings. The most important consideration was deemed to be 'having an agenda for all to refer to' (70% thought this to be very important), followed by 'being face-to-face' (65%). Having handouts or a presentation was seen as less crucial to the successful running of a productive meeting (26%). Fourteen percent felt that the ability to simultaneously edit and work on documents was very important.



Figure 7:



### 6.7 *Other Factors Influencing Productivity*

Two other factors appearing to affect productivity are worth mentioning. More ‘ad hoc’ meetings were judged to be productive (60%) than regularly scheduled meetings (53%). This is perhaps not unexpected since ad hoc meetings are more likely to address new material that may be of more interest to participants than ‘regular’ weekly updates. The other interesting factor we discovered related to the respondents’ involvement in post-meeting duties. When the respondent was responsible for distributing meeting minutes they deemed 81 percent of meetings productive. This compared with 54 percent when the respondent had no post-meeting duties to perform. One explanation for this is that the respondents’ involvement may have generated more ‘buy-in’ to the meeting’s purpose.

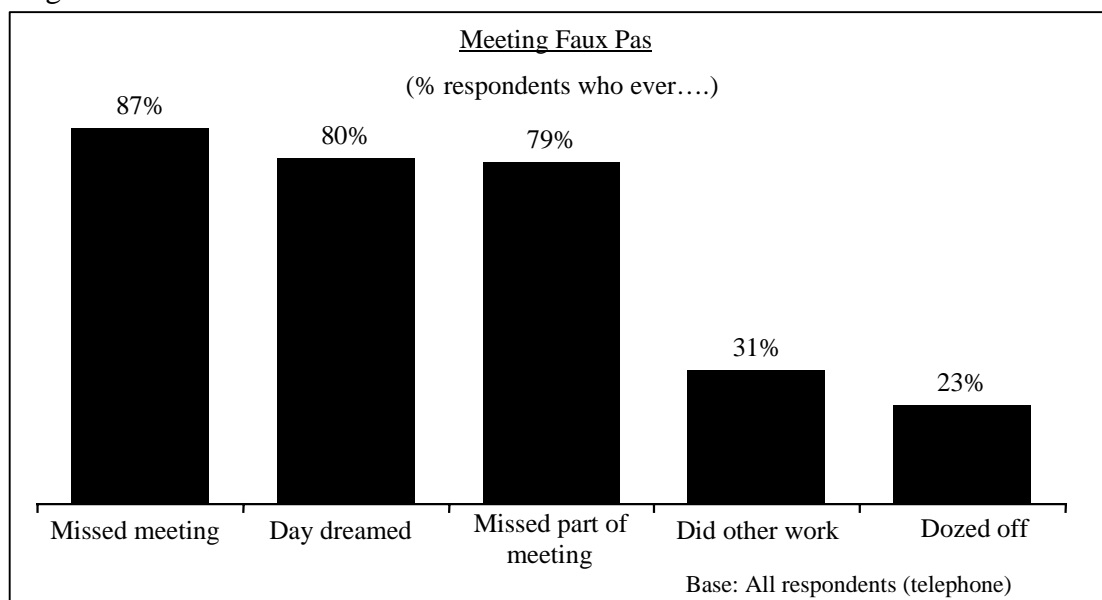


## 7. MEETING BEHAVIOUR

### 7.1 *Meeting Faux Pas*

One of the more interesting findings was the extent to which our respondents, the heavy meeting-goers, had experienced dysfunctional meetings or meeting behaviour. Most of the respondents (79%-87%) admit to daydreaming, missing meetings or parts of meetings. Just under a third have brought other work to meetings and nearly a quarter say they have dozed off during meetings!

Figure 8:

