Let's Meet

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The world of work has changed forever. Last year the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development reported that 78% of organisations had embraced hybrid working.

With some employees working daily in the office, some from home and some splitting their time between both, employers are reassessing how they can make best use of their office space.

This is not just about supporting concepts such as hot desking, but in delivering flexible meeting room solutions which foster efficient communication and collaboration, regardless of whether an employee is attending in person or remotely.

Careful thought needs to be given as to how meeting spaces should be physically reimagined, as well as to the technologies which can optimise their effectiveness.

In this article we'll touch on a few things you might want to consider, whilst drawing on the experiences of those who have already successfully redesigned their meeting spaces.

Embrace flexibility

The new work dynamic means many organisations will need offer a range of meeting room solutions.

With staff and managers juggling their time between office and remote locations, flexibility is key.

Spaces may need support the small collaborative huddle, the mid-sized team gathering, the boardroom meeting or a theatre-style presentation.

Each will require different video-conferencing solutions to deliver effective communication, enable equitable engagement, empower collaboration and optimise productivity.

Leading social enterprise Places for People well understood this when reorganising office space having committed to hybrid working.

Our expert engineers advised on the specification and deployment of no fewer than 65 video conferencing systems to serve rooms of varying size and application, across multiple sites.

Senior Project Manager Martin Hassall-Lees explained the process. "We advised the room layout, what it is going to be used for, whether it's a meeting room or a collaborative space where the desks will be moved around, which Avoira's team used to provide the best kit to serve that space."

Well briefed, our engineers were able to specify Small, Medium and Large Teams-compatible systems, in this instance from Places for People's preferred vendor, Logitech.

Citing how well the overall package satisfies a more mobile workforce and offers a much-enhanced user experience, he concluded that "Without the solutions delivered by Avoira we couldn't do what we do, it's as simple as that."

What do we mean by 'equitable engagement'

One of the complaints about earlier meeting room technologies was that some participants, particularly those joining remotely, felt less involved than others.

It's a criticism video-conferencing hardware and software vendors took on board, upping their game to level the playing field.

This has seen the introduction of AI-driven, high definition, dual lens cameras such as Poly's Studio E70. This features speaker tracking technology so that the camera automatically zooms in when someone is speaking, and out when someone nearby joins the conversation.

But it's not just the tech. Room layout is important. Microsoft has championed a circular set-up – dubbed Campfire – which sees in-person participants facing both each other and large screen displays hosting videoconference attendees.

We've written in greater detail about empowering equitable engagement and how to deliver. To discover more, click here.

ROOM CONFIGURATIONS

Not all meetings are the same.

Their participants, purpose, format and venue vary. The challenge that variety presents makes sourcing expert, vendor-independent video-conferencing expertise imperative.

Every meeting space needs to be separately evaluated to determine which of a multitude of technologies will secure the best outcome.

This means not just understanding how and by whom a space is going to be used, but of any obstacles, such as a noisy air-conditioning unit, which might present an idiosyncratic challenge.

However, there are some rule-of-thumb pointers that can help inform the type and combinations of video-conferencing devices that might typically serve different rooms.

Huddle / Small Rooms
Size: 16' by 16' | 2-6 people

Serving a smaller space, with a need for only a restricted audio-visual reach, can involve a relatively simply set up.

A key consideration will be the available field of view.

Huddle rooms will frequently feature a table sited close or even right up to the screen. Here, in order for everyone in the room to be seen you will need a camera that offers a full 180-degree field of view such as Jabra's Panacast 50.

Medium Rooms
Size: 18' by 20' | 6-12 people

The meeting space now offers a greater audio-visual challenge, demanding a more sophisticated solution.

Rather than a small integrated videobar or webcam, a high-definition pan-tilt-zoom (PTZ) camera will be required to cover the room and its occupants.

Attention will also need to be paid to audio pick-up to ensure everyone in the room can be heard. Here deployment of technology such as the Poly X50 may assist.

This impressively capable video conferencing system incorporates an acoustic fence which, as the name suggests, blocks outside sounds and suppresses background noise.

It allows you to define the fence perimeter (within its operational capabilities) and cleverly identifies when someone is speaking within it. It simultaneously lowers sound outside the fence, improving vocal clarity.

Large Rooms
Size: 15' by 32' | 12-16 people

As the room size increases, so does the scale of the technological challenge, with a significantly more sophisticated solution required.

