

Bringing business sustainability startlingly to life



TelePresence enabled the academics to develop their ideas as a virtual team without incurring the financial costs or environmental harm of air travel

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Professor Sarah Slaughter
MIT Sloan School of Management
United States of America

BT and Cisco use TelePresence as part of an environmentally-friendly unified communications and collaboration platform, to speed the development and launch of a strategic white paper

Background

Corporate sustainability shapes the business practices of BT and Cisco: today they both place it at the heart of their approaches to corporate social responsibility. In jointly developing a strategic white paper on the topic, the two companies employed a groundbreaking toolset to powerfully demonstrate how technology can play a critical role in enabling truly effective collaboration at a distance: thereby helping to reduce carbon emissions.

Challenge

The white paper was to be authored by a global panel of six academics, each a respected expert on corporate social responsibility and sustainable business issues. It would create a strategic blueprint – supported by a clear set of recommendations – to show organisations how to adopt sustainable business practices.

Those chosen by BT and Cisco to serve on the editorial board were:

- Professor David Grayson, chair of corporate social responsibility and founding director at the Doughty Centre for Responsible Business in the UK
- Professor Zhouying Jin, Director of the Center for Technology Innovation at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
- Dr Mark Lemon of the Centre for Resource Management and Efficiency at Cranfield University in the UK
- Dr Miguel Angel Rodríguez, director of the Base of the Pyramid Learning Lab and lecturer at IESE Business School in Spain

- Professor Sarah Slaughter, senior lecturer in the MIT Sloan School of Management and co-ordinator of its Sustainable Business Laboratory in the US
- Professor Simon Tay, a lawyer, policy adviser, and environmental policy expert at the University of Singapore

Using traditional means the six academics would have developed their ideas by flying to meet each other several times, a costly and environmentally damaging process. The opportunity identified by BT and Cisco was that the white paper’s collaborative production and launch processes could create a compelling metaphor for its content.

Solution

BT and Cisco made TelePresence facilities available to the academic team. Enabling extraordinarily realistic virtual meetings, TelePresence uses high-definition video screens providing life-sized images, with crystal clear directional audio. The facilities are built to a standard design everywhere – supporting the illusion of actually sitting around the same table – and real time sharing and exchange of documents is also enabled.

TelePresence is just one of a new generation of unified communications and collaboration (UCC) tools. The IP-based nature of TelePresence technology avoids the necessity for wholesale architecture upgrades, and it will integrate seamlessly with other UCC network applications. Conference traffic is typically routed over the BT 21st Century global network (in fact, BT is the only European provider to achieve Cisco Certified TelePresence Connection certification).

Case Study

Collaboration in Innovation

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Phil Smith
Vice President of Technical Marketing
Cisco Systems

To kick the process off, an independent technology journalist facilitated an initial editorial TelePresence session, involving nine people in different locations around the world. Thereafter the academic panel was free to develop and refine the agreed abstract of their paper over the course of four further TelePresence conferences – each lasting approximately two hours.

As well as those TelePresence conferences, extensive use was made of other UCC tools such as Cisco WebEx online meetings, as well as audio conferences supported by Microsoft Live Meeting. In particular these tools were used to deal with specific points of detail not needing the participation of the full panel.

As Professor Sarah Slaughter, of the MIT Sloan School of Management in the USA, recalls: “TelePresence enabled our panel to debate environmental, social, and economic issues with the kind of personal vigour that we normally find only if we fly to meet each other at international events.” Phil Smith, Vice President of Technical Marketing at Cisco, adds: “Not only was the academic team able to collaborate extremely effectively at a distance, but also the entire exercise was achieved in much shorter timescales than would otherwise have been expected.”

Offices worldwide

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Once the white paper had been finalised, a global event marked its publication. This launch echoed the key role of TelePresence in the preparation stages, but numbers were much larger. Using global TelePresence meeting facilities, three-dozen journalists – based in nine geographical centres across the world – were invited to attend in groups of six. Those TelePresence launch sessions were each hosted by senior BT and Cisco executives, and two academics from the nearest appropriate time zone were also in attendance to respond to specific questions.

Most of the participating media people, drawn from national newspapers and top CSR and technology publications, were new to the uncannily lifelike TelePresence experience. In discussing the BT Cisco white paper, they were given the opportunity to immerse themselves in the medium, and compare its realism with conventional (but still worthwhile) videoconferencing technology. Typical of the comments were those who were amazed by the speed with which they were able to suspend disbelief and feel an intrinsic part of a meeting that bridged the world.

Value

Seeking to demonstrate beyond doubt that embedding sustainability into business strategy delivers tangible business and societal benefits, the white paper [A New Mindset for Corporate Sustainability] explores both short-term and long-term issues. It includes some 21 case studies on major organisations including Hyflux (Singapore), Citicorp (USA), Novozymes (Denmark), Marks and Spencer (UK), Grameen (Bangladesh), and Tetra Pak (Sweden).

Steve Masters, Head of Global Convergence Propositions in BT Global Services, comments on the way that the white paper's production processes reflect its content. He observes: “This points the way towards more agile and adaptable organisations – speeding decision-making and enabling interaction in other areas such as global supply chains and worldwide research and development communities.”

From the white paper experience, it is easy to see why TelePresence is bringing big cost savings and environmental gains for Cisco and BT. For the six academics alone,

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François Barrault
CEO
BT Global Services

savings were estimated at 116 travel hours, \$7,000 in airfares, and 16 metric tonnes of carbon. Analysis of the press events – which took place in Hong Kong, Singapore, UAE, Poland, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, London, and San Jose – reveals that between them the attending journalists saved over 160 travel hours, more than \$13,000 in airfares, and better than 20 metric tonnes of carbon.

Phil Smith says: “TelePresence is fundamentally changing the way we work in Cisco and BT. In Cisco alone, five thousand TelePresence-enabled collaborative events are taking place each month.” In broad terms, factoring the figures in the previous paragraph by 5,000 conveys the sheer scale of the benefits available from TelePresence to global organisations and to Planet Earth itself.

The TelePresence-enabled global launch for the white paper saw journalists attending the virtual events from all over the world including the Hong Kong Economic Times, Germany's Sueddeutsche Zeitung, the Netherlands' CIO Magazine, the Sunday Times and BBC Radio in the UK, Japan's NHK Television, Newsweek from Poland, and Gulf Business in the UAE.

François Barrault, Chief Executive, BT Global Services, concludes: “Cisco and BT have taken a great leadership initiative with TelePresence, as part of our unified communications portfolio. Not only are we going to help our customers save money; but also we will positively impact the environment. And, more than that, our people will have a better lifestyle.”

