



DFID

Department for
International
Development

DFID Case Study

Benefits resulting from the Global Video Conferencing network at the Department for International Development

“The VC facilities are of particular value in Pretoria since the office acts as the HQ for a number of Regional Advisers. They value being able to discuss issues with counterparts within the region without having to travel. Group meetings can be held between several countries at the same time. This has allowed us to keep in touch without using up a great deal of time and money”

Alistair Bromley, ICT
Manager, DFID - Central
and Southern Africa 2005

The Department for International Development (DFID) is the Government Department which deals with the distribution of Britain's aid funds to developing and third world countries.

DFID operate in 72 countries and so effective communication facilities are a vital component in the Department's operation. Video Conferencing was first introduced in limited form in 1996 linking the two UK offices but has since been massively expanded to an international network with over 160 systems.

Measured Benefits

DFID's investment in this global network has resulted in benefits both to the users individually and to DFID as a world wide organisation.

- A total of 29,795 Video Conference meetings have taken place between January 2003 and May 2009.ⁱ
- The 4084 calls made in 2005 between its two UK offices and its international offices and to aid bodies such as the World Bank avoided at least 735 meetings and a net 303 tonnes of carbon emissions.ⁱⁱ
- On conservative assumptions, each call in 2005 avoided tangible travel and subsistence costs of almost \$300 (£156) per call. In addition, the freeing of productive time for other purposes was valued at an additional £24 per call. Further, videoconferencing provides an opportunity to strengthen relationships by greater visual contact.ⁱⁱ

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- Many staff in DFID, in particular their overseas staff, have expressed a need for multi videoconferencing facilities particularly within their own regions. Originally, the set up of the VC systems only allowed for point to point conferencing between 2 sites. The bridging system (as available in 2005) could allow up to 36 simultaneous connections with up to 8 sites at a time having a visual presence at meetings and the ability to join audio and video conferences together. So now overseas regions could hold their own regular meetings without needing to involve the UK offices.ⁱⁱ
- DFID are keen to promote a healthier work/life balance and to look at ways of reducing stress. Reducing the requirements for many staff to travel has and will continue to be of great benefit. Of a survey taken in 2006 38% of respondents believed that VC had positive effects on their work-life balance with 11% strongly positive.ⁱⁱ
- Many DFID staff at all levels are now able to join in meetings that they would never have been able to travel to previously and many meetings are held which would not have happened at all, but because they can, they do.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Ministers, senior civil servants and the Secretary of State can communicate face to face with DFID personnel in war zones and trouble spots on a daily basis if necessary without needing to increase risk by travelling there.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is clear that DFID's investment in videoconferencing is delivering major benefits for the organisation, its staff and the environment.

Development and implementation

Carillion Communications Ltd started working with DFID in 1996 when they were one of the early users of video conferencing. At that stage the main use was to save DFID personnel travelling between Head Offices in London and Glasgow. In 1997 the incoming New Labour government began a major push to encourage the use of electronic communications and discussions began about installing video conferencing into some of DFID's overseas sites.

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Installation of dish into the Bangladesh office



Completion of 3.8 metre dish on the roof of the
British High Commission in Nairobi

By the very nature of DFID's role, the majority of their offices are situated in third world and developing countries which receive aid from Britain and where lack of a reliable telecoms infrastructure is a significant problem. Installing video conferencing in some of the overseas sites was therefore going to be more than a little challenging. In the earlier stages of the roll-out a very mixed range of connection facilities had to be used including ISDN, leased line and satellite. Later a gradual conversion to IP operation has been made but still with a variety of network formats.

The wide variety of locations and local facilities means that DFID have limitations to the bandwidth routinely available and so the default is set at 256kbps. This still provides good quality meetings and the ability to share data within those meetings over the VC links.

Carillion's relationship with DFID works very much as a partnership, as video conferencing and audio visual advisors, consultants and contractors. Carillion have helped to steer DFID through the evolution of their global network as the timing to implement new systems and technologies became right for them, and as the technology became more and more reliable.

Carillion and DFID have implemented in excess of 158 video conferencing systems all over the world together with 2 bridges, or Multi Conference Units (MCUs), which allow multiple locations to participate in a video conferencing meeting. DFID have regular meetings involving 15 or more locations.

Carillion have a permanent member of staff located in DFID London assisting their team in the running of the bridges, booking of conferences and operation of the management programmes.

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ⁱ DFID 17 June 2009.

ⁱⁱ Professor Peter James - 4D Work and SustainIT. "CONFERENCING AT DFID - The Economic, Environmental and Social Impacts. Final Report 8 May 2007"

ⁱⁱⁱ Carillion Communications Ltd AV Awards Entry 2003 EXCELLENCE IN VIDEO CONFERENCING "Global Video conferencing Network over Satellite, ISDN and dedicated lines"
