SHUTTERSTOCK

Team building

AV Magazine teamed up with property title *Property Week*, and *WorkSpace*, the flagship event covering office sector trends and transformation, to host AVWorks, a free virtual workspace conference exploring AV's pivotal new role in the workplace.
Rob Lane reports on some of the highlights.

The impact of Covid-19 on the AV industry has been huge, but as *AV Magazine*'s recent workspace conference, *AVWorks* – itself affected by the pandemic, having been scaled back to a virtual event – illustrated, the fast-paced changes unleashed by the virus offer opportunities too. As conference host and AV group editor Clive Couldwell said when summarising the event, Covid-19 has really "opened things up."

AV Magazine teamed up with *Property Week*, the UK's No.1 property title, and *WorkSpace*, the flagship event covering office sector trends and transformation, to bring together leading players in today's fast-paced AV revolution for the free, one-day October 2nd flagship event. Contributors and virtual attendees included AV innovators and cross-sector decision makers focused on the office space: occupiers, landlords, developers, architects, consultants, integrators, and facilities management firms.

The studio-style, live-streamed and fully interactive conference – digitally enhanced for a truly immersive experience – AVWorks provided deep insights from a host of keynote speakers and panels, alongside excellent networking opportunities for virtual attendees who

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> **Greg Jeffreys, Visual Displays / AVIXA**

were able to explore how new ways of working re-define what offices are, how they're used, where they're located and how they're sourced.

Working practices have changed forever as a result of Covid-19, accelerated in a way none of us could have believed possible, and AV technology is helping enable this workplace revolution. Business success in the post-Covid world will have to rely on AV technology to power collaborative, connected workspaces, offering new opportunities for the industry. AV technology has the power to unite dispersed workers, ignite creativity and power productivity.

The office space sector has long

been an incubator for AV innovation, powered by technology and driven by workforce demands for flexibility, connectivity and style. Indeed, AV innovation has generated rapid change in the corporate sector in recent years, driven in particular by the widespread adoption of unified communications and video conferencing. This change has accelerated exponentially in the past seven months - thrust to the forefront by the global pandemic, AV technologies are seen as vital business tools and the source of strategic advantage.

During his keynote speech on the Legacy of Covid-19 in the AV Market, Adam Cox, head of imaging, pro video and collaboration at Futuresource

Consulting, explained how the pandemic had caused "total disruption within a few weeks." The speed at which companies have had to react to the crisis has been "unprecedented" he added, opining that the new work from home culture would not have been possible ten years ago without conferencing tools such as Zoom and Teams.

Helen Causer, office and investment lead at Argent, in a panel conversation with Jeremy Dalton, head of VR and AR at PwC acknowledged that the role of technology in the workplace has shifted since Covid-19 hit, with "things changing more quickly than ever before".

This change is, she explained, an

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"acceleration of themes we've already been seeing" in businesses, the difference being that so many people are now working from home with many planning to remain there for much of the working week (when questioned, only four per cent of people watching the stream said they'd return to an office every day). The challenge for businesses is to find a way to encourage workers back to the office, with technology at the forefront of accelerated change, enriching staff experiences and enhancing safety through improved airflow, space efficiencies and other technological innovations.

Paul Williams, CEO of Derwent London, agreed explaining how his com-

pany has been using technology to help with social distancing in the office. Technology is "important to ensure buildings are operating smartly", he said, and is equally crucial in making sure that home working is as efficient and enriching as it is in the office: "Not working from home - living at work".

In the same panel, Jenny Hicks, head of technology at Midwich, opined that most businesses worked out what was needed quickly at the start of the pandemic, namely video and collaboration tools, with much of the infrastructure already in place pre-Covid.

"But we haven't looked at the effect of people working in a mixed way (on returning to the office)," she said. "When you put 30-40 people in a space and they 'video speak' you get noise!"

Midwich did look at this situation pre-Covid (how increased use of video conferencing at the desk creates audio challenges) but since staff began returning to the office Hicks reckons video usage has increased five fold (51 per cent of staff video conference from their desks, according to Adam Cox, head of imaging, pro video and collaboration at Futuresource Consulting – one of the keynote speakers).

As volumes fluctuate with increased at-desk conversations this leads to a "whole different level of noise pollution", said Hicks, and AV tech can be used to mitigate this, perhaps with the use of 'pink noise' as a 'volume fluctuator'.

New types of technology initiatives are coming in to enable collaboration, she added. Staff who were previously less tech literate have been forced to get to grips with this new normal, with user adoption growing "exponentially".