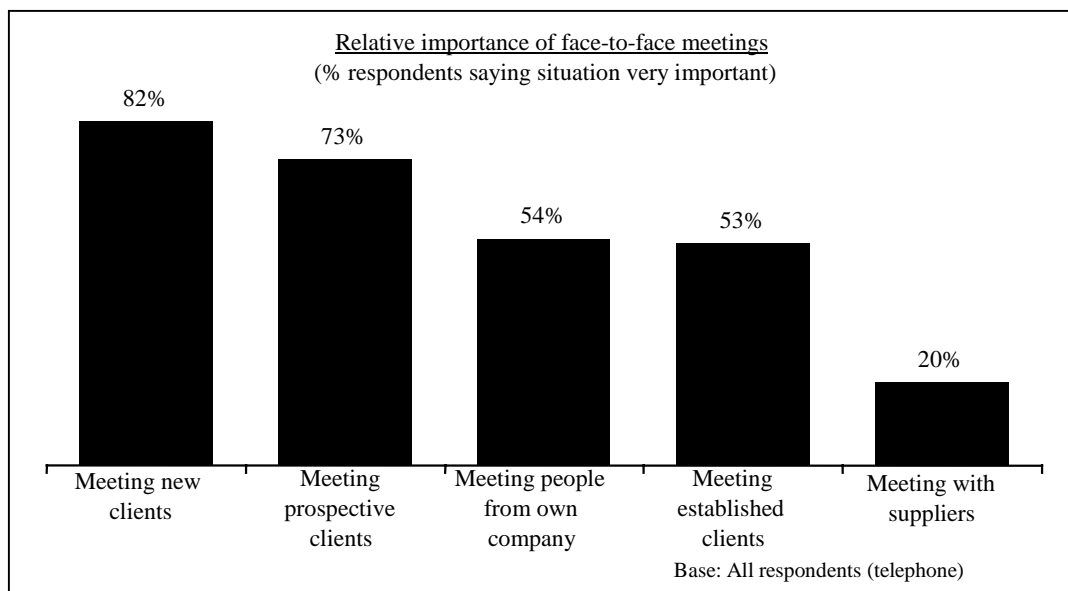


### 7.2 *The Importance Of Meeting 'In-Person'*

Opinions as to the importance of conducting a meeting 'in-person' depend on the meeting initiator's relationship with those attending the meeting. Whilst meetings with new and prospective clients are thought to require a more personal touch in the initial stages of the business relationship, being face-to-face is not seen to be as crucial in meetings with more established clients, suppliers, or during internal meetings. Those respondents who are more likely to view their meetings as productive tend to be in favour of 'in-person' meetings.



Figure 9:



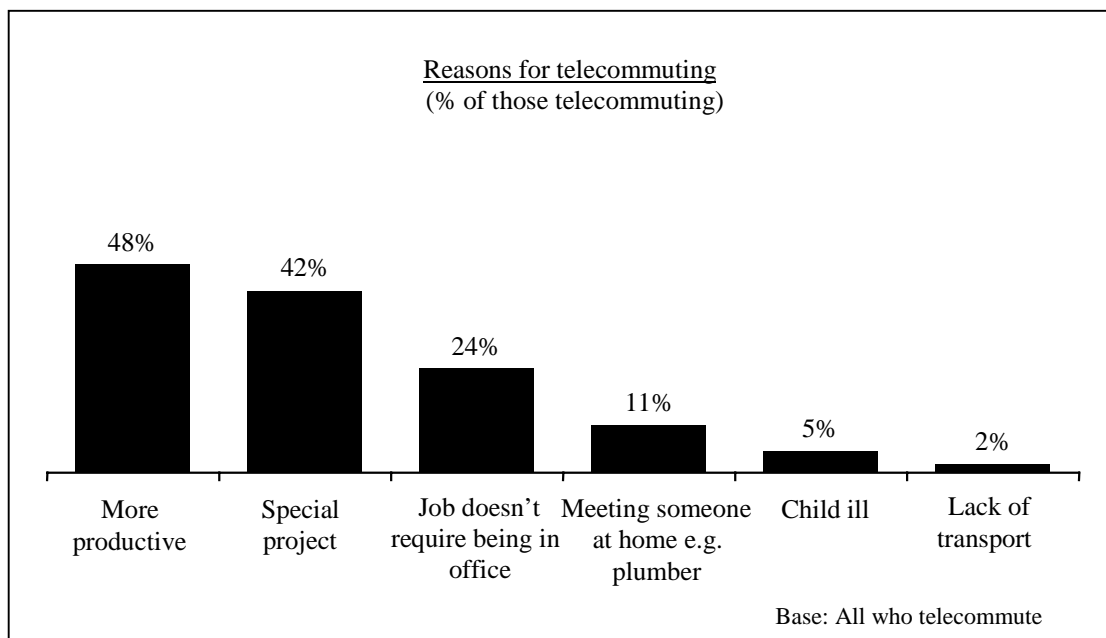
### 7.3 *Working From Home: Over Half Have Telecommuted*

Another key feature of the working environment today is telecommuting. Over half (52%) of busy professionals have worked from home using technology to stay connected to the office. Men are more likely than women to have telecommuted, as are those who work for larger companies and businesses with offices abroad.

