

Executive INSIGHTS

In this 2nd in a series of executive interviews, ISPR President Matthew Lombard discusses important issues related to the Telepresence with industry thought-leaders and technology experts.

How would you describe the current “State of the Industry” with regard to Telepresence technology?

DD. The industry is coming down off five years of hype around the room systems known as “Immersive Telepresence.” These are the large room systems with life size images, excellent spatial audio, etc. Instead of being the new norm in videoconferencing these systems have begun to rightly take their place as an excellent choice where appropriate (negotiations, longer executive meetings, etc.) We are now in the era of “access,” where “pervasive video” is available to everyone wherever they are. The tool sets include immersive telepresence, and along with it go smartphones, tablets, smaller room systems and the rest of the choices. The work organizations now need to do is figure out the right blend for them.

Q. You have stated that whether it’s laptop or tablet-based visual conferencing or even room-centric telepresence systems, it is all ‘telepresence’ with varying degrees of quality. Can you elaborate? What do you think is the minimum requirement for presence?

There are two camps surrounding the word “telepresence.” One camp involved in the industry says that If modern society accepts Kleenex as a generic description of a facial tissue, or Jell-o as the name for all flavored gelatins – even though these are really only a single type or brand - then we have to allow some flexibility in the use of Telepresence to describe a space when not all systems truly fit the technical description. Add to that two additional complicating factors:

1) Video Conferencing (six syllables) has often had a poor reputation - historically due to manufacturers overselling the capabilities of the products in the space. Most of the bigger manufacturers’ were all ready to jump at the chance of changing the name of the space to disassociate themselves from the poor performing products of the past. Telepresence (four syllables) gave them the chance to give something old a new name.

2) About five years ago Cisco chose to name their entire suite of products TelePresence (note the big “P”) – originally to differentiate themselves from the legacy types of products and features on the market before them, but now just representing their brand for all



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video. No other video firm had the marketing might or budget to challenge them, so all firms adopted a “we have telepresence too” stance.

Clearly most of the people in the industry have accepted this generic “telepresence” as the description for “new, good video systems.” Most that is, but not all...

The other camp can’t wait to vehemently protest everything I’ve written above. Telepresence, they say, is all about the experience – an “immersive” experience. (Notice that we are defining an amorphous term with another amorphous term.) Many people have different beliefs about what makes this experience immersive – usually falling in line with whatever product they sell, support or use. 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, full concierge services to make your connections 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.

Q. What do you think is the immediate short-term effect of widespread user adoption of cloud-based video conferencing and collaboration on the presence industry?

DD. “Cloud” can mean two different things. On one had it can represent virtualization – as in the drive to replace hardware with software solutions that can be located away from the user. BlueJeansNet is one example of a virtualized offering that uses processing power to replace standard hardware MCUs and offers it as a service. The other definition can simply relate to the consumption model. Cloud Video can be Video as a Service

Executive INSIGHTS

(VAAS) when someone else buys the hardware instead of you and offers it to your organization as an operating expense. By having both of these choices available more organizations can have access to these tools within models that work for them.

Q. At ISPR, we are concerned with research that focuses on human behavior and interaction as a result of utilizing presence technology. Do you have any thoughts on how human communication, or society in general, may change as a result of widespread visual communication systems?

DD. A few years ago, we used to make fun of the idea of videoconferencing from a mobile phone. We all pictured how ridiculous it would be with everyone on a public bus holding a phone at arm's length and having conversations with people that are not present. It turns out that our vision of this was all wrong. It isn't about the mobility of the device but, instead, it's about the mobility of the user. That's what is driving the change in conferencing and collaboration. A number of recent advances in consumer technology have conveyed the widespread belief that we can have our content anywhere we are, and on any device we happen to have with us. This breaks us out of the fixed videoconference and telepresence rooms and lets us use visual collaboration tools from our office, our home, our hotel, our client's office, the beach and, yes, that bus, too (if it's absolutely necessary). This explosion in the demand for rich media connectivity wherever one happens to be will continue to put market pressure on the global wireless carriers to find ways to increase available bandwidth and on industry suppliers to meet this "new norm" of our expectations.

Q. Do you expect that residential consumers will adopt presence technology as a TV application in the next five years?

DD. Look around your house. If you have teens this is already in place. As these people enter the workplace and older leaders age out the use of presence and collaboration will be as normal as it is for teens today.

Q. Assuming adoption of telepresence technology becomes more widespread, how do you think it will impact business travel? Do you think Presence will become an application that replaces other modes of communication (audio phone, text messaging, social networking, etc.)?

DD. Throughout the history of the videoconferencing industry people have always led ROI conversations with cost avoidance around air travel. The marketing always sounded something like, "install [insert the video systems du-jour] and your travel costs will go way down. It'll pay for itself in no-time and then you'll rack-up the annual savings." While I believe that there is some truth to the correlation that collaboration technologies help reduce travel costs it's not quite as cut-and-dry as the marketing pitch. But

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- David David Danto has nearly 35 years of experience
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- for the Consumer Electronics Show Innovations Design &
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more than that, focusing on travel cost reduction entirely misses the point that properly selected collaboration tools can transform an organization in ways that are exponentially more valuable.

Travel is a necessary evil of business. It doesn't go away. To be successful people need to see clients, inspect facilities, spend quality time with colleagues and bridge cultures. Investing in collaboration technologies just to reduce travel spend shows more naivety than savvy. The right reasons to add these technologies are far richer and more complex. Here are just a few:

1) Being able to work with peers regardless of their location brings a powerful sense of community to an organization. Human beings tend to demonize people they don't see ("we have our act together, but those idiots over there can't get it right.") Regularly seeing your colleagues increases the quality of your relationship with them and improves your ability to communicate effectively.

2) Once you establish effective collaboration tools within your organization you gain the ability to assign the best person to each job regardless of geography. Supervisors and employees no longer need to be in the same office, city or even country. Subject matter experts can provide input from wherever they happen to be. All of this is made possible because you can electronically connect individuals for rich, spontaneous communication that takes place as easily as it would if they were in the same office.

3) Productivity increases can grow exponentially using effective collaboration tools. Face to face conversations can take place immediately when they are needed – not after complex meeting arrangements are first made. Time previously wasted on planning meetings, or going to another floor, or another building, or the other side of town all goes back into your schedule as available.