

International Videoconferencing

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SUMMARY

William J. Higgins, AIA, describes the benefits of videoconferencing and details past international videoconferences led by the Commercial Service of the U.S. Department of Commerce surrounding the architecture, engineering, and construction industries.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES OPEN NEW DOORS

Futuristic forecasts tend to have an otherworldly quality about them. While new technology has an undeniable impact on our lives, the impact is never quite as originally imagined and is often tamer or more mundane than the early prognostications. Some technologies that initially seem alien quickly become part of the landscape—in some cases so quickly that many people fail to exploit their full potential.

Videoconferencing is one such technology. In just a few years, it has become relatively cheap and nearly ubiquitous, with the cost of equipment dropping nearly 80 percent in 2002. Yet architecture firms have been slow to exploit its full potential for business growth, particularly in the international arena. Opportunities exist to explore and exploit this technology with minimal investment or risk through a federal program to help U.S. firms—especially small and medium-sized companies—to increase exports.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE SUPPORT

The Commercial Service (CS) of the U.S. Department of Commerce is a global network committed to supporting U.S. commercial interests around the world. The CS offers comprehensive, customized solutions to the international trade challenges of U.S. companies and provides export promotion assistance through a variety of products and services. In support of its mission, the CS

makes videoconferencing services available directly to architecture firms interested in communicating directly with partner firms in other countries. The CS can establish video links with more than 40 countries worldwide and plans to expand the service to 80 countries.

In the summer of 1997, the International Committee of AIA San Francisco (AIA/SF) launched a series of videoconferences in association with the San Francisco office of the Commercial Service, led by CS Director Stephan Crawford. The goal was to offer AIA/SF members, particularly in smaller firms, an opportunity to gain firsthand knowledge of foreign markets, meet potential professional partners in foreign countries, and experiment with a technology that could change the way we do international business, without expending the time and money for business travel and research.

EARLY SUCCESS STORIES

The videoconference series cosponsored by AIA/SF and the CS initially focused on acquainting U.S. architecture firms with the technology and promoting its use. The first four series (in 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000) connected one U.S. site with one foreign site.

“Bridging the Americas: Designing Profitable Inter-American Business Partnerships” began in June 1997 with a video link between San Francisco and the U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The format featured a panel discussion between architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) professionals and CS experts at both locations—architects, engineers, contractors, and economists. Discussion topics included a market overview, Argentine business practices, and potential projects and partnering opportunities.

In 1998, the series format was repeated in a live video link with the U.S. Consulate in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and again in 1999 with professional counterparts in Mexico. Each of these conferences fostered dialogue and partnership between Bay Area firms and their Latin American counterparts.

LOOKING WEST

In the spring of 2000, the AIA/SF International Committee created a videoconference series entitled “Spanning the Pacific” to update interested firms on the re-emerging economies of Southeast Asia. In the first videoconference of the series, 25 design professionals in San Francisco were linked to a group in Hong Kong for an overview of the state of the AEC industry in Hong Kong and China. The series continued with a video link to our counterparts in the Philippines. Additional conferences are scheduled to be held with professionals in Vietnam and South Korea.

EXPANDING THE REACH

AIA/SF’s experience and success with point-to-point videoconferencing has led to multiple-city, multiple-panel conferences connecting several U.S. locations in real time with several foreign locations. The first of these global discussions was held in January 2002 between the AIA International Committee PIA and AFEX, a French organization representing 100 leading architecture firms seeking partnerships for international projects. Jointly sponsored by the Commercial Service and the Centre Français du Commerce Extérieur (the French Export Promotion Agency), panels of architects in Paris; New York; Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia; and San Francisco gathered for a two-hour discussion spanning nine time zones.

The session, conducted by V-SPAN, allowed attendees at all five participating sites to see and hear participants at the other four sites simultaneously in four separate squares on a large video screen. In addition, members of one U.S. firm participated passively from two of its national offices. The session was recorded and made available to a maximum of 1,000 additional persons in an archived streaming-video format.

The program was moderated by Robert Ivy, FAIA, editor-in-chief of *Architectural Record*,

and included analyses of the cultural differences between the United States and France, city versus suburban development, green building and sustainable design, restrictions on practice, and how to market partnerships. In Ivy’s words: “Despite the recent hype of globalization, French and American architects have found relatively few occasions to share in joint venture, on either side of the Atlantic. This electronic, digital leap attempted to bridge the distance...and the issues we discussed drew us together.”

Most recently, the AIA International Committee PIA joined AIA/SF and the Boston Society of Architects/AIA to host a multicity videoconference with counterparts in China. Participants in the three U.S. cities were introduced to colleagues in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong in a sequence of panel presentations and question-and-answer sessions. Cliff Pearson, senior editor of *Architectural Record*, moderated the conference and facilitated the dialogue. Topics included the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, market challenges for U.S. firms, construction and development financing, and project opportunities for U.S. architects and engineers. The six sites spanned 16 time zones, from afternoon and evening in the United States to morning in China. Despite the technical challenges of linking six cities around the world in real time, the conference content was excellent and the delivery successful, with nearly 100 professionals participating worldwide. Much knowledge and insight was gained regarding the tremendous growth in China and the protocols and professional practice issues facing U.S. architects in this vibrant region.

