

Telepresence@InfoComm08

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Telepresence technologies are rapidly addressing the need for virtual “in-person” meetings for corporate, government, education, entertainment, manufacturing and healthcare markets, among others. In this all new, full-day program, leading telepresence manufacturers will discuss present and future applications of telepresence technologies and services, and current telepresence users will share their case studies with attendees. You will be able to learn from experts how to capitalize on the latest high-end audio and visual communications that make “being there” a reality.

What really is Telepresence? More importantly, what really isn't Telepresence?

What has become clear is that there are two distinct definitions of telepresence forming. They are not necessarily at odds with each other, but the second is a slightly cynical version, couched in more specific and familiar terms used in video collaboration today.

Telepresence – definition number one: telepresence represents the use of a number of technologies, aesthetics and acoustics that together allow a person or people in one location to meet and collaborate with a person or people in another location (or locations) where the experience simulates all people being in the same location. Implied in this experience is the understanding that the technologies, aesthetics and acoustics involved in the simulation are, or should be, practically invisible to the users.

Telepresence – definition number two: Telepresence is a video conferencing industry buzzword that represents a class of products that purportedly perform much better than the perceived past video conferencing norms. Any one of a number of differentiators (possibly including high definition video, spatial audio, large screen displays, images projected or reflected in front of a camera's eye line and/or other features) can be identified as the reason a product in the first person (your product) is truly Telepresence, and the lack of any or all such differentiators can be identified as the reason a product in the third person (their product) is not truly Telepresence.

Regrettably, some of the manufacturers in the space are using the term “Telepresence” as a buzzword even where it is not remotely appropriate. By any definition, Telepresence requires a life-size element to be considered part of that category. However, one large manufacturer has decided to call all of their products “Telepresence” regardless of the number or size of their displays, and another manufacturer has begun referring to their executive desktop units as “personal Telepresence.” This blurring of the lines may help these firms in their short term marketing, but the confusion that will definitely ensue will hurt the conferencing industry in the long run.

Why telepresence is great

It would be difficult to come up with a more attractive appeal than the one being used by the current Telepresence manufacturers. In comparing themselves to traditional video conferencing systems and products, they stress the following three points:

- The system will meet all of your visual conferencing needs with a quality that is almost lifelike, reducing the difficulties and expenses of traveling.
- Unlike past video conferencing products, Telepresence systems are reliable – the calls always go through.

- No specific training is required to use the systems. There are little or no control buttons. Just walk into the room and use it.

It is not difficult to understand why such a message is being widely embraced. Who wouldn't want to invest in a technology that is 100 percent successful, 100 percent reliable and requires no knowledge to use.

Beyond these messages though, there is a large list of advantages that a Telepresence system will provide:

- A meeting's remote participants will typically appear normal size – as if they were in the room with you.
- Visual details will typically be extremely sharp – you will be able to make out subtle changes in facial expression, which is a key part of interpersonal communication.
- Eye contact between local and remote participants is typically excellent – people will generally look like they are looking at whatever they are actually looking at - and this is important when building consensus and trust in a meeting.
- Sounds are typically directional, just as they would be in a face-to-face meeting – things happening to your left sound like they are happening to your left and you can hear side bar conversations, just like in a same room meeting.
- Visual images and sound will happen in virtually real time – there is no noticeable delay between participants over great distances. People can interrupt and challenge just like physically being there.
- Depending upon the system and/or services you purchase, an operator or concierge may be at your disposal, connecting calls for you as quickly as you feel you need them. As a user it is just like walking into a meeting room and starting the conversation.

Experienced together, the list above tremendously enhances the quality of a meeting with remote participation. Users will experience less “technology fatigue” than they would have in a traditional video conference. Meetings will be more productive, livelier and more interesting than they may have been in the past. When used specifically in its optimal situation, comparing Telepresence to a video conference is like comparing a live orchestra to someone playing a harmonica.

Why Telepresence isn't really a single universal solution

Most of the conferencing industry has firmly embraced the hype of Telepresence. If you are one of the new firms in the space you're quick to announce that your product is the best thing since sliced bread. If you're one of the traditional conferencing manufacturers you're quick to embrace the onrush of new customers for whom you have a suite of solutions that includes telepresence amongst other offerings. If you're one of the industry analysts you're delighted with the excitement in the space you cover. Everybody is happy.

