



Telepresence: travel companies embrace the idea of not travelling

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With the profit margins for selling travel becoming leaner and leaner, travel-related organisations are seeking alternate, more profitable revenue streams.

At a recent demonstration in Tata Communications' Singapore offices, iWire took to opportunity to examine the latest technology for telepresence conferencing.

First a little background. Telepresence is any technology that facilitates a single meeting with participants in multiple locations; all participants are able to see and hear each other. Generally, this is implemented as a group of people in each location sitting on one side of a conference table, with a bank of large screens opposite them. If the screens are properly arranged, participants will have the impression of being looked at when they speak.

An image of a typical telepresence facility may be viewed [here](#).

For some time, telepresence has been employed as a private facility between employees of large corporations with facilities installed in their own buildings. However, Tata Communications is expanding this usage to offer public-access telepresence rooms, based on Cisco technology, in many locations around the world.

Requiring a constant connection of 20MB/sec, telepresence facilities can be a major impact on most organisations' Internet connections. Tata addresses this by making use of its own IP infrastructure for as much of the connection as possible.

Currently, Tata has 10 [public access rooms](#), with another 41 in planning. However, it is the latest alliance announcements that will encourage growth in the industry.

If one thinks about it, a corporate travel agency is in the business of facilitating meetings, but do those meetings actually require everyone to be in the same room at the same time?

American Express Business Travel and Carlson Wagonlit Travel have taken the view that a physical journey is just one possibility in the many ways of facilitating a business meeting.

Margins in the travel business are lean and getting leaner. Many, perhaps most, corporate travel agencies are charging a fixed fee for service in addition to the price of airline tickets as there is no other way to make money. With this in mind, many such organisations are seeking newer, high-

margin opportunities. AMEX and CWT are two such companies that have seized upon the idea of travel without the travel.

Currently, both companies have announced they will become booking agents for the Tata fleet of public-access rooms, taking a share of the \$US500/hr fee charged for each room used in a conference hook-up.

"CWT recognizes the intense pressure corporations are under to contain rising T&E costs and maximize return on investment," said Pauline Quéré, CWT vice president, Customer Product Marketing. "By incorporating telepresence into the full range of products and services in our demand management offering, CWT provides a compelling alternative and solidifies its role as a key partner in helping clients demonstrate measurable return on investment. To that end, we are very pleased to be moving forward with Tata Communications, an industry leader in the telepresence arena."

Certainly there are also reductions in the carbon footprint of a meeting if the only things travelling are photons and electrons.

Furthermore, Tata Communications has also announced an alliance with Starwood Hotels and Resorts to embed telepresence facilities into a number of hotels. After-all, a hotel is an obvious place to host telepresence - they certainly have all the necessary facilities and infrastructure.

"We intend to make telepresence available to as many users as possible with our global network of public telepresence rooms and our suite of managed telepresence networks services for businesses. Our partnership with Starwood is a major step towards making this vision a reality," said John Landau, Senior Vice President Global Managed Services from Tata Communications.

The author travelled to Singapore as a guest of NetEvents and Tata Communications.