

# Technology brings distant meetings closer

*Video, as well as sound, make teleconferencing a viable alternative to travel*

Just like George Jetson talking to his boss Spacely Sprocket on a futuristic computer screen, companies of all sizes today are talking to co-workers and customers "screen to face" over real time, interactive videoconferencing systems. If you're anything like me, you're skeptical. We've all heard the rumors or experienced the "Max Headroom-like" video, the annoying delay, and choppy audio associated with videoconferencing. It did, in fact, involve heavy duty work. Both parties would first have to schedule a meeting well in advance, park oversized trucks outside a studio and have thick, tangled cable extending from the

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site to the trucks. Today's videoconferencing equipment has evolved into small telecable-sized boxes and remote microcameras set on top of a monitor or your desktop computer. It only takes a few maneuvers to get the meeting started, and common ISDN lines have replaced the satellites. So just like everything else in the technology industry, these products improve and become more "user friendly" over time.

Today, videoconferencing is a billion dollar industry annually projected to grow to \$5 billion by the turn of the century. Decreasing equipment and operating costs are pushing the technology down into middle size and small companies. Remember when computers were only for large corporations? New markets and applications like "Telemedicine" are opening up. Doctors use the technology to diagnose patients, or connect with multiple treatment centers from home. Legislation has recently been passed allowing legal firms to take depositions and testimonials via videoconferencing. Corporations are cutting their travel bud-

gets by 50 percent, and the time lost to travel is now productive. Human resource managers are interviewing potential employees from across the nation (or world) and trainers are interactively reaching classrooms of infinite proportions.

So what's the catch? Many local companies are equipped with a high-end conferencing system costing upwards of \$50,000, but there is no saying which companies can or will benefit the most through videoconferencing. Those that have utilized it more are world-wide businesses such as Whirlpool, Arthur Anderson and Dana Corporation. There are people who take on this stuff more than others, but it's not so much the company as the mindset of the company. As with any new technology, people are not yet willing to embrace it fully.

As a frequent user of the videoconferencing medium, I have found the technology to be quite reliable and mostly trouble free. Technical problems will undoubtedly pop up from time to time, but most iron themselves out during the first few months of use. Because most meetings are "point to point," (only 2 locations) operating the equipment is fairly straightforward. As more locations are added (multipoint), the higher the probability of technical difficulties. If possible, make a test call an hour or two before



your meeting, to give yourself time to deal with problems.

Today's group videoconferencing units cost \$8,000 to \$50,000 depending on the quality you need, and require one to three ISDN lines (Integrated Services Digital Network) lines. The more lines used, the faster and smoother the connection. Full-motion video, or 30 fps (frames per second) can be achieved with 3 ISDN lines, but "good" quality video can be achieved with a single line and 15 fps. In Indiana, a

company can expect to pay about \$150 per line for installation and a monthly fee of 35 to 85 dollars. Air time charges are similar to that of a cellular phone. It can be expensive, but so is travel time.

Would I conduct all meetings this way? No. Is it for you? I remember asking this same question about the Internet two years ago. While it certainly does not replace all meetings, there have proven to be cost saving opportunities for companies of all sizes. **BP**