Remember what your parents said about things that sound too good to be true?

Telepresence systems perform well in very specific applications because of some very specific parameters. Veer from these parameters even a little and the experience collapses.

First of all, the manufacturers' positioning that “Telepresence is video conferencing that works/is reliable” requires some scrutiny. Why has traditional video conferencing had reliability issues? The most typical reason for video conferencing failures is the lack of a robust network to support the calls. If your network can't support IP calling rates between devices at 384KBps to 768KBps how will it support Telepresence calls requiring anywhere from 6MBps to 20MBps? You're either going to need to buy a whole lot of additional network infrastructure or move your Telepresence calls to

an off-premises (paid) network. These are both models that the Telepresence manufacturers suggest. They are also both models that would “fix” most of the problems experienced with traditional video conferencing.

Another reason traditional video conferences have failed is the inherent instability when trying to call infrequently used endpoints. As an example, your New York to London weekly call may usually work, but your annual Fiji to London call does not. Or similarly, your regular internal calls work, but your calls to a new customer or client site do not connect.

Does Telepresence fix these problems? In the first example, Telepresence systems are so expensive that you’ll never put one in your Fiji office or anyplace where there would be necessary but infrequent usage – the return on investment would never be justified for the limited applications. In the second example, unless a client or customer has bought the exact same product from the exact same provider that you have, it would take a string of minor miracles (involving connectivity, compatibility, bandwidth, etc.) to connect a Telepresence system in your firm’s offices to one at their site. Put simply, telepresence is like a luxury car where the steering wheel has been removed and you have about five destinations you can select with a single button on the dashboard. It’s luxurious, comfortable, and very, very limited.

Beyond the comparison to traditional video conferencing, the basic Telepresence concept presents some challenges in and of itself. When you do have two locations that always need to connect just to each other, each with a non-mobile compliment of staff, then Telepresence is the clear answer for high quality, effective communications. But, what if you have three locations...or four? Telepresence systems have really struggled with these multipoint scenarios. One solution is called “voice switched” where a complex algorithm figures out who is speaking and makes sure that person is visible on one of the displays at each location. Another solution is “continuous presence” where everyone at each participating site is visible on the displays (in a smaller image) at all times. While both of these solutions allow for multipoint meetings, it really isn’t Telepresence anymore. In the first scenario you have to sacrifice the eye contact with those that aren’t speaking – which frankly is sometimes more important than looking at who is speaking. In the second scenario, you’ve sacrificed life-sized images, directional audio and all of the other things meant to differentiate the experience. In this frequent real world application the whole reason a firm has invested heavily in a telepresence system is gone. Also gone is Telepresence favorable contrast with legacy video conference systems which can do the very same job with a rapid return on a much lower investment.

What will you learn at Telepresence@InfoComm?

- What is the history of Telepresence
- Which manufacturers are providing Telepresence systems
- What are the differences between the available products
- What should you look for when trying to select the right one for your firm
- Who are the current experts in the field
- What are their thoughts on successful installations of Telepresence
- Who are the current users of telepresence
- What are their thoughts on the benefits and drawbacks of their installations
- Where can you turn to get assistance on next steps

Then, when the seminar is over, you can head on down to the IMCCA presented HD and Telepresence Showcase and look at some of the systems that were discussed in action – right on the InfoComm show floor.

What can you win at Telepresence@InfoComm?

Attendees of Telepresence@InfoComm are eligible to win one of two complete video conferencing systems being provided by Polycom and Tandberg. One drawing will take place for those present in the first half hour of the event, and the second drawing will take place for those present in the last half hour. These are brand new, high quality systems valued in the many thousands of dollars. Don't miss this chance to fly-home the proud owner of the latest in high definition conferencing technology. It may be the best odds you'll get in all of Las Vegas!

Come Join Us!

Come join us for a one day intensive program of presentations, demonstrations, Q&A, refreshments, valuable prize giveaways and networking. To attend the event, go to www.infocommshow.org and register for InfoComm 08, then select the IMCCA educational event "Telepresence@InfoComm." For more information about the event and sponsorship opportunities contact IMCCA Executive Director Carol Zelkin at czelkin@imcca.org.