

Green on green

When conferencing providers and strategists used telepresence for Point Nine, the peer-networking forum, to discuss green issues, *Geny Caloisi* was there to share the experience and keep the air miles tally



Green videoconference: left, Broxborough, USA, in talks with seven other sites

On a sunny, late winter morning in London, ten people gathered at Cisco's offices to discuss whether companies and organisations can speed up business processes and reduce their carbon footprint by using telepresence.

Appropriately it used telepresence to bring together 39 participants from eight sites around the world to conduct a brainstorming session about diminishing CO₂ production by using technology and the barriers against its usage.

Point Nine is an end-user networking forum facilitated by Wainhouse Research, whose mission is to bring together the conferencing managers and strategists from large enterprises to share their knowledge, experiences and projects with their peers and industry experts. At the green meeting, the participants of the conference were people from environmental NGOs, visual communications and collaboration specialists, potential end users and companies using telepresence on a daily basis.

The meeting started by noting that if everybody that was connected via telepresence, had instead travelled to London, it would have resulted in 194,000 air miles and 76,000 lbs of CO₂.

But these calculations, of course, are not necessarily that straightforward. Andrew Davids, senior researcher at Wainhouse, who was talking from Broxborough offices in the USA, argued that, even though he didn't personally take a plane to get to London, the plane he could have taken still took off from the airport. The general agreement was that there needs to be a government-led initiative to cut the numbers of flights taking off. The building

KEY FACTS

Point Nine is an end-user, peer networking forum facilitated by Wainhouse Research. Its mission is to bring together conferencing managers and strategists from large enterprises to share their knowledge, experiences and projects with their peers and industry experts. Since its inception in 2006, its round-table meetings have attracted over 200 managers.

Virtual and live attendees at the green event included representatives from Aetna, BT, Cisco, Conservation International, Ernst & Young, Johnson & Johnson, Morgan Stanley, OCI Group, Orange, Pfizer, SPL, The Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, and the World Wildlife Fund.

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of terminal five at London's Heathrow might indicate that just the opposite is true, although recent events there have proved a powerful disincentive to air travel.

Peter Lockley, from the World Wildlife Fund, said that by the end of this century, the global temperature of the planet would increase six degrees. Lockley, who is the WWF head of transport policy, is urging everyone to reduce CO₂ emissions by 50 per cent by 2050.

He said that of 350 FTSE companies asked whether being green was important, 89 per cent said it is; and employees looking for a new work place favour companies that have a strong green policy against those that haven't – all part of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) movement which people are increasingly aware of.

Videoconferencing and telepresence offer real options for business that need quick time to market and decision making processes. Apparently there are airlines looking into offering videoconferencing

and the option of using videoconferencing is real.

Speaking from the USA, Scott Wilcoxon, senior video collaboration consultant at BT, said that in the UK it is reducing the amount of travel for their employees by providing remote offices.

Steve Bleiberg, Johnson & Johnson conferencing manager, pointed out that telepresence is changing the dynamics of adopting visual communications. With telepresence, it's the CEOs and CFOs that request it. Beforehand, IT or a-v departments had to justify the adoption of videoconferencing on their budgets, to end up most times with a less than satisfactory experience, telepresence seems to be the obvious solution, no matter how much it costs.

'Telepresence and videoconferencing should be seen as tools, not toys. This change will come about with a social change, a behavioural change,' said Cisco's vp for green engineering, Paul Marcoux. Marcoux's point was that we can't just blame planes, we need to work together to change social behaviour. In order for a green initiative to work, Marcoux said, there needs to be in place a rigorous auditable model to calculate the carbon foot print. Cisco itself has a set of standards for self-analysing.

Another company that has seen the need to have a fair way of measuring companies efforts to be greener is The Visual Environment Ltd, which has introduced 'Video Miles', a multi-manufacturer compatible software programme that can automatically and accurately monitor companies'

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videoconferencing environment. The idea is to help users target, measure and monitor their entire videoconferencing network, calculating carbon savings, cost savings, ROI, utilisation, man hours and number of calls.

Multi-site issues

The telepresence meeting experience was very good, although very intense. Four hours in front of the three huge screens was tiring and at times the meeting was very hot. However, all members of the group were impressed with the speed of connection and the ease with which the system changed site when a different speaker was talking. Only once one of the participants broke the code of conduct

on a visual communication meeting by tapping the table, indicating they had a comment to make, which resulted on the camera immediately focusing on that site, even though they had nothing to add (a mere twitch of the hand can disrupt proceedings of this kind!).

Something that became apparent was the need for clear venue signage, so the other participants knew where the speaker was located.

Ideally I would have also liked to see large name plaques in front of the participants – with 39 people around the world gathering in one virtual space, it's difficult to keep track of who is who and where their viewpoint comes from. It was important, for example, to know when it was a telepresence engineer, rather than an end user talking.

Participants at this Point Nine meeting were asking whether summits of conferences could be carried out via telepresence, in particular since there are many new conferences being launched each year. The technology is available but I'm not sure it would work in a bigger group of people or if the life-like images on the screen would win over an audience as they would if they were in person.

The adoption of telepresence will depend upon the dynamic of choices users have and the collaboration between manufacturers to allow seamless connection between different telepresence brands. Also, telepresence should be a complement to, not a replacement for videoconferencing.