Previously businesses chose a particular platform (Zoom, etc) for meeting rooms, but the pandemic has seen a rise in 'bring your own meeting' so users come into offices with their own laptops, platforming off the hardware in the office and effectively use the same tech they deploy at home. BYOD is more important than ever now, alongside more flexible working.

"One thing we've spotted is that a lot of businesses are bringing in flexible working and shared (and cleaned) workspaces," Hicks added. But working from different desks can result in a reduced sense of belonging at work, so sets hot desk spaces are preferable.

PwC has introduced enhanced working flexibility, explained Dalton, with staggered arrivals. An 'office bot' lets staff know what slots are available to arrive in and they select the one they want. This allows greater confidence for staff returning to work, reducing the chances of infection from 'rush hour' staff arrivals. It is, according to Dalton, all a question of trust.

"Tech is agnostic and it's up to us to work out the best ways of using it and mitigate negatives," he said. "It's all about trust - if employees have trust they will work. They need to be included in how things work so they have ownership too."

Hicks agreed: "Opinions and user experiences count. It cannot just be IT and facilities management teams." Staff need a voice: there needs to be a rounded view on everyone's needs before tech is chosen. "This is essential now as people have worked out their own ways of working from home."

Speaking during the *Property Week* section of the conference, Katrina Kostic Samen, director, head of workplace strategy and design at Savilles, opined that although the "pendulum has swung to home working" the "office is not dead", and although it is going to be a very different environment, it is "here to stay". However, there is a disconnect between what UK workers want and what firms can provide, with only 63 per cent of companies providing relevant facilities.

This is borne out by comments from Futuresource's Adam Cox, during his keynote, 'The Legacy of Covid-19 in the AV Market', that there were widespread webcam and headset shortages in the early days of the pandemic. Indeed, 75 per cent of headsets used by home workers were consumer products, as pro equipment simply wasn't available.

Hybrid working

Hybrid working is becoming the norm, he explained, with people working no more than two or three days in the office, and increased growth in unified communications.

There had already been strong growth in the sector between 2015 and 2019, said Cox, so the foundations were already largely in place before Covid-19. However, it has taken the

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pandemic for staff and companies to fully engage with UC, as before many preferred to use more traditional, non-tech communication methods to do business. Necessity is, as always, the mother of invention, or, as Cox said, "the first click is what's needed to get people to adopt."

He continued: "It's the technology revolution of our time. Remote working is a revolution in the workplace and they (staff) don't see things going back to how they were before. It's all about technology plus cultural change plus trigger points (ie. Covid)."

New tools of the trade

The various video conferencing tools (Zoom, Rooms – plus the cloud) have changed things, he explained, as has the commoditisation of video conferencing tech, with equipment "massively more affordable" than it was in previous years. In addition, a cultural change was under way long before Covid, with millennials in decision-making positions in companies and tech-savvy Gen Z staff demanding enriching technology in the workplace and at home.

"Workforces have always changed and workplaces have had to change as a result," he said. "Collaborative tech is the latest development. This changes how people work in terms of their location."

Cox sees home working as both an opportunity and a threat to the office environment and AV investments there – although he doesn't believe it will affect things hugely (outside the obvious reduction in spend brought about by Covid-led reductions in revenues).

Whilst huge changes were occurring in the use of meeting spaces in offices even before Covid, with 38 per cent of companies holding meetings in breakout areas, this has doubled in the last 12 months, accelerated by the pandemic of course.

Cox believes that we will now see 'new normal meeting rooms'. The traditional meeting room where staff dialled in will no longer be the hub, with multiple locations preferred.

The future of the workspace

Following his keynote 'Achieving digital transformation: AV's role in changing social norms and revolutionising workspaces and user experience', *Jeff Fairbanks*, global head of employee operations & collaboration solutions at Bloomberg discussed the future of the workspace and technology's place within it.

"Post-Covid we will move into an environment whereby visual socialisation will be absolutely the norm," he explained. "This medium that we're in will not go away, it is now mainstream. It will be part of everything we do moving forward, always.

