

MEET & GREET IN 3-D: VIRTUAL ONBOARDING AT IBM



In the range of options

available to talent managers, one platform that's expanding rapidly is the virtual world. A growing number of companies now encourage their employees to onboard and network within online universes — essentially, they meet within a video game.

Computer users have been gathering in 3-D, virtual environments for years as part of game play. Companies have followed, seeing advertising potential in these environments.

And now they are stepping into these universes themselves by having employees establish their own characters, called "avatars," in 3-D virtual worlds such as Second Life.

Second Life is a subscription-based program in which users can interact, create goods and services, and even buy and sell land.

IBM is now using it as a meeting place and orientation tool to easily merge and render accessible its workforce, effortlessly traversing vast geographical and cultural distances in the process. Chuck Hamilton, director of IBM's Center for Advanced Learning, is helping the company go virtual with thousands of employees.



TM: To what extent are your orientation and networking needs being moved over to Second Life?

CH: I don't think you're ever going to see all of anything go on in the space, but it is a way we can augment stuff we're already doing. We're initially applying it to a four pilot programs.

The first pilot program is the Fresh Blue program. The participants are interns in China. There are about 300 of them who are coming on this year who don't get an IBM ID, so they're not quite IBMers yet, but they're in the process of becoming IBMers. They need an external location where they can meet in the 2-D world, so in a sense, they need to be able to collaborate in the standard Web environment that we see, so we set up an environment for that.

At the same time, we were asked, "Could they physically meet, not physically in that they go to a building, but could



they physically meet in a virtual world?" They could virtually meet in these worlds to do some other things — maybe get to know one another a little bit better, build some relationships with those people, practice doing things that they would need to do, so we don't have to bring these interns from all different parts of China to some physical place to have these ad hoc meetings and direct some of their learning. So, Second Life is playing a role in bridging both the cultural gap and the geography gap in that case.

The second pilot program is centered on a group in India, actual IBMers who are new to IBM, so they're part of the onboarding process that we have at IBM. The concern is that we want to get them into some kind of real live, simulated project action as quickly as possible. Even though they may not be on a specific project, they want to try out different scenarios.

With them, IBM was using another virtual world called Plane Shift, but we found we could do much more in a Second Life environment to do this kind of simulated work. They could work on teams and work on a project together and understand what it was like to have certain resources and so on. So, they moved a portion of their training over to Second Life, and again, they're still going to have some face-to-face meetings and regular training, but in addition, now they have an opportunity to meet in this way.

The third pilot program is a greater IBM program built around mentorship and leadership, particularly with our aging workforce. What we wanted to develop was a bigger community of employees who had retired from IBM or were former IBMers working as leaders at another company and were still part of the greater extended community of IBM, as well as existing IBMers who are in-house and need to share in their wisdom. So, we created a Second Life community built around that.

The fourth pilot program has not been developed yet. With any luck, it will be developed this year. It's something we're calling "rehearsal studios." Essentially, as a character in Second Life, you are the driving force behind your avatar, so in a way, you could be an actor — I could commission you to be an actor, and what I could say to you is, "What I'd really like you to do today is play the role of the very tough CIO of such and such a company, and Chuck's going to come in, and I want you to take him through this same rigor that you would take any salesperson through." So, you become an actor in an environment that's simulating the context of what you do in your job, and we can record the whole thing.

It's not a new idea to film this stuff in these virtual worlds — that's been going on for many years. [Gamers] film one another because things happen so fast in game environments that you have to film it to find out what happened and then learn from it.

So, we're going to build these rehearsal studios around that idea.

TM: Do you see IBM's use of Second Life as potentially bridging the gap between new talent and upper-management?

CH: That is happening. What I'm already hearing from a lot of people is that they love meeting this way — it's engaging, they get to know a lot about the individual with whom they're meeting. So, I anticipate that this is going to be something that more and more people will do. I also anticipate, because we're learning this from experience, people tend to represent themselves in the space the way they want to be viewed, and so they dress in a way that's appropriate to their culture. The skin color they choose is appropriate to them. They could have shown up as anything — they could have shown up as a fish if they wanted to — but they chose to show up as what they are. So, people are going to represent themselves in ways that are very attractive to one another and to themselves and want to share more in that respect.

TM: Part of the allure of Second Life is creating a virtual identity, which might not represent your real-life identity. How have IBMers responded to this ability?

CH: It's kind of a bizarre thing. We're not telling our employees to wear a suit or whatever, but they show up in Second Life, and they tend to look the way they want to be represented. For most people, they know working at IBM carries with it a certain professional status, and so they work the same in that virtual world as they do in the real world. For them, there didn't seem to be a distinction.

TM: Do you imagine that usage of Second Life will foster fresh thinking among your employees?

CH: A lot of technology has thwarted their efforts to be more creative, and what I'm seeing in this space is that we're all of the sudden opening up an environment or a platform that says, "You be the creator. You open that up." As a matter of fact, very little of content that is created in the Second Life environment is created by the owners of the tool themselves — all of that content and the world you see there is created by the people who participate in it. This is a very creative medium right from the get-go. You're seeing a merging of skills that weren't naturally merged before. This environment is very artistic, so you've got this medium merging art with technology and social with environmental. **TM**