

Tyler Carmody:

Hello and welcome to another episode of UCX USA Talks. I'm your host Tyler Carmody and today I'm joined by the president and principal analyst of Metrigy, Irwin Lazar. For over 20 years, Irwin has been responsible for benchmarking the adoption and continued use of emerging technologies in the workplace. He comes from a security architecture and design background and I am thrilled to have him speak with us about something that is extremely important in the modern workplace, achieving meeting equity for hybrid employees. Let's get started.

Our first question is, what is exactly happening with meeting spaces today? Do you believe that companies are changing how they provision meeting space?

Irwin Lazar:

Yeah. So, hi. And, it's great to be here and nice to chat with you, Tyler. So, yeah. So, Metrigy goes out every year and does a study of end user organizations. We gather data about what they're doing and why. We just recently published a study of workplace collaboration technologies and we found that, yes, companies are changing the way that they provision meeting space. They're putting touchscreens into rooms. They're looking at multi-camera and center room camera systems. They're looking at technologies for framing participants. All as a means of ensuring that as people come back to the office and we enter this world now of hybrid work where it's going to be pretty rare that everyone in a meeting is in that meeting facility, so they need to ensure that people who are working remote are equal participants.

And, that's been really the mantra that's driving the evolution of office and meeting space. Have video in that space. Have the ability to share content and have that ability to ensure that no matter where you're attending the meeting from, you have equal access to one another. You can see everybody. You can chat with them. You can ideate with them and so on.

Tyler Carmody:

So, I feel like we're coming on three years with the pandemic and it's interesting to see when we first started, you would see everyone when they were on Zoom and Teams with just horrible camera quality, microphone quality. No one really knew what they were doing because it was such a new world. What do you think are the challenges that companies are facing with respect to ensuring that in office and remote employees can have equitable meetings?

Irwin Lazar:

Yeah. So, the paradigm's kind of flipped on its head for where we were pre-pandemic. It used to be if you were involved in a meeting, 80%, 90% of the people were in the office. The rest were connected remotely through dial in. Now, we've spent two years roughly where people were mostly meeting at home. They were using video tools. They had access during the meeting to chat, to content sharing, to note capture, to virtual whiteboard applications. And, now when we go back to this environment where again maybe 40, 50, 60% of the people are in the meeting room, they may be at a disadvantage now because they're looking at a screen and they're trying to talk to the people who are in front of them and they don't see the chats. They can't easily communicate in an ideation sessions on a virtual whiteboard without everybody opening up their laptop and putting their heads down, which kind of ruins the whole point of being in that meeting space in the first place.

So, I think that's the biggest challenge, is the way that meetings are conducted, what happens in those meetings, has changed. You can't just dial in and listen in on a meeting anymore and really have a good

sense of what's happening. Conversely, the people in the office have to be able to see those side chats, see the documents, see the whiteboard and so on. So, creating that space that works for all regardless of where people are... I think that's one of the big challenges. I'd say that the second biggest is just focusing around making participating in a meeting easy to use. So, today most companies use more than one meeting app. They may have one that's their official company app but then they're joining meetings on other apps outside of their company. And so, how do you do that and make it as easy as possible for people to use has been a big area of concern.

Tyler Carmody:

So, with UCX USA, obviously when our event comes to Austin, I will be on site in Austin. However, otherwise I am fully remote in my bedroom in Philadelphia. And, just before we started the UCX USA Talks series, I purchased a very, very nice Logitech webcam. Obviously, a webcam is very different from technology you'd see in a conference room. So, my question is, what are some of the technologies that vendors are delivering to support meeting equity?

Irwin Lazar:

Yeah. I think there's kind of two distinct areas. One is in the homes. You mentioned that having a high quality webcam. We've seen vendors like Polly and Cisco and others, Neat as an example, that have introduced personal video devices. I'm using one right now that it's a single device. Built in speakers, built in microphone, four K camera. It has noise cancellation. It has the ability to frame me so if I move, it keeps pulling me back to the center. It has acoustic fencing so any noise that's happening outside of the front of the camera is blocked out. So, those kind of examples. Also, we see a lot of interest in things like all in one devices that include speakers, microphone, high quality monitor and so on, as a key device for people working from home.

In the office, if you think about what's happening in the meeting space, touchscreens are becoming prevalent. Our research shows roughly 30% of companies now that are deploying a touchscreen system into their meeting rooms. That's going to go up to about 60% by the end of 23. They're not putting them in every room, but they're starting to deploy them. And, that gives you the chance to pull up content like you mentioned, virtual whiteboard that people in the meeting room can manipulate and see as well as people who are working remote. We've seen launch from companies like Logitech and Owl, center room camera systems that you put a camera in the middle of the table and then that captures the people as they're looking at one another and not necessarily just looking at the front of the room. So, that's another way to improve that visibility for remote participants.

