

## Mini-track: Distributed Group Support Systems (DGSS)

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Distributed communication technologies and the context in which they are used have undergone tremendous changes over the last decade, roughly the same timeframe that this mini-track has been a part of this conference. Hence, it is only natural that the papers chosen for presentation this year mirror these changes. Two of these changes are technological: the increasing reliance on Web-based systems; and, the incorporation of multi-media capabilities into a variety of groupware. Two other changes are a reflection of the maturity of this field: the increasing sophistication of the research questions being studied; and, the global nature of the studies.

The first and most visible trend is how Web-based systems have dramatically altered the manner in which distributed teams communicate and collaborate. Since early implementations of group support systems focused on face-to-face environments, considerable attention had to be paid to the “client” infrastructure—from how terminals were arranged to the sequence in which tools were available. Even with the emergence of distributed communication tools such as Notes, the client side of such systems could not be ignored. Such investments in client infrastructure were costly and proved to be major hurdles in the wide deployment of distributed GSS for many organizations.

With the emergence of the Web and the free availability of browsers, a new generation of distributed group support tools has evolved. Such tools, some of which are freely available, have reduced organizational overhead by reducing the focus on the client infrastructure and integrating features of the tools with existing platforms. Some of the papers in this year’s mini-track—Kumar and Benbasat; and Rorbaugh, for example—examine different aspects of the Web in the context of distributed communication and collaboration.

A second trend that is evident in a variety of distributed group support systems is the incorporation of various multi-media capabilities. From the relatively mundane voice-embedded e-mail messages to the more sophisticated full motion video conferencing, the gamut of options for communicating across distances has increased tremendously over the last decade. Partly as a reflection of this trend, some papers in this mini-track—Watt, Walther and Novack; and Damian, for instance—deal directly with this issue.

A third trend has less to do with technological maturity and more to do with the methodological maturity of this field. In the early days of DGSS research, primarily academic questions were studied using relatively simple research methods. Now, however, studies by Valacich and Sarker, and Ocker for instance, probe organizationally relevant issues with precision and rigor.

Finally, a theme that characterizes the remaining papers in this year’s mini-track is their global nature. Studies by Stenmark; Chan, Lim and Wong; and, Massey, Montoya-Weiss and Hung are set in the context of today’s global economy and deal both empirically and theoretically with issues that transcend a purely North American context. Reflecting the increasingly international and interconnected nature of the world we live and work in, these papers seek to extend our knowledge beyond a single country and a single context.

In conclusion, the papers in this year’s mini-track reflect accurately how the technological and organizational contexts surrounding DGSS have changed over the last decade.