

COMMUNICATIONS

TELEPRESENCE: FACE TO FACE

HWL has rolled out its state-of-the-art Telepresence system around the world. Facilities are booked solid by executives across the globe. Your office may be next!



O real you could reach out and shake hands. Some people even try.

Traditional video-conferencing has not yet surmounted its core challenge – making it feel real. Fans of free online services will be familiar with blurry, jerky videos with terrible sound quality. Conversations seem unreal and feel unsatisfactory. They don't deliver the essential and ineffable – the real human connection, the main driver behind key face-to-face meetings. The 'Star Trek' experience – the Holy Grail of video-conferencing – seemed to be far off science fiction. Until now.

Mr David Nicholls, Head of Group Information Systems, explained the genesis behind the project. "The idea for step changing our existing video-conferencing facilities into a true, lifelike experience came straight from our Group Managing Director [Mr Canning Fok] who was extremely clear about the levels of quality that were expected and the priority locations in the first wave."

Strategic global offices of the Hutchison Whampoa Group now house a cutting-edge video-conference suite called 'Telepresence'. Milan, Calgary, Amsterdam, London and Hong Kong all host the wildly popular new technology and service. The reality of the experience is allowing managers to replace time-consuming international travel with a Telepresence session. Executives save time and working effort by keeping their feet on

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Of course, it doesn't hurt that a stroll to the custom-designed Telepresence suites is easy on the travel budget and our environmental footprint compared to international jet travel. It is estimated that 516 flights have been saved since the new Telepresence system was launched in 2012.

HWL, Hutchison Global Communications (HGC) and Cisco Systems have teamed up to make this service possible, and HWL IT professionals enable the hosting of Cisco System's teleconference and telesuite technology. An online booking portal launched by HGC is dedicated to providing the concierge services for this new technology. In Hong Kong, "the systems are always fully booked after 2pm (HK time)," says Mr Michael Ho, Senior Manager of the Group Information Services Department, reflecting

the demand for ultra-high-quality communications between Hong Kong and European colleagues.

DETAIL, DETAIL, DETAIL

This new technology shows all participants life-size on the screen and eliminates delay in audio and video that can lead to an unreal experience. To provide lively, high-quality video-conferences, the Telepresence rooms have been renovated to meet standards set by Cisco.

"The distances between the screens and the conference desks are carefully adjusted. The rooms have integrated lighting which eliminates shadows to produce high-quality, natural-looking video," said Michael.

All Telepresence conference rooms have soundproofed, identical walls, and some even use the same chairs. This was a project of some complexity. David explains, "We quickly realised that this was not solely a technology project as it involved major building works incorporating important details like room furnishing, acoustics, lighting and room administration. The first thing we did was bring together a cross-functional team across the key regions comprising experts from the Group HR, property management and secretarial support to work alongside our technical partners and the internal IT team."

This was not only a challenge for the IT team, but also for HGC, which offers the concierge service for the Group.



516

flights saved

4,275t

CO₂ reduction

Ms Jennifer Tan, HGC's Managing Director, told *Sphere*, "At first glance, people may simply think that the concierge service acts just like a receptionist, helping callers put through video calls. But it is more than that. Many video-conferences have to be arranged at short notice and scheduling is quite challenging work."

The cross-functional team completed the first phase, from room refurbishment to hardware installations for Hong Kong and London, in only three months. For other companies, it normally takes six to nine months. "Unlike any other project, quality is literally in your face; it either works amazingly or you are hugely disappointed. Of course we were delighted to come online and deliver a truly amazing experience. I am told that we did all this in record time, so everyone involved should feel extremely proud," David added.

GOOD BUSINESS, GREEN PLANET

In the old days, executives spent days traveling globally to take part in meetings and conferences. Even though teleconferencing existed for some years, quality varied. The high-quality Telepresence system has become a vital communication tool for executives in the HWL Group. Telepresence saves travel time and cost, and maintains the benefits of face-to-face meetings. David said the new technology is especially important for those business cases where the distances are long, interactions are frequent and many people are involved.

Earlier generation systems also contribute. Ms Ann-Christin Larsson, Executive Assistant to **3 Sweden**'s CEO, has benefited from the convenience brought by the systems. "Using the HWL concierge service to schedule multiple partner meetings is an easy task due to the booking portal. For meetings between **3 Sweden** and **3 Denmark** we have a pre-set, making setting up a meeting as simple as pressing three buttons," she said.

Mr Nicholas Höglberg, CEO of **3 Sweden**, says the system not only saves time and money, but also elevates the efficiency of its business. "With our Telepresence room, we have increased our productivity. It also gives us the opportunity to schedule board meetings at short notice without having to first check the availability of flights."

He stressed that Telepresence promotes one of the HWL Group's objectives – to be environmentally friendly. "Our customers are evaluating us more and more on our environmental initiatives." He is a huge advocate of the carbon footprint reduction benefits. The estimated carbon emission reduction through Telepresence for the Group in 2013 was 4,275 tonnes.

COMING SOON, TO A THEATRE NEAR YOU

"We hope the system will spread among the business units, especially our retail business in Asia Pacific, whose buyers and suppliers are scattered around Europe," said Michael Ho. In the near future, Michael expects there will be one or two more locations installing the immersive Telepresence systems. He

welcomes enquiries from HWL business units considering how the technology can benefit them. The upfront cost is more than made up by the efficiency and environmental gains. Nicholas says it best – "Using Telepresence simply makes sense." □

HGC, AT YOUR SERVICE

Providing the new concierge service to executives around the globe is no easy task, but HGC has a handle on it after one year of operation. Jennifer finds the service has benefited the Group as a whole. "We keep running costs down. Instead of paying a third party, we provide it ourselves. I believe the payback period of this will be short, and it will continue to benefit the Group in terms of travel time and cost saving."

Having gained experience within its own family, HGC plans to offer the concierge service to outside parties. "We started with the HWL Group, and this was a very good learning experience. The Group has operations in different countries, sophisticated demand and high expectations of this service. Being able to serve the Group well means that we are well-prepared and equipped to extend our services to other corporate customers."