

## Column by AIPC President, Edgar Hirt

### *Meetings Technology – an Opportunity and a Challenge!*



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**AIPC is the pre-eminent international association of convention centres, with a mission of encouraging, supporting and recognizing excellence in centre management. It's global network of over 165 leading centres in 53 countries, combined with the active involvement of more than 650 centre management professionals ensures a broad and diversified level of industry knowledge and expertise, while its wide variety of program activities supports members in developing and enhancing their skills in the areas of operations, finance, technology, staff development, marketing, client relations and sustainability.**

For as long as modern meetings and conventions have existed, there has been a debate around whether or not face to face meetings would be eliminated by evolving communications technology. On the one hand, critics pointed to the cost savings and travel inconvenience that could be achieved by having participants on either end of a phone or a video link; on the other were those who said such an arrangement could never replicate the benefits of actual personal interaction.

The debate raged on year after year, punctuated by rising levels of panic every time

an economic recession or travel challenges such as those that arose from SARS or the trauma of 9/11 captured everyone's attention. In the end, it seemed, the personal element won out and the conclusion was that for the vast majority of people, nothing could replicate the benefits of "face-to-face" interactions.

But throughout this period, two things were quietly happening – and together, they may be shifting the odds in a new direction.

First, the technology was getting better. Tiny, fuzzy images with startling lag times gave way to crisper, larger ones with real time interaction, leading to a much greater sense of reality. Costs became more manageable with web-based options replacing the more costly dedicated links and specialized equipment that characterized earlier versions. The remote alternative not only became of a higher quality but also more cost-effective and readily available.

And the fact is, this trend will only continue. Most observers feel that communications technology is poised on the brink of quantum leaps forward, propelled by greater storage and transmission capacities and better software to facilitate the whole thing. What has now gone from barely tolerable to useable may now be headed for the downright remarkable. Secondly, concerns around sustainability intensified – and in particular, the carbon impacts of the long distance travel required of delegates to actually attend their meetings. This issue has gone to the point of creating calls by many governments, NGO's and international organizations for new limits on business travel, and is unlikely to subside anytime soon. And while convention centres and other industry suppliers have made huge efforts to reduce the impacts of the meetings themselves, there's not much they or anyone else can do on the travel side.

In practice, it is the combination of several factors that poses the greatest risk. The synergy amongst corporations and governments eager to achieve cost savings and the ability of the same groups to reference environmental responsibility as the reasoning behind their decisions is irresistible. At the same time, there are many well placed influencers in the technology areas that would benefit from a move toward remote meetings who will inevitably be only too happy to encourage a move in this direction.

What to do? I think we have to look at three areas;

First, we need to actually document the benefits we have been claiming for face-to-face meetings rather than relying on old adages which are getting tired in the face of new technical advances. It won't be easy, but anything that is real – as we claim the benefits of personal interactions to be – lends itself to some form of measurement and it's just a matter of figuring out how this can best be done.

Secondly, we need to organize our counter arguments about why collective meetings are more efficient – things like the alternative they offer to many more individual meetings, for example, or how the advances they precipitate in the end have much greater overall value than any sustainability costs they may incur. Again, we have taken all this for granted for so long that little work has been done to actually identify and organize the positive points, and this isn't enough at a time when we will need much more persuasive arguments.

Finally, we need to make sure that we are doing our best to incorporate the new technologies into existing meeting formats to make them even more effective than they would otherwise be. The new technologies aren't going away – the challenge is to make them work for us instead of seeing them as a threat. If we can harness their power to make face-to-face meetings more powerful and broadly useful they will become more of a force for meetings than a threat – and delegates will get even more benefits than they would have without them. In some cases, this means that there will in fact be remote components to organized events – this is already happening now – but if that enhances rather than detracts from personal participation then the net effect will remain positive.

For many years we've got by with saying that nothing can replace personal interaction – and so far that has usually been enough. However, we're now facing a future where we're going to have to do a lot better than that in the face of better technology and stronger counter arguments.

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