Communications Upgrade: Video Conferencing at BAS

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BAS is headquartered in Indiana, a bucolic place to grow corn, a family, or a company. Most of you reading this article are not from Indiana, or even an adjacent state. At some time, you have probably contacted us in search of information, technical support or other assistance. The format for such communication has changed dramatically during my tenure at BAS.

When I began my career here in 1978, it took more than an hour to sort through the mail each morning. Formal letters were the primary method of inquiry, particularly for customers from other countries. We even received the occasional telegram. The telephone was also key. We had neither voicemail nor a hold function on the phone. Some probably wondered about that avant-garde, deep bass rhythm that they heard while they thought they were put on hold. It wasn't a Philip Glass composition—just my heartbeat as I held the receiver to my chest and called to others for help in answering a question. Soon we adapted Telex, a now defunct means of communicating more rapidly with our overseas customers which involved a keyboard and a dedicated line to Western Union. This rapidly gave way to FAX, which seemed revolutionary at the time, in spite of the fact that it had been available for decades. Letters became FAX messages, and with the transition came an increased sense of urgency. A conversation that required two weeks or more when we exchanged letters now mandated completion on the same day if it began with a FAX. Although it was fundamentally impossible to cram multiple contacts from two weeks of communication into a single day, we felt obliged to try anyway. Telephones acquired voicemail and little blinking lights to prompt us to action, but it became much harder to reach someone when we tried to return a call since they all had voicemail messages of their own. The email revolution hit us about the same time it started to seriously transition out of the university domain and into the public sector. The same-day philosophy of the FAX generation was replaced by the same hour, or even same minute credo of email.

Throughout these transitions in telecommunication, there has remained a need to periodically make personal contact. The geeks among us call this face time. The traditional visit by a company representative on a regular circuit has fallen out of favor. As demands on time increase, the ritual of setting up a personal appointment in advance, and being obligated to remember it, has proven too inconvenient for many clients, and extremely expensive for the companies paying for the travel costs supporting this inefficient mode of communication. "Trade shows," those expositions of products and services which accompany conferences, have also seen declining attendance and ever increasing costs for both buyer and seller. The concept of getting information now, today, this hour, when you need it, has superseded all else. This lust for immediacy is part of what drives the growth of the Internet. Yet, we sometimes still need to talk face to face, and to actually show something to another individual. We still send out our technical people to visit clients, and stand (with pained feet) in trade shows. But now we also offer another alternative for those who wish to talk now, with one or more of us, and also examine our products, our data, or ourselves.

Video conferencing is a resource that puts you in the same room with other people, without an airplane ticket. You hear and see them at the same time that they hear and see you, just as in a normal conversation. This is not the clunky "videophone" technology that you may have seen five or six years ago. That offered you a "freeze frame" of someone's face (usually in a very unflattering pose) while the voice continued in normal conversation.

Video conferencing ("VC") facilities are present at major universities, corporations, and government sites around the world. Each facility can connect with one, or more, other facilities. Linking up to another video conference center involves a telephone call. VC centers maintain dedicated telephone lines for this purpose. You view another group on a video monitor, which also shows members of your own group in live-action, simultaneous transmission with clear audio. This interactive process is very much like meeting together in a room, except the sound is even better! A 360° directional microphone picks up and distributes conversations with amazing clarity.

This summer, we added a video conference facility at BAS. It is easily accessible by all business units within the company. The contract analytical laboratories of BAS Analytics use it to talk with their clients around the world. The electrochemists, chromatographers, and physiologists can wheel in carts with instruments and animals. Our engineers and developers can organize a group meeting with others—even the chalk talks. If another person at the company is needed in the conference, they can be called into the conversation as needed.

Details about our system specifications are listed in ***T1***. It is not necessary for your facility to use the same equipment, but it may be useful information for your technicians to know. More important is the information provided in ***F1***, which provides the telephone number to call when linking up to our system. Video conferencing is like a telephone call: the person who dials the number pays for the call.

It doesn't take long to set up the VC center for a conference, just a few minutes. However, we need to know 1) who will place the call, 2) when the call will be placed, and 3) the estimated duration of the conference. Normally, you would exchange information about a videoconference with your contact at BAS at some time prior to the meeting. If the conference involves technical support under a contract, including an annual scientific support agreement, contract analytical service, or engineering contract, we will meter the duration and charge appropriately under the terms of each contract. Let us know what interests you and we'll advise whether any supplemental charges apply.

T1

BAS Video Conferencing Facility

Specification	Description
Model	Picturetel System 4500ZX – Concorde
Monitor	32" Sony Color
Audio	Full duplex with IDEC, Bose powered speaker system
Format	SG3, SG4 and H.320 and Video Algorithm
Camera	Powercam 100 with pan, tilt, zoom and autofocus
Display	Picture in Picture (PIP)
Microphone	360° Directional Microphone with automatic tracking, noise suppression and gain control
Number of Sites in Conference	2 to 6
Data Ports	2 x RS232
Interface	Video graphics, VCR audio
Additional Features	Far-end camera control, voice-activated and director control multipoint software, LAMB (look-at-me-button), infrared keypad, world cart, document camera

F1

Connecting to the BAS Video Conference Facility