

Video on the Front Lines

Oklahoma Army National Guard

Polycom Video Conferencing Solutions Improve Readiness and Response Capabilities for the Oklahoma Army National Guard

The United States Army National Guard, with its mission of providing trained and disciplined forces for domestic emergencies, serves a vital purpose in this country. Existing in all 50 states, three territories and the District of Columbia, Guard units are well-known for their swift response in times of need, battling fires or helping communities deal with natural disasters, civil unrest and other emergency situations.

In addition to those responsibilities, the Oklahoma Army National Guard (OK-ARNG) is working hard to make sure it serves the citizens of its state in the most efficient way possible through use of the latest communications technology.

“On a National level, the Guard organization had deployed video conferencing technology in a few centralized locations throughout the state,” explains Chief Warrant Officer, Welly Gibson, activity manager for the Oklahoma Army National Guard Visual Information (VI) and Distributed Technology Training Project (DTTP). “Our initial experience with video conferencing using those few systems was a success and we could see such potential for cost savings and family support that it didn’t take long to determine that we needed to expand beyond that limited deployment.”

The Oklahoma Guard identified the need for video throughout the state in the summer of 2001 and started with 20 Polycom video systems and a Polycom MGC™-50 bridge. Today, there are approximately 124 Polycom video systems, at least one at every National Guard facility in the state. A Polycom MGC-50 and an MGC-100 facilitate between 800 to 1,000 hours of multipoint and mixed network calls every month of the year.

Video in Service

“The benefits we derive from video conferencing are two-fold,” explains Gibson. “Cost savings is key – video allows us to keep our people off the roads, which also improves productivity. Family support for deployed soldiers is the other critical use of the systems.”

Command and Control, commanders communicating with their subordinates, has been greatly impacted by the use of video conferencing. All of the Guard Commanders meet prior to weekend drills. These drills, and the associated meetings, may be held 50-100 miles from where the Commanders live and work. That used to mean a Commander would leave work in Tulsa, Oklahoma at 5:00 pm and drive 100 miles to Oklahoma City for the Commanders’ call, returning home well after midnight. Now they go to the closest National Guard armory and participate in the meeting over video, resulting in substantial time savings, reduced travel expenses and improved quality of life.

Challenge

Reduce driving time, improve productivity, and proactively address quality of life issues for Oklahoma’s Army National Guard service men and women

Solution

Polycom group video collaboration systems including the award-winning VSX™ line; Polycom PVX™ personal conferencing software; Polycom Visual Concert™ data collaboration solution; Polycom PathNavigator™ advanced gatekeeper; Polycom Global Management System™ management software; Polycom MGC bridges

Result

A statewide video conferencing network that saves the Oklahoma Army National Guard significant costs, supports first responder activities, enables distance education and facilitates family support for deployed soldiers

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Chief Warrant Officer
Oklahoma Army National Guard*



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"We had high-ranking personnel traveling one and a half to two hours by car up to three times a month to attend meetings. That's burning a lot of time and money sitting in the car. Now we can do a 15 to 30 minute video call and they can get back to work," says Gibson.

Family support for deployed soldiers is an important priority for National Guard units all over the United States, and in Oklahoma. Video conferencing has provided a new medium for connecting families with soldiers and guardsmen around the world.

"It is so important to us to connect families, especially during the holidays," says Gibson. "For soldiers to see and speak with their families face to face and in real time is a real morale booster."

Gibson is also currently working on plans to involve schools in these family support video calls. He hopes to virtually bring deployed men and women into classrooms to speak with the students about things like their daily lives where they're stationed as well as their responsibilities and how they're feeling. Following the call with the class, family members in those school communities can have private video calls with a deployed family member.

Video conferencing also plays a role in first responder support. In the event of a bombing or natural disaster, the Oklahoma Guard is able to establish real-time visual communication between the first responder team and the command center in Oklahoma City. Video was leveraged in this way in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, enabling daily communication for those deployed to Louisiana and the Oklahoma Guard headquarters.

Education is another frequent use of the video network, both for ongoing EMT training between units in Oklahoma and an organization in San Antonio, and for graduate and doctorate-level classes offered to Guard members through a partnership with Oklahoma State University.

In addition, desktop video conferencing, using Polycom's PVX software application is allowing upper-level personnel to support their units without the travel time, which can often be a 70-80 mile trip.

The IT Perspective

The Oklahoma Army National Guard has deployed more than 124 Polycom group video collaboration systems, including the company's award-winning VSX line, which offers exceptional voice and video quality. 20 Polycom Visual Concert appliances support data collaboration during video conferences, and the organization leverages the built in People+Content™ simultaneous display functionality of the video systems.

Polycom PathNavigator advanced gatekeeper and Global Management System management software enable remote monitoring and administration of the network. Polycom MGC bridges facilitate multiple external connections, transcoding of various devices and systems, and continuous presence.

Gibson reports that video conferencing has been very well received. "Everyone loves the experience and people in the Guard couldn't be happier about the reduced driving time."

Mobilizing a Solution

The more than 124 systems that make up the Oklahoma Guard video network include Polycom's VSX line, which offers exceptional voice and video quality. For data collaboration during video conferences, Gibson's team has deployed 20 Polycom Visual Concert appliances and leverages the built in People+Content simultaneous display functionality of the video systems. Polycom PathNavigator advanced gatekeeper and Global Management System management software enable remote monitoring and administration of the network.

The Oklahoma Guard's Polycom MGC bridges facilitate multiple external connections, transcoding of various devices and systems, and continuous presence so that everyone is visible during the call whether they are speaking or not. The majority of calls on the network are multipoint, including a number of different locations in one conference. The Commander of the Field Artillery Brigade, for example, has three battalions reporting to him. By connecting with his subordinates over video in a multipoint call, he's able to reach a large number of people and present information only one time.

The entire video network is run by only three people, Gibson, Master Sergeant (MSgt) Graylan Fulsom, and Sergeant First Class (SFC) Matthew McKamie (US Army Retired). Gibson credits the fact that they can run so lean to the ease of use of the Polycom video and management systems.

"With only three of us running this program, the Polycom management software is a life saver," says McKamie. "Our video operations center is located in Oklahoma City, but even if none of us are physically there, we can very quickly and easily set up calls and remain responsive to our users' needs."

Both Gibson and McKamie always carry their wireless laptops so they can set up video conferences on the fly and have been known to initiate calls from airport concourses and even from the side of the highway.

Marching On

Immediate plans for the Oklahoma Guard include offering federally-mandated training courses, such as equal opportunity employment, sexual harassment and diversity, over video. Currently the organization sends more than 100 people to a central location for this training three to four times a year, incurring steep costs in terms of "windshield time," per diem outlay and lost productivity.

In Gibson's quest to always make conferencing as simple as possible for his end users, he is planning to deploy I/O controllers at each site. These control systems will allow Gibson and his colleagues to remotely bring up conference rooms, down to the details of turning on the video displays and lights before anyone shows up for a conference.

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Polycom Headquarters:

4750 Willow Road, Pleasanton, CA 94588 (T) 1.800.POLYCOM (765.9266) for North America only.
For North America, Latin America and Caribbean (T) +1.925.924.6000, (F) +1.925.924.6100

Polycom EMEA:

270 Bath Road, Slough, Berkshire SL1 4DX, (T) +44 (0)1753 723000, (F) +44 (0)1753 723010

Polycom Asia Pacific:

8 Shenton Way, #11-01 Temasek Tower, Singapore 068811 (T) +65.6389.9200, (F) +65.6323.3022

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