"What we will see, I believe, is a further collapsing of physical distance. I don't think we'll see a reduction in travel or physical interpersonal connections. What I think you're going to see is physical interpersonal connections as a force multiplier being magnified by the fact that in between those physical interactions we're going to augment VR, we're going to augment video stimulation via VC. So, we're going to see our connections much more enriched.".
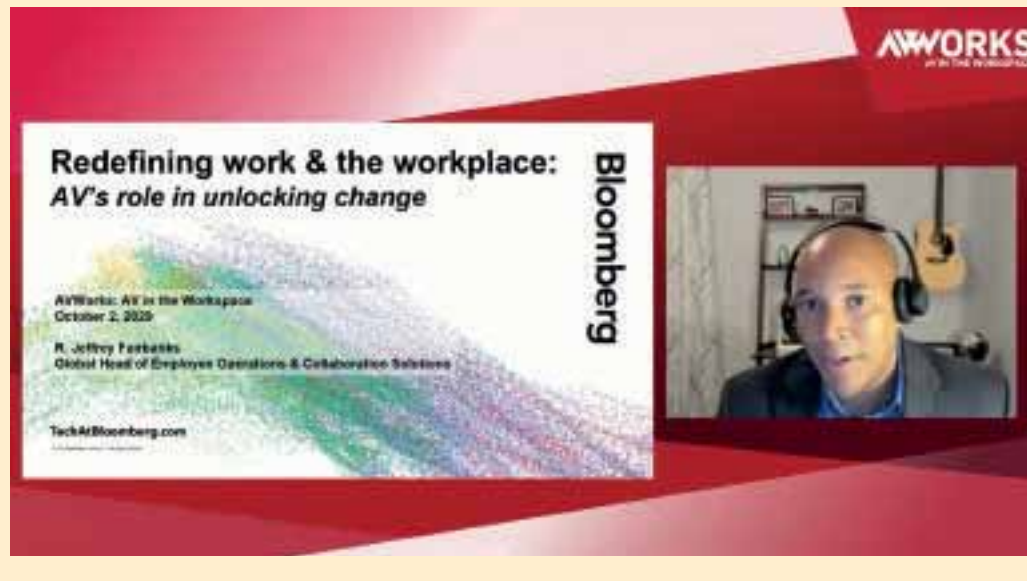
Today's deployed technology must be able to serve both in-room and remote users more effectively, with seamless dial-in and out-of-office.

"Collaboration tools are now business-critical investments," he explained. "Funds may be diverted to home workers, but equally meeting rooms must be able to cope with the new normal.

"Businesses need to prepare for further waves and also flexible working. It's here to stay. Offices will need to be revolutionised - more and bigger meeting rooms due to social distancing and also due to hybrid working."

Office design changing

Office design needs to change too, he added, but technology can provide some solutions: for example, track-and-trace built in to existing IT platforms. The way we work has "undoubtedly" changed permanently, and flexibility is key – particularly in terms of where people work – with technology more important than "ever before".

Following the keynote, Clive Couldwell questioned Cox's earlier comment regarding the commoditisation of video conferencing tech, opining that it was perhaps more to do with prices falling. Cox admitted that it was more a "process of commoditisation".

Couldwell also asked how quickly the AV industry will be able to adapt to create AV standards, with Cox replying that vendors currently prefer to get products and solutions to market than to standardise, with standardisation "a longer term thing".

Greg Jeffreys, director at Visual Displays and committee chair for AVIXA's standards steering committee believes that AV requires an equivalent to IT services management standardisation.

In his keynote on tech's role in a successfully digitally enabled workspace, he notes that AV needs to change in order to be seen as a "recognised profession".

"My experience is that the AV profession is often regarded by the CEO as the equivalent of the nerdy kid his neighbour recruited to wire up his home cinema system," he opined.

"And it's not like that with IT. Without rock-solid network computing and internet access it's not possible to even own or run a business. It's like the person who visits a dentist, grabs them by the most indelicate spot and says now, we're not going to hurt each other are we? The leverage of this symbiotic, mutual stranglehold is not afforded to AV."

IT has its ITIL v4 Cert scheme, adding a veneer of authority that AV lacks "at the moment", he explained, although AVIXA has an equivalent scheme in development. The forthcoming User Experience Design for AV Systems is based on human-centred design principles.

"It's iterative - all about talking to the users, and not just the buyers," explained Jeffreys. "Speaking to the actual users is pretty much a foreign concept to AV, and this has to change. But this does need buy-in from the clients."

Jeffreys agreed with everyone at the conference that Covid has changed everything. "The pandemic has brought the future forward (in terms of deployment of AV in the workplace)," he said.

"Less money will come to AV and what does come to us will be spread more thinly," he cautioned.

"Some tough decisions will be taken. Technology, previously seen as essential might be regarded as 'fat wear', unless it really makes its case effectively."

Couldwell agreed: "There'll be no tech for its own sake, but properties and environments that deliver. Covid has opened things up - a fully digitally-linked world that needs to be linked in a discerning way.

"The property world is seeing how strategically important technology is. Automation is more advanced, but although its sophisticated it needs to be intelligent too – to help people work together." ∎

Further coverage of the AVWorks conference sessions will follow on the AV Magazine website.