Can video-conferencing ever replace live meetings?

by Christine Miller

In 1974, as part of a group of management consultants and Telecoms industry executives who gathered in London's Post Office Tower, I shared a groundbreaking experience, participating in trials of a revolutionary technological breakthrough intended to dramatically change the way meetings were conducted. That breakthrough was called Confravision, one of the first video-conferencing facilities in the world. The broadcast took place in studios equipped with cameras and screens allowing participants to converse as if they were in the same space. Was this the way forward for enlightened management who wanted to keep up with innovative methods of communication? It seemed like a winner, cutting expenses for journeys and facilitating easier access; however, it was costly and limited in locations, which hampered its uptake and growth.

In 2005, conference services in all forms represent a major growth industry. From the face-to-face conference market, estimated at £11.7bn a year in the UK (UKCMS), to web-conferencing, with user numbers projected to increase to 107 million in 2004 from 79 million in 2003 and 51 million in 2002 (IDC), meetings are proliferating. Effective communications between individuals and groups within organisations, and with outside clients and suppliers, remain critical to success. Whether such meetings take place in person or remotely, a range of possibilities exist.

This article aims to provide an overview of current trends, to assist companies in assessing various options for utilising available technology.

The Business of conferences

According to the UK Meeting Industry Association's recent statistics, business trips have grown by 53 percent over the past 10 years. It appears that conventional face-to-face conferences have not been affected by the increased use of video- or web-based conferencing facilities, and that growth in this sector will continue.

One notable trend is corporate conference organisers seeking unusual venues and activities for their delegates. Whilst traditional business hotels still have their place, many companies are choosing alternative locations offering inspirational surroundings, with castles, country houses and purpose-built retreat centres gaining in popularity.

Open Space Technology

An alternative to conventional conference formats, Open Space is a face-to-face process allowing groups to explore a pre-defined question in a way that uses diversity of opinions to foster knowledge and understanding. Open Space Technology is in use in a wide variety of organisations around the world, including GlaxoSmithKline and O$_2$. Developed by Harrison Owen in the mid-1980s, it is based on the principle that delegates at conferences often derive more benefit from the interactions they experience in the coffee breaks than in the sessions themselves.

"Open Space Technology is one way to enable all kinds of people, in any kind of organisation, to create inspired meetings and events. In Open Space meetings, events and organisations, participants create and manage their own agenda of parallel working sessions around a central theme of strategic importance."
www.openspaceworld.org

Electronic conferencing

Modern technology has rapidly increased the scope and availability of conferencing as a key communication tool for companies to stay in touch internally and enhance relationships with their customers and suppliers. Security concerns, increased travel costs and environmental issues all contribute to the increased uptake of electronic conferencing as a viable and cost effective method of exchanging vital business information. Major benefits include:

- the speed with which meetings can be set up
- the ability to include people from almost any geographical location
- the convenience of conducting the meeting right from your desk.

Conferencing is now used in a wide variety of environments, including government bodies, corporate, education, healthcare and financial institutions.

Advantages of video-conferencing include increased efficiency and shorter meeting times.

There are three main types of conferencing:

Audio conferencing - also called phone conferencing and teleconferencing, brings together any number of people from almost anywhere in the world, and makes use of conventional voice telephony. It works very simply; the conference organiser pre-books the service, informs participants of access details. Service providers offer a range of facilities such as recording of proceedings, muting capabilities for calls delivered as lectures, Q & A sessions, roll-call of attendees, with costs varying according to supplier and level of service chosen. It is now often used in conjunction with web-conferencing.

Video-conferencing - is a real-time event with people communicating as if they were in the same room. Participants gather in different locations, positioned in front of video cameras, simultaneously talking and viewing each other on monitors and screens. Depending on the advanced features of the network, video-conferencing can also allow participants to view and share digital documents, such as spreadsheets, Powerpoint slides, documents and images.

Recent research from the University of Bradford, UK conducted for BT in conjunction with Sustain IT, has shown that BT saved £128m a year by eliminating over 300,000 face-to-face meetings, representing an average saving of £432 per meeting.

Advantages of video-conferencing include:
- Increased efficiency and effectiveness in making decisions more quickly.
- The shorter meeting times needed (two thirds of sessions lasted for under an hour).
- Fuel and emission savings.

Peter James, Professor of Environmental Management at Bradford, said: "As well as saving time and money and enhancing the employee's work-life balance, conferencing can also have a significantly positive impact on the environment. Each of the 1.5 million journeys BT eliminated last year created an average saving of approximately 32kg of CO_2 emissions. This means that the use of conferencing prevented a total of around 47,400 tonnes of CO_2 being pumped into the atmosphere each year."

Conventional video-conferencing requires specially equipped conferencing systems, in specific locations, and originally used ISDN networks, similar to the Confravision of the 1970s and 1980s. This means there is a limitation on venues, the participants have to be present in the location, and therefore it is a method employed more often by larger organisations wishing to link sites. Video-conferencing should provide a complete simulation of a normal meeting environment, enabling both parties to see, hear and present material, just as if they were in the same room.

