

Designing Real Homes Using Virtual Meetings

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K. Hovnanian Homes creates an efficient way to hold meetings among disparate employees with video conferencing technology and a cloud service.

The Challenge

The past few years have not been easy for homebuilders trying to stay afloat in the U.S. housing market. While the industry is beginning to experience a turnaround, businesses in this sector are still struggling with sluggish demand and a weak economy. However, in these tough times resilient builders survive by finding more efficient ways to operate. K. Hovnanian Homes is a homebuilder with corporate headquarters in Redbank, New Jersey, and satellite offices across the country (New York, Arizona, Virginia, Florida, and Minnesota). The 50-year old company has used collaborative technology to facilitate communication among remote employees, thereby reducing the time and expenses associated with business-related travel.

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K. Hovnanian implemented a video conferencing solution with more than 15 end points several years ago, pairing it with a managed service that provides a private network and call management functions to ensure meeting reliability. Video is often used for quarterly accounting and budget planning, design, and other industry related meetings. Brian Catri, IS field operations manager at K. Hovnanian, said executives use video to meet with each other on a regular basis. “Our executives value the benefits of face-to-face meetings, so they use video extensively to communicate with remote meeting participants,” he said. “Many executives and directors work in satellite offices, so video gives them the in-person feel that audio-only conferences lack. As a result, we have cut down on our travel costs.”

As the company's meetings increasingly take place over video, mobile devices such as iPads and laptop computers have become popular ways of joining a meeting. In fact, the use of mobile devices for video meetings is so popular that the company needed a customized managed service solution to allow participants to easily connect with the video meeting, no matter their device or location.

The Solution

IVCi had designed and implemented K. Hovnanian's original video conferencing solution while also providing the company's managed service: MVE, or managed video experience. MVE is a cloud-based service that ensures the success of video meetings by managing the operational and technical requirements of the conference. MVE provides the expertise and resources that many companies either do not have in-house or cannot dedicate to video meeting management. MVE services include all scheduling, proactive meeting monitoring and concierge services.

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To address the growing use of mobile devices throughout K. Hovnanian (including by the company's CEO), IVCi added its Mobility Experience to the homebuilder's MVE solution. IVCi's Mobility Experience works in conjunction with IVCi's Managed Video Experience to connect consumer desktop video clients like Skype and Google Video Chat with business class offerings from Polycom and Cisco. The Mobility Experience service is application and appliance independent, allowing K. Hovnanian to connect to video meetings from any location, using any combination of video endpoints and consumer solutions.

K. Hovnanian executives and directors are heavy users of video, often preferring to hold calls throughout the day when needed, rather than by appointment. IVCi makes it possible for participants to join video calls on an ad hoc basis using their endpoints' internal multipoint capabilities. Participants can easily connect to calls without having to contact IVCi or asking to have a call scheduled. Mobile users connect using Skype, Google talk, or their Internet browser to join private rooms via ad hoc manual-dial. IVCi designed this custom solution to conform to the unique way K. Hovnanian employees use video.

“Our executives are very enthusiastic about being able to sit in a video conferencing room and just pick up the controller, hit the directory, push an office in another city – and instantly connect with the other participants,” Mr Catri said.

This unique solution expanded an instructing environment from a classroom in the North Carolina campus to an immersive, interactive learning experience for local and remote participants across the country and the globe. The room was designed to be dual-purpose, so that when TelePresence is not in use the classroom can be used as traditional lecture hall, with a projection screen covering the TelePresence system.

The Results

“IVCi's Mobility Experience is working wonderfully for us,” Mr. Catri said. “The executives love the ease of use it provides, and the directors who work at remote locations not connected to our network, or at an office with a video conferencing system, will utilize the Blue Jeans network and a virtual Skype room to join one of our video conferences. This service has given us a lot of flexibility,” Mr. Catri said. “In addition, traveling for meetings can be costly, so we have found this system to be more efficient. It is a major money saver.”

One K. Hovnanian director relocated to an office in the Middle East where the cost of dedicating a circuit for the use of international video calls was too costly. Instead, the director has come to rely on IVCi's Mobility service to stay connected to his counterparts in the U.S. The director uses IVCi Mobility in the Middle Eastern office, his home, and his car. Another executive uses the Mobility Service for West Coast trips, replacing conferences that would have previously been held over audio with video calls made from a mobile device in his hotel room. The Mobility Experience makes it possible to connect from a home office or hotel room using just a laptop computer or iPad. The director can now easily use video from his home office and even stayed connected during his summer vacation in Italy.

In addition, the company has recently brought in-house the architecture/home design process that it previously outsourced; the design team is scattered all over the country. “Video conferencing facilitates the sharing of designs and ideas among our executives at corporate headquarters and the remote design team,” Mr. Catri said. “Document cameras allow us to share the progress of the blue prints, and this ability to push content across the network has been a big plus for us. Our remote team can easily share the architectural diagrams, view a 3D virtual walk-through, and address changes that are being made to plans at headquarters in weekly video meetings with a simple laptop connection. In turn, the design process is more efficient, because the design team in one state does not have to travel to the corporate location each week to share the content.”

K. Hovnanian, by using a managed service that allows easy and reliable video calls from any device, anywhere, has maximized its use of its video conferencing solution. In fact, the system is so effective that the company has not yet had to upgrade the technology. “Our video system combined with the managed service works very well, and IVCi has been a great partner for us,” Mr. Catri said. “We once considered managing our video calls ourselves across our own network, but when we calculated the ROI, this did not prove to be effective. What IVCi provides is something we would need a much larger IT staff to accomplish,” Mr. Catri said. “It is also important to note that video is critical to us for the human factor – trying to resolve something on a video call, and hashing the issue out that way, is a lot easier knowing I don't have to leave my family for a few days to travel for a meeting. Therefore, we recently renewed our contract for IVCi's managed service – we are not going to change what works.”