Professionals who work from home at least once a month (44%) average 4.2 days per month from their home office. The most common reason given for telecommuting was that it is more productive.



Figure 10:



## 8. BUSINESS TRAVEL

### 8.1 *Travel Fan Or Travel Foe?*

The study revealed varying attitudes toward business travel. Twenty-seven percent said they 'usually look forward to getting out of the office'. Half of those asked had a more neutral attitude, describing travel as 'not bad as long as I don't have to do it too often', whilst the remaining 19 percent 'prefer not to travel if I don't have to'. Respondents from smaller companies (less than 50 employees) were significantly less likely to enjoy business travel, whilst those who do not currently travel abroad tended to view the chance to get away in a more positive light.

Additionally, 'travel fans' combine 'personal' and business travel on their trips more frequently than 'travel foes'. Professionals such as bankers, lawyers or engineers (27%) are significantly more likely than senior executives (4%) to say they combine the two whenever they can.

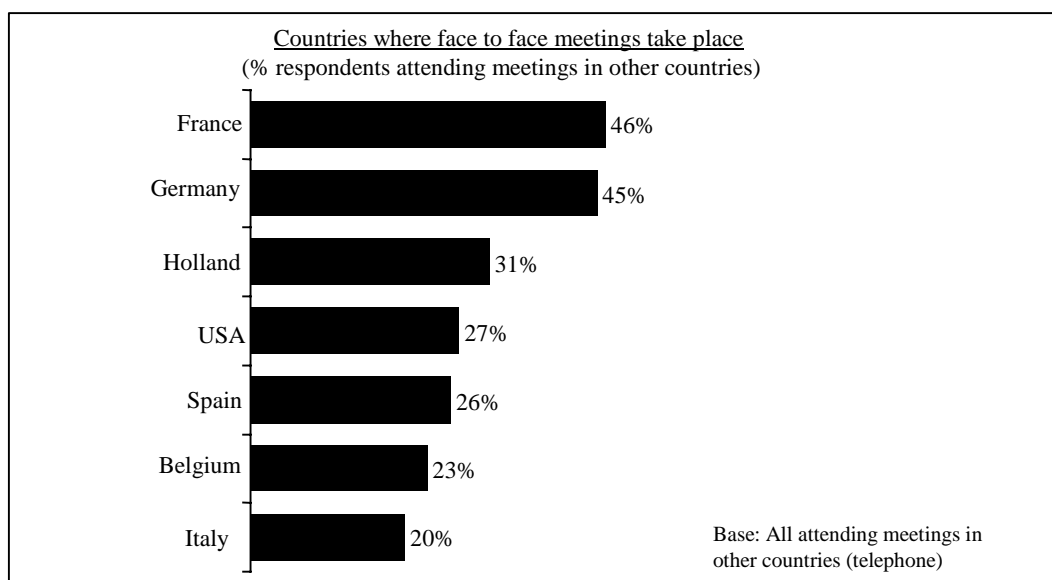




## 8.2 *Trips Abroad*

Forty-three percent of busy professionals interviewed attend face-to-face meetings abroad. Eighty-one percent travel to Western Europe, with France and Germany being the most common destinations. Just over a quarter (27%) visit the US on business, whilst 13 percent go to Central /Eastern Europe, 10 percent to S.E. Asia and six percent to South America.

Figure 11:

