

Facilities Focus

I See You Out There: A follow-up report on video conferencing

By David Huber, Project Manager,
FM Solutions Division of Commonwealth Architects

I know what you are thinking: Dave you're a little behind the ball on this one because we just discussed video conferencing at last month's joint IFMA/IIDA meeting. Yes, that is indeed true, and while I am often behind the ball in life, I have some logic for this one. I found the information at the meeting to be very interesting. I had questions, though, and began doing a little bit of follow-up research. I discovered that where video conferencing is concerned, we only scratched the surface at the last meeting. I discovered some rather practical ideas about the actual conferencing space that I wanted to pass along to help fill in some of the gaps from last month's meeting.

Let us begin with what your cross-country associates will see through their monitors. When Peter Jennings is reporting on the events of the world, you are privy to all of the background newsroom activity behind his distinguished head. This is because ABC News wants you to associate Mr. Jennings and his nightly report with the fury of a newsroom, such as ripping the report off the AP wire at the last second and rushing to press. They want drama and excitement. You do not.

In your video conference room, the object will be to provide a blank pallet as a backdrop to your conference. This involves avoiding overload of the senses. Keep the color schemes neutral and the design elements supportive so that the space will not compete with the users. Do not give your international office-mates a focal point other than you. Avoid plants and artwork as they only add unnecessary visual clutter.

A major consideration of any video conferencing room is the sound, or lack thereof. In an effective video conferencing space, the only sound heard should be the one you want heard. Any noise other than the voices of the participants will be a distraction that will amplify across phone lines. The location of the room is also of vital importance because the surrounding spaces have a direct impact on the conference room. The room should ideally be located in a quiet place far away from loading docks, building mechanical rooms, restrooms, common kitchenettes or elevator shafts.

Sometimes these adjacencies are unavoidable. You can help block out any exterior distractions by constructing the walls to the underside of the deck and insulating over the suspended ceiling grid. HVAC ducts can also be insulated to reduce the sound of air movement. Consider placing air diffusers away from the microphones to avoid a white-noise effect. Finally, use padded carpeting and do not hesitate to work acoustical panels into the interior treatment.

It is very tempting to place the video conferencing room along an exterior wall. Fight this temptation if you can. Video conferencing rooms require controlled lighting in order to be effective. 100 to 110-foot candles of light on a 45-degree angle are needed so that a sharp image can be transmitted through the monitor without creating a shadowing effect. If your conference room *is* located on an exterior window wall, consider light filtering or entirely opaque shades as opposed to spotty window blinds.

The logistics of planning a video conferencing space can be a challenging effort for designers and facility managers. The industry offers limitless technology choices as well as extensive opportunities to conduct your business without ever leaving your office.

See you out there...

Tell us what you think. Send feedback/comments/suggestions to: David Huber at dhuber@comarchs.com or Sara Cowherd at scowherd@comarchs.com.
Visit our website at: www.comarchs.com