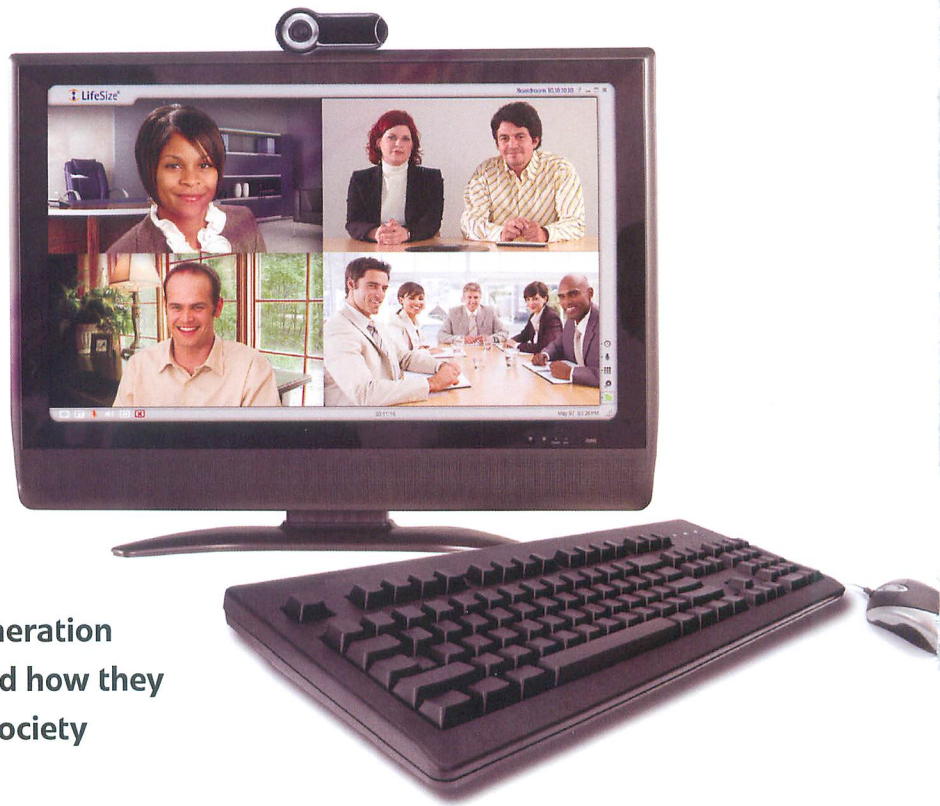


VC echoes the vision of DC



David Hornsby looks at the latest generation of video communications systems and how they resonate with David Cameron's Big Society

Civil Society IT's Summer 2010 issue reported on the driving forces behind the VSO's adoption of a video conferencing (VC) system. Until now the VC medium has been a rather closed and costly one. With systems designed for the corporate boardroom or dedicated Telepresence meeting rooms, VC brands such as Tandberg, Polycom and Cisco have dominated a high-end market that costs in at a hefty price. At the other end of the scale, low to no-cost domestic technology has crept into the daily practices of many organisations that haven't even considered the need to look into owning their own tailor-made VC system.



The onset of accessible and low-cost videoconferencing technologies echoes the prime minister's Big Society concept

Now upstart VC companies have created middle-ground opportunities for the use of high definition video conferencing (HDVC) on any office or home desktop with a new generation of low-cost technology. HDVC systems deliver vastly better-quality images over a narrower bandwidth at about one-tenth of the system cost of their predecessors.

Regardless of your political leanings, there is a resonance between the Cameron government's 'Big Society' project and the new architecture in the core design and deployment models of more recent-entry suppliers. Both mark a shift away from the centralised and dependency-creating model to one that gives independence and empowers.

Measuring the benefits

How do charities both encourage and benefit from this change? Like businesses, we need to reduce our carbon footprint. Government, supporters, competitors, activists, volunteers and employees all create the need to show that your organisation is acting on its environmental conscience. The sector is judged by its ability to direct funds responsibly to its own service end-points, minimising outflows from operational activities, and so reporting tools are required to prove the benefits to stakeholders.

It is relatively obvious that the convergence of new low-cost HDVC

suppliers, low-cost HD monitors and high-speed broadband offers the opportunity for true-to-life, face-to-face video meeting experiences. Today's environment of full accountability requires more. The HDVC technology wraps up time and space but managers need to be able to report accurately on the bottom-line results of doing so.

Previously the only way to demonstrate the quantitative effectiveness of VC was by manual analysis of reams of raw data. Few were prepared or able to make the effort, relying instead on vague qualitative statements such as 'faster, more effective contact', 'reducing people time', 'cutting travel hassles' and 'minimising planetary stress'.