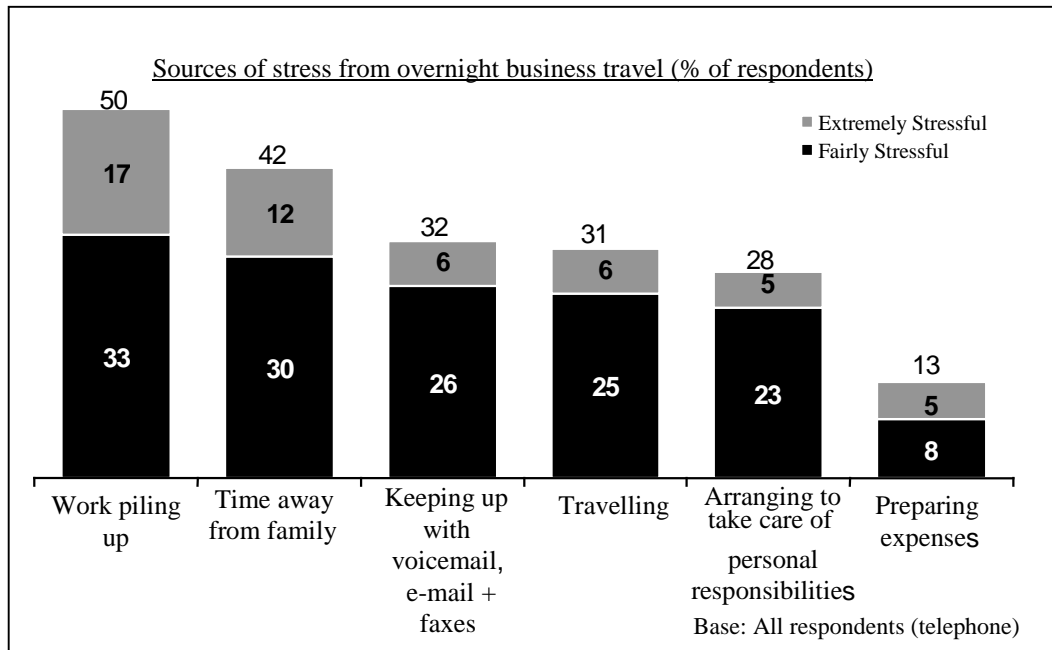


## 8.3 *A Source Of Stress*

Business travel is often a significant source of stress for busy professionals. Overall, 26 percent say they are more stressed when travelling for business versus 14 percent who say they are less stressed. The most predominant causes of stress from overnight business travel include worrying about work piling up at the office (half of respondents say this is extremely / fairly stressful), spending time away from the family (42%), and keeping up with the voicemail, e-mail and faxes (32%).



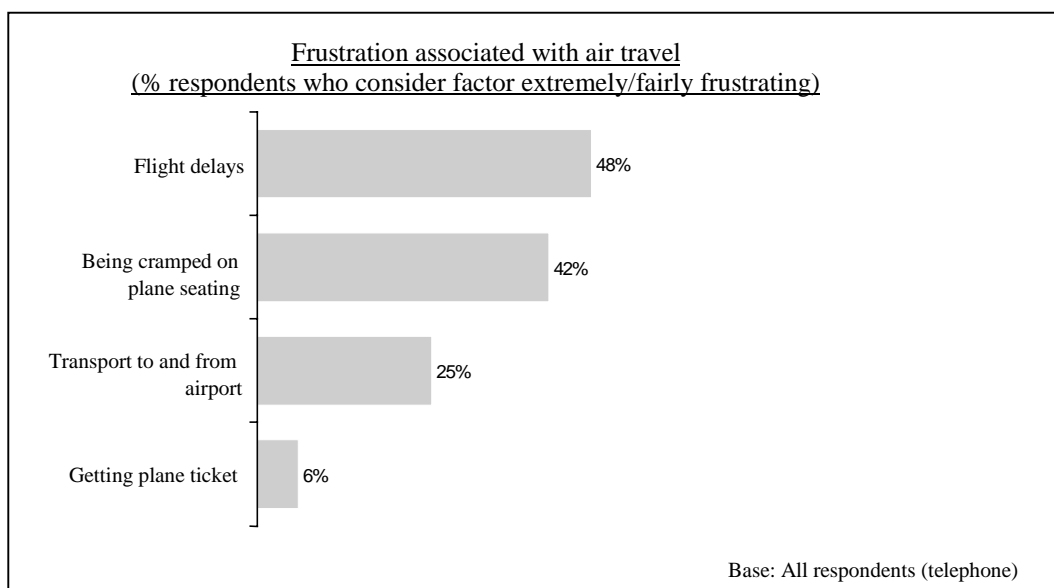
Figure 12:



#### 8.4 *Air Travel*

Closely related to stress is the level of frustration felt by many busy professionals when they travel by air for business. Most frustrating are flight delays and cramped seating conditions.

