

Redefining manager interaction at IBM

Online communities that connect people across the globe can foster remarkable knowledge sharing. But what about connecting over 8,000 employees to discuss pressing issues? IBM has found that creating massively parallel conversations helps them navigate the complexities of a dynamic working world. Here, we learn about one virtual gathering called ManagerJam, which tackled the ever-changing role of management by inviting all IBM managers to weigh in on their successes and pick up techniques and ideas from their peers.

This article was originally published in Knowledge Management Review September/October 2002, Melcrum Publishing. For more information, go to www.melcrum.com.



By Lynn Dorsett, Michael A. Fontaine and Tony O'Driscoll

Contents

- 1 Leveraging massive conversations to exchange knowledge
- 2 Challenging the status quo
- 4 A new genre of corporate interaction
- 5 Chronicling the Jam
- 7 Where do Jams fit into the Knowledge Management mix?
- 8 Reflecting on ManagerJam
- 9 How to get a Jam going in your organisation
- 11 It's time to Jam!
- 12 About the authors
- 12 Contributors
- 13 References

Leveraging massive conversations to exchange knowledge

Rapidly sensing market needs and responding to them in a timely manner keeps a company competitive. Hierarchical, command-and-control models handled these activities in more predictable business climates. But today, organisations are migrating towards networked, knowledge-based and democratised organisational constructs to handle these pressures. And as this migration occurs, functions and roles within the traditional organisation are being impacted. Nowhere is this impact more palpable than for the role of the manager.

In today's information-rich work environment, employees have access to many sources and channels of communication, such as e-mail, instant messaging, Web casts and discussion databases. Consequently, they no longer have to depend on their managers to stay informed. An IBM 2001 employee survey revealed that employees saw the intranet as the most credible, useful and preferred information resource. Furthermore, a recent internal study estimates that there are thousands of active communities within IBM. In fact, it has been argued that communities of practice may well represent the natural social structure for the creation and dissemination of knowledge.^{1,2} Community members usually share similar job functions, have a common sense of purpose and have been shown to accomplish tasks more efficiently than by adhering to traditional hierarchical communication channels.³

In this new organisational context where employees are members of self-organised communities and have access to many rich channels of communication, one traditional role of the manager – that of information conduit – has become marginalised. This doesn't suggest that the role of the manager is no longer important. In fact, internal research has validated that managers remain the key influences of an employee's work experience at IBM. However, the role of the manager is currently undergoing radical change.

Key points

- The waning of command-and-control models has given organisations the opportunity to define new ways of working in a democratic environment.
- Creating virtual conversations that connect people all over the world at once offer unprecedented ways for all employees to exchange knowledge that will benefit them and their organisations.
- IBM's ManagerJam, an example of a massive parallel conversation, brought together over 8,000 managers to discuss the changing nature of management.
- Managers could participate in the Jam by posting and browsing suggestions, rating others' replies, and starting or adding to conversations.
- Jams differ from online communities and can be characterised by these features: scale, horizontality, purposefulness, immediacy and history.

Challenging the status quo

From a structural perspective, two of the key issues surrounding the use of communities within organisations are understanding how best to provide support for them and demonstrating the value derived from supporting them. These issues both stem from the fact that communities are largely perceived as being ancillary to traditional organisation structure and thriving in the 'white space' of the organisation charts. In order to overcome these issues, organisations have to become more knowledgeable, intentional and systematic about managing communities by giving them a more strategic role in running the business.

Given these emerging roles and structural challenges, IBM developed 'The Role of the Manager@IBM', an innovative, two-year, company-wide initiative designed to strategically transform the role of the manager within the corporation. This initiative was launched with ManagerJam, a worldwide virtual event that offered all IBM managers a unique forum in which to meet, share best practices and brainstorm new ideas. Modeled after the award-winning WorldJam, a global online event that brought together over 50,000 IBM employees in May 2001,^{4,5} ManagerJam represents a new genre of corporate interaction that, by its very nature, can only take place in a computer-mediated, virtual environment. A Jam creates a many-to-many environment in order to enable a many-to-one gathering of best practices.⁶ The Jam was organised to facilitate discussion among managers around six predetermined topics, with the goal of collectively tackling them in a defined period of time. In essence, ManagerJam contributors were working collaboratively to build a real-time database of best practices that could be immediately applied to address current and pressing business issues.

