

Meetings technology

An opportunity and a challenge

by Edgar Hirt

For as long as modern meetings and conventions have existed, there has been a debate around whether or not face-to-face meetings will be eliminated by evolving communications technology.

On the one hand, critics pointed to the cost savings and decreased 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 occurred, such as those that arose from SARS or the trauma of 9/11, which 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,

AIPC annual conference and general assembly

2011 will be a big year for the international meetings industry's engagement in the United States, with both AIBTM in Baltimore and IMEX America launching within months of each other. This is creating a new focus on the relationship AIPC's North American members and clients have with those from other parts of the world – which in turn creates an additional benefit for all members attending the 2011 AIPC Annual Conference and 53rd General Assembly, which will be held in San Diego, USA, from 28 June to 1 July. As one of the most successful meetings destinations and facilities in America, San Diego will supply the perfect backdrop for the conference programme. Themed 'It's All About Change', the programme will be based on the how the industry is changing and what needs to be done in response. For more information, visit <http://www.onetec.be/aipc2011/content/default.html>

two things have quietly been happening, and together they may be shifting the odds in a new direction.

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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 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 process. What has gone from barely tolerable to useable may now be headed for the downright remarkable.

Secondly, concerns around sustainability intensified, and in particular those of the carbon impacts of the long-distance travel required for delegates to attend their meetings. This issue has come to the point of there being calls by many governments, NGOs and international welfare 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 is 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 among corporations and



About the author

Edgar Hirt is the president of the International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC) and managing director of Congress Center Hamburg. AIPC is the pre-eminent international association of convention centres, with the mission of encouraging, supporting and recognising excellence in centre management. Its programmes are directed towards enhancing the profile and performance of its members, using purpose-built facilities with the primary function of accommodating and servicing meetings, conventions, congresses and exhibitions. The association enjoys a global network of over 166 leading centres in 53 countries, with the active involvement of more than 650 centre management professionals. For more information, e-mail marianne.de.raay@aipc.org or visit www.aipc.org.



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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 areas of technology that would benefit from a move towards remote meetings, and will be only too happy to encourage this move.

What to do?

I believe that three areas need to be considered:

1. We need to document the benefits we have been claiming regarding 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 advantages of personal interactions to be – lends itself to some form of measurement and it is just a matter of figuring out how this can best be done.
2. We need to organise our counterarguments about why collective meetings are more efficient; for example, the

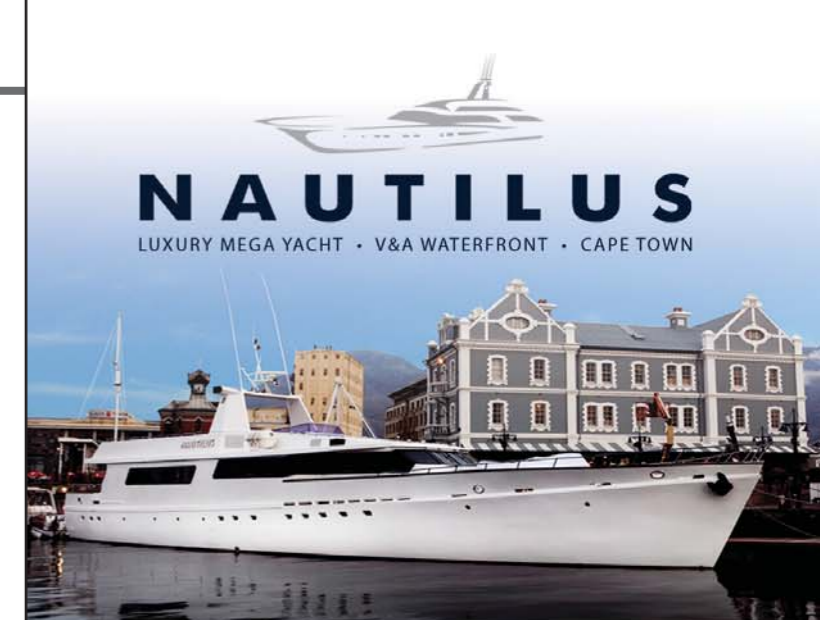
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alternative they offer to having many more individual meetings, or how the advances they precipitate in the end have much greater overall value than any sustainability costs they may incur. Again, we have taken all this for granted for so long that little work has been done in actually identifying and organising the positive points and this isn't enough at a time when we will need much more persuasive arguments.

3. 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. New technologies aren't going to go 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, new technologies will become more of a force for meetings than a threat – and delegates will gain even more benefits than they would have without them. In some cases, this means that there will in fact be remote components to organised events – this is already happening now – but if this enhances rather than detracts from personal participation, the net effect will remain positive.

For many years, we've gotten by with saying that nothing can replace personal interaction.

However, we are now facing a future in which we are going to have to do a lot better than that and counter our argument more strongly in the face of better technology. **35**



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res@thenautilus.co.za • Tel: 0861 A-B-O-A-R-D
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