

Connected Planet

Starwood Hotels opens first TelePresence Suites: an eyewitness report

by Joan Engebretson February 24th, 2010

If you've used traditional teleconferencing, one of the first things you notice about the public Cisco TelePresence system at the W Chicago City Center Hotel is that you never see yourself.



I asked a question at the press event yesterday that marked the opening of the Starwood Hotels first two TelePresence meeting suites (the other is in Sydney, Australia, with eight more planned worldwide). As I spoke, I realized that, although people in four other locations worldwide were watching me, the screen at the Chicago facility instead showed one of the other sites.

This apparently was no accident but instead was part of the design process. You don't normally look at yourself when you meet with people in the same conference room—why should that change just because you're meeting via technology? As Robert Hermany, Starwood senior vice president of hotel operations pointed out, it eliminates a lot of tie straightening.

In designing public telepresence rooms, Cisco did a lot of research to create a configuration that would truly make people in different locations feel they were in the same room, said Mark Weidick, general manager of Cisco's TelePresence Exchange business unit. The project, code-named "Magic Carpet," looked at everything from wall color to audio quality.

The W Hotel system in Chicago seats six participants in a half-oval configuration at a conference table, with the video screen positioned exactly where you would expect the rest of the people at your meeting to be. On the screen, you see near life-size jitter-free images of people at another location seated at a similar table. As Weidick explained, Cisco took pains to make sure that "it looks like the other table is physically attached."

Yesterday's event linked Starwood's Chicago and Sydney sites with sites operated by Cisco and Tata Communications in Santa Clara, Calif.; Singapore; and Paris. Which site was on screen depended on who was talking at any point in time—and in another apparent move to minimize distractions, only two participants appeared on screen simultaneously.

[Large corporations have been adopting telepresence](#) solutions that rely on high-speed connections, often managed by a service provider, as a means of minimizing air travel and maximizing employee productivity.

[Public meeting rooms](#) such as those operated by Tata and Starwood also are beginning to appear.

Bookings at public facilities tend to be split about 50/50 between meetings linking sites around the world and meetings that would eliminate just a day trip, said Peter Quinlan, director of managed telepresence services for Tata. The farther apart the facilities are, the longer the meetings tend to be, he said. While the “day trip” alternatives typically last about an hour or two, the meetings that replace worldwide travel are more likely to take the form of two four-hour sessions.

“And it’s not just for business—we’ve had people do birthdays,” Quinlan said.