Alternative vendors Polly, Crestron, Cisco, as examples, have systems where you can put cameras around the meeting rooms so you can capture people from multiple directions and then use AI to display the best view of a person, frame the people who are in the room. So, I might join a meeting where five people are in a room but I don't know that. All I see are the five boxes of each individual like I might have seen if everyone were working remote. So, we've seen a lot of momentum on the vendor community to use AI, come up with innovative designs to improve that experience for both in office and remote employees.

Tyler Carmody:

So, I can't tell you how many times pre-pandemic I walked into a conference room and there is just tons of technology. [inaudible 00:06:44] feel like there's a \$100,000 worth of stuff in that room alone. But, now you go in there now and like you said, there would be a single Owl camera that can capture

everyone in the room. Just very simple setups now. How do you think companies are making room systems easier to use?

Irwin Lazar:

Yeah. We've seen a lot of interest in one touch join systems, about 60 [inaudible 00:07:06]... About 56 to 60% of participants in our study have deployed those. And, what a one touch room system is, is they're a system that's optimized for a specific meeting application. So, say I'm a company that uses Zoom and Zoom's my primary meeting app. I walk into a Zoom room and I see a tablet there that says here are the list of meetings that this room has been booked into. I press one button. I join the meeting. Everything pops up on the screen and away I go. That's the easiest way to ensure high quality experience.

It becomes a challenge though if you want to use that room for other meeting applications and we're starting to see vendors, Cisco and Zoom as examples, Google as another, that are adding additional meeting applications to that screen. So, I can come in and say, "Well, no. This is going to be a Google Meet session." Or, "This is going to be a Go To session." Or, some other meeting. And, I can click on a button and launch that. It's a little more complicated, may require some additional licensing. But, that's really the direction that everyone's heading into.

Still a lot of people that deploy what we call BYOC meeting systems where there's either a computer in the room or you bring your laptop and plug in. That's still not necessarily the easiest way to go. It allows you to just run whatever client you need to run. But, I think the trend is pretty clear toward having that system in the room that just requires pressing one button on the screen and hopefully you're in that meeting pretty quickly.

Tyler Carmody:

For sure. So, [inaudible 00:08:30] our final question of the session, which I feel like puts a nice little bow on everything that we talked about and that is, what steps can companies take to improve meeting experiences if they don't have budgets for new hardware?

Irwin Lazar:

Yeah. It's a good question because in this day and age and where the global economy is right now, there are definitely constraints on spending, especially capital spending. I think first and foremost it's look at the applications that you have and assess are you using all of the features that are available to you today. So, if you look at features like front row and smart rooms and others from Microsoft, Cisco, Zoom, really all the meeting vendors now have some of those features that capture people and pull them into their own frame, that make the chat available within the meeting room so if remote participants are engaged in chat, maybe you see that at the bottom of the screen when you're sitting in a meeting room.

Look at some of those one touch systems. They do tend to be fairly cost effective, using lower cost Android tablets now in many cases versus some of the more expensive ones that we saw early on. I think that's really the best you can do. Other than that, it's come up with best practices. When the pandemic first started in early 2020 and companies were sending everybody home, one of the first webinars I did was how to have good quality video conferences at home. And so, you look at things like lighting and making sure that you're not sitting in front of a bright open window, that you have a well-positioned microphone, that you have enough bandwidth. All of those kind of things that can contribute to better quality meetings.

And, then just potentially looking at ways to reduce the number of meetings. One of the things that really hurts meeting quality is when people are sitting in front of cameras all day long. So, we see a fair amount of interest in reducing the number of meetings in a day, putting breaks in, having meeting free days. All of those can not necessarily improve the quality of each individual meeting from a voice and video perspective but they can make the meetings more effective.

Tyler Carmody:

Well, I certainly hope that my setup gets your seal of approval. With that, we are all done with this episode of UCX USA Talks. Before we sign off, Irwin, do you have any final takeaways for our audience?

Irwin Lazar:

Yeah. I look forward to seeing everybody at UCX USA in September and looking forward to seeing Austin.

Tyler Carmody:

Absolutely. Well, thank you Irwin for speaking with us and I'm certain everyone learned a lot about how to make the new normal much more equitable. I hope you all enjoyed this session and for more updates on the world of unified communications and technology, please be sure to check out our website, ucxusa.com, and follow us on social media at UCX USA and at UCX USA Expo. And, have a great day.