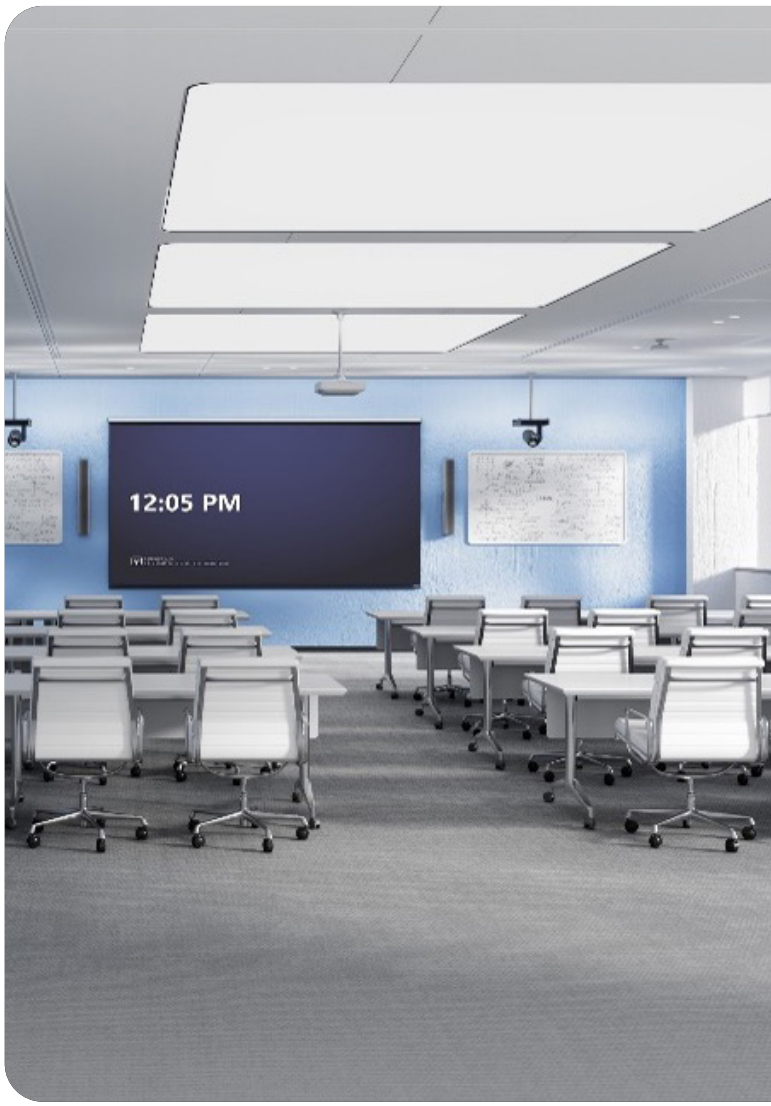
Here, a single PTZ camera is unlikely to suffice. Deploying multiple cameras will ensure the video feed captures all participants, whilst the addition of a presenter camera will enable display of the presenter alongside a view of the wider room.

If the room is to feature a whiteboard, it may also make sense to specify a content camera.

Furthermore, the audio pick-up will need be extended to ensure the room is fully covered. Further challenges may be presented if seating and tabling layouts are flexible,

Technologies which can successfully meet the needs of these more testing environments include Yealink's MVC960 Microsoft Teams Room System (PDF) which can support as many as nine cameras.

This might be complemented by Yealink VCM38 ceiling microphones. Each of these units incorporates eight microphones to deliver 360o voice pick-up and extend reach. Integrated beamforming technology also automatically locates and optimises an individual speaker's voice.



Informal Meeting Spaces

By their nature and purpose, the layout of informal meeting spaces tends to be flexible, their size small.

This means they may be best served by a plug-and-play mobile solution which can be moved within and between informal meeting spaces.

A good example is Yealink's Zoom and Microsoft Teams certified MeetingBoard package.

Offering either a 65" or 85" whiteboard, this integrated solution incorporates an AI-powered 4k PTZ camera with speaker-tracking, auto-framing, multi-focus framing and picture-within-picture functionality.

This is complemented by full duplex audio with 16 beamform equipped microphone arrays.

Considerations

Whatever the size of room that you are considering kitting out, there are some important practical considerations you should address.

You'll need ensure the room has appropriate power and data provision to feed your planned AV set-up.

Our engineers can assist with this by providing installation elevations as part of a wider project survey. These will exactly detail what is required for each bespoke installation.

That survey will also confirm cable access routes and identify and address any specific visual or acoustic challenges.

If you're opting for a Microsoft Teams solution, we'd also recommend securing a Teams Meeting Rooms Pro licence. This will ensure you automatically benefit from the latest product upgrades and enhancements.

Practical options you might wish to consider in order to make life that little bit easier include booking panels. These will prevent double-bookings and mean that those outside the room can quickly see who is using a room and for how long.

Meeting room consoles can also add value, their clear touch-screen functionality making starting, joining and sharing content in meetings a doddle.

Consoles designed for larger rooms can also be used to control lighting and other equipment.

See, Hear, Do

A large room, divisible into small meeting places, provides the perfect opportunity to illustrate just what can be achieved through deployment of a range of videoconferencing technologies.

Of course, it's not just about serving the differing needs of people actually occupying a space, but those taking part remotely, whether the physical set up is for a boardroom, large, medium or small meeting or huddle.

It's a scenario with which Progress Housing Group is well familiar through the renovation of the primary meeting space at its Lancashire headquarters.

"There's one big space which can accommodate 30 people for a board or full team meeting but that isn't what's needed most of the time," reported Head of Technical Services, Andy Rawcliffe. "It's fitted with cantilever walls so we can break it into three component parts to host three distinct meetings."

