

A Visit to the In-World Offices of Teamwork Dynamics

By Ira Wolfe

And while the virtues and vices of Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter get supporters and detractors hot under their collars, introducing “Second Life” into a conversation gets their blood boiling. “I don’t have enough time in my “first life.” Who the hell has the time to live a second one?” is often the censored version of what I often hear. As a result of the recession, businesses and individuals have drastically cut their expenses by doing business and training in Second Life. Many businesses kept their training budgets in tact during the current recession—they just traveled into Second Life at the low, low price of \$0.

A few weeks ago, a good friend of mine took me on tour of his Second Life “offices.” This was my “aha” moment when I finally understood the power and influence of Second Life.

After fumbling around a bit, I found myself standing next to Tom on his island. In real life, I was actually sitting behind my desktop in Maryland while Tom was in Texas. But our conversation was taking place in Second Life and the dynamics were different. Tom motioned me to follow him—and this was the first sign that this learning experience was going to be vastly different than what I imagined. In Second Life I wasn’t just watching Tom, I was following him!

At least I was trying to follow him. “Walking” in Second Life requires a little mouse-hand-eye coordination as well as knowing the difference between a right—and left-click. After bumping into a few doors, walls and chairs, we arrived in Tom’s conference room.

There I was in Second Life in a virtual conference room with virtual chairs. Tom says, “Take a seat. Make yourself comfortable.” But instead of thinking, “has he flipped his lid?” I’m trying to select which chair I should sit in—just like I would in real life. Do

I sit facing the door or away from it? Do I sit next to Tom or across the table? I’m starting to see how Second Life is turning the teaching experience into real learning. (Ironic isn’t it how real-life learning might be even more effective in a virtual world?)

After finally figuring out how to get my avatar to sit in the chair, Tom starts to tell me about what he’s doing in Second Life. Tom does executive team building and coaching and many of his clients are located around the world. Traveling to them or them traveling to him is just out of the question. Teleconferencing and videoconferencing worked but the interaction and engagement was lukewarm. Second Life changed it. Just as I was feeling a different experience even after a few minutes, Tom’s clients too found themselves immersed in conversation, not just two participants on either end of an interaction.

It gets better. Tom asks me to turn around and look at the screen. “Screen? What screen?,” I ask. “The one right behind you,” Tom replies. I turn my avatar in my virtual chair, forgetting completely that I’m still sitting at my desk in MD, to see a large screen with a Powerpoint® presentation. Tom begins to talk about his business until I notice what appears to be DISC wheel on the wall behind the screen. (Both Tom and I are big proponents of using assessments for personal and professional development including DISC.)

Tom quickly jumps out of his chair and says “follow me.” After a few fumbles with my mouse, I begin to follow Tom. I’m starting to get it. In Second Life, this isn’t just role-playing. Like the most talented actors, you become the character, not just role playing lines from a script.

Tom and I end up seated on one of two large sofas. In front of us was a coffee table. In back of us was the DISC wheel. Tom starts describing how he holds

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his coaching sessions in this area of his office. He points to what looks like a computer on the coffee table and pulls up a DISC profile for one of his clients. He then stands up and begins to point out where this manager fell on the DISC wheel which compares all the communication and managerial styles of the executive team. I'm completely engaged and immersed in what he's saying. I'm not distracted by the clutter on my desk, the phone, and the emails like I often am when I'm listening to a teleconference or participating in a webinar. I'm in Second Life!

What I expected to be a 30-minute introduction lasted nearly two hours. By the end of my out-of-world-in-Second-Life experience, I finally understood how online gaming and its social networking capabilities were more than just games, where students and managers could be entertained and trained. Second Life has far-reaching applications.

Schools, universities, and other learning environments are now using Second Life to prepare students for the workforce. The interactions are dynamic, interactive, and engaging. Hundreds of universities hold classes, online discussions, and conferences in Second Life where students discuss developing technology, advise current businesses about technological development, learn leadership skills using business simulations, and build their own virtual businesses to have a competition for who will be most successful. Businesses are using Second Life, or other virtual communities, to on-board employees, train customer service and sales skills, and develop new leaders. Several companies are using Second Life to hold job fairs and interview candidates.

Why is Second Life and other more "mainstream" forms of social media important in the discussion of generational differences? Because social media technologies transcend the four most common causes of conflict between the generations: definition of work, communication, meetings, and learning. Instead of becoming a divisive force that creates

conflict between generations, social media technologies can be the bond that bridges the generations.

Engaging young workers in a virtual world where they can be actively involved is a whole lot more productive than forcing them to sit in a class, your office or behind a computer where their minds and thumbs are busy doing other things. Social networking technology presents an opportunity for young and old to learn new things together. Communities like Second Life help redefine work, communication, meetings and learning while still accomplishing the outcomes you want. Sites like Facebook encourage cross-generational collaboration on business development, customer relationship management and employee engagement. They provide a neutral venue where experienced workers can coach the less experienced and young workers can mentor older workers on the newest modes of communication and meeting places.

Second Life as well as any of the more traditional social networking sites may or may not exist in their current form several years from now just as Atari and Commodore were here and now are long gone. But the technology behind those names is alive and well and changing the way we do business and live.

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Ira is also the author of "**The Perfect Labor Storm 2.0: *Workforce Trends That Will Change The Way You Do Business***"

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