

How To Throw A Big Corporate 'Jam'

IBM's new tech clears way for company meetings with hundreds of thousands of employees

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Pulling off a corporate makeover sometimes means touching base with everybody.

That's what IBM^{IBM} found over four years ago.

The world's biggest computer maker was angling for a wholesale change in corporate culture that would bolster its role as a technology leader.

Big Blue wanted to avoid repeating its near-death experience in the early 1990s when the personal-computer revolution and its own stifling culture almost led to its breakup or bankruptcy.

Top managers decided the first step in IBM's makeover was to call for an all-hands company meeting to brainstorm ideas.

But with over 300,000 employees scattered across the globe, calling a staff meeting was out of the question.

Fortunately, researchers at IBM Labs had a secret weapon. It was called Jam, an Internet-based platform designed to gather ideas and foster discussion anywhere in the world.

IBM was preparing Jam for customers. But the tool would come in handy for its own challenges.

Beginning in May 2001, Big Blue put its new technology to the test by holding a series of online meetings with hundreds of thousands of employees worldwide. Input from the sessions helped reshape IBM's marketing, manufacturing and other policies as it recovered from the 2001-02 tech recession.

IBMers say Jam can do the same for other big companies who want to mobilize employees in organizational change. This applies to multinationals with thousands of workers and government agencies and even communities trying to change how they do things.

What is Jam? In some ways, it's easier to describe what Jam isn't.

It's not a blog. It's not a pep rally. And it's not just an online forum.

It's an online event, powered by IBM software, hardware and net-

works. And it can be run through the existing computer networks of most companies or other groups.

The online meeting of minds centers on a few specific topics, with the goal of producing concrete ideas management can act on. There's a fixed beginning and end. And it has clear, measurable goals.

The theory: By tapping the collective knowledge of IBM's global work force, the company can take advantage of ideas that might not occur to a top executive.

By cross-pollinating workers who might not ever run into each other in the physical workplace, IBM could make better use of locked-away experience and skills.

"Out there in the vast universe of 320,000 people doing business in 175-odd countries around the world, there are people with clever, pragmatic things that work," said Mike Wing, IBM's vice president of strategic communications.

And so began IBM's first Jam session. Over a period of three days in May 2001, more than 50,000 workers participated in the online event, exchanging ideas on how to steer IBM forward.

Executives found the exercise so useful, they soon made it part of IBM's management strategy. Since the original WorldJam session, IBM has hosted five more Jams. Other Jams helped managers rethink their roles and ease IBM's 2002 merger with PricewaterhouseCoopers.

IBM execs say the company's most important Jam was ValuesJam, a session held in July 2003. It's called a watershed event that helped IBM redefine its core mission for the first time in 75 years.

The distilled input of thousands of workers produced three new value statements: "Dedication to every client's success," "Innovation that matters — for our company and for the world" and "Trust and personal responsibility in all relationships."

These values have become part of IBM's mantra.

Big Blue is keeping up with its

Jams. Its last WorldJam in 2004 produced 32,000 ideas. CEO Sam Palmisano and other managers are pledging to use the best ones.

More recently, IBM has started offering Jam to outsiders as part of its consulting services.

The first outside customer was UN-Habitat, a United Nations agency promoting livable cities. The group hosted a Jam session in December to gather input for the group's World Urban Forum this June in Canada.

Charles Kelly, the event's chairman, says he first heard about Jam while reading a Harvard Business Review article about it.

"One of the things that really impressed me was the global reach," Kelly said.

As Kelly explains, Jam is more than an online discussion forum, a format that's been around for years. It's more of an event, an online Woodstock of sorts.

It works like this: For a set time — usually 72 hours — the Jam system lets participants read and post comments to each other in real time.

Subject experts act as moderators, encouraging more discussion.

What makes Jam unique, Kelly says, is the way it encourages thoughtful discussion from all participants, not just the highest ranking or most vocal.

Unlike most online forums, which tend to attract like-minded users and wander from topic to topic, Jams have a set agenda — a limit of four to six major topics — and aim to bring together people who wouldn't normally interact.

For the UN-Habitat event, the group installed Internet terminals in poor areas in Nairobi, Kenya, and the Philippines. It was the first time many users conversed with someone outside their nation, let alone world leaders.

The democratic nature of the dialogue brought issues to the fore that Kelly hadn't thought much about, such as urban agriculture.

"I didn't know what urban agriculture was before I started this job," he said. "It turned out to be a mas-

sive theme in the Jam.”

The peer-to-peer nature of Jams, rather than the top-down approach of most business settings, is a crucial part of extracting ideas, says **IBM's** Wing.

“Everyone’s microphone has the same volume,” he said. “It doesn’t matter what your title is, what your position is or your location. You can say whatever’s on your mind.”

Case in point: One participant in an early Jam session called for fellow workers to unionize. Management let the comment stand.

