

The High-Tech Boardroom

Changing the way meetings are conducted



By Jeremy Rock

Hotels are investing a considerable amount of money to provide modern high-tech boardrooms as part of their conference and meeting room facilities. Not only are the rooms being equipped with expensive millwork, granite and wood conference tables and leather chairs, but they are also investing a considerable amount of money in high-tech audio visual equipment that is typically found in large corporate facilities.

In the same way that hotel rooms are trying to emulate guest's homes by installing flat panel televisions and surround sound systems, hotel boardrooms have evolved to take on a modern look with state-of-the-art technology. This allows hotels to better market their meeting room facilities and increase their potential revenues. Clients are no longer being subjected to traditional banquet tables and chairs. Now they can attend meetings in the comfort of a luxury leather chair and have the latest technology at their fingertips.

It all starts with the facilitation of a high-tech boardroom table. Today's conference tables not only look aesthetically pleasing, but contain a multitude of cabling and equipment that is embedded within the table itself. From projectors to microphones, much of the equipment is designed to be readily accessible but without being visible to the clientele. Most tables contain equipment trays that are located underneath the table to access for cabling, power and equipment. While the rooms are provisioned with wireless connectivity, most consultants still say that wired connectivity is still more stable than wireless, at least in the meeting room. Guest's can plug in to a variety of wired connections (including HSIA) located in pedestals that are strategically placed in most tables. These provide connectivity from voice, data and video to component AV inputs and SVGA cables to access the flat panel monitors, sound systems, streaming media and other network related information. The outlets also contain 110V power to power laptops and other devices.

When we think of a boardroom, audio conferencing is always one of the most important items. While the traditional Polycom sound station conference speaker phone is still widely used, newer installations are taking advantage

of embedded microphones in the boardroom tables and the integrated sound system that are controlled via installed conferencing systems. Polycom's Vortex system is an example of one of these systems and is designed to provide echo and noise cancellation and integrate with their video conferencing product line. Instead of using a traditional phone device, these systems

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are controlled by a customized touchscreen wireless digital device such as those provided by Crestron that control all of the boardroom technology. These devices can be programmed to control everything from the integrated lighting system to the volume controls for the sound system. Previously if a hotel had provisioned a sophisticated high-tech boardroom, it would have required the services of an audiovisual technician to facilitate the use of the technology. These new touchscreen digital control devices are custom programmed to ensure that the use of the device is very intuitive and easy to operate. As such, most of the systems can be operated by the clientele using the room without the aid of a technician.

Traditionally boardrooms have been used to make presentations to a group or to make an impression on a client. One of the most widely used systems in a boardroom is that of an LCD projector and screen. In the past, most presentations were conducted using LCD projectors which allow the presenters to connect their laptops to the projector to make their presentation. While this technology is still

widely in use in larger boardrooms and conference rooms, the increase in the size of plasma and LCD monitors (now up to 80 inches) has prompted some hotels to move away from the use of LCD projectors in favor of connecting directly to flat screens. Most favor the improved clarity of the images that are being projected and that it negates accommodating the typical motorized drop-down screens and projectors. Additionally the screens can be connected to a variety of media including but not limited to television, Internet, remote presentations and video conferencing. In many instances, the boardrooms are being provisioned with both projectors and flat screens to take advantage of various types of technologies and client requests.

For those boardrooms that are still using LCD projectors, there are other technologies that are finding their way into the rooms. Interactive whiteboards can turn a computer and projector into a powerful tool for teaching, collaborating and presenting. In this instance, a computer desktop screen is projected onto the interactive whiteboard surface. Then, using either a special pen or the person's finger they can access and control their computer applications just as they would with a computer mouse. The presenter can make notes, highlight important information, and collaborate on group ideas which can be stored on the computer and printed or e-mailed.

A well designed room can really make an impact when it comes to facilitating a video conference meeting. In the past this technology has not really caught on because the cost and the lack of other facilities utilizing the same types of systems. This is all starting to change with some video conferencing standards starting to emerge (ISDN – H320 and TCP/IP – H323) and the increasing number of facilities offering the service. Boardrooms are being designed with built-in video conferencing systems that are integrated with the audio conferencing and sound systems. The camera can be built into the millwork above the flat panel monitor and can be operated via the wireless digital control console located on the table. The use of video

conferencing equipment allows meeting participants to not only view other remote meeting participants, but to also collaborate on projects or view the same presentation on the flat panel displays located in the room. The screens are large enough to be able to partition the onscreen real estate to view both the presentation and the people in the conference. The fixed installation also avoids having to wheel in a cart and setup the equipment for every meeting.

While most of this technology is hidden behind the room furniture, it is important to realize that from a technical perspective some of the technology needs to reside in close proximity to the room. Operationally items such as DVD players and other input devices usually need to be readily accessible to personnel from within the room. It is therefore preferable to have an environmentally friendly in-room storage area designated to accommodate this equipment. This also requires that the room be engineered and designed with the necessary infrastructure requirements to make all of the components work. As such, the design must take into account the necessary connectivity between

the various equipment components, some of which resides in an outside AV/computer room and other locations. This typically involves the sizing and placement of conduits that facilitate the wiring and cabling between all required components. A well engineered design can really make the difference when it comes to the integration of technology with the aesthetics of the room.

Hotels are constantly looking to gain an edge over their competitors when it comes to providing unique and attractive services for group business. By enhancing the boardroom/conference facilities these rooms will not only become an attractive selling point, but can also become an important source of additional revenue if promoted correctly. Not only can the various services be up-sold, but the automation of the systems can reduce the technical services labor cost that is usually required to operate the room.

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The following is a list of services and how they can be positioned from a revenue generation standpoint:

- **Video Conferencing** – With the cost of travel starting to be impacted by the recent fuel prices, many companies will look into the use of video conferencing to simulate important face-to-face meetings.
- **Audio Conferencing** – While most people consider audio conferencing to be a speaker phone placed at the center of the boardroom table, many of the newer boardrooms are equipped with the latest audio conferencing systems.
- **Web Casting** – Web casting is mainly used to broadcast parts (or all) of a live meeting to reach people otherwise unable to attend.
- **Electronic Whiteboards** – The use of electronic whiteboards has started to become popular as a way of enhancing presentations especially if the presentation is being viewed by other parties via video conferencing or a web cast.
- **HSIA, Wired and Wireless** – Some HSIA providers tend to specialize in managing bandwidth for meeting rooms and function space. A few examples include: Guest-Tek, Wayport, Core Communications, Leap Networks, Ethostream, RoomLinX and StayOnline.
- **Technical Services (Available at the touch of a button)** – While most of the new high-tech boardrooms are usually provisioned with Crestron, AMX or FSR digital control devices that are design to allow just about anyone to operate the systems in the room, very often there is still a need to have a technician facilitate the functioning of the more technical aspects of the technology.

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