

New video conference technology links a First Coast public defender's offices at a low cost

And with some smart shopping, the cost turns out to be lower than expected

BY KEVIN TURNER | STORY UPDATED AT 8:38 AM ON THURSDAY, DEC. 17, 2009



BRUCE LIPSKY/The Times-Union
Refik Eler, chief assistant public defender, talks with representatives of Vidyo and IDSolutions during a video teleconference.

When newly elected Fourth Judicial Court Public Defender Matt Shirk took office in January, one of his first priorities was to find ways to save money.

"One of the things we wanted to do was to completely overhaul the technology," Shirk said.

Among his goals, he said, was to cut down paperwork the office generates in handling 60,000 cases a year by digitizing all of the office's documents. That project is under way, he said.

And another technology goal, Shirk said, was to find a cost-effective way to communicate with his offices in Nassau and Clay counties. It's been a waste of time and resources for attorneys and administrators to drive back and forth to Jacksonville for meetings, he said. So he asked his office's IT director, Joe Frasier, to find a cost-effective video teleconferencing system.

Video teleconferencing has notoriously cost big bucks, both for needed equipment and software licensing, and packages from leading companies were much more than the office could afford to pay, Frasier said. For example, industry-leading teleconferencing equipment manufacturer Polycom would have charged a minimum of \$37,000 for a teleconference system, Frasier said.

Other video conference packages were inexpensive, but the video quality was bad, he said. Plus, he had to find something that would support everyone in the office. Chief Assistant Public Defender Refik Eler wanted a simple "click and use" interface, and Shirk wanted the system to be compatible with his Apple Macintosh computer.

Then Frasier stumbled across Vidyo Inc., a video teleconferencing newcomer, while browsing a tech magazine this year. Instead of charging premium prices for proprietary cameras and other equipment, Vidyo instead allows customers to use their existing computers - Macintosh as well as Microsoft Windows PCs - and regular consumer-grade Webcams. Video teleconference participants download Vidyo software and use whatever wired or wireless connection they have.

The video quality was impressive, too, Frasier said. Vidyo Regional Vice President Jeff Dill said that's because a new technology, "scalable video coding," allows Vidyo to detect the strength of each person's connection and adjusts video connections to custom-suit each one. The result was smooth video for everyone in a video teleconference, regardless of the quality of their Internet connections.

"At first, I couldn't believe it," Frasier said. "Once I saw it working, that was it."

He called the company and negotiated a deal to put Vidyo teleconferencing in all three offices. He also obtained 325 "guest" licenses that allow any invited video teleconference participant to take part from anywhere in the world - as long as they have a broadband connection and a computer with a Webcam. For a guest user, participating is a matter of downloading Vidyo software and entering a conference ID that is e-mailed to them, Dill said.

The one-time cost for the entire package was about \$16,000, Frasier said. In the world of video teleconferencing, that's cheap, he said.

"The guy's budget-minded. He's a deal-maker," Shirk said.

The package Frasier negotiated included 75 guest connections and permanent connections in the Jacksonville, Nassau County and Clay County offices. The 250 additional connections came from Frasier's agreement to allow the company to conduct a study on the way the office uses its technology. The office is one of Vidyo's first government customers, he said.

"I see a client who is using the product and saving the taxpayers' money," Dill said.

But it could be used by any business with regular video teleconferencing needs, Dill said. On a three-screen setup, the software can be set so one screen is larger than the other two when the person in that screen is talking. Each user in a video teleconference can view up to eight conference video feeds.

"That would give you the 'Hollywood Squares' or 'Brady Bunch' effect," Dill said.

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