

a good time to avoid a big mistake

Maintaining inter-operability is essential if you are thinking of up-grading to telepresence. BY LISA HONAN



Lisa Honan is CEO of Eyenetwork, Europe's leading videoconference booking service.

After many false dawns, in 2008 we can say with confidence that video communications are finally entering into the mainstream with the long anticipated 'network effect' leading to an acceleration in videoconferencing use. Through the magic power of network infrastructure, this acceleration increases exponentially. So what is driving these rapidly improving times? One major factor is the arrival of so called 'Telepresence'. Although this is the name of a Cisco product, it is also becoming a general description for 'Very High Bandwidth' video communications. Hewlett Packard (HP) and the two main videoconference vendors Tandberg and Polycom have comparable products.

Operating with up to a guaranteed 5mb per 1080 (High Definition) screen bandwidth, over expensive private networks, the effect is sensational. For a three screen room, that gives up to six people at each location a virtual 'wall' with the graphic resolution of approximately twelve normal televisions. You can see the freckles on someones' nose as you have never done before on a TV screen.

This is a wonderful development, but as can sometimes happen with any rapidly developing technology there is the risk of problems of compatibility. Most videoconferencing has operated historically over ISDN. In the internet world, this is rather antiquated technology and is being slowly but steadily replaced by Internet Protocol (IP).

The ISDN connections for videoconferencing were usually point to point operating at 128 Kb/s or 384 Kb/s (kilobytes per second). Over the public Internet, bandwidth might be typically 512 Kb/s, or even variable bandwidth (using as much as the videoconference units think is available). The public Internet does not guarantee Quality of Service, but generally it works pretty well. The challenge is to offer systems which make the most of the new technology, using set-ups designed to show 5 Mb, but also remain compatible with the older 'legacy' systems. Offering a guaranteed Quality of Service through the maintenance of a Virtual Private Network may provide a secure, optimum service, but it makes it very difficult for customers to connect their existing videoconferencing equipment to the latest set-ups.

In the last 15 years of industry development all the major manufacturers have worked towards setting non-proprietary standards to ensure connection between the different brands. However, with the new wave of technology companies face the problem that they can spend considerable amounts of money upgrading their videoconferencing systems, but cannot connect their other offices who are still using older systems to their new suites. Connecting the old systems with the new can be done. HP have shown the way, connecting all their 'Halo' rooms to an ISDN and public Internet 'bridge' made by Tandberg.

The decision to remain proprietary has a much wider consequence for the planet. The fewer people who step on a plane to cross the world to have a business meeting the better, as air travel is one of the largest contributors to CO2 emissions. Maintaining competition in the field is crucial to ensuring the technology continues developing in the best interests of customers and the world at large. For the moment, it's important that companies looking to upgrade their systems make sure that they can still communicate with customers and suppliers. This would help ensure the wonderful accelerating interest in video communications does not grind to a halt.