Just as important, Jams use ad-

vanced text-analysis technology to reveal patterns in the discussion. That helps highlight wide areas of agreement, pinpoint comments that strike a nerve and pull out useful ideas.

Nick Donofrio, senior vice president of technology and innovation, calls it a key part of spurring innovation within.

Not all of **IBM's** ideas for Jam have panned out. An early version featured an instant-messaging module; few people actually used it.

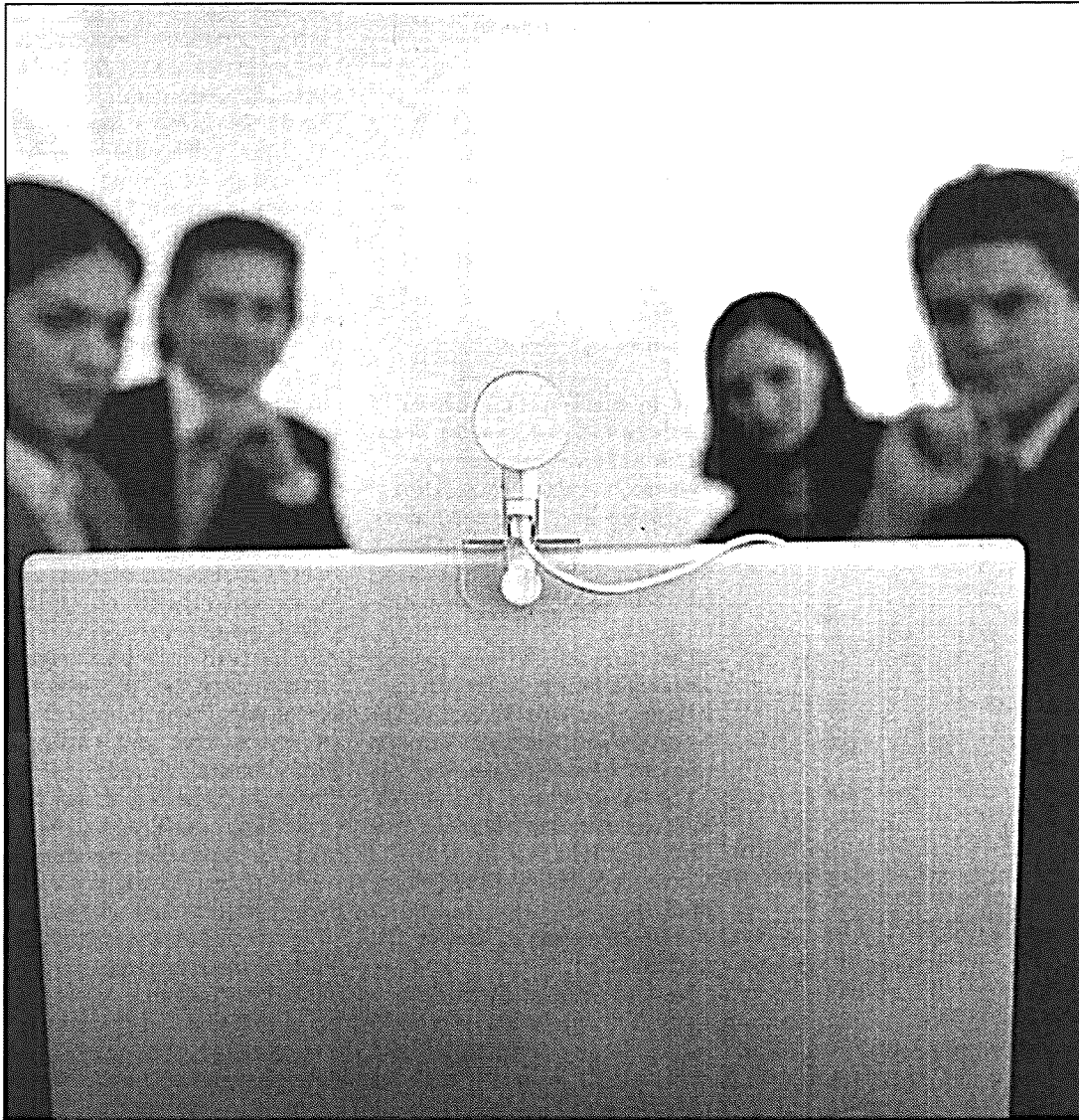
Jam sessions aren’t cheap. By definition, they’re large-scale events

that require heavy-duty planning and infrastructure. Each company is different; so are their goals for a Jam event. Customization can add to the costs.

UN-Habitat paid about \$1 million to host its Jam, and that was a special contract that covered only **IBM's** costs.

But most companies big enough to need Jam can afford it, Wing says.

“The primary obstacle to it is fear, not technology,” he said. “Is the organization ready to handle that degree of openness?”



IBM has an Internet platform that lets thousands of workers use laptops and other computers to attend mass staff meetings. Big Blue calls it an in-depth way to gather ideas and mobilize employees. Getty Images