

Custom conferencing

The training auditorium at Saudi Aramco's Excellence Centre is a showcase hall with a customised discussion system tailored to meet the company's educational needs. **James Ling** reports

LARGE SCALE CORPORATE A/V

usually goes hand-in-hand with highly specific needs and bespoke systems, and Saudi Media Systems' project at Saudi Aramco's Excellence Centre auditorium certainly fits into this category. The petroleum company wanted a state-of-the-art lecture hall with a discussion system built-in to the seating and a powerful visual setup that could synchronise with the audio solution.

The lecture theatre is the centrepiece of Saudi Aramco's HR department professional development centre at Ras Tanura – also known as the Excellence Centre. The site is largely involved with management training, so it features a number of seminar rooms and conference rooms of various sizes as well as the main conference auditorium. As an educational facility, the auditorium hosts a mixture of seminars, technical presentations and conferences. As such, it required a system that could provide high quality A/V functionality without distracting from its main purpose – teaching.

'In the auditorium there is a high definition digital conference system that is integrated with the discussion system,' explains Saudi Media Systems managing director Dr Claude Wells. 'The auditorium operates in a standalone mode in such a way that people in the audience can ask questions to anyone at the seminar desk, or to someone at the lectern,' he continues. 'When they ask to speak the cameras will



212 of the units have been installed in the auditorium

automatically go to the live microphone.'

The system needed to be configured in this way to meet the multiple requirements of Saudi Aramco. Not only did it want a conferencing system for the hall, it also wanted a streaming system so that proceedings could be documented in its archive, and an HD video conferencing solution to allow remote sites to participate in conferences.

In response, Saudi Media Systems opted for a Televic TCS5500 digital conference system. It installed 212 of the modular units into the armrests of the auditorium's Quinette Gallay seats. The armrest location was a specific request from Saudi Aramco as it didn't want audience members to have to move in order to take part in any discussion. 'The capability to build a discussion system into the armrests means that participants can ask questions from their seated position,' explains Dr

Wells. A further benefit of this is that the students are still able to take notes from the lecture while they are waiting to ask their question.

'We went with the Televic system because it is all digital, so you get very clean audio. They integrated well into the seating, they have a full digital control, and an easy interface to the remote control system,' explains the managing director. 'You can also take digital feeds to and from the system for other users.'

A further advantage the TCS5500 system provided for this installation came with its ability to be used as a feed by members of the media. 'There is a press capability so that the person can plug in audio feeds and record off it, or they can take it to their camera systems and have a clear audio stream coming into them directly from the conference system.'

While the functionality of the system is obviously of paramount importance, Dr Wells is keen to highlight the support he received from the manufacturer, 'Televic were

very responsive because they had to customise the unit to fit it into the seat,' he explains. 'That capability of Televic to customise the solution is a key distinguisher with them. They are not looking to sell just a box, but they are willing to produce the modules that are custom fitted for this very constrained physical space. Very few manufacturers are willing to go to that level of effort to offer solutions.'

Away from the discussion system, the primary audio system in the hall is controlled by a Peavey MediaMatrix Nion DSP. JBL cabinets have been positioned around the perimeter of the room as the

talking,' continues Dr Wells. 'So the person who is speaking, no matter if they are at the lectern or the panel desk or in the auditorium, is always seen by the audience.'

As the auditorium is lit for video conferencing, the projection system needed to be bright enough to overcome the room lighting. 'Because we have eight projectors, each of them with more than 6,000 ANSI lumens, effectively it's a 48,000 ANSI lumens display, so we don't run it at full brightness,' says Dr Wells. 'It's at a level where even when using the projection system you don't have to dim the lights of the hall. It is rear projected,



A Televic TCS5500 digital conference system has been installed in the arm-rests of the seating

main sound system and these are supported by Bose ceiling speakers to provide reinforcement.

Meeting visual needs

Equally important to the auditorium's system is the visual side of the solution. The video conferencing cameras are an HD offering from Tandberg. The rear projection system is an eight projector two by four seamless display. These units project onto a curved screen which is nearly 10m wide and nearly 4m high as one image. 'The solution uses Christie HD projectors that are signal processed through a Christie Spyder Vista VX20 display management system,' says Dr Wells. 'In a video conference, for example, we can have the far side in HD video, the presentation can be in HD graphics in the middle and then you can have something else on the near side. We can have multiple windows open on the screen and can dynamically resize those by where you want to have the priority,' he explains.

'If a person in the audience is asking a question, that video is also fed up to the large screen display at the front of the room so that no one has to turn around to see who's

so it will support full audience lighting allowing note taking and video conferencing. It's a nice bright auditorium for a training environment.'

It is also with the projection system that Saudi Media Systems needed to overcome its biggest challenge. 'The largest technical challenge was projecting the high definition seamless display onto a curved wall,' recalls Dr Wells. 'We were able to overcome this using the twist and blend capabilities of the Christie projectors. That made our lives easier.'

Dr Wells is clearly pleased with the end result of the system and does not think there will be any major technical problems in the future. 'All the equipment is very reliable and robust, so we don't anticipate there to be any major maintenance issues besides changing projector bulbs and colour balancing across the wall when you have multiple projectors.'

This has been a high-end project for Saudi Media Systems, and one that its managing director is rightly proud of. 'Saudi Aramco wanted this as a showcase auditorium, and so it's gone in as exactly that.'

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