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Consultant's Connection: The AV-IT Convergence That Wasn't

When an IT department took over the operation of classroom AV systems, it had the big idea to replace existing equipment with PC-centric solutions. Oops.

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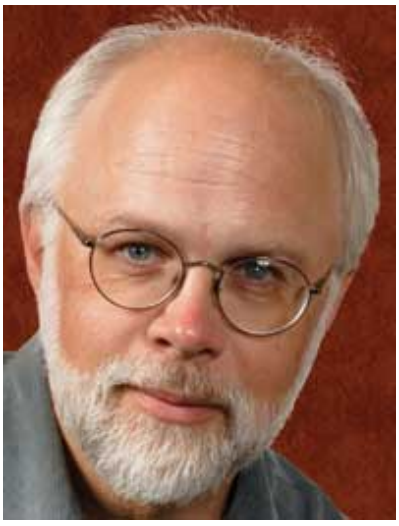
Recently, a client took over the operation and support of its classroom AV systems from an outside party that had been doing the job. The new "owner" of the classroom systems was a college IT department unfamiliar with audio, video, or AV control systems. The outside party was an AV group toiling alongside its own organization's IT department. Each took a different approach to the overlapping worlds of AV and IT technology. The college IT department, having taken ownership of its school's classroom systems, quickly became frustrated on a number of levels. First, the staff found it difficult to pin down the source of system problems. Despite the fact all the AV systems had been provided by a single integrator, technicians from the integrator often reported that issues lay somewhere else and that they weren't qualified to address them.



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Cost was the second level of frustration. Part of the reason for taking over support of the systems was the perception that support costs had been too high and the client thought it would be less expensive to do the work themselves. But after obtaining a quote they felt was exorbitant to replace an amplifier in one of their rooms, and then learning the hourly rate for changes to the control system programming, the owner began casting around for other technology solutions. Because the client, the IT department, understood computers and software, it figured it made sense to find a solution that was PC-centric. The solution needed to combine video switching, audio mixing, recording and playback, signal processing and distribution, plus system and environmental controls in a single PC that could be operated from a wireless laptop or a fixed PC at the podium through a Web interface.

Enter the third problem. Because programming for their existing control systems was not in a language they knew, and because they didn't have the time or funding to send technicians to learn the language, all new programming had to be in a language the technicians understood–preferably a Web-based language.

In the meantime, the other group, the AV department that had originally supported the classroom

AV systems, made an argument to its own supervisors that in their organization's case, it would save money and make sense for the AV group to become part of the IT department. Done. The two are now one integrated department working smoothly together.

What's the difference? Didn't both organizations achieve the same of goal of merging AV and IT, albeit via decidedly different paths? Yes, but in the first instance, the IT department took over something it admitted was outside of its expertise. In response, it looked for a solution it could manage, in a paradigm it could understand. In the other case, the AV department worked out a solution that brought its expertise into an existing IT department, helping the IT department understand not just technological differences, but also similarities, and mapping out ways the groups could fit together.

How AV and It People Think

What these vignettes illustrate are the differences in thinking between AV and IT departments when it comes to AV systems. One of the key issues for IT managers is the ease of use and creation of self-healing networks. It's a big reason why they view AV systems with suspicion. While the AV industry has made strides, it still has not achieved the goal of "plug and play" that the IT world expects. Both of the major control system manufacturers now offer the ability to control their systems through a Web interface. The pressure to move in this direction will only intensify in coming years as more end users wonder why they have to spend so much money on interfaces when less expensive alternatives are available.

Lest you think IT managers are being uptight, the root of their AV suspicion is in the mission-critical nature of IT to business and government operations. The technology has to work, and has to work transparently to the average end user. AV, however, has not yet achieved mission-critical status across business and government.

That said, from observing IT managers during design, implementation, and operation of IT systems, I think they oversell the simplicity of their systems. The amount of time spent setting up switching and routing fabrics, interfacing with the outside world, and setting up computers rivals, if not exceeds, the effort we put into design, installation, and configuration of AV systems. True, there are now overlaps between us, but as professionals we are not integrated, and I doubt we ever will or need to be.

Presented with my client's goal of a PC-based AV solution, I posted questions on InfoComm Listservs seeking feedback. Among them: "Are you using a

Windows or Mac multimedia PC as the core of your classroom AV presentation and switching systems?" "Are you using a stand-alone AV control system, or are the control functions also handled by this computer?" "How are you handling speech reinforcement, assistive listening, and recording in these systems?" "What problems have you encountered and/or solved?"

I got just two responses, which probably goes a long way toward demonstrating where we are in using PCs to handle AV systems. One was from an individual who said it sounded like an interesting experiment and asked me to get back to him if it worked (it didn't). The second came from a major university that uses "integrated" AV systems in its classrooms and is experimenting with the deployment of digital recording and distribution of classroom lectures.

After much angst-ridden discussion, my client decided to move forward with IT where it could by implementing Web-based control systems, while retaining a more traditional approach to integrated AV systems. Will we ever achieve the goal of a seamlessly integrated AV/IT system, i.e., a "monster

PC" capable of flawlessly performing all the AV functions our clients seek without crashing in the middle of a class or presentation? For now, I don't think so. There are still too many technical issues surrounding digital audio and video systems such as the need for dedicated floating-point processing of digital audio signals. But we can dream. Or wake in a cold sweat in the middle of the night, screaming ...

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