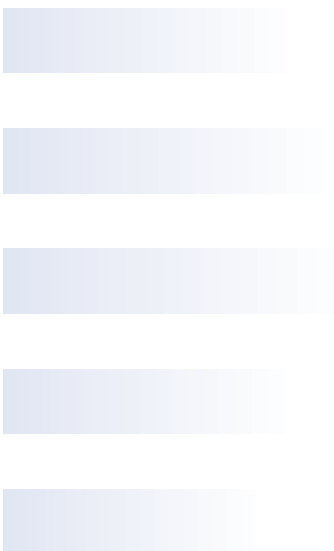
What did participants want to talk about?

4,554 posts and replies resulted from ManagerJam.⁷ So what were the most popular topics? Here's how many posts and replies registered in each of the topic areas determined before the Jam:

- 1,062 to *Building Careers: How do you prepare employees to outgrow their current jobs?*
- 982 to *Managing Performance: What approaches have you found most effective at turning your team into a true meritocracy?*
- 721 to *Fostering Innovation: How do you encourage appropriate risk-taking so that your department drives change and grows the business?*
- 703 to *Translating Strategy to Results: What do you do to help your people understand IBM's business strategy and use it to propel their own operational and personal successes?*
- 582 to *Human Face: How do you use the resources at your disposal to make IBM uniquely supportive for your employees?*
- 504 to *New Customer Landscape: How do you help your people work actively with colleagues across IBM to deliver what our customers need today?*

While the idea of meeting and sharing best practices is not a novel concept, and online communities have been around a few decades, the notion of creating a massively parallel online conversation – where every manager within the IBM Corporation is invited to participate – is something new. The fact that managers could virtually ‘Jam’ on how to adapt to the changing structure within which they operate and how to define their new role within that changing structure, is ground-breaking as it endeavours to establish a new standard for how work is conducted by managers within the organisation.

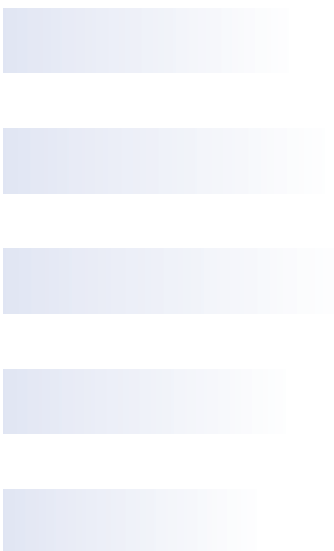
In this transformational intervention, the medium was the message and all managers, in Jamming on the issues that mattered most to them, were given first-hand experience in how to evolve from information conduit to innovation catalyst and from functional administrator to cross-functional boundary-spanner.



A new genre of corporate interaction

ManagerJam, like the Internet itself, provides an egalitarian mechanism through which managers of all ranks can speak with each other, thus decentralising position power while centralising knowledge flow and optimising focus. According to Mike Wing, Vice President of IBM's World Wide Intranet Strategy and Programmes, "ManagerJam was an innovation at the intersection of two distinct trajectories: the changing role of the manager and the emergence of a new form of corporate interaction. It's neither top-down, nor bottom-up; it's horizontal – what we call employee-to-employee communications. Rather than being some kind of giant cyber-suggestion system, it's a radically democratic environment designed to help managers help each other." Wing, points out that "there is no hierarchical permission channel within a Jam. It is, in effect, a new communication mechanism for focusing the collective minds of the managers on pressing issues – and immediately applying what they learn from the interactions to address those issues."