Figure 13:



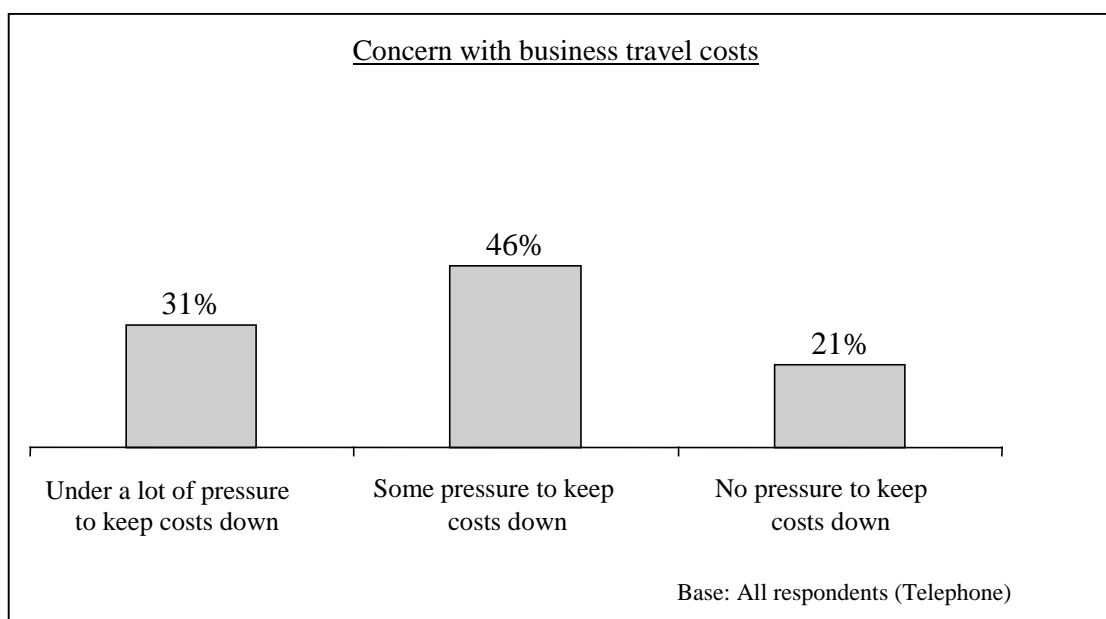


### 8.5 *Under Pressure To Keep Costs Down*

Most busy professionals are under pressure to keep the costs of business travel down. Just under a third of respondents feel they are under a lot of pressure to keep the cost of business travel down, 46 percent feel under some pressure and 21 percent say they are under no pressure. Women in particular are more likely to feel they have to watch their budgets (38% women vs. 28% men).

There are also some interesting differences in attitude by company size. Larger companies (i.e. those with over 250 employees) tend to be more cost conscious than their smaller counterparts, although this may partly be a function of the sheer volume of travel and the fact that it is more likely to be international. Nearly half the respondents from companies with less than 50 employees say they are under no pressure to watch budgets.

Figure 14:





## 9. VIDEO AND AUDIOCONFERENCING

### 9.1 *Videoconferencing Enters The Workplace*

Videoconferencing is a more recent development in the UK business environment, compared with the US, where it has become more commonplace (nearly two out of three US respondents have used videoconferencing at least once). Just over a quarter (26%) of UK respondents had used videoconferencing before, but it appears that few use it on a regular basis. Those working in larger companies with offices abroad were significantly more likely to have participated in videoconferences in the past.

The vast majority of these respondents (75%) used videoconferencing exclusively in a conference room. Twelve percent used it solely from their laptop or desktop PC, whilst nine percent have access to both methods.

### 9.2 *Let's Videoconference: 72 Percent Want To Do It From Their Computer*

While most voiced a preference for in-person meetings, the convenience of videoconferencing still held a strong attraction for busy professionals. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of those who used videoconferencing from the conference room said they would use it more often if they had access from their laptop or desktop computer. This preference held true across all segments and indicates an opportunity for companies to hold down their travel costs through the use of such technology.

### 9.3 *Internet Access*

The vast majority of respondents had Internet access (83%). Those who sometimes worked from home were significantly more likely to be connected (89% vs. 77%). Amongst those with access, 61 percent had access at work, five percent at home and 34 percent had both.



