



Agro industry

Daily Use

- Departmental meetings
- Governance meetings
- Internal training
- Telemedicine

Solution

- Polycom® HDX® 4000
Personal Telepresence
Solution
- Polycom VVX® 1500
Business Media Phone

Results and benefits

- Significant reduction in travel costs
- Greater efficiency at work
- Improvement of employee welfare
- Increase in services for employees

Polycom® visual communication solutions serve SOMDIAA employees

For over 60 years, the SOMDIAA Group has been a major player in the food-processing industry in Africa, producing 220,000 tonnes of sugar, 140,000 tonnes of flour and 50,000 tonnes of animal feed each year from agribusiness plants spread throughout French-speaking Africa (Cameroon, DR Congo, Gabon, Chad, and Reunion Island). The group currently employs 11,000 staff and in 2009 it posted a turnover of EUR 257 million.

SOMDIAA uses video conferencing both for traditional and non-standard purposes, mainly in three areas: governance, training, and telemedicine.

Initially, a traditional use in a complex environment

In October 2008, at the very start of the financial crisis—which the management quickly understood would be severe and long lasting—a decision was taken to reduce costs. As the company's governance and central services are situated in France, while the production sites are located in Africa, the most pressing issue concerned the travel budget.

Furthermore, the sites are located in rural and remote areas where no telecommunication or transmission networks are available. The IT department at SOMDIAA was required to develop tools to guarantee high audio and video quality on the low bandwidth available via satellite, and thus ensure that the video conferencing systems could communicate with each other.

Conducting departmental meetings by video conference quickly became customary. The sales, product, financial, and human resources departments rapidly adopted this new way of working; in fact, the high usage rate sometimes meant meetings had to be postponed due to a lack of available rooms!

SOMDIAA is a group made up of a large number of subsidiaries, all established in central Africa; each Board of Directors of these subsidiaries, has members of the general management based in France. This situation involved frequent travel and the associated costs were estimated by management at amounting to an average of EUR 6000 per trip. Each Board of Directors now uses video conferencing for their meetings, which not only reduces costs but also the long hours spent in the air as the average flying time ranges from a minimum of 6 hours to a maximum of 12 hours (Reunion Island).

“By adopting video conferencing, the pioneering spirit that is the driving force of our group is now only limited by our imagination. This option has allowed us to explore areas such as Governance, Telemedicine, and Social and Support Projects, and place an emphasis on the true place of people, well beyond a simple cost-cutting exercise.”

Benoît Coquelet, Managing Director, SOMDIAA

"The challenge SOMINFOR faced was to develop a video conference network using satellite connections (256 kb) each shared by over 100 users, and we are both extremely satisfied and proud of our work."

Thierry Boudin, Project Coordinator, SOMINFOR, computer subsidiary of the SOMDIAA Group

Video conferencing also used for training

In view of the pessimistic prospects for the global economy at the end of 2008, and contrary to the reaction of most companies to cut their training budgets, the SOMDIAA management deliberately decided to adopt the opposite strategy and take advantage of the technology to offer a wider range of training courses to employees: the number of training hours delivered in 2009 was double that offered in 2008. Video conferencing adds extra value to all different types of training, such as the courses delivered by the holding company to its subsidiaries, transversal training exchanges, and the sharing of experience (see the next chapter on Telemedicine). It also helps staff increase their professional skills and learn new software programmes.

In relation to both governance and training, the general management is extremely happy with the return on investment. In addition to decreasing costs, the use of video conferencing improves efficiency at work and enhances the work-life balance of employees by reducing the number of nights they are required to spend away from home. The adoption of video conferencing systems has led to revolutionary changes in the group.

The use of telemedicine in agribusiness

Faced with the two problems of healthcare and remote locations, SOMDIAA has developed medical resources at its production sites: there is a clinic and a medical team (general practitioner and nurses) at each site to provide basic care to employees.

A decision was taken to use video conferencing to provide ongoing occupational training to its doctors, while superior care can be also offered to employees through the use of remote specialists. The first area to take advantage of this system was cardiology, as an electrocardiograph connected to an onsite PC enabled a cardiologist in Yaoundé, Cameroon to diagnose and issue a prescription remotely for the employee concerned.

Furthermore, and contrary to the usual practice of having European specialists help doctors in Africa, video conferencing has reversed this trend as African specialists in tropical diseases are now helping European doctors gain a better understanding of such ailments.

A promising future trend

The management believes that the system's future mainly lies in two areas. Firstly, its use in the field of telemedicine could be further expanded to include other devices (such as dermatoscopes and otoscopes) and to set up partnerships in fields other than cardiology; and more significantly, video conferencing could also be used by regional doctors as a clinical installation or telemedicine system to reduce the gap between the group's 'well-cared-for' employees and the local population, often deprived of quality or specialised healthcare. SOMDIAA has also joined the telemedicine network in French-speaking Africa (RAFT) for this purpose.

The second area concerns mobile video. In the near future, SOMDIAA would like all mobile employees to have access to video conferencing systems irrespective of where they are located by fitting a webcam to their laptops and using a video soft client, which, together with IP satellite access, will allow such employees to work anywhere.

Some of the group's communication tools, such as chat, e-mail and IP telephony, have already been brought together on 'smartphones' and this convergence will be completed through video conferencing. This means that it is now possible—in the middle of a cotton, corn, or sugarcane field—to record a video of a plant disease and communicate with a remote research centre to find a solution; or show a faulty component or part to a factory assembly line to diagnose the repairs required.

Choosing Polycom

SOMINFOR, the subsidiary responsible for the group's computer systems, compared the various solutions on offer and the customers' experiences and concluded that Polycom offered the most suitable professional solution for the project thanks to its wide range of terminals, ranging from video soft clients for mobile workstations to more sophisticated systems for office-based work. The ease of implementing the Polycom solution was also a decisive factor.

After choosing this solution, SOMDIAA took advantage of the expertise of its computer subsidiary, SOMINFOR, to develop the video conference infrastructure and make any adjustments required due to the use of satellite transmissions.

SOMDIAA is extremely proud of its video conferencing policy and Polycom is pleased that the group has decided to use its technology for a wide range of applications.

Learn more

To learn more about Somdiaa please visit www.somdiaa.com.

To find out how Polycom solutions can help your organisation, visit us at www.polycom.eu or speak with a Polycom Account Representative

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