Nancy Lewis, Director of Global Management Development, also stresses that ManagerJam is not simply a technology solution, but rather an expertly crafted transformation initiative, "This is not about the technology. This is about providing a new medium to facilitate innovative, cross-functional dialogues across the manager population within IBM. The technology is like the 'Miracle-Gro' that allows leadership practices to evolve more rapidly within a highly networked organisation." In short, ManagerJam was a marriage between the best in technology and the traditional principle of community interaction: gathering people with common interests to discuss problems and share best practices, only on a massive scale aided by technology. So how did it work exactly?

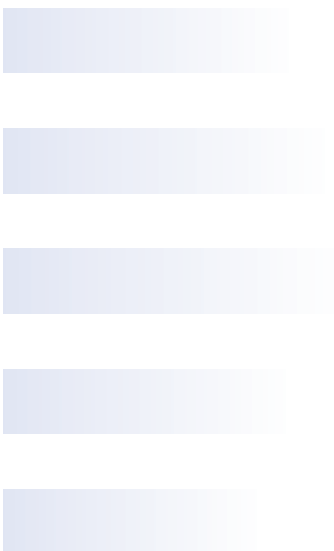


Chronicling the Jam

Beginning at Noon Eastern Time on 9 July, 32,000 managers worldwide were invited to Jam. For 48 hours, they Jammed on six key topics that managers, employees and executives had previously identified as being crucial to the changing role of the manager at IBM. These topics included how we motivate employees and grow talent, how we arm our employees with the resources and skills to deliver what customers need, and how we encourage risk-taking so that employees feel enabled to drive change and grow the business. The electronic forums within ManagerJam offered the ability for these topics to be brainstormed, challenged and resolved through many-to-many communication on a massively parallel basis.

Because IBM's intranet has no geographic, time or space boundaries, managers in Chicago had the opportunity to share ideas with globally distributed peers in Bombay, Tokyo or anywhere else on the globe where their peers were Jamming. Regardless of their physical location, all IBM managers face similar issues. ManagerJam provided a central venue for this cohort to collectively address these issues. Managers could also choose how to participate in the forums. They could simply browse through postings; participate in ongoing discussions by posting their own comments, questions and suggestions, reply to others' comments; or rate the ideas selected by moderators as having the most promise of immediate implementation. The forums spawned a variety of new ideas and encouraged interaction in a way that would not have been possible offline.

ManagerJam's forums were led by teams of moderators and facilitators, IBM managers and executives who were particularly interested or prepared to lead discussion on a given topic. The role of the moderators and facilitators was mainly to support the flow of discussions and to contribute constructively to issues raised by managers. They did so by steering the dialogue, encouraging participation and deeper thinking, offering insight into the topic at hand and flagging comments posted by managers containing ideas or solutions that had the potential for immediate implementation. Once identified, these actionable ideas were rated by participants as 'Ready Now' or 'Almost Ready'. Those that were rated 'Ready Now' could be implemented immediately by managers without further approval.



By the numbers: Examining the Jam activity

Here are some statistics gathered from participants in ManagerJam:

- I would participate in ManagerJam again in the future: 89 percent
- ManagerJam gave me ideas or solutions I can use in my work: 68 percent
- ManagerJam could become a critical collaborative tool to help me perform my job: 60 percent
- I intend to apply ManagerJam best practices in my day-to-day work: 60 percent
- ManagerJam is a good substitute for face-to-face networking: 40 percent
- ManagerJam saves me time in finding information: 32 percent
- I plan to spend more time reviewing the best-practices summaries on the ManagerJam post-event Web site: 25 percent

While it began from a simple idea – to connect managers at all levels to offer practical, grassroots solutions to their everyday IBM management challenges – ManagerJam evolved organically into a significant transformational event. As the event unfolded, managers were able to quickly identify the top-rated ideas that they could choose to immediately adopt or share with others. Crossing the boundaries of physical location, time zone and hierarchy, ManagerJam offered an opportunity for managers to interact, collaborate, build connections and develop ideas on how to solve the acute problems that they collectively faced. These activities led to positive perceptions of the Jam. See sidebar for further information.

