

Ann Clarke of Claremont Group Interiors looks at the latest developments in audio visual and video conferencing technology and why it is becoming so important for facilities managers

It's a recession and companies are looking for ways to tighten their belts. Little wonder that the issue of how we work is moving up the corporate agenda once more. Flexible working has always been big news of course, but this year has seen a renewed fascination with the whole topic. According to research from the Future Foundation, the proportion of people who work from home for at least one day a week is set to rise to over 16 per cent by 2020. The government has become especially interested in the phenomenon over the past year or two, pressing for more legislation and encouraging firms to enable staff to work more flexibly. Earlier this year the Office of Government Commerce (OGC), published a new report called Working Beyond Walls to highlight to public sector organisations the opportunities for more flexible working that their counterparts in the private sector had pioneered.

With a clear business case based around work-life balance, staff retention, lower commuting costs, reduced property costs, higher productivity and so on, it's little wonder that the government is keen to build on the organic growth of flexible working demonstrated by many private sector firms. The government is also aware of the way that the new ways we work have reshaped the labour market. Already we have seen a very different shift in unemployment levels in the current recession compared to the last major downturn in the 1990s. Instead of mass redundancies, firms are already pretty lean and flexible with a workforce able to bend itself to a far greater extent to the new conditions. Few commentators are expecting the same traumatic mass unemployment we've seen in the past.

So with flexible working resurgent and workers increasingly willing to work pretty anywhere and anyhow, the question is: what is the office for if technology allows us to work where and how we like? Fortunately, the answer to this potential existential crisis is already clear, because the office fulfils the same function it always has, which is to bring people together. This is particularly important in a world in which the capital of most organisations is intellectual. The problem with having the main asset of your company in the heads of the people who work for you is that it can suddenly disappear so the need for people to communicate with each other daily has never been greater. That is why there has been a profound shift in office design over the past few years, with the emphasis moving from the provision of dedicated private spaces for individuals to shared spaces and meeting rooms for teams of people.

If the principle role of the office has now become increasingly that of a forum for the exchange of information, it follows that the office must exist to serve a technologically literate and mobile workforce and provide them with a focal point for all that they do. There has been a lot of talk in recent years about the convergence of technologies but I believe that the issue of convergence is equally appropriate for the way that buildings knit together the disparate threads of technology, people and place.

We have certainly seen people take more of an holistic approach to commercial building design. It starts with a clear understanding of what is needed from the facility and from that we have to look at how the whole package is integrated; from the design of the room, the products used to fit it out, access to data and power, audio-visual equipment, booking

systems and the integration with facilities management services. In my opinion, pulling together these elements in a coherent manner that resolves the potential conflicts between their life-cycles is one of the most important roles of the contemporary FM.



As a result, it's no longer enough to have basic AV equipment that cannot integrate with other systems. The rooms and their equipment have to integrate seamlessly with the technology people bring with them so that information can be displayed and shared quickly and without disruption to the meeting. They must allow for videoconferencing, which has now reached the tipping point at which enough people have systems to make it a must-have for an increasing number of organisations.

They must also integrate with the intelligence now inherent in buildings. Room control systems allow the host to control all aspects of the environment. That includes the lighting, ventilation, projection equipment and curtains and blinds. Some of these systems provide fully integrated control, covering projectors, audio and video sources, cameras, screens and lighting. Also these modules are becoming more sophisticated and can now host room booking systems too. These systems can also be used across the client network and can work with other proprietary products such as Outlook.

The convergence of AV equipment with other IT has driven demand for a new generation of networked AV products. In many ways, this simplifies the convergence of technology with wider business needs not least because it encourages people to share information from their laptops and other IT when they are in meetings and presentations. Problems can be resolved over the network so that also helps to minimise disruption. Presentations can now be run across multiple rooms and across sites, mirroring the virtual working environment which more and more of us enjoy.

The business benefits of taking an integrated approach can be profound. Take the example of a company called Belden, one of the world's largest designers and manufacturers of electronic cables, connectivity products and related items for the specialty electronics and data networking markets. The business has over 5,000 employees worldwide not counting its array

of suppliers, contractors, consultants and clients who all must be catered for in terms of property decisions. When the UK arm of the business recently moved to new offices in Manchester it gave it the perfect opportunity to look at several key areas of its business.



David Stokes Head of IT of Belden explains: The growth of the business in North Manchester meant we had to find a solution that meant people were able to work together rather than in clusters in a variety of offices. In terms of communication we've balanced open plan space with cellular space so people can get the right mix of teamwork and privacy. We'd never had video-conferencing facilities before, but we've already seen a dramatic reduction in the amount of money and time we spend travelling. The installation we have now is fully interactive so we can work in real time on white boards as well as having face to face meetings. Not only does this make it far easier to hold meetings and means we can be flexible in co-ordinating meetings quickly, we've already seen significant reductions in our travel budgets. We've calculated we're saving at least 18 per cent already which is great for the bottom line and also, because of the reduction in journeys, great for the environment.'

In other words, a clear, undeniable business case for the provision of a smart technological solution to a real business issue. I recall that years ago, people talked a great deal about the potential death of the office as a result of new ways of working. But that was premature to say the very least. What we've actually seen is that these developments have driven a change in the way offices are used. And, rather than becoming less important to the business, the office has become more important and far more sophisticated in response to the changing demands we put on it. Not least because it is the key for the exchange of intellectual capital between that expensive army of flexible workers that dominate the world in which we work.

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