

May 12, 2009

On the Road

## A Meeting in New York? Can't We Videoconference?

By [JOE SHARKEY](#)

I HAD been planning to spend this month in Tucson, where I have been finishing a book on air travel. Then I got a phone call from my publisher in New York asking if I could come to a meeting to discuss the changes that seem to be occurring each day in the travel industry.

The desert weather was magnificent. I had no great desire to get myself onto some airplane and fly across the country.

But I had no choice. And so off I went, with that dreaded connection through the grandly named George Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston, where more often than not I have to run like a boot-camp grunt from one distant terminal to another to get to my connecting flight.

Until about a year ago, I used to scoff at the assertion, long made by the videoconferencing industry, that its high-end technology, in many cases, negated the need to get on an airplane and travel to a face-to-face meeting. But starting early last year, sales began to rise, offering evidence that videoconferencing was, in fact, being used more often to replace some [business travel](#).

I now regularly use videoconferencing. Often, my wife has to stay back East while I have the luxury of working in Arizona. We use a simple [Skype](#) Internet connection — little cameras and microphones hooked to our laptops — to hold nightly videoconferences, in which our two pet parrots in New Jersey also participate.

The parrots are early adapters, following the screen image, replying vocally, dancing with joy when motivated. They seem to get it — except that the chatty African grey evidently believes that I am actually inside my wife's laptop and marches behind the screen to peck at it and get me out. I mean, they're [birds](#), after all.

Skype and similar low-end products are great for casual use. And sometimes, they can be useful for business. Last month, for instance, I used Skype to communicate with a magazine editor in Barcelona. She was at home with her baby, but the virtual face-to-face meeting accomplished its purpose.

In fact, people in the growing high-technology end of the industry, which is called “telepresencing,” say the Skype-type systems have helped videoconferencing gain traction. The technique has given life to “the general idea that video is a realistic possibility to communicate for business,” said Marc Trachtenberg, the chief executive and co-founder of Teliris, which is a major player in telepresencing, along with competitors like [Cisco Systems](#).

With the highest-end Teliris product (Cisco has a similar product), you see a space that looks like a half of a conference room and you face a wall of up to six high-definition screens that give the illusion that people in a similar room in another location are in the same place.

After a while, it isn't easy to tell where the real room ends and the virtual room begins. The system costs \$150,000 to \$200,000 a unit. A much less expensive option is a high-definition desktop system that costs under \$10,000. All are mutually compatible.

Some of us consider systems like Skype technological marvels, like a barely recalled exhibit at a World's Fair. But many others consider those systems mundane, and increasingly demand high definition for business uses.

“The current generation of students and people entering business already use video in a core way,” Mr. Trachtenberg said. “It's ingrained. I mean, these are people who get annoyed when they don't get smooth motion on their iPhones.”

He added, “Skype and those kind of things are good for social uses, but they're not designed to replace the idea of a face-to-face meeting.”

The recent alarm about [swine flu](#), which led to travel restrictions to and from Mexico and a hotel quarantine in Hong Kong, underscored the value of being able to conduct virtual meetings with multiple participants in various locations, Mr. Trachtenberg said. Teliris, by the way, recently received \$11 million in new equity capital from investors.

No one expects videoconferencing to replace more than a minor segment of business travel, though the size of that segment may be growing faster than I had thought.

Still, back in Tucson, I had called my agent and asked if we couldn't simply have the meeting with my publisher via Skype.

"Hello," she replied in a tone that meant, "What planet are you on?"

I immediately booked my airline ticket.

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