Informed management reduces Audio Visual costs in public service

Visual communications are becoming a core part of the public sector workplace. Using qualified personnel to design, install and maintain the technology is the best way to keep costs down, says InfoComm International's Dan Goldstein.

It is almost everywhere you look. From the digital signage that welcomes visitors in the reception area of a council chamber or courtroom, to the interactive whiteboards in schools, the video archiving of X-ray and operation data in hospitals, and the projection systems and audio guides of modern museums.

Audiovisual or AV technology was once the sole preserve of the meeting room or auditorium, where overhead projectors or 35 mm slide carousels enhanced the presentation experience, before being supplanted by the now ubiquitous PowerPoint. Today, many public-sector facilities use audio and video in ways that could not have been imagined even a decade ago – to improve communication, raise productivity levels, and much more.

Yet few areas of the public sector have developed a clear strategy for ensuring that they adopt best practice when buying and using AV technologies. Many purchasing decisions have been made on a piecemeal basis, with little thought being given to system performance, its future upgradability, or its maintenance over time.

Pitfalls of owning AV

Because so many AV products are now networkable, there has been a trend in some circles to place these devices under the ownership of an in-house IT department. On paper this makes sense: there is almost always more IT in a public-sector facility than there is AV, so IT already has the manpower and a recognised position of authority within the organisation. What it lacks is the right expertise. The world of IT is essentially binary. Either a device is on the network, or it isn't. Either you have access to that file, or you don't. Either your iPod will work on your lunchtime jog through the park, or it won't.

Kevan Jones, executive director of the Southern African Communications Industries Association (SACIA). "Through InfoComm's CTS certification programme, we seek to ensure that those who buy AV products receive a system that meets their needs, that is properly accounted for and that is correctly maintained over time."

The world of AV involves many more shades of grey (or, perhaps more appropriately, colour) between the extremes of "off" and "on". Whether a surgeon in a remote location can correctly advise on a procedure taking place hundreds of kilometres away will depend on whether the operating theatre has the right quality and colour temperature of light for videoconferencing. Whether all the delegates in a training session can hear every word spoken by their instructor will depend on whether the acoustics of the lecture theatre have been properly compensated for in the design of the PA system. And whether users of a videowall at a museum can interact properly with the exhibit will depend on whether the projector lenses have been accurately specified for the distances and ambient light characteristics of the space.

Ensuring that a properly qualified AV supplier is involved in specifying such products is the best way to ensure that costly mistakes are not

SACIA recently hosted the InfoComm CTS Prep class at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Parliament's Aubrey Ngcobozi (left) receives his completion certificate from Kevan Jones CTS, executive director of SACIA, course instructor Hassan Ghoul CTS and Jasper Cecil, director of the University's Audiovisual Centre

made – and the sooner such a supplier is involved, the better. And this is not just a question of specifying. These days, the various items of AV technology – projectors, screens, loudspeakers, microphones, controllers and so forth – work at their best when they are designed to be integrated together as a system.

Controlling costs over time

While the appropriate design and installation of a facility's AV system will ensure that costs are controlled at the purchase stage, what many public sector managers need to know is how to budget for their system to be properly maintained over time. In the education sector, for example, tales abound of schools and colleges installing projectors but then having no budget to buy replacement lamps for them.

Many qualified AV installers now offer maintenance contracts as part of their service, and indeed the surest way of accurately budgeting for total cost of ownership is to assign the job of maintenance to the supplier that originally specified the system. Not only will the technology have been specified with minimal maintenance in mind, but the supplier will be more intimately familiar with all the individual products involved.

In fact, what many public sector facility managers are now realising is that the competencies of AV specialists now extend far beyond merely managing the costs of the AV system. The same skills that allow lights to be dimmed automatically when a presentation begins can also be leveraged to provide automated lighting control for an entire building, thereby further reducing costs and contributing to a lower-carbon building. And it doesn't stop at the lights – heating, ventilation, air-conditioning and more can all be brought under centralised control and management, slashing operating costs and increasing operational efficiency still further.

How to find the right AV supplier?

Over the past few years, as the cost of AV equipment has come down, many companies have begun to paint themselves as specialists in the field despite having relatively little expertise. In the end, there is only one way to be sure of a correctly delivered project and a high quality of

service, and that is to use the services of suppliers that are members of a professional trade association, and whose have earned recognised certification.

A non-profit organisation, InfoComm International is the world's largest professional body representing the AV community. Through its CTS certification programme, it seeks to ensure that those who buy AV products receive a system that meets their needs, that is properly accounted for and that is correctly maintained over time. Across Africa, InfoComm activities are supported by SACIA, a local trade association whose members have committed to truth, honesty and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of the audiovisual profession.

InfoComm has offered its CTS (Certified Technology Specialist) programme for more than 30 years, and every year certifies more qualified AV professionals than anyone else. InfoComm's certifications are the only AV credentials to achieve accreditation through the International Organisation of Standardisation (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) ISO/IEC 17024 certification of personnel. Their CTS training programmes are delivered under licence by SACIA with all testing carried out by independent Pearson Vue testing centres located in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. InfoComm's CTS programme assesses individuals against peer-developed standards of competencies; provides an assessment (exam) that is independent of any specific course or curriculum; enhances continued competency through ongoing renewal requirements; and requires adherence to a code of ethics.

For end customers, CTS certification provides evidence that the holder is a practising AV professional with proven competencies in designing, specifying, installing and maintaining audiovisual systems to the highest standards.

SA Parliament commits to professional standards

In South Africa the audio visual department within Parliament is responsible for providing AV facilities in support of all parliamentary activities. "In our quest to ensure transparency and good governance it's critical that we facilitate effective communication between all stakeholders," explains AV technical specialist Aubrey Ngcobozi.

"We have a large team of AV technicians who come from a broad range of backgrounds – some with experience in IT, some from an electrical background and others from the live events industry. In order to ensure we all work effectively together we've committed to work according to clearly identified standards and industry best practice. InfoComm has clearly defined these for the AV industry and their training programmes delivered in South Africa through SACIA have provided a fast-track learning experience for our staff."

Over the last 12 months, about a dozen AV technicians from Parliament have attended SACIA training courses and many are now preparing to write the InfoComm CTS examination. "Audio visual technology is developing at a rapid pace and one of the things we really like about these SACIA courses is that they evolve to reflect current technology trends. "Likewise, the CTS certificate needs to be renewed every three years. Any AV professional with a current CTS certificate is able to demonstrate he's up to date with the science and technology behind today's modern AV systems," concludes Aubrey ■