

Making the quantum leap

AIPC President Edgar Hirt says meetings technologies provide both opportunities and challenges.



For as long as modern meetings and conventions have existed, there has been debate about whether or not face-to-face meetings would be eliminated by evolving communications technology. On the one hand, critics pointed to the savings in cost and travel that could be achieved by having participants on either the 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 the SARS epidemic or the trauma of 9/11 captured everyone's attention.

The personal element seemed to win out and the conclusion was that, for the vast majority of people, nothing could replicate the benefits of face-to-face interaction.

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 specialised equipment that characterised earlier versions. The remote alternative not only became higher in quality but also more cost-effective and readily available. This trend will only continue. Most observers feel

that communication technology is poised to make quantum leaps forward, propelled by greater storage and transmission capacities and better software. What has now gone from barely tolerable to useable, may now be headed for the downright remarkable.

Second, concerns around sustainability intensified and, in particular, the carbon impacts of the long distance travel required of delegates to attend meetings. This issue has gone to the point of creating calls by many governments, NGO's and international organisations for new limits on business travel, and it 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.

It is a combination of several factors that poses the greatest risk. The synergy among 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 technology providers that would benefit from a move toward remote meetings and who would 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 document the benefits we claim face-to-face meetings have, rather than relying on old adages. 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.

Second, we need to organise our counter arguments about why collective meetings are more efficient. I think the advantages they precipitate in the end have greater overall value than any sustainability costs they may incur. We have taken

all this for granted for so long that little work has been done to identify and organise the positive points. We will need far more persuasive arguments.

Finally, we need to make sure that we are doing our best to incorporate the new technologies into existing meeting formats. The new technologies aren't going away so the challenge is to make them work for us instead of seeing them as a threat. If we can harness their strengths to make face-to-face meetings more powerful, they will become more of a force for meetings than a threat.

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