

Video Vanguard

A leading law firm adds a comprehensive videoconferencing system to its administrative toolkit and finds outsourced expertise is critical to its success.

BY DON KRESKI



TOP: Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw in Chicago boasts eight conference rooms with installed multimedia systems. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Audio Visual Specialist Mentor Gjurgjiali, a contract specialist employed by SPL Integrated Solutions, works in one of the Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw control rooms. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Mentor Gjurgjiali checks video settings in the mock courtroom at Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw.

All photos are provided courtesy of SPL Integrated Solutions in Columbus, Maryland.

What do the managers of Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw have to teach us about today's audio-visual (AV) and videoconferencing systems?

"A great sports car is not enough to win a race," said Mentor Gjurgjiali, an Audio Visual Specialist working at the firm's Chicago office. "You've got to have a good driver."

Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw moved into its new Chicago office in June 2005 and began to use a new, comprehensive AV system.

"We came from offices with fairly basic AV systems," said Heidi Dabrowski, Conference Services Manager. We did some WebEx meetings, PowerPoint presentations, and teleconferences – and we've turned them into something a great deal more sophisticated. We've been able to show our people a whole new way of doing things."

In just over a year, the office has gone from one or two videoconferences a month to about 25. John Holthaus, Director of Administration, reports that staff and partners – spread out across 13 cities in the United States and Europe – have moved from audio-only meetings to videoconferences where they can see and interact with each other quite naturally. The firm is combining WebEx with video so attorneys can collaborate on documents while meeting at a distance.

According to Dabrowski, it took more than new equipment to bring these changes about. What made the difference?

SIGNIFICANT CHANGES

Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw is one of the world's largest law firms. Worldwide, the firm has more than 1,400 practicing attorneys, with about 1,000 lawyers and staff at the Chicago office. They work in virtually every area of corporate and public law.

The AV systems in the new building are extensive. The office includes 33 meeting rooms, eight of which have installed collaborative communication systems, with the rest relying on portable systems as needed. One of the multimedia rooms has moveable walls; its sound and video systems are set up to work together when the rooms are combined or separately when divided into two or three smaller rooms. The firm has purchased one videoconferencing codec that is accessible from any of the collaborative rooms.

The firm hired the international AV consulting firm Shen, Milsom & Wilke to design the new AV systems and SPL Integrated Solutions to integrate and install them. Gjurgjiali, an SPL employee, came on board on an outsource basis to manage the systems.

Gjurgjiali says that at Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw, as at many firms, managers and attorneys use a wide range of technologies to support staff and client meetings, including projection systems for computer and video display and audio teleconferencing. SPL also installed a new mock courtroom in the Chicago office, with all of the AV systems that might be brought into play during a real trial. Attorneys have used it for up to three weeks at a stretch for trial preparation.

BRIDGING THE GAP

Still, the most significant changes in the way the firm does business have been brought about by improvements in long-distance communications. Dabrowski says the firm has moved several regular inter-office staff and committee meetings to the videoconferencing system. Attorneys with special expertise now consult face-to-face without leaving their home offices. Staff members from various offices collaborate on projects via video. Attorneys and partners meet with clients in other cities without traveling to see them.

"I've always heard the theory," said Dabrowski, "that if you're meeting someone for the first time, it may be better to meet in person. After that it's easier to meet on video. But now many of our people say that video can be very valuable even on a first meeting. It provides a more intimate connection than a phone call or audioconference ever could."

Holthaus argues that the technology is good enough for any meeting.

"Is it the same as having the person in the room?" he asked. "No, but it's gotten pretty close. You can see facial expressions, watch body language, and catch subtle things that, on occasion, can be very helpful." Gjurgjiali added that "it's surprising how much you can see over a video connection, if the system is of high quality and set up properly."

EVOLVING NEEDS

Though Holthaus and other managers at Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw definitely expected the new systems to be used extensively, exactly how they've

Heidi Dabrowski, Conference Services Manager, MAYER, BROWN, ROWE & MAW, Chicago, Illinois

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been used has sometimes been surprising. Gjurgjiali says his first three months at the firm were very busy, because administrators and attorneys would want to use the rooms in ways that no one had envisioned. Rather than saying 'no, this is all that's possible,' he would reconfigure equipment and reprogram control systems as needed.

"We had one room that was set up for presentations," Gjurgjiali recalled. "It had only one microphone input in the front. The attorneys wanted to run a videoconference with a panel discussion, using eight microphones at the front and a couple more for audience participation. I had to run the extra microphones and then reprogram the control system so that it would be easy to turn them on and off and easy, too, to set up the room the same way in the future."

Dabrowski says those kind of changes would not have been possible had they tried to manage the AV systems in house.

"We didn't have the capabilities to be running multimedia systems at the level that we envisioned," she said. "And to find somebody with the kind of experience and knowledge we needed would have been very difficult. Mentor's technical knowledge is quite broad and deep and he has been of great assistance to us. To be able to look at things from an engineering point of view, to be able to tweak the code to match how we're using the system and how demands are changing is beyond anything I could have found on my own."

Gjurgjiali is just one of more than 100 AV system managers that SPL has placed in organizations across the country. Doug Carnell, General Manager of the firm's Chicago-area branch, said "the support is more than just an outsource arrangement, but a true client/vendor partnership. SPL meets regularly with Heidi to understand her needs and how we can meet them. We also supply backup personnel when Mentor is on vacation or if he needs extra help for a big event. You can call this an outsource service, but really what we offer our clients is a way to get

the most of their investment through on-site and off-site support."

MAKING VIDEOCONFERENCING ROUTINE

The need to reconfigure systems has diminished, but Gjurgjiali still spends a lot of time working with the North American and European offices to make sure that meetings go seamlessly.

"The sound quality has improved dramatically," Holthaus said. "And Mentor has been able to set up the equipment so that if a video line fails, we have a backup right in place. To a casual observer, there might be a momentary flicker on the screen, but you don't drop the call. In the past, we were always worrying, 'I hope the line doesn't drop,' so this just makes this a much more useful and less hectic experience."

Gjurgjiali has also been working with the staffs at various Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw offices to upgrade and operate their systems.

"We have folks at the smaller offices who have a zillion different hats that they need to wear," Dabrowski said. "Mentor is able to reach out across the miles and help them tweak their systems. So when we do these multi-office videoconferences, we've got the levels balanced, and the systems all work together."

The key to making the new systems more productive, then, is to have an experienced conferencing technician on-site.

"The systems have gained a lot of popularity with the sophistication that Mentor brought," Dabrowski said. "Our video calls are now almost seamless. We've gotten to the point that you can have a conversation with someone across the world and really have that intimate feel." ✱

about the author

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