Making the strategic use case for your tech

With enterprise continuing to embrace AV, is enough attention being paid to user experience, and how easy is it to measure the effectiveness of technology? *Rob Lane* investigates.

The enterprise sector's embracing of AV technology continues at pace. However, there is some difference of opinion as to whether much of this corporate tech adoption lacks a creative edge, with too much AV box-ticking (perhaps with one-box solutions), and not enough attention paid to delivering a service for users – point and shoot, rather than creative interaction.

It is perhaps more difficult to measure the effectiveness of AV technology within enterprise when user experience is compromised.

"I do agree," says Dave Wilson, strategic project director at Engage Works. "Experience is key, and so rather than giving a 'tech-injected boardroom' brief, clients should be working to create a 'brand experience suite' brief. The brand and the deployment of tech go hand in hand, so when tech is thought about right from the point of a blank page, it gets utilised in a much smarter way."

"I totally disagree that corporate AV is just about shoving high-tech kit into offices and boardrooms," opines Christian Bozeat, director at macom GmbH UK. "It is definitely not about slapping tech on to a wall. The Microsoft Surface Hub is a great example of there being no magic wand with technology."

According to Bozeat, "smart clients" have a good look at the technology, adopt a strategic approach and understand that AV is about business outcomes and not just tech. They restructure internal teams to take account of the new technology, design and deploy it in a structured way and change working practices and processes to maximise its effectiveness – deploying change management processes and designing the user experience for their own systems.

"Offices and boardrooms have a very different use case for AV, which is steered to absolute reliability and simplicity of use," adds Vince McAtamney, technology consultant at Inition. "However, I do agree that enterprises could do more to make their AV an 'experience'".

Space saving systems

Space is often at a premium, says McAtamney, going some way to explaining why systems are integrated rather than standalone, 'statement' pieces.

"You can normally categorise corporates into two categories," says Dan Watson, senor consultant at PTS Consulting. "Those that install AV and technology to 'digitalise' their company so that it is up to speed with the latest and greatest tech, attracts new talent, and can retain current staff. Corporates with this adoption strategy are the ones that are most likely to use tech on a point-and-shoot basis. On the other hand, there are clients who install technology to facilitate business requirements – and these tend to understand the importance of utilising the technology creatively."

Adds Emma Bigg, director at Octavius RE: "Some enterprises are really pushing the boundaries in terms of creative use of technologies and using it to evolve the culture of communication and collaboration in the workspace. Others are still in the world of point and shoot."

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Director, Octavius RE

The biggest misconception that many enterprises make, according to Bigg, is that office and meeting room AV is a standalone system that works in isolation to the rest of the company systems. "Workspace AV is part of the digital transformation of an enterprise and needs to be integrated into other workspace systems to be effective and deliver RoI," she says.

Where point-and-shoot is the default setting for corporates, some believe that it's as much a software as it is a hardware issue – a lack of understanding and deployment of innovative software solutions compromising the user experience capabilities of AV tech.

"Hardware is just the enabler, software is where the clever stuff happens," says Wilson. "It could be either in an under utilised space, which is why software and the flow of information should always be created and defined before hardware is even considered."

Bigg agrees: "Yes, certainly on the collaboration side software can be the issue in terms of getting some users to understand that apps are their friend, and also because you have to ensure the IT department is onboard with the solution as they will be supporting some of the software aspect for users –especially if it needs to be deployed on mobile devices and laptops."

But for Bozeat it is much more nuanced: "The issue is not one of hardware or software. It is the lack of a user experience design process, strategic deployment process and any form of change management – and importantly a lack of suitable support for technology. It is easy for users to blame the tech than it is to blame themselves."

McAtamney believes it's more about design failings than anything to do with either hardware or software. "AV software, especially control system software, used to be very reliant on skilled programmers, often over complicating the user interface. But today this is less the case. Hardware too has evolved from the 'flaky' legacy days into now far more stable, reliable digital and networked solutions.

"I do believe though that even with reliable hardware and software options, the true 'magic' and 'experience' an AV system delivers is dependent upon its logical design. This is often lacking in enterprise systems."

Enterprise staff should, of course, always be presented with reliable technology that also operates consistently and efficiently. But are they getting it?

"Most hardware on today's market is reliable and stable if installed and commissioned properly," explains McAtamney. "I believe that system design and UI programming is key here, and that the only way to achieve this is by using accredited AV designers who have open conversation at the planning stage with the real end users."

