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Video Conferencing Encourages Collaboration

Agencies deploy desktop systems to support telemedicine, court hearings and telework.

Karen D. Schwartz

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Seeing shackled prisoners being transported by van to a hospital or courtroom is rare today, especially in Michigan. That's because about three years ago, the Michigan Department of Corrections deployed a statewide desktop video conferencing system at the state's 32 correctional facilities.

Lynnette Holloway, a video specialist with the Department of Corrections, says telemedicine is widely used throughout the agency. "Many of our physician specialists use the telemedicine application to communicate with patients and nurses at a correctional facility and with our managed care provider in Nashville," she explains.

Holloway notes that users need only a notebook with a video conferencing client and a broadband connection. "One of the most frequent users is our infectious disease doctor, who can be anywhere while talking with patients and administrators. Because he has instant access to electronic health records of inmates, he has all of the information he needs to make a diagnosis."

Another growing use of desktop video conferencing is for prisoner misconduct hearings. The technology offer an effective way to meet the seven-day window required by law, especially in light of recent budget cutbacks that have reduced the number of administrative judges assigned to hearings.

In both cases, Department of Corrections IT administrators simply push out a Polycom Converged Management Application (CMA) RealPresence Desktop client to both ends of the discussion. Desktop units at correctional facilities are outfitted with Logitech web cameras. The department headquarters in Lansing, Mich., houses a Polycom MGC+50 bridge and CMA 4000 system to route calls and deploy the CMA desktop application remotely.

For the agency, the main drivers for deploying desktop video conferencing were to reduce costs (desktop systems are significantly less expensive than room-based gear) and provide timely services to constituents.

Those are major reasons for many state and local governments to use desktop video conferencing, says Subha Rama, a senior analyst at ABI Research. In addition to reasonable licensing fees, desktop video conferencing generally leads to higher productivity and greater employee satisfaction. What's more, many government institutions are turning to desktop video to reduce travel, which results in lower emissions and costs, she says.

Telework Tool

The Oregon Department of Education first implemented desktop video conferencing in its school districts as part of the Oregon Virtual School District project, which provides content management and learning management systems for schools in the state. To support the project, the Department of Education began using the Cisco WebEx Meeting Center system.

\$527 Amount saved by using video conferencing to replace three meetings requiring six hours of round-trip car travel per year

SOURCE: Polycom Return on Investment Calculator

“We’ve used it more and more over time, for everything from holding meetings to allowing stakeholders to attend some of the events we hold remotely,” says Josh Klein, the department’s CIO.

Since implementation, schools throughout Oregon have made good use of the technology, both for face-to-face administrative meetings and for instruction. In the Department of Education itself, desktop videoconferencing has led to greater productivity and less travel for staff and team meetings. For example, the department holds a Google Summit each year and has begun broadcasting it via WebEx, so people can attend remotely, Klein says.

As the Department of Education seeks ways to save money and make employees happier and more productive, it is also looking into expanding its telework program. The first step would be to implement a Voice over IP infrastructure, then make it possible for workers to use desktop video conferencing to attend meetings with a more office-like experience, Klein says.

Steps for Success

Try these pointers for getting the most from desktop video conferencing:

- Seek systems that are standards-based and interoperable with other desktop video conferencing and room systems.
- Consider upgrading network capacity if you plan to use conferencing extensively throughout the agency.
- Use high-definition video both on the computer and on the webcam.
- Factor in a budget for training and support.

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