Over the course of the 48 hours, 8,123 managers (25 percent of the total manager population) participated in the Jam. This compares very favourably to WorldJam's participation rate of 16 percent. The most striking statistic around ManagerJam is the dramatic increase in the posting activity of managers. In WorldJam, only about 10 percent of participants were unique posters, while the other 90 percent lurked. In ManagerJam, 22 percent of participants were unique posters – two times the number seen in WorldJam.

Most importantly, 60 percent of managers responding to the survey intend to apply ManagerJam best practices in their day-to-day work and 25 percent plan to spend more time reviewing the best-practices summaries on the ManagerJam post-event Web site.⁸ Research has shown that good ideas have a much better chance of seeing the light of day and, better still, being immediately implemented when they are created and recognised within a massively parallel conversation.⁹

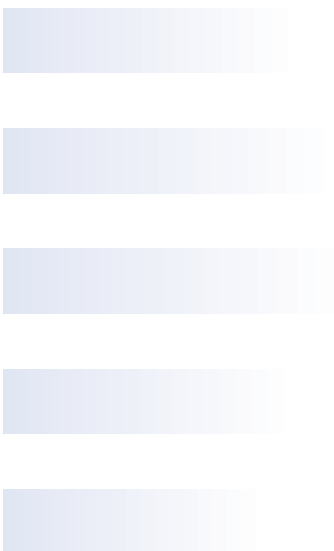
Where do Jams fit into the Knowledge Management mix?

Given this backdrop, it becomes clear that Jams differ in some important ways from traditional online communities. In fact, Jams can be characterised by five key features¹⁰:

1. *Scale*: The value of a Jam comes from its ability to identify important learnings within large-scale human interactions. Everybody, not just a ‘representative’ subset of the management team, was invited to participate.
2. *Horizontality*: A Jam is flat in structure. There is no chain of command, no one’s in charge and even professional expertise takes a back seat to democracy. Everybody’s microphone has the same volume.
3. *Purposefulness*: There is a common goal for all participants in a Jam. The focus of this Jam was to share best practices to address pressing issues associated with the role of the manager at IBM.
4. *Immediacy*: A Jam’s authenticity is derived from the fact that it’s a real-time and finite event, and that there are real, often serendipitous ‘knowledge accidents’ among participants that emerge because of the time constraint imposed.
5. *History*: Despite a Jam’s immediacy, nothing is lost. Because it occurs online, there’s an instantly accessible and analysable record of the best practices identified.

One of the key distinguishing factors between a Jam and an online community is that a Jam is temporally bounded and can accommodate virtually limitless participation. In contrast, traditional communities of practice tend not to be temporally bounded (that is, they emerge and decline in an organic, rather than predetermined fashion) and are usually limited in size.

One of the distinguishing factors between a Jam and a physical best-practice sharing programme is that there’s no structured division of focus in Jams. Physical best-practice conferences typically gather a representative sample of employees into a physical space, and further divide this cross-section into teams that focus on a subset of topics. The limits on large physical gatherings can be overcome by Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). In a Jam, the context is more like an ‘open space’ where participants can move from topic to topic and cross-pollinate ideas across all the topics. Furthermore, large physical gatherings require that everyone chosen to participate must be present for the duration of the event, while Jams allow participants to add value to the discussion whenever the igniting forces of passion, knowledge and experience lead them to contribute.