It's probably fair to say that AV systems went through a phase of being too complicated – although, according to Watson, things have improved.

"Users want flexibility and as a result touch panels used to be installed everywhere allowing everything to be routed to everywhere," he says. "This had/has a large impact of UX from a usability and reliability point of view."

Plug and play

Although flexibility remains a key requirement, systems have become much simpler, not only due to new technologies, but also due to how workforces are using the hardware and software do their jobs.

"The balance has now tipped towards reliability and quality being the biggest requirement," opines Watson.

"A couple of recent PTS projects have seen the removal of physical user interfaces in AV-equipped spaces, with a realisation that minimal to no user interaction with the AV systems (apart from plug and play) results in fewer things going wrong. The system will always work as there is nothing to change."

System support is also key, when it comes to reliability: without support services and adequate staff training, user experience and technology's effectiveness will be compromised.

Says Wilson: "Technology always has its moments, but to ensure reliability and consistent up-time, advocacy from staff during build and then subsequent training is key. Technology can fail, but user error can be eradicated by

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well trained staff."

"It's getting better," adds Bozeat. "Hardware is reliable if designed properly. The bigger issue is that companies need to take AV technology seriously and put proper support processes in place, look at what they have and support it appropriately. AV needs proper support just like IT has. If you support AV on a shoestring, of course it will be an issue for users."

According to Bozeat, enterprise needs to appreciate that it needs AV technology consultants who work only with detailed design, and quality integrators to realise such designs.

Consultants and integrators can encourage enterprise in understanding that the end user should be getting the best possible experience from AV – ultimately helping to measure the technology's effectiveness.

"In order for the AV industry to encourage corporates to listen to end users and provide the technology to facilitate user requirements, the corporates need to recognise AV as a specialist topic and engage with a consultant/SME," says Watson, adding that the consultant must specialise not only in AV, but also in digital transformation, change/visioning and strategy.

"It is all down to proper consultation and buy in," adds Bigg. "If enterprises engage all project stakeholders then as the integrator you are more likely to be successful in delivering an effective solution that works for everyone.

"I think the biggest barrier is how enterprises approach these projects, and how knowledgeable the people driving them internally are about the technology and its potential impact."

It is still often the case that IT departments are tasked with an AV installation, with the AV system designer distanced from the end-users.

"This can lead to some very 'clever' solutions but not necessarily the ones the end-users need or will use," says McAtamney. "So often poor design is caused by lack of communication between the end-user and the system designers."

Although it's true that the IT and AV worlds are continuing to merge, in many enterprises the IT and AV functions are still separate.

"When delivering tech into a corporate environment, the majority of issues relating to IT are around security policies, user account strategies and support processes of the hardware/software being deployed," explains Watson.

"Similar issues also relate to facilities management. Early engagement with IT and FM teams is therefore key."

Involving IT and facilities

However, although some difficulties remain, the existing IT infrastructure can help measure the effectiveness of AV technology. IT and facilities management teams can also help to frame a business's current understanding of technology, and therefore how the UI and UX should behave within an existing structure.

"I think their involvement makes it easier if they are onboard with the solution," says Bigg. "Manufacturers are building AV kit that is designed to work on an enterprise network, and appreciate the IT requirements to keep the network functional, reliable and secure.

"The involvement of IT is also essential to measuring effectiveness, as they tend to be the first port of call if there is a problem – so they are triaging the issues, and coordinating the resolution. They also will have good insight into user behaviour and historical issues which can be useful in terms of designing them out in the new system."

Of course, the process of measuring technology's effectiveness is made more complex by the need to satisfy the existing, often exacting requirements of IT.

"Where are compromises made?" asks Bozeat. "They are made all over the place. The biggest one is how the AV is connected or not to the corporate network."

"Compromises are often made through security restrictions, firewalls, CRMs and so on," adds Wilson. "These may block out some of the more exciting executions, but as long as you know what you're dealing with from the off, it will limit the compromises."

According to Wilson it's all about "outcomes". The effectiveness of a tech-enabled space should be measured against what the user experience led to: better relationships; more engaged clients; reduced project time; an increase in sales. User experience is increasingly seen as crucial in enterprise AV, helping to ensure that the technology's effectiveness is measured more efficiently. But in order to be effective, all stakeholders, including IT, and AV consultants and integrators must be in the process. ■