## 10. CONCLUSIONS

What are the major conclusions we can draw from this research? MCI WorldCom Conferencing points to four critical findings that organisations should consider in order to become more efficient and effective in meeting planning:

1. Meetings involve costs beyond the obvious tangible costs for travel, hotels and food: there are significant “soft costs” associated with the meetings, namely the salary costs of those preparing for, attending, and following up on the meetings. When attendees have to travel to a meeting, often enduring travel congestion or cancellations, these soft costs can increase drastically due to the time spent in transit. Videoconferences and audioconferences are significantly less expensive – both in terms of hard and soft costs – than face-to-face meetings involving travel.
2. In addition to the cost savings for the organisation, conferencing yields personal benefits for many professionals, including less time away from the family and not falling behind with work back at the office. Overall, conferencing helps us to achieve that widely sought-after balance between our personal and professional lives.
3. With improvements in technology, the pace of business has increased in recent years, and “information overload” has ensued for many. Audio and videoconferencing can help improve employees’ time management and reduce costs by replacing some business travel. However, conferencing will never completely replace face-to-face meetings: some meetings such as new business meetings tend to be more effective when conducted in-person.
4. Face-to-face meetings have been around since the dawn of time, and we know how to maximise their effectiveness. Meetings held via audio or videoconferencing, on the other hand, are a product of today’s technology. Professionals can make conferencing as productive as face-to-face meetings by following a few simple guidelines for effective meeting management:
  - set clear objectives
  - make sure all participants have the agenda and all documents well in advance
  - arrive or call-in a few minutes early so the meeting can begin promptly
  - introduce all participants
  - moderate the discussion



## 11. BACKGROUND

### 11.1 *MCI WorldCom*

MCI WorldCom is a global communications company with revenue of more than \$30 billion and established operations in over 65 countries encompassing the Americas, Europe and the Asia-Pacific regions. MCI WorldCom is a premier provider of facilities-based and fully integrated local, long distance, international and Internet services. MCI WorldCom's global networks, including its state-of-the-art pan-European network and transoceanic cable systems, provide end-to-end high-capacity connectivity to more than 38,000 buildings worldwide.

MCI WorldCom Conferencing is the fastest growing conferencing entity in the world, according to Telespan Publishing Corporation. It helps companies meet more effectively, reducing travel costs and increasing productivity. MCI WorldCom Conferencing provides audio, video and Net Conferencing, equipment sales and support, as well as Tele-Management services to complement customers' electronic meeting needs. With five call centres in the US, one in Hong Kong and one in Europe, MCI WorldCom Conferencing is the global conferencing solution. More information on MCI WorldCom Conferencing can be found at <http://www.wcom.co.uk/audioconferencing>.

### 11.2 *The Research Business International*

The study was conducted by *The Research Business International*.

*The Research Business International* is the seventh largest market research company in the UK (AMSO 1998), with a turnover of over £15m, and is a wholly owned subsidiary of Maritz Marketing Research, the research arm of Maritz Inc.

Established in 1981, *The Research Business International* now employs 75 research executives in the UK who carry out qualitative and quantitative research studies across a wide range of market sectors. The company's reputation lies in its ability to solve complex marketing and research problems, in the areas of strategic, brand, advertising and new product development.

### 11.3 *Objectives*

The overall goal of the research was to help MCI WorldCom Conferencing better understand the needs of its clients in the area of meetings, including audioconferences



and videoconferences - as well as conventional in-person meetings. This overall goal drove the four specific research objectives:

1. Determine meeting behaviour
2. Determine meeting attitudes
3. Identify ways to make meetings more productive
4. Identify ways to help reduce the costs of meetings

#### 11.4 *Telephone Survey*

The first phase of the research consisted of a telephone study conducted in October and November 1998 to identify participants and to solicit background behaviour and attitudes toward meetings. Over 400 professionals in middle and senior management positions who were heavy meeting goers (i.e. they participated in at least four meetings in an average month, either in-person - where they travelled out of town or another person travelled to attend, by audioconference or by videoconference).

#### 11.5 *Diary*

Following the phone survey research, The Research Business *International* conducted in-depth research amongst nearly 90 heavy meeting goers, recording the details of over 600 meetings. This research, which used a diary methodology in which participants recorded their meeting habits and attitudes over a two-week period, was carried out throughout November and early December 1998.

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