



Telepresence: Is it Solving the Wrong Problem?

Telepresence is a wonderful tour de force of the advances technology has made over recent years; an exemplar of what is now possible with the communication bandwidths that are available to us.

The idea that we can step into an adjacent room in our office in London and meet face to face with realistic clarity colleagues who were only 10 seconds ago seated at their own desks in Moscow, New York, Jaipur, Beijing and Auckland would be considered Science Fiction only a few decades ago. But here we are, able to hold meetings in the same way we always have, using miracle technology that makes 12,000 miles seem barely more than two metres away. Able to present our thoughts to each other and debate them round the table in ways that are almost indistinguishable from those we have been familiar with for hundreds of years. We can argue, interrupt, talk across each other, have side conversations with our neighbours, dominate, filibuster, ignore quieter members, play political games, turn up late, fail to prepare, and remain uncommitted to the conclusions in the same way we used to be able to do when we were all in the same physical room.

It may be great that technology enables us to hold meetings in the same way that we are used to, but let's face it the way we are used to holding meetings is not that great!

Recent research demonstrates that meetings have levels of poor behaviour, inefficiency, and performance deficits that would be unthinkable in any other core business process. Surely the idea of computeri-

sation is that it improves process efficiency and performance, so what has gone wrong in respect of meetings?

Well the answer is, that nobody actually thought about redesigning the process. In all other computerisations of key processes, the process is first carefully reconsidered—going back to the purpose and objectives, and redesigning

the approach from there. But in the case of 'collaboration at a distance' all of the effort appears to have been focused on the distance part of the issue and largely neglected the collaboration part.

In short, telepresence has solved the wrong issue.



Photograph courtesy of Wikipedia

But the problem is not entirely the fault of the technology, because even where the technology has been designed to be capable of supporting new processes our paradigms lead us to largely ignore this potential. Unthinkingly, we see meeting as meetings - *"I mean what is difficult about that? - we turn up and we talk, problem over!"* But for years the data and our own experiences have been yelling at us that it is not that simple ... so why don't we listen?

Our meeting process is essentially flawed and it has been

Our meeting process is essentially flawed and it has been for years.

for a considerable period of time. It is fundamentally inefficient at supporting modern participative leadership styles and the levels of passion and engagement that we need, but the limitations of the physical environment and traditional thinking have largely

thwarted past attempts to introduce more participative tools and approaches. Techniques of group involvement have been introduced in the past, but the effort and forethought required to maintain them, combined with the

pressures on people's time, an optimism that 'people will get the message anyway', and a lack of measurement to 'referee' the outcomes, has meant that, in the vast majority of organisations, only 'brainstorming' has survived longer than a season, and that not particularly well.

But now a new medium comes along with the potential to make the use of such participative tools almost effortless, to shift our paradigms on engaging people and to offer new possibilities for creativity and insight, and what do we do? We recreate what we already had!

But it is actually worse than that. The lack of intrinsic participation in our old meeting processes, and an increased dependency on empowered people, means that eye contact is ever more crucial in building and evaluating commitment to the conclusions, and while the new telepresence technology is increasingly good at representing this, it does so at a cost—and the cost is inherent in the constraints of practically all hundred thousand dollar facilities; they are rationed!

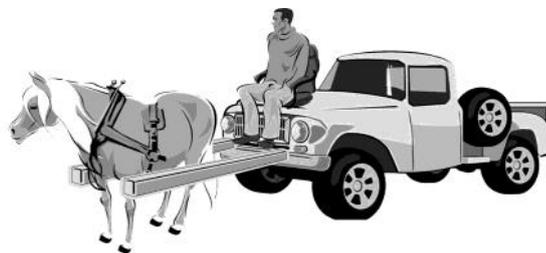
In most organisations with a telepresence facility you will find that you need to book the room in advance, and that its availability is not as immediate or 'on demand' as you would ideally like. Furthermore, even if you are able to schedule your collaboration timetable, you may not find that the availability of your telepresence room suits that schedule, or indeed that it ties up with the availability of telepresence in the zone that you are trying to collaborate with. In other words, telepresence makes collaboration 'a big thing' which has to be planned in advance, and not something which is spontaneous, responsive, frequent and brief.

Contrast this with meetings over the web, where the facility (*a personal computer with internet access*) is available to everybody (almost) all of the time, where meetings can be woven in almost seamlessly and can be brief, focused and immediate. The downside is that they are not so good at eye-contact, but the upside is that they are not actually dependent on a process which requires it.

Eye contact is essential for 'single channel' processes, such as presentation or debate, where one person is transmitting and the rest are receiving, but it is far less important in highly participative meeting processes ('multi-

channel') where everyone is transmitting and receiving concurrently - such as is the case when people contribute sticky-notes to a wall, or any of the wide range of exciting techniques that have been developed for years, and have been awaiting this moment.

But instead of grasping the new technology for how it can support a new and better meeting process, our tendency has been to use it to shore up our old thinking. In his book 'Meeting by Design', Mike Clargo expresses it as follows: *"Imagine that you are a farmer back at the age of the horse and cart, and somebody brings you a modern truck. Large format video conference suites are akin to replacing the front grille with proper harness mountings, and for fitting a bench seat in place of the bonnet. It utilises the extra volume available but ignores the potential of the*



state-of-the-art internal combustion engine. The use of large format video conferencing utilises the bandwidth available in modern technology but largely ignores the potential of that technology to transform the way meetings actually take place."

'Overall, I think I preferred my old cart, but you have to keep up with the times, don't you?'

state-of-the-art internal combustion engine. The use of large format video conferencing utilises the bandwidth available in modern technology but largely ignores the potential of that technology to transform the way meetings actually take place."

Internet band width and functionality has tremendous potential for the different ways in which we can engage and collaborate with our colleagues, both locally and at a distance.

Telepresence has its place in helping us to collaborate over long distances, but its place should not limit our thinking on the true potential that exists from these technology advances. Please do not let telepresence become a panacea in your mind; a gravitational black-hole to our thinking; a reason not to see the possibilities that now exist on the horizon.

So what do you think?

Feedback in one click:

For background on the research quoted in this article, or to understand more about the opportunities of web-based meetings and further develop your thinking in this area we would recommend the book: **Meeting by Design** ISBN: 978 0954 302146. www.MeetingByDesign.org

Tools to measure and manage meeting effectiveness can be found at Inspirometer.com



Tag-Check Ltd | Ongar, UK
Telephone: +44 12 797 1110

