

Ulta Beauty Vice President of IT, Infrastructure and Operations Jeffery Whittemore had one major goal for the company's new videoconferencing equipment: "We just wanted it to be easy."

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Modern Digital Collaboration Tech Is Paving the Way to Hybrid Work

As they continue to experiment with new workplace models, companies lay the foundations to support remote collaboration.

by [Erin Brereton](#)



Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

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When it became clear that a [hybrid work environment](#) would be the norm moving forward for [Ulta Beauty's](#) corporate employees, Jeffery Whittemore moved quickly.

The vice president of IT, infrastructure and operations for the Illinois-based retailer, which has more than 1,300 locations in the United States, replaced the [collaboration technology](#) its 100 corporate employees had been using — primarily traditional speaker-phones — with [Cisco Webex Room Kits](#), video collaboration systems featuring integrated audio and visual components.

"It was really important for the return to the office to make sure all the conference rooms were outfitted the same way," Whittemore says. "We have people who really haven't used the physical conference rooms all that much for a couple of years now. We just wanted it to be easy."

Businesses around the world transitioned successfully to all-remote work environments when the COVID-19 pandemic struck almost three years ago, often supporting them with patchwork technologies deployed on a temporary basis. Today, however, many of those organizations are shifting to long-term hybrid work environments, and the temporary deployments are yielding to permanent solutions.

That's presenting new challenges for IT leaders, who must ensure work experiences that optimize productivity regardless of employees' locations while also protecting the network.

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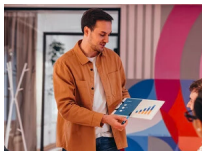


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Experience

To date, Ulta has rolled out the technology across roughly 30 [conference rooms](#). In addition to its corporate headquarters, the company installed some units at high-end store sites, such as its New York City location, where the IT team added conferencing capabilities to a training room that’s used for new product instruction and sales meetings about new brand launches.

Ulta uses a mix of technologies in its conference rooms, including [Crestron](#) controllers and the [Microsoft Teams](#) collaboration platform, that all integrate comfortably. During meetings, employees benefit from being able to see each other’s expressions and frequently use Teams’ chat feature to comment on what’s being presented, Whittemore says.

“It’s a richer experience without interrupting the meeting,” he says. “In all forms of communication, lack of feedback is a dangerous thing. Instead of relying on tone of voice or hesitation, you get more visual cues from a person’s face when you’re presenting. It’s more challenging to read the room without video.”

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Camera and connectivity advancements have helped increase the availability of conference equipment that’s more straightforward than older versions of the technology, according to Bob O’Donnell of TECHanalysis Research.

Users can join meetings by simply clicking a button, and the systems often include high-resolution cameras. While connectivity can still be an issue in some areas of the country, broadband access generally also has improved, O’Donnell says.

“You’ve got to balance the quality of the camera with the speed and size of your broadband connection,” he says. “Those are the two critical pieces.”

Advanced camera sensors and [artificial intelligence](#) help the systems deliver better meeting experiences for remote participants by automatically zooming in on speakers, for example, O’Donnell says.

How to Enable International Collaboration

Organizations with multiple locations have struggled to optimize collaboration for years. That was certainly the case for HKS Architects, which has 26 offices in eight countries.

“We do a lot of interoffice collaboration, and when you start working in a 3D building model, latency is just a killer,” says Michael Smith, vice president of IT operations for HKS. “We had people who would literally say, ‘I’m going to open my model and get a cup of coffee; I’ll be back in 30 minutes.’”

This was a massive waste of time and resources and a terrible experience for users. Many employees used laptops that Smith jokingly calls “boat anchors,” weighing up to 6 pounds. The company considered cloud solutions, but viable options were limited at the time.

So, in January 2020, HKS stood up an on-premises [virtual desktop infrastructure \(VDI\)](#) environment to support real-time collaboration. The firm deployed 60 [Citrix virtual desktops](#), supported by four [Cisco UCS C240 servers](#) (each with four [NVIDIA T4 GPUs](#) per server) and a [C260 server](#) (with [NVIDIA A10 GPUs](#) installed).

“We wanted to stand up a best-in-class environment,” Smith says.



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Jeff Whittemore, Vice President of IT, Infrastructure and Operations, Ulta Beauty

The new infrastructure resides in a data center at the company’s Dallas headquarters, but employees around the world can remotely access the system from a variety of devices. “We implemented most of this before we even knew COVID was a thing,” Smith notes. “This wasn’t a change that was spurred by COVID, but because of the pandemic, we had maximum adoption almost immediately.

“The VDI environment also has helped facilitate the hybrid workflows that became common during the pandemic. “Being able to offer an

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experience that is equitable for a remote designer, it really helped us to utilize our talent across the firm,” Smith says. “It opened up talent pools across the world, as opposed to us thinking that we needed to hire someone in New York City. We had people come to us during the pandemic and say, ‘I’m in Raleigh. Can I still work for you?’ And we said, ‘Sure, 100 percent.’

“End users now have shared access to high-end resources. “We have 250 people using 60 virtual machines on an ad hoc basis, as opposed to having to provide 250 high-end computer-aided design laptops,” Smith says. He can perform updates to the system in the middle of the workday by bringing one server offline at a time to provide patching. “We basically don’t need to have dedicated downtime windows,” he says.

Today, users in remote offices can access massive files through the VDI environment from simple devices like tablets, reducing the need for HKS to issue employees expensive machines.

“You’re streaming an image, and so you’re getting 80 kilobytes instead of 10 gigabytes,” Smith notes. “If I set you up and put you in front of it, and you didn’t know it was remote, you’d have no idea. It’s just a very robust experience.”

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How Technology Can Make Meetings More Inclusive

Clearview Federal Credit Union in Pittsburgh started moving toward a partially remote workforce in 2018, well before the pandemic. As part of the transition, it issued Dell laptops to all its employees while installing Cisco touch-based Spark Board collaboration tools in conference rooms and executive offices.

“From an IT perspective, we felt things were moving more and more toward a video delivery,” says Raymond George, Clearview’s vice president of IT. “When you’re dialed in with eight people in a conference room and you’re remote, that experience is not all that great because there’s no body language, there’s no presentation to look at. With the boards, people can share their screens and go through things together.”

The organization’s videoconference and phone setup allowed employees to quickly transition to working remotely full time when the pandemic struck.

“We were in really good shape to send everybody home, as far as having the hardware and infrastructure in place,” George says.

Today, employees who join meetings remotely can see participants in the conference room write on the board, which is integrated with the Webex platform. They also see their onsite coworkers. “It really improved the experience from the standpoint of a personal connection,” George says. “You can see people and how they’re reacting to whatever is being shown.”

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