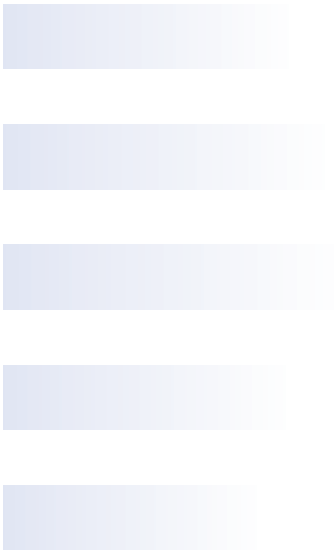


Reflecting on ManagerJam

ManagerJam is a cutting-edge example of the power of integrating knowledge-based processes with technological capabilities supported by human interaction. We learned that the high-human touch needs of knowledge workers must be systematically incorporated into the high-tech design of the overall Jamming solution. Human involvement in Jams should be structured, first and foremost, to facilitate connections among people and ideas, while providing rich social environments for both event participants and moderators.

Just as in physical meetings, structure is essential to the success of large-group online meetings. The way the environment is set up, the ground rules that are established for participation, and the processes that are put in place, all play a role in making the experience productive and useful. Determining the right amount of structure to impose within a Jam is a context-specific factor. If too much structure is imposed, the serendipity of knowledge accidents and chance encounter is minimised. If too little structure is imposed, the common focus atrophies and the sense of cohesion is lost.

Another key lesson is that Jams, by their very nature, have specific attributes that tend to provide value to particular situations. In other words, they are not a ‘silver-bullet’ solution to all organisational woes. Jams are a highly effective way to rapidly collect and apply best practices that address pressing business issues. They can quickly cultivate a sense of connection within a population by helping catalyse activities of the group around pressing issues. However, Jams do not replace traditional online communities. They serve a different purpose within the organisation and should be seen as being complementary to other communication and collaboration vehicles that add value in different contexts.

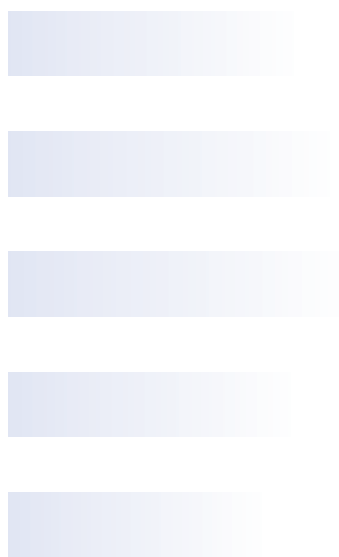


How to get a Jam going in your organisation

IBM suggests taking the following steps to start a Jam of your own:

- 1. Understand the objectives.* As with most large projects, Jams begin with a clear set of objectives. Stakeholders need to consider what they expect to change as a result of the Jam. For ManagerJam, there were five objectives: begin non-hierarchical dialogue among managers; begin the behaviour change (collaboration, networking, open sharing of ideas); begin to build a sense of community among managers based on management issues; get managers to think differently about solving company-wide management issues; build a knowledge library based on manager insights.
- 2. Select engaging topics.* The best results seem to come from including a number of varied topics rather than a few focused ones. Employee surveys, executive strategies, focus groups and other communications vehicles can help shape the Jam topics. Crafting the topic statements with care is key; the statements need to be both engaging and provocative.
- 3. Conduct topic research.* Once the topics have been selected, each one needs to be researched to fully understand what the organisation already knows about it. The research can take as long as a month to compile, depending on the number of topics selected.
- 4. Select facilitator teams.* Facilitator teams are a combination of people with prior Jam experience, those who are subject matter experts and people who in some way embody the desired Jam results. Facilitators are not 'announced' in the Jam as the moderators are. In this role, facilitators have the freedom to guide the dialogue as participants. A facilitator team supports each moderator who is the more formal discussion leader. For global Jams, facilitators should be located around the world.
- 5. Engage the moderators.* Moderators are selected based on their recognised expertise or leadership in the topic area. These tend to be busy individuals who are fully engaged in their day-to-day work, and their time can be difficult to schedule. To ease this problem, a lead facilitator may be assigned to each moderator. This person, who has Jam experience, acts as right-hand person for the moderator, coordinating the facilitator team and providing focused communication to the moderator during the Jam event.
- 6. Transfer skills and build the facilitator teams.* About one month before the Jam event, facilitators and moderators meet for a day to be briefed on the Jam's objectives and to be trained on Jam best practices. In this meeting, they also clarify roles and begin building the facilitation teams. Globally dispersed facilitator/moderator teams also launch a collaborative space in which they continue the Jam preparation. The collaborative space is also used along with Instant Messaging and telephones for communication during the Jam event.

