Backman Vidcom president Laurie MacKeigan

Remote control

The ability to collaborate over vast distances and time zones is having a massive impact on the ability of companies to grow

BY TOM MASON

The benefits of long-distance collaboration were brought home to Backman Vidcom president Laurie MacKeigan during a demo in California. MacKeigan and her colleagues were at Solano Community College to conduct a demonstration of their audiovisual communications technology. As part of the presentation, some technical glitches were intentionally introduced to show how issues could be fixed quickly with the help of some remote expertise. "We showed how technical support from someone in our office in Halifax, along with a partner in Australia and a partner in California, could correct technical issues in real time on a moment's notice," says MacKeigan. Three experts who were spread across the globe were fixing issues in the classroom remotely.

Technical problems related to AV can occur at the worst possible moments, sometimes in front of key stakeholders, creating a moment of duress, embarrassment, and credibility loss for those leading the presentation. While the ability to collaborate over vast distances and time zones is having a massive impact on the ability of companies to grow, the kinds of global solutions described previously are becoming the norm for anyone who makes use of teleconferencing solutions. Dave Rudderham, Backman Vidcom's vice-president of technology, says that despite what many executives think, effective distance collaboration is a lot more complex than opening a laptop and switching on Skype.

"It used to be you'd have a conference phone in the middle of the table and that was all you needed to be able to communicate with the rest of the world," says Rudderham. "Now you've

got teleconferencing, web conferencing, videoconferencing, whether it's locally, regionally, nationally, or all over the world. We deal with clients who have offices all over the place who use several different devices to collaborate with each other. The big struggle for them is how to simplify the user experience so the technology isn't impeding their business but rather contributing to it instead. That's really where the change has been. Whether it's a teacher in a classroom or executives in boardrooms making big decisions, they expect the technology to just work. AV only ever gets noticed only when it's broken. So if we're doing our job properly, you should never have to hear from us."

Backman Vidcom designs, installs, and maintains systems for a range of clients that run from small businesses with a boardroom to large institutions with complex communication requirements. It recently completed a multimillion-dollar system install in an industrial site in New Brunswick. At Dalhousie University, the company recently finished a major project in the new Collaborative Health Education Building (CHEB), including classroom audiovisual systems and a simulation system for training.

"The classrooms at CHEB are based on similar classrooms that Dalhousie's [faculty of medicine] uses to train medical students in New Brunswick," says Rudderham. Each classroom contains a videoconferencing component for distance learning and for presenting guest lecturers from remote locations. There's also a teleconferencing component for backup to the videoconferencing, but it's the system's simulation component that's the real killer app.

"The simulation system is pretty amazing," says Rudderham. "It's intended for creating clinical scenarios as part of student exams and their learning structure." There are 28 small clinic rooms similar to doctors' offices where the students can go through a range of scenarios, from an ingrown toenail to a major medical issue. They also have three patient-care labs that are multi-bed scenarios and a domestic setting (an apartment). Everything is monitored by cameras and recorded.

"Evaluators can review the recordings live as the students go through the scenarios," says Rudderham. "They can use the recordings for reviewing the actions taken, looking for improvements, or highlighting things that are well done. It's basically training the next generation of health professionals."

Backman Vidcom has partnered with Utelogy, a California-based manufacturer of cloud-based AV control, management, and analytics platforms. Efficiency is one of the big benefits of a well-functioning AV system, according to MacKeigan, particularly one that can be managed remotely or programmed in advance. "Say a professor comes into a classroom and spends the first five minutes preparing to get the technology to work," she says. "You take that five minutes and you multiply it by how many classes during a day each year. That's a lot of lost productivity."

So what if the classroom technology was programmed in advance, and all the professor has to do is push a button to start the class? The projector comes down, the lights dim, the lecture notes are captured on an overhead display— all from the touch of one button on a simple console, either by the professor

or remotely from a help desk. "This is a new dynamic for our industry," says MacKeigan.

Tom Murray, Backman Vidcom's vice-president of sales, says that traditionally AV was viewed as a cost centre in the corporate world. That way of thinking is changing quickly. "It's now a strategy driver, especially when you put a powerful analytics system behind it," he says. "With analytics, you can start tying AV in with things like student-learning outcomes at universities or reducing corporate costs."

Take a corporation with six boardrooms across the country, for example. It spends $80,000 rolling out videoconferencing systems in those boardrooms to reduce travel expenses, but once it gets them out there, the executives realize one particular boardroom isn't being used.

"Why is that?" asks Murray. "Is it equipment failure? Is the technology too complex? Do the staff need training? Because AV systems can be networked, we can effectively resolve these issues immediately through a managed services program, just like we did at Solano College in California."

In fact, Backman Vidcom can troubleshoot and fix problems before they occur. For example, if you knew that a projector lamp was near the end of its life, wouldn't you want to replace it now instead of risking having it fail during an important boardroom presentation? "The data reporting helps our clients make smart decisions, especially when it's time to buy equipment," says Murray. "They already know what products achieve optimization, longevity, and efficiency based on their own organization's needs, utilization, and behaviour. If managed and deployed correctly, AV technology can be a powerful business tool used to accomplish an organization's goals."

MacKeigan says the days when companies such as Backman Vidcom were selling boxes have long past. Today the company starts by identifying positive business outcomes for clients, then designs systems to achieve those outcomes, whether the solution lies in videoconferencing, security, digital signage, CCTV, access control, or some combination of all of them. "We don't view ourselves as a traditional AV company," she says. "We're a next-generation technology company. We do a wide range of things, but the common denominator is that we make technology relevant for our clients."

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