There are still occasions when there are good reasons to travel, despite the ever-present prospect of near gridlock on the roads and the occasional volcanic ash in the skies. Sometimes we need to put up with whatever it takes just to get there, but there are also times when the journey isn't worth it or simply isn't possible – yet a phone call won't do.

Video-Miles by The Visual Environment is an example of a secure automated reporting service that quantifies all these elements for both new and existing VC systems, regardless of manufacturer. Finance directors factor in ongoing VC system running costs and usage patterns to

manage their RoI and create customised net overhead savings reports. It accurately presents the benefits of owning a VC system, automatically measuring and monitoring people time, travel cost and CO₂ emission savings targets against actual performance.

If HDVC is all about another way to communicate effectively with each other, an example of how it can liberate people is illustrated by the long-distance trauma counselling psychiatric practice that uses Logitech's LifeSize HDVC technology (pictured left). With its old VC system it took at least ten or fifteen minutes for the patient to feel comfortable enough to start to disclose their feelings; using HDVC, patients feel the doctor's remote telepresence so intimately they open up almost instantly.



Civil society meetings and conferences can be held online to review campaign reports and receive activist presentations

Reaching wider audiences

The LifeSize Video Centre is another startling innovation. Created to support corporate communication webinars, the Video Centre also readily translates into a source of revenue from those who cannot attend conferences and learning events in person. Recently announced with 'market disruptive' pricing, at 720p30 resolution the system broadcasts a live video stream out to up to 1,000 simultaneous HD web viewers. It also delivers over 50 concurrent stored recordings at 360p30 resolution to up to 450 authorised on-demand viewers.

Whether it be broadcasting secure live or recorded HD video messages to employees and supporters; holding safe regional HDVC management meetings between office desktops; or allowing home workers to meet and stay in touch on their laptops, important personal bridges can be built and maintained face-to-face but without travel. As HDVC system prices have tumbled many more civil society organisations can take increased responsibility for their distance communication objectives.

Even for the smaller web

conferencer there are HD visual web conference services. These are remotely-hosted web meeting services that work without the need for additional hardware. The innovative 'MeetWithMe' from Safeserve.com is an example that is discounted for charities and allows up to 12 simultaneous video feeds of conference participants – as well as more than 100 simultaneous voice only, VoIP and ordinary, telephone calls from other attendees. With session recording and playback, such cloud services meet communication needs professionally and in ways that free online programs such as Skype simply cannot. And yes, MeetWithMe even has an iPhone App!

By using either HDVC systems or web services, civil society meetings and conferences can be held online to

review campaign reports and receive activist presentations. This is often easier to organise than a private or public meeting. Visiting speakers, external advisory experts or members of other groups with a success story to tell – all can be invited as the occasion demands, wherever in the world they are based.

In conclusion, HDVC now quantifiably cuts travel costs, minimises personal meeting time and reports on saved tons of CO₂ to Defra standards, automatically and accurately. Hosted web meeting services perform a similar function at even lower cost, and without subjecting anyone's computer to the risks of downloading and installing external software.

Whether you want to consider deploying HDVC systems or start by using the more basic visual web conferencing services, in the best cases, suppliers of both these communications technologies have adopted the inclusive design approach that is key to enabling more effective communications. ●

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Site inspection

Norwood – www.norwood.org.uk

The changing images on the homepage draw attention effectively. But there's no ability to control the image changes. The site visitor is in the dark as to how many images there are in total or indeed how to go back or forward a picture. Implementing a carousel would work well here, setting expectations and handing site visitors control.

The news ticker is easily missed, being so close to the powerful images. Similar to the imagery, the ticker also has no controls to pause, rewind or forward a story. BBC News has an excellent example of a controllable ticker.

It's great to see the support helpline visible on every page at the top. There's also a clear call-to-action to donate online, making it very easy for potential donors. However, the logo and search are positioned unconventionally. Search is traditionally expected at the top right and the logo top left, a mirror of Norwood's implementation.

The main navigation labels are exemplary, being clear and posing exactly the questions a site visitor might have about the organisation and website. The teaser views of 'what we do' and 'how you can help' on the homepage provide the site visitor with key information as well as enhancing the site's search engine optimisation (SEO).

However, the left hand navigation is lacking in usability. The text size is too small and the area doesn't stand out as navigation, being on a white background.

While viewing options are available on the top left, it's surprising that this only presents colour contrast choices. There's a recognisable text resizing icon but no way to change the font size. Although text resizing is possible through browser controls, only advanced web users tend to be aware of this.

Video content is slow to load and starts playing automatically. Best practice is to offer visitors the option to play. A variety of factors such as bandwidth, appropriateness of the situation (eg in the middle of an office without headphones) can determine this choice.

Overall, the site has decent usability but mostly lacks in offering its visitors control. With some changes it could easily provide a superior user experience. ●

Score: 7/10

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