7. *Prepare to Jam.* During the month prior to the event, facilitator teams review research materials for their topic, develop work processes for the Jam event, discuss possible directions the dialogue on their topic may take and align on possible facilitator actions. The Jam research teams begin to design the research to be conducted at the conclusion of the Jam. Communications teams develop campaigns designed to pull participants into the Jam and to sustain participation throughout the event. Time is scheduled on the calendars of key executives who will participate in the Jam event.
8. *Jam!* During the Jam itself, the well-prepared team executes its plan. Topic facilitation teams stay in constant contact via Instant Messaging and occasional telephone calls. Cross-topic discussions and geographic hand-offs occur in collaborative space.
9. *Mine the knowledge.* Since the entire Jam transcript is preserved, all the work done during the event becomes part of the organisation's knowledge library. Throughout the months following the Jam, the event continues to inform the organisation.



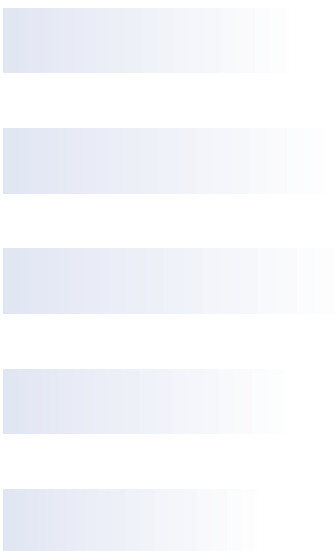
It's time to Jam!

Many companies discuss the democratic power of the Internet, but very few actually take advantage of it. ManagerJam provided managers of all ranks from all around the globe with the opportunity to talk openly about IBM and the issues they currently face as managers within an increasingly turbulent and threatening business climate. In addition, it allowed democratic interaction on an unprecedented scale, embedding knowledge sharing into what is rapidly becoming an institutionalised communication and transformation vehicle within IBM.

Jams have a paradoxical effect on information flow and power distribution within management ranks. For both power and information, a Jam is, on the one hand, radically decentralising – it opens access and empowers managers to take more responsibility for their actions – and centralising, because it turns the results of its interactions into a usable set of best practices that are shared across the community of managers.¹¹ In short, great ideas can be identified and acted upon very quickly. Furthermore, this intervention deliberately focused on the management population within the organisation and allowed them to grapple collectively with the complexities of the knowledge economy in an environment that mimics the flat, knowledge and community-based organisations that we believe will become more prevalent in coming years.

ManagerJam was probably the largest ever attempt to combine people and technology (high-human-touch and high-tech) for the purpose of gathering information and knowledge for the greater good of the management community itself and ultimately for the IBM Corporation. By participating in ManagerJam, managers were afforded a sneak preview of how their role is changing and how much of their work will be carried out in the future.

Building upon this concept, business-unit specific 'Manager ActionNets' – customised virtual collaborative spaces – will soon be launched as part of the 'Role of the Manager@IBM' initiative. This will allow a business unit's managers to begin working collaboratively to tackle the pressing issues challenging their business. We'll let you know how that goes.



About the authors

Lynn Dorsett leads the IBM team responsible for delivering teaming services to the employees and managers of IBM. Over the past eight years, her team has led IBM to collaborate beyond e-mail and in the process, saved the company hundreds of millions of dollars. Contact Lynn at ldorsett@us.ibm.com.