HOW TO LINK UP

For firms or components wishing to take advantage of this global communication tool, the following suggestions may be helpful:

Organizational Tips

- Select a country or region of significant business interest that has emerging market potential.
- Select a country or region that has CS videoconference capability or a private

sector provider that can accommodate a quality broadcast.

- Consider global time zone differences when organizing and scheduling a conference.
- Develop an agenda of topics, and require panelists to prepare in advance to address the topics.
- Have the panelists from each site exchange lists of potential questions in advance to facilitate the discussion of issues. This is especially important if language poses a challenge.
- Share bios of panelists with all participants in advance to minimize the time needed for introductions and to confirm the expertise of panelists.
- If possible, invite a larger audience to attend the videoconference as observers and as Q & A participants, to extend the learning experience to a larger group.
- If possible, try to ensure that all participants speak the same language; the use of interpreters, particularly if they are unfamiliar with architectural jargon, will slow the communication process and detract from spontaneity.

TECHNICAL TIPS

- Plan for failure; always have a Plan B, such as a teleconference backup because the technology is not infallible.
- Remind participants to account for the inherent delay in transmission (one to two seconds), to keep participants from “stepping on each other” during interactive portions of the videoconference.
- Use microphones that can be muted, and remind participants to use the mute button when not speaking to reduce background noise and unintended interruptions.
- Ask participants to wear dark clothing to minimize glare or washed-out images.
- If possible, record the event in an archived streaming format for later distribution to others.

- If possible, Web cast the event in real time to enable passive participation by a wider, PC-based audience.
- Have a single moderator orchestrate the discussion and control the flow among participants.

NOTES ON EQUIPMENT AND COST

The equipment used by the CS is usually Polycom Viewstation. Polycom Corporation has the largest share of the corporate videoconferencing market. The same equipment is not necessary at each location, but the equipment needs to meet international videoconferencing standards. Individual firms can link up separately to a larger videoconference by going through a bridge service provider like V-SPAN.

The conferences are generally run over ISDN lines; the ISDN service provider and cost may vary, depending on time of day, duration, and the countries involved.

The total cost of a videoconference will vary according to the number of sites, whether or not the program is to be archived, other technical considerations, and the portion of the cost that the CS is willing and able to absorb. The cost, however, is often surprisingly low, particularly when concerted efforts are made to assemble reasonably large audiences at each site.

POST-CONFERENCE FOLLOW UP

Arrange for follow-up critique of the session to assess how to improve the content and use of the medium. Arrange for individual person-to-person and firm-to-firm sessions with the CS to further explore the creation of business-to-business partnerships.

The nature of your interaction with the CS following a videoconference will depend on your objectives. If you participated in a videoconference to conduct a market assessment, the CS would be interested in helping you fill any gaps in your understanding of the dynamics of that market by providing clarifications or additional information.

If your goal was to meet contacts or to prepare for a trip, the CS would be available to facilitate a meeting, conduct background checks on

potential overseas partners, or assist in managing logistics. The CS is results-oriented; fostering actual business relationships is its primary mission, and a videoconference is only the prelude to what it can do.

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTOR

William J. Higgins, AIA, founded Architecture International in 1994 to experiment with new forms of global design practice. He is a former principal of The Architects Collaborative Inc. (TAC), the firm founded by Walter Gropius in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the Bauhaus tradition of modernism and multidisciplinary collaboration.

Higgins is a former vice chair of the AIA International Committee Advisory Group. He served as chair of the AIA/SF International Practice Committee from 1996 to 2000. During his tenure, AIA/SF created a liaison with the Department of Commerce to coordinate cosponsorship of videoconferences with Latin American and Asian colleagues.

Higgins's 30 years of experience in international practice includes the design of 36 projects in 10 countries throughout Asia, China, Latin America, and the Middle East. He has collaborated with many architects worldwide and helped establish and foster long-term bonds among our professional societies.

He has a Bachelor of Architecture degree from Louisiana State University and a Master of Architecture degree from Harvard University.

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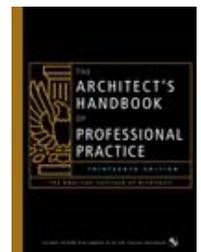
More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 10.05.09 Getting Paid for International Work
- 04.06.01 Forming Strategic Alliances
- 10.05.02 Managing International Teams

For More Information on This Topic

See also "Practicing in a Global Market," by Roger B. Williams, FAIA, JIA, and C. Richard Meyer, FAIA, *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 6, page 100.



See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



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