Web-based video conferencing
With the advent of broadband (ADSL), it is now possible to use the internet to broadcast live multi-media events directly to the desk-tops of people anywhere in the world where they have a connection and a suitably equipped computer. Internet technology has dramatically lowered the cost and increased the quality of multimedia transmissions. At its simplest, Web Conferencing is the online complement to the common conference call. Participants log in to a restricted website, where they can view slide presentations, send text messages to others in the meeting and work together on documents and spreadsheets. Some services also offer online white boards, where the

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presenter can draw diagrams, as well as the ability to conduct surveys of conference participants and tally the results. Web-based video-conferencing runs over local and wide area networks, as well as the public internet, turning ordinary desktop and laptop computers into two-way videophones. Providers include Webex and Microsoft Live meeting.

Streaming

"Streaming" is the term used to describe a process whereby media is delivered and processed in a steady stream, through, for example, Windows Media Player or QuickTime Player. Sometimes also described as "webcasts", content is played on the receiving computer, but is not stored on the machine. Unlike the opposite procedure where a file is downloaded to a hard drive before being played, the material is broadcast synchronously in real time. This offers better content protection for the transmitter, and allows live transmission of events. Video-on-demand is the ability for Web users to view archived material at any time. Often "webcasts" are recorded and also made available as video-on-demand files later.

IP (Internet Protocol) networks

Conferencing over an IP network means that your communication systems are integrated through the internet, rather than using conventional telephone lines. New IP technologies, perhaps typified for consumers by the free Skype VOIP (voice over internet protocol) service, and by suppliers such as Vonage for business use, can be beneficial for companies both for voice and video broadcasts. Transferring from conventional circuit-switched video and audio networks to the more cost-effective IP networks depends on the capacity of the wider network, because the "Packets" of information transmitted via the IP are extremely time sensitive.
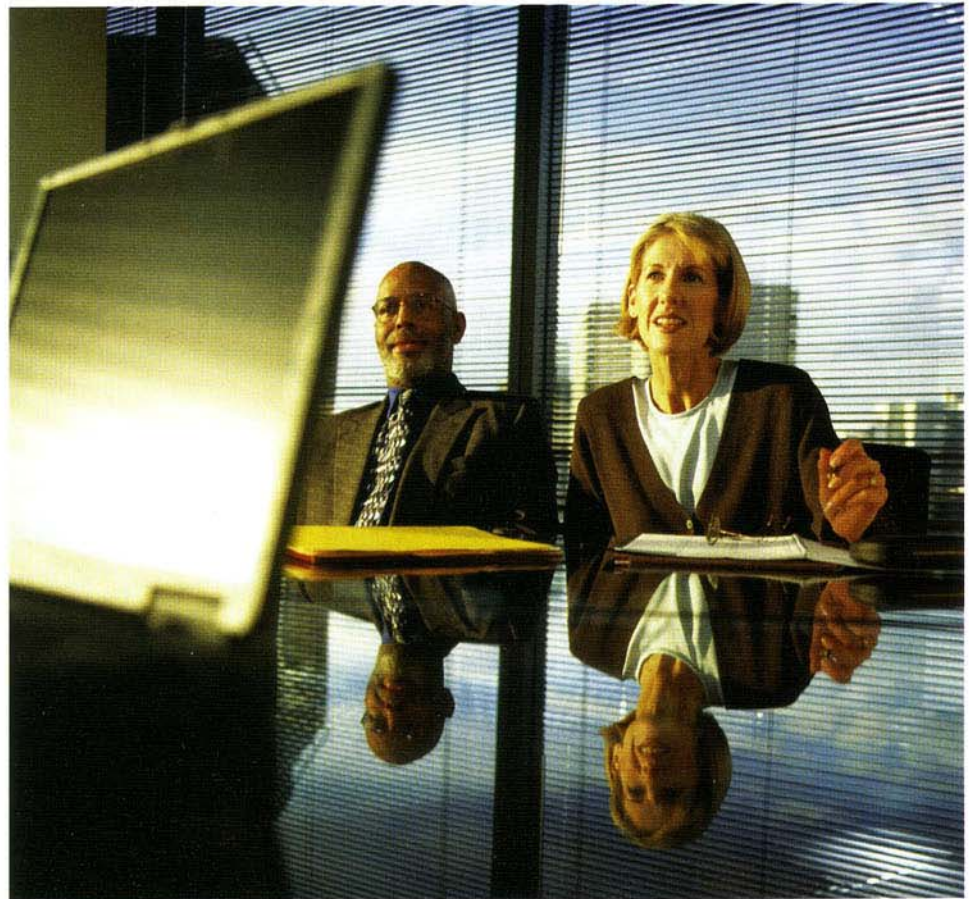
The slightest delay (as little as 200 milliseconds) can render the packet of information useless, in that it becomes asynchronous to the broadcast and is therefore irrelevant. Given sufficient capacity and integrity (Quality of Service - QoS) of the network, IP systems promise to be the conferencing medium of the future.

So will electronic conferencing replace face-to-face meetings?

e-Conferencing certainly has a place in improving communications, cutting costs, saving time and money and reducing damage to the environment. However, physical events are still important for companies to develop social networks and build employee loyalty, and to strengthen business links with potential and existing customers and suppliers. The human desire for direct contact still exerts a powerful influence on the way we do business and conduct our lives in general. A blend of both methods would seem to be the solution for many businesses, in view of financial and environmental concerns coupled with world events. **CEO**

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About the author

Christine Miller, MA, author, speaker, facilitator and consultant, is Founder Editor of ReSource Magazine, an independent quarterly publication dedicated to business and personal growth. She has a background in research, marketing & training, having held senior management posts with UK public companies. She is currently developing methods for applying Open Space and Emergent Knowledge Solutions in a wide range of commercial and non-profit sectors.

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