Michael A. Fontaine is a senior consultant at the IBM Institute for Knowledge-based Organisations. He regularly researches and consults with organisations that nurture and support communities of practice and virtual collaboration. You can e-mail Michael at mfontain@us.ibm.com.

Tony O’Driscoll is a member of the IBM Centre for Advanced Learning. He’s responsible for driving innovation in learning to achieve IBM strategic objectives. Tony’s e-mail address is odriscol@us.ibm.com.

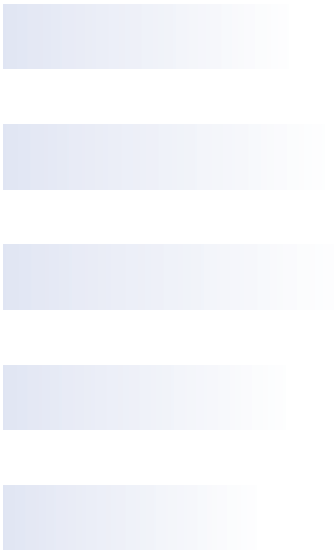
The IBM Institute for Business Value develops fact-based strategic insights for senior business executives around critical industry-specific and cross-industry issues. Clients in the Institute’s member programmes – the IBM Business Value Alliance and the IBM Institute for Knowledge-Based Organisations – benefit from access to in-depth consulting studies, a community of peers, and dialogue with IBM strategic advisors. These programmes help executives realise business value in an environment of rapid, technology-enabled competitive change. You may contact the author or send an e-mail to bva@us.ibm.com for more information on these programmes.

Contributors

Nancy Lewis, Director, IBM Management Development.

Jim Newswanger Corporate Intranet Research Manager, IBM World Wide Internet Strategy and Programmes.

Mike Wing, Vice President, IBM World Wide Intranet Strategy and Programmes.



References

- ¹ Wenger, Etienne (1999). *Communities of Practice: the Key to Knowledge Strategy. Knowledge Directions*. IBM Institute for Knowledge Management: Boston.
- ² Davenport, T. H. and Prusak, L. *Working Knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1998.
- ³ Allen, Stanley (2001). 'Building Connectivity at Wells Fargo'. *Knowledge Management Review*. Sept/Oct 2001.
- ⁴ Halverson, C. A., Newswanger, J.F. et al. 'WORLD JAM: 50,000+ online' (under review) CSCW 2002, the ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work.
- ⁵ Feder, B. J. 'IBM Meets with 52,600 Virtually'. *New York Times*, 29 May 2001.
- ⁶ Spira, Jonathan, Friedman, Steven and Ebling, Susanne. (2001). 'IBM's WorldJam: How IBM Created a New Standard Intracompany Communication'. Basex: New York.
- ⁷ Newswanger, James (2002). IBM ManagerJam Participant Survey Analysis.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Boone, Mary (2001). 'Opening a Dialogue with the Whole Organisation'. *Knowledge Management Review*. Sept/Oct 2001.
- ¹⁰ Spira, Jonathan, Friedman, Steven and Ebling, Susanne.
- ¹¹ Ibid.



IBM United Kingdom Limited

emea marketing and publishing services (emaps)
Normandy House
PO Box 32
Bunnian Place
Basingstoke
RG21 7EJ
United Kingdom

The IBM home page can be found at **ibm.com**

IBM and the IBM logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of International Business Machines Corporation in the United States, other countries, or both.

Other company, product and service names may be trademarks, or service marks of others.

References in this publication to IBM products, programs or services do not imply that IBM intends to make these available in all countries in which IBM operates. Any reference to an IBM product, program or service is not intended to imply that only IBM's product, program or service may be used. Any functionally equivalent product, program or service may be used instead.

This publication is for general guidance only.

Photographs may show design models.

© Copyright IBM Corporation 2002. All Rights Reserved.