

How to design spaces for meetings and events

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With a return of group business, some hoteliers are adding event space. Technology should be top of mind in the design process.

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There is a surge of renovation activity going on in the hotel industry. Some renovations are related to acquisitions and reflagging. Others are long-overdue updates and concept refreshes that convert dated venues to "millennial-ready" spaces. With a return of group business, some hoteliers also are adding event space.

There is excitement around rapidly developing and advancing technologies added to meeting spaces. Digital events, virtual and hybrid meetings, social, interactive and immersive events are hot topics among meeting planners and facilitators. Do you want to simply accommodate, or optimize advanced event technologies?

Future of meetings

Let's imagine the future for meeting and event spaces. Let's assume: Meetings equals people communicating. Therefore, the future of meetings equals the future of people plus the future of communicating.

What technology will we be using five years from now? Will we have changed dramatically? Will we grow bigger ears so that our listening will be directional? Will we evolve to have telephoto eyes so we can see in dim light and read tiny text from the back row? Probably not, but it is likely that people will have higher expectations for image quality and somewhat better aural discernment.

Humans are essentially analog beings with analog ears, analog eyes and analog brains. However, technology is exploding in the digital domain, in software and hardware and cloud streaming of information. In order for digital technologies to effectively communicate with analog humans, data must be converted back and forth between these two domains. Microphones, visual displays, loudspeakers and video cameras are the common interfaces connecting humans to the digital world.

Until humans sprout Bluetooth antennae, we have to rely on these analog-to-digital-to-analog converters. Consider this: Humans are far better at listening through noise (albeit stressfully) than microphones are, and our eyes can see far better in even awkward light than the typical video camera. Our eyes can see the Milky Way at night, and those same eyes can walk on the beach in Miami at noon. No single camera can do that today.

We need to design spaces that are good for "analog" humans, and this can be done by focusing on four areas:

1. **Connectivity:** Fast and effective wired and wireless connections. Almost all advanced event technologies rely on having robust, fast Internet connectivity. With the advent of [802.11ac](#), this cannot be emphasized enough. Eighty percent of wireless systems designed and installed in the last five years will need to be replaced for 802.11ac, according to experts.
2. **Low background noise:** In noise-criteria terms, that means below NC35 in large ballrooms, below NC30 in meeting rooms, and below NC25 in boardrooms and rooms used for conferencing, streaming or digital recording.
3. **Low reverberation:** No echoes and no lingering sound energy. Ballrooms should have less than 1.2 seconds of reverberation (at 500 hertz) while small boardrooms less than 0.6 seconds.
4. **Lighting:** Balanced, bright, well-controlled lighting is essential for great meetings. Video cameras need high light levels for best quality; the color temperatures of all fixtures in a room should be the same; and light from ambient sources (windows, etc.) must be controlled.

CapEx strategy

Be careful that what you are planning will not worsen existing conditions. For example, if you have fabric-wrapped wall panels, replacing them with hard surfaces will dramatically increase the reverberation and background noise levels in the room. If you have an existing hard-cap or acoustic-tiled ceiling and are thinking of an open Web design, you will need to wrap the HVAC ducts to prevent room noise levels from becoming loud.

First, focus on the acoustics. Can the event space be improved by bringing in portable equipment? Not likely for acoustics. If lighting is insufficient we can bring in portable lights, but if the room is too noisy due to HVAC or lack of sufficient acoustical treatment on the walls we cannot reasonably fix that with portable equipment. Fix the acoustics as much as you can, when you can.

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Heating and cooling systems create noise, and ceilings, floors, walls and partitions can absorb noise. Consider relocating noisy equipment from the spaces above the ceiling and replacing or servicing the ballroom partitions to make the room have low background noise and low reverberation. Make sure there is enough acoustic absorption on the appropriate surfaces to control sound levels. These investments will have a bottom-line payback in reduced guest complaints and more meetings overall.

Next, do the basics well. Provide high-quality built-in sound systems and flexible lighting systems with easy-to-use controls. Consider permanent rigging in larger spaces. Install a robust dry tie-line network of cabling throughout the space. Reliability and flexibility are the key factors for these elements.

Lastly, hire the right people. Do not rely on your IT guys to design the AV, and do not rely on your interior designer to determine proper acoustical treatment. It's just not in their area of expertise, and it's not fair to them.

Last word

Remember that your investment is for the long term. Your "technology-ready" spaces will be a distinction over your competition and guests will be more satisfied, which will lead to more positive recommendations and more profits.

Jeff established Electro-Media Design, Ltd., in 1990. For more than 20 years he has overseen production of the hundreds of designs created by Electro-Media's audiovisual engineers. Jeff remains active in the development of new products and design approaches that sometimes converge different technologies to enhance functionality, reduce system complexity and cost, and improve reliability. Through this work, Jeff has distinguished himself as a consultant's Consultant. He serves on technology committees for a number of industry associations and is a frequent guest lecturer at their conferences throughout North America. He has authored numerous articles for trade publications. Prior to EMD, Jeff managed the A/V Systems Design for the Marriott Corporation's Architecture and Construction Division from 1980 to 1990. He completed more than 250 projects for Marriott, including five-star resorts, convention/conference centers, corporate and educational facilities.

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