



Working Smarter

By Christopher Durso

Seeing Is Believing

No herky-jerky video. No poorly synched audio. No tiny screens or giant cameras. This is not your father's videoconferencing.

A recent interview with John Landau, senior vice president of global managed services for Tata Communications, seemed utterly routine. He sat at a conference table, relaxed and smiling, and talked about Tata's Telepresence program, which involves building a network of public rooms around the world where pretty much anyone can participate in a next-generation videoconference. "The threshold for what is called 'telepresence' is a virtual meeting environment but feels immersive," Landau said, "because you can sit in the room and talk to the other party and feel like you're in the same place."

Indeed, it was easy to forget that he wasn't — in the same place, that is. While we sat in a Tata Telepresence room in Herndon, Va., 30 minutes outside Washington, D.C., Landau was a few hundred miles north, at Tata's offices in Matawan, N.J. But Telepresence allowed for a seamless face-to-face interview, with sharp, perfectly synchronized video and audio, direct eye contact, and a sense of physical presence. "We telecom people used to talk about how the world is shrinking," Landau said. "Planes did a lot of that. This is shrinking the world that much more."

High Visibility

It might be time to banish your decades-old impressions of teleconferencing — bulky phones with postage-stamp TV screens; projections of jumpy, Max Headroom-style images; shouted, overlapping conversations dissected by lags and gaps. Today, better and increasingly cheaper technology is making high-definition (HD) videoconferencing a viable option for meeting professionals

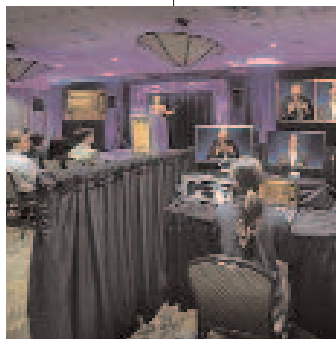
looking not so much to replace live events but to expand their reach, convene quick-turnaround business meetings, or accommodate last-minute schedule changes. "I wouldn't say it's like ESPN's 'Monday Night Football,' but it is almost that good," said Brian Lagestee, senior vice president of technology and business development for PSAV Presentation Services, whose High Definition Event Video Conferencing program (HDEVC) offers Internet-based HD video services for meetings of all sizes. "I would say it's one layer below

that. It's better than looking at a typical IMAG [where the presenter's image is projected onto a large screen]. It's definitely come a long way."

Mizuho Securities USA took advantage of that for a meeting it held at the Omni Berkshire Place in New York City on June 1–2. Two or three weeks before the event, concerns about the swine flu led a handful of Tokyo-

based presenters — who would be speaking to several hundred U.S. and Canadian investors during the meeting — to cancel their travel plans. Working with PSAV, Mizuho arranged for the Tokyo speakers to make their presentations live via HDEVC, with their images projected on a six-foot screen at the front of a classroom-set room. "What we always say is, if we don't hear any complaints, [attendees are] satisfied," said Tomoko Miyata, vice president and co-head of investor relations for Mizuho Securities USA. "But we heard that they were impressed that we carried out the entire program by bringing in this technology, because our competitors were either reducing the size of their events or canceling their events."

PSAV uses PolyCom technology to offer high-



SCREEN AND HEARD: High-definition videoconferencing — including PSAV Presentation Services' HDEVC program (left) and Tata Communications' Telepresence system (right) — is "shrinking the world that much more," according Tata's John Landau.

ON THE WEB: Watch a demonstration of Cisco's TelePresence technology at www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrjWKEzRhFI.



definition 1080-resolution video running over a high-speed Internet connection. The company has certified nearly 100 hotels, convention centers, and other venues across North America as being able to accommodate its HDEVc services — including the St. Regis Washington, D.C., where we conducted a videoconference interview with PSAV Director of Business Development Brian Presley and Virtual Marketing Salesperson Brian Swann, both of whom were in Long Beach, Calif., and National Director of Sales Development Chris Walsh, who was in Schaumburg, Ill. A MiniDV camera, microphone, and four-channel audio mixer were arranged unobtrusively around a conference table in one of the St. Regis' meeting rooms. Presley and Swann were projected onto a movie screen perched on a six-foot tripod, while a few feet away, Walsh was on a 50-inch plasma screen.

The experience, while not quite as cozy as Tata's Telepresence room, was clear and comfortable. After an adjustment period of about five minutes, it was easy to relax into the rhythms of the videoconference — to stop yelling into the microphone and staring at the camera, sit back, and just enjoy being able to read facial expressions and body language and, thanks to the pin-drop quality of the audio, gauge vocal inflection. The room at the St. Regis can accommodate 40 to 50 people for a meeting, but given the plug-and-play nature of the equipment involved, it was obvious that the scale of the HDEVc event could be ratcheted up or down as needed. "We're doing 75 percent in telepresence mode, for smaller business meetings," Swann said, "and 25 percent with larger sessions," where a speaker is brought in to address an audience via HDEVc. The cost of the service, Presley said, is comparable to "travel costs for two people" — or, he added with a laugh, "one CEO."

Loud and Clear

While PSAV piggybacks on existing Internet capabilities in a variety of settings, the METS Center

conference facility, in Erlanger, Ky., near Cincinnati, has an 18-seat boardroom, a 30-seat classroom, and a 150-seat auditorium that are all hardwired for Internet-based HD videoconferencing. "We haven't gotten many site-to-site meetings or things like that," said Phil Horney, the METS Center's director of technology. "It's always been [broadcasting] a keynote [to a remote meeting location]. But the response is great, because they aren't used to seeing the person in such a clear picture and sound."

Likewise, the backbone of Tata's Telepresence system is a series of specially built public rooms, powered by Cisco TelePresence technology — nine so far, in the United States, London, India, and the Philippines, with dozens more planned. Tata and Starwood Hotels & Resorts will debut Telepresence suites in at least 10 Starwood properties around the world by the end of the year. Pricing is straightforward: The rooms are \$500 per hour, although Tata runs price promotions regularly.

In July, the World Wildlife Fund-UK used Telepresence suites at Taj Hotels' 51 Buckingham Gate in London and Cisco's Eurocentral facility in Scotland to announce its One in Five Challenge, which encourages corporations and government agencies to reduce their business flights by 20 percent within five years. "It was important for us to be able to demonstrate the latest telepresence technology to our delegates," said Lucy Bertenshaw, WWF-UK's One in Five Challenge manager, "so they can consider its use or other videoconferencing technology to replace face-to-face meetings." She added: "Many of the delegates talked of how good the technology was and how impressed they were."

But the point, said Tata's John Landau, is actually to make it easier for people to meet face-to-face — if not always in person. "From our experience," he said, "this does reduce our travel for meetings. But it increases our frequency and quality of meeting." ■

Take Away

We Have to Ask

Will high-def videoconferencing ever replace the live, in-person, face-to-face meeting? The professionals say no:

Brian Swann, PSAV Presentation Services:

"We don't want it to, because we're in the meeting business, and because we understand the necessity of meeting face-to-face."

John Landau, Tata Communications:

"[Telepresence] allows you to have the right people at the right time at the right meeting. But I still have to meet with my peers [in person]."

Phil Horney, The METS Center:

"There's a lot to be said for meeting someone in person versus just speaking to them over the phone, especially when I'm meeting a client for the first time."

► **Christopher Durso** is executive editor of *Convene*.

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