

MEETING TECHNOLOGY HEAD-ON

Edgar Hirt explains why the meeting planners must embrace the new wave of technology coming into the industry

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 are the critics that point towards cost savings and travel inconveniences that are eliminated by virtual conferencing. While on the other are those who say such an arrangement can never replicate the benefits of personal interaction.

But two things are happening that together may be shifting the odds in a new direction.

First, technology is constantly getting better. Tiny, fuzzy images with irritating lag times have given way to crisper, larger ones with real time interaction, leading to a much greater sense of reality. Costs are more manageable with web-based options replacing the more costly dedicated links and specialised equipment that defined earlier versions. The remote alternative is not only 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 along with better software to facilitate the whole thing.

Secondly, concerns around sustainability have 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, NGOs and international organisations for new limits on business travel.

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.

At the same time, there are many well placed influencers in the technology sectors that would benefit from a move toward remote



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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 technological 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 organise 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 organise 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. Delegates will get even more benefits than they would have without them.

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. ◦

Edgar Hirt is the President of the International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC); and Managing Director of CCH, Congress Center Hamburg. AIPC is the pre-eminent international association of convention centres, with a mission of encouraging, supporting and recognising excellence in centre management. Its programmes are directed toward enhancing the profile and performance of its members and their purpose built facilities whose primary purpose is to accommodate and service meetings, conventions, congresses and exhibitions. The AIPC is a global network of over 166 leading centres in 53 countries, with the active involvement of more than 650 centre management professionals. For further information please contact marianne.de@raayaipc.org or visit www.aipc.org.