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## Technology

# The technology trends changing meeting spaces

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Hoteliers have many opportunities and challenges that arise from the

increasing use of technology in meetings spaces.



From left: Moderator Jeff Loether, of Electro-Media Design; Andrew Moffett, of Marriott International; Eric Bracht, of Electro-Media Design; and Bob Cohen, an independent consultant, discuss how technology is driving changes in hotel meetings spaces during the “Planning for the future of meetings” panel at the 2016 HTNG North American Conference. (Photo: Sean McCracken)

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FERNANDINA BEACH, Florida—Technology and generational shifts are changing meeting planners' and attendees' expectations for meeting spaces and events in general, according to a panel of experts at the 2016 HTNG North American Conference.

Speaking at the “Planning for the future of meetings” panel, Andrew Moffett, global discipline leader of event management at Marriott International, said hoteliers need to create meeting and convention spaces that allow attendees to simultaneously take in content like presentations while allowing them to simultaneously remain social and collaborative, which he said are the primary goals of millennials during events.

“Events are judged not just on the content but how (effective) was the networking,” Moffett said. “Are we giving attendees a way to connect even before they're on site?”

Moffett said those goals are met in part by finding ways to weave social media and apps used by planners and attendees into the meeting space. He said hotels should also offer things like video systems and televisions that broadcast presentations going on in large rooms into smaller spaces and hallways where networking is the focus so attendees can enjoy both at once.

### How technology affects events

Consultant Bob Cohen said technology is changing what guests and planners can accomplish during meetings and social events, and that means hoteliers have possible new revenue streams.

“One of the things that is paramount is looking for incremental revenue,” Cohen said. “And one of the ways of doing that is using the latest technologies.”

He said weddings in particular are rife with change, where hotels can do things like create mobile apps specifically for weddings, offer wayfinding and digital signage, provide drones for photos or even create special glass DJ booths.

Eric Bracht, a consultant with Electro-Media Design, said there are different expectations for technology in meeting spaces across the globe. North American hotels are expected to have more portable technology because “access to equipment to labor is fairly easy,” while other regions with more expensive labor, like Europe, lean more on built-in systems.

“That way you don’t have to have someone come in and tear it down,” Bracht said. “You just push a button on the control system and things are ready to go. That model has kind of carried over to the Middle East/Africa region as they kind of adapted the European systems. And Asia is kind of a mix between the two.”

### Unique spaces for meetings

Moffett said many planners are seeking out more unique locals—ranging from restaurants to even a parking garage [Marriott](#) officials once rented out in Europe—to have more effective meetings.

“You want to give them some stimulus other than the typical meeting space venue,” Moffett said. “There’s a trend toward that experiential side to help attendees retain information.”

Moffett said that thinking affects how Marriott approaches food and beverage spaces, so they have the flexibility that they can be “activated” into a meeting space when needed but still fulfill their central function.

But Bracht said hoteliers must keep in mind the need for basic infrastructure—things like Wi-Fi and lighting—before trying to turn every unique or attractive space on property into a meetings opportunity.

“I worked at a resort property for many years that had an absolutely fantastic pool area,” Bracht said. “People loved to do events at the pool, but when it got dark there was no light. Clients would get very upset when they’d find out.”

He said not making those considerations can quickly turn a positive into a negative.

“Otherwise, it can become an after-the-fact thing that can upset people and damage the experience,” Bracht said.

### Accommodating virtual meetings

One of the recurring messages of the panel was that hoteliers in general need to do a better job of accommodating virtual and hybrid meetings, which entail offering a satisfying experience to both people who are at an event in person and those watching and listening online via audio or video streaming.

Cohen said successfully making events compelling for both groups can lead to potential revenue streams for event planners, but Bracht once again warned that hoteliers need to plan before the fact to make sure they have the technology in place—from bandwidth to good lighting and audio equipment—to ensure things go off without a hitch.

“Everything important to the people sitting in the room is important for the streamer,” he said. “Can they see the speaker, or is there bad lighting? Can they hear, or is the air conditioning causing interference?”

He said these systems need to be thoroughly tested in advance to ensure a good experience.

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