

Meetings technology: Threat or enhancement?



By Edgar Hirt

Edgar Hirt is the President of the International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC); and Managing Director of CCH, Congress Center Hamburg
secretariat@aipc.org
www.aipc.org



As in almost every other industry, congress centres are undergoing a technology revolution with new innovations and applications appearing every day. At the same time, the expectations of clients are increasing continuously, with many technological features which were until recently considered luxuries now simply expected by organisers and delegates alike.

In particular, connectivity and presentation technology are seen as key ingredients. Delegates who are used to instant and continuous contact with the outside world simply expect that this will be equally available in a meeting context, and can't imagine having to suspend their communications. At the same time, expectations are increasing for more highly sophisticated presentations in a world where high entertainment value is everywhere.

Fortunately, the ascendance of wireless technology has meant that most facilities can offer the very latest services without having to rely on imbedded technology which may be difficult or impossible to develop in an

older centre. But to a centre manager, as well as to an event planner, there is a larger question: do all these new technologies threaten conventional meetings and congresses? Or do they offer new ways to expand the impacts of such events to new audiences and add an extra dimension to the meeting experience?

This is a debate that has been going on for a very long time. Proponents of the "technology solution" long stated that technology would simply replace the need for meetings and conventions as they would allow people to communicate via remote access instead of having to travel great distances to attend a meeting in person. They envisioned us all giving up travel for the sake of participation in "virtual meetings", where we'd all be sitting in various locations looking at the presenter or other participants on large screen video monitors.

The fact is, this simply hasn't happened largely for three reasons:

First, it is clear that meetings aren't just about content – they're actually more about interactions, and you

can't interact effectively on the end of a video connection. It has been suggested that meetings, conventions and trade shows are a way to "validate" the information available through other sources such as the Internet by having an actual, face to face encounter with the people behind that information.

In any case, if such a transition were to have occurred, it would most likely have happened in the wake of the global security and travel concerns that occurred early this decade – yet, in fact, delegate travel was one of the first areas to rebound when travel began to increase again.

Second, there are some things a "virtual meeting" simply can't deliver. Delegates get the advantage of building connections and networks amongst colleagues as well as the benefits associated with experiencing new destinations, facilities and cultures. These are added pleasures – but they also contribute to the overall value of the learning experience associated with an event.

Finally, the same technology that was suggested as being a threat to meetings and conventions has, in the end, proven to actually enhance them and add value to participants. The ability to "beam in" presentations and demonstrations from a remote location is an example of this, as is the opportunity to share meeting proceedings more effectively through devices such as web casting. In providing better content, technology in effect creates even more reasons to participate in the meeting and makes that participation more valuable.

As technology improves, so will the importance of all these added benefits. In an increasingly impersonal world, the value of interpersonal relations and developing new insights will only increase. So while you can expect to see such meetings – related technologies to increase in the years ahead don't expect to see them replace such events altogether! ^{Events}