With the redesign also seeing the introduction of four-seat, diner-style collaboration booths, the audio-visual challenge was considerable.

The videoconferencing solution therefore need to serve a sizeable room, simultaneous hosting of separate – and audio-visually self-contained meetings in distinct zones, as well as the communication needs of booth collaborators.

In this instance, our meeting rooms experts advised deployment of Yealink's extra-large Microsoft Teams meeting room solution, the MVC940, coupled with the same vendor's UVC86 4k dual-eye tracking camera.

Equipped with 12-times optical zoom and 90° field of view, our experts saw that this would capture high-definition images of every person in the room, even when zoomed in.

This, they saw, would promote equitable participation for all, whether on site or taking part remotely.

To ensure the most effective audio pick-up they specified Biamp Parle TCM-X ceiling mics (PDF), with playback via Extron Soundfield ceiling speakers. These are managed by a central control system which allows activation of devices either in specific zones or across the whole room.

A smart solution, it's highly effective with Andy reporting it "works perfectly. If we shut the door the conferencing just works in the one section it's supposed to, it doesn't spill out."

Meanwhile, for the simpler needs of the collaboration booths, our engineers recommended Yealink's MeetingBar A20 Teams edition video conferencing kits.

And with that, through independent, expert insight, every need was served, every challenge met.

Instilling confidence

It's all very well installing the latest meeting rooms technologies, but if people are not comfortable and confident in using it, that investment will never be fully realised.

One of the great advantages of applications such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, is that their existing prevalence for both work and personal use means many people are familiar with them. They're also pretty intuitive.

As such they offer a scalable platform which will likely sit well within employees' existing skill sets, allowing them to more quickly become more effective.

Nonetheless, it's important to ensure that all users understand how to make the most of the software in not just communicating but collaborating.

Watch out for blind spots. For example, staff may be versed in how to join an internal meeting, but less so an external one.

Think too about the hardware they might use and how assured they are in connecting to a VC system, using wired or wireless connections. If they can use their own laptop to join meeting, familiarity might ease the process and foster greater productivity.

Employing a Bring Your own Meeting (BYOM) policy can also make things easier by allowing meeting organisers to use in-room conferencing equipment simply by plugging in their own device.

This means that rather than everything running off a laptop, the in-room microphones, speakers and display are used.

Keeping Meeting

One of the biggest concerns raised by those looking to refresh or introduce new meeting technologies is how they can maintain kit and, if an issue develops, get it fixed.

Thankfully it's one that is easily addressed.

At Avoira we believe post-installation care is as important, if not more so, than the expertise and experience invested we invest in specifying, designing and implementing your meeting rooms solution.

We offer a range of highly responsive maintenance and support services. These include remote diagnostics and software updates, plus field service engineers who deliver both scheduled preventative maintenance and urgent fault resolution services.

You can also choose from one of nine care packages to ensure your organisation's needs are best met. These offer varying guaranteed response times and support hours, including 24/7/365 services.

Questions & Answers

We hope this meetings rooms overview has provided you with some food for thought in considering how you might optimise use of your spaces and the productivity of your teams.

Before we sign off, we thought it might be worth addressing some of the more frequently asked questions we are asked to address.

Where can I get more impartial information on what I will need for my office and how do I choose between all the different equipment on offer?

Talk to us. Avoira specialise in offering specialist independent consultancy services. We're not tied to any one manufacturer which means we can specify and design the most appropriate solution for each project.

We offer a free site survey in order to identify specific needs and challenges. We then provide a detailed, costed and time-scaled solution so that you enter into the project understanding the full scope.

How long does it take to convert a room to a video conferencing room?

The majority of installations take no longer than one day per room. For larger, more complex solutions this may stretch out over a couple of days. Our engineers will advise the project timescale in advance and liaise with you to minimise downtime or disruption.

Do we need to buy new office furniture as well?

As part of our turnkey service, we offer custom built furniture solutions, with tables designed for videoconference meetings. However, we generally find that the existing furniture is usually fine to retain as part of the installation.

What do we do if we can't get the technology to work?

Don't panic! We provide full and highly responsive support packages with the solutions that we provide. This means that you will have a dedicated service desk team on hand to guide you through any issues. Should it not be possible to resolve an issue remotely, our field service engineers can apply their expertise on site.

What is 'acoustic treatment'?

This term refers to technologies which can address challenges presented by rooms with poor acoustics.

We've found demand for such technologies as part of a videoconferencing solution is increasing. This is partly due to the recent popularity among architects of glass walls and open ceilings, neither of which promote good acoustics and which, despite the advances in integrated system technologies, can challenge some videoconferencing packages.

In increasingly popular spaces such as small meeting pods and serial segmented individual workspaces, these may be addressed by technologies such as Yealink's DeskVision A24 collaboration display and the compact Neat Frame.

Our engineers will identify any acoustic challenges when surveying your meeting spaces and specify solutions to overcome them.

What next?

Let's talk.

If you're looking to reimagine your meeting spaces to enhance communication, collaboration and productivity, contact our specialist video conferencing team for a free, expert and no-obligation consultation.

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