

Online Collaboration Bolsters Charity's Effort to End AIDS

International HIV/AIDS Alliance reduces travel costs and increases productivity with web conferencing solutions.

Executive Summary

Customer Name:

International HIV/AIDS Alliance

Industry:

Charity

Location:

Brighton, United Kingdom

Number of Employees:

450

Challenge:

- Facilitate communication and knowledge sharing in global network of partner organisations
- Reduce travel costs and save resources
- Help ensure business continuity in event of travel disruptions

Solution:

- Web conferencing provides easy collaboration anytime, anywhere, on any device including iPhones, iPads, and smartphones
- WebEx Connect IM makes on-the-spot communication and collaboration a reality for field, partners, and HQ staff
- SaaS-based collaboration suite enables rapid deployment worldwide

Results:

- Enabled global employees and trustees to meet and chat with flexibility and convenience
- Saved more than 25 percent on travel
- Improved ability to diagnose and fix problems on remote computers

Challenge

The International HIV/AIDS Alliance (IHAA) was formed in 1990 by a group of donor agencies and international organisations to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS. Headquartered in Brighton, England, the charity works with 36 organisations and hundreds of diverse community partners to help prevent HIV infection, provide care and support to communities affected by AIDS, and build healthier communities. Communication between its secretariats and partners in Asia, Eastern Europe, South America, and Africa is absolutely critical to its mission, but email was proving to be a slow and cumbersome collaboration process, particularly difficult when working on documents.

In addition, approximately 20 to 30 percent of the employees in Brighton are away from the office at any one time, often travelling abroad. Air travel alone was costing the Alliance up to £580,000 (US\$900,000) per year, with over half of this coming from funds that could have been reinvested in the charity.

The organisation tried addressing these issues with a video conferencing system that proved to be challenging in remote locations and was made worse because bandwidth requirements exceeded the capabilities of the technology. The Alliance installed an enterprise real-time communication platform that facilitated instant messaging, conferencing, and multiparty voice and video calling among its various communities. However, groups outside the secretariat network could not access the platform. "We knew that we would find our answer in technology, but the challenge was in finding the right type of technology," says Paul Higgins, head of IT at the Alliance. "We needed a solution that anyone could use, regardless of where they were and what type of computer they were using."

The issue culminated when an Icelandic volcano erupted in April 2010. The resulting ash cloud shut down much of Europe's airspace for more than a week, causing chaos for thousands of travelers including 30 staff members from the Alliance. "The crucial moment for us came when we realised our trustees were not going to be able to attend our annual board meeting," says Higgins. "We needed a contingency measure that would allow communication and collaboration between invitees, even if they were stranded in various global locations."

Solution

The International HIV/AIDS Alliance tried other conferencing solutions, but realised that they did not deliver the speed and immediacy that its projects required. In the end, it was the charity's standardised Cisco IT system that prompted an investigation into Cisco WebEx™ technology.

"Cisco has always been a very trusted supplier for us, and we had heard very positive reviews of WebEx Meeting Center," says Higgins. "We decided to conduct the annual board meeting using the WebEx platform and were very pleased by the results, particularly in how easy it was to share documents and exchange comments." After the success of this meeting, the Alliance decided to implement Cisco WebEx® Training Center as a replacement for its old training solution. Cisco® WebEx Support Center and WebEx Event Center followed.

Cisco WebEx Connect Instant Messenger vC6.5 also proved to be an effective communication vehicle for the organisation and its various constituents. “All of our partners, regardless of whether or not they are in the secretariat network, have been able to easily download the software and start chatting immediately,” says Sam McPherson, associate director of the Alliance. “We find the WebEx IM solution suits our needs much better than our previous platform.”

For the Alliance, the best part about the Cisco WebEx solution portfolio was that it came packaged as an integrated software-as-a-service (SaaS) offering. Not only does this mean a consistency of experience for the charity’s various external partners, it also offers greater scalability at a far lower cost than a hardware-based solution. “Our organisation relies heavily on the relationships we have with our global partners,” says Higgins. “And as we continue to build our presence in various communities, we need to collaborate more and more. With WebEx technology, we can expand our use of the software both easily and cost-effectively.”

The charity now uses Apple iPhones and iPads to take its WebEx collaboration a step further. “The WebEx Meeting Center app allows our staff in Uganda to communicate much more effectively with staff back home,” says McPherson. “We can conduct a productive two-way discussion and improve field access to vital health information. We’ve provided all of our senior management team with iPhones and iPads so they can work more efficiently on the move.”

“We want to exploit the technology available to us and truly become a collaborative organisation. By using the full complement of WebEx solutions, we hope to move closer toward our vision of a world in which people do not die of AIDS.”

—Sam McPherson, associate director, International HIV/AIDS Alliance

Results

Thanks to the WebEx implementation, the Alliance now collaborates much more flexibly and efficiently with its global members. “Whether it’s board meetings, finance and audit committees, or policy and advocacy committees, we’re now conducting all of our crucial gatherings online,” says Alvaro Bermejo, executive director of the Alliance. “It’s certainly a lot more useful than having a single video conferencing system. And when a full meeting isn’t needed we can communicate through WebEx Connect IM, which is a lot more cost- and time-effective than a telephone call.”

Now that many face-to-face meetings are no longer necessary, the charity is also seeing a significant decline in spending. “We are hoping to see a savings of £160,000 (US\$250,000) in travel costs this year, which is just phenomenal in terms of our finances,” says Bermejo. “The more we save on travel, the more funds we have to put directly towards helping communities.”

Meanwhile, the benefits also reach the charity’s fundamental IT systems. The IT department can now diagnose and fix remote computer problems more conveniently, thanks to WebEx Support Center. Rather than having to be on site to work on a remote employee’s system, engineers can securely access the PC through a web-based browser. This remote support also extends to the Alliance’s Measurement and Reporting System database, saving time and resources on what used to require travel.

The International HIV/AIDS Alliance is committed to becoming a leader in using technology to improve communication and knowledge-sharing between its global teams. “We want to exploit the technology available to us and truly become a collaborative organisation,” says McPherson. “By using the full complement of WebEx solutions, we hope to move closer toward our vision of a world in which people do not die of AIDS.”

Next Steps

The Alliance is looking at new ways it can extend its use of Cisco WebEx Connect. “We are definitely planning to make more use of this system,” says Bermejo. “It really is ideal for quick, easy, and effective collaboration.”

The charity is also enthusiastic about furthering its environmental initiatives using WebEx technology. “We are making a strong shift toward a greener, more sustainable and efficient organisation,” says Bermejo. “We will be continuing our efforts to change the culture of the Alliance to one that does not depend on air travel.”

For More Information

To find out more about Cisco WebEx solutions, visit <http://www.webex.co.uk/product-overview/index.html>.

Product List

- Cisco WebEx Meeting Center
- Cisco WebEx Training Center
- Cisco WebEx Event Center
- Cisco WebEx Support Center
- Cisco WebEx Connect Instant Messenger vC6.5



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