



## MEETING SPACE CONNECTIVITY:

# The increasing demand for reliable WLAN in hotel meeting space

### THE CHALLENGE

Meeting attendees in hotel conference spaces demand dynamic bandwidth for an increasing number of wireless devices. Hotels must meet guest expectations for bandwidth in meeting spaces while still increasing revenue.

The contemporary hotelier with meeting space at his or her property knows that the opportunity to increase revenue with meetings and events also

comes with the challenge of exceeding meeting planner and attendee expectations for wireless connectivity.

And it's a high-stakes battle to claim a piece of the meetings industry pie – of the 1.8 million meetings per year, 85 percent were conducted at venues with lodging. Meetings generate 250 million overnight stays by 117 million Americans and 5 million international attendees, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers' 2011 report,



“The Economic Significance of Meetings to the U.S. Economy.”

Not only are attendees expecting faster wireless connections, they are carrying more devices that draw more bandwidth – all while meeting planners struggle to reconcile the extra costs associated with providing the appropriate connectivity to their attendees.

According to the “2012 MPI Business Barometer Annual,” meeting professionals in all three regions (Canada, Europe and the U.S.) rank “better Internet access in venues and hotels” as either the most or second-most demanded technology, but planners rank it the tenth most available and accessible solution, and suppliers rank it eighth.

While Internet accessibility has been mandatory for the past 10 to 15 years as a cost line item, its perceived value among consumers, who are accustomed to wireless hot spots at places like Starbucks and McDonalds, isn’t necessarily high, said Justin Blackburn, HSA/IT event manager at Hilton - San Francisco Union Square.

“Meeting planners who aren’t even tech people understand the need for wireless access, but sometimes they’ll ask, ‘Why is it so expensive?’” Blackburn said. End-users don’t necessarily understand that the hotel may have invested millions of dollars in infrastructure to add the technology, and

they have to provide services on top of that. “We have to explain to them that they will have wireless access everywhere they need it, and we’ll have technicians on call. Then they start to recognize that we’re actually providing a service, too.”

The Hilton - San Francisco Union Square offers 100 mbps of bandwidth in all meeting and event spaces. The wireless network offers 802.11a/g/n connectivity.

As Doug Rice, executive VP and CEO of Hotel Technology Next Generation (HTNG), explains, the extreme example that every hotel IT department must plan for is when a speaker gets up on stage with 500 people in the audience, and asks everyone to download a large document, or do some other bandwidth-intensive task, all at the same time.

“Five hundred people downloading a 10-megabyte document, and expecting a response time of 15 seconds, will require about a 3 gigabit (3,000 megabit) Internet pipe – but only for 15 seconds,” Rice said. “Most hotels have nowhere near that capacity.”

“Hotels can’t afford to pay for bandwidth to meet these once-in-a-great-while, not-always-predictable events,” Rice said. “But they also can’t afford the reputational hit of NOT providing it to a piece of strategic meeting business, and it’s hard to always predict that a particular meeting will need it.”

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## THE SOLUTION

Clearly, a hotel committed to providing the best meeting and group experience must make high-density wireless connectivity in conference spaces a priority.

Indeed, many hotels are focusing on their wireless infrastructure as an area for improvement. A sizeable 32.7 percent of respondents to *Hotel Management's* 2012 Voice of the GM Survey said they had upgraded wireless infrastructure including adding bandwidth in the past 12 months. And 22.5

percent of GM respondents said they would be upgrading/investing in this area of technology in the next 12 months.

The first step of any meeting space wireless infrastructure upgrade is the site survey, which identifies existing shortfalls. This should be carried out by a professional wireless enterprise analyst.

The analysis will indicate system shortfalls, including what areas require increased access points. According to HTNG's "A Guide For Understanding Wireless in Hospitality" (2006), one of the biggest challenges of providing consistent wireless

## Peak Demand Management

- 1** Contract with the local telecommunications company or Internet service provider for bandwidth on demand.
- 2** Use sophisticated software to allocate the hotel's available bandwidth to different users.
- 3** Use a wireless architecture that does not have a centralized bottleneck so it can handle peak demand when you have many users.
- 4** Ensure that access points are site survivable and can continue to provide service without a centralized controller and smart enough to compensate for changes in the radio-frequency environment.
- 5** Local bridging at the access points will allow traffic to take the shortest path for better performance.



THE WESTIN NEW YORK GRAND CENTRAL

◀ The Westin New York Grand Central's recent renovation included an upgrade to a 1GB fiber optic pipeline.

connectivity in a hotel is the physical structure and potential radio-frequency interference issues. Therefore, it is essential to work with an expert in wireless enterprise to establish a network with appropriate infrastructure, device configurations and management software to monitor device status, capture faults, audit and automatically correct device configuration issues, gather network statistics and generate compliance reports.

Additional WLAN network management can include network analysis solutions that use remote sensors or access points to continuously monitor the airwaves.

An optimal system analyzes traffic flow to interpret WLAN performance and to identify common characteristics that may impede network performance, such as interference from neighboring WLANs, channel overlap, over-utilized APs & channels, network congestion and performance degradation. By providing a view of all WLAN traffic, the Network Assurance tools enable network administrators to remotely troubleshoot performance problems, monitor network availability and remedy policy violations.

There are many ways for the hotel to customize the

wireless solution for meeting and event clients — be it to control the customer's costs, provide flexibility or allow specialization of networks. Some examples include:

- Public IP addresses
- Custom VLANs
- Custom security
- Custom wireless network names
- Custom portal page graphics

"When we make usernames and passwords specific to the client, it really feels like it's their event," said Nate Clapp, director of PSAV at the Westin New York Grand Central. "It's a nice touch."

## THE BENEFITS

Without a doubt, the importance of reliable, robust wireless connectivity is essential to today's meeting planners and attendees. The up-front costs of investment in wireless infrastructure most certainly will be recouped — whether it is through an increase in customer satisfaction or revenue derived from customer buy-up for customized wireless solutions.

Todd Shallen, VP and general manager of Hotel del Coronado in Coronado, Calif., explains that

## What is a Wireless Local Area Network Site Survey?

### OBJECTIVES:

- Define the quantity and location of access points to meet application needs and performance in a WLAN coverage area

- Evaluate the performance of a new or existing WLAN

### DELIVERABLES:

- Includes data collection and evaluation of the WLAN infrastructure

- Includes recommendations for design alteration to achieve optimum performance



the No. 1 guest complaint at his historic property was related to wireless connectivity prior to some significant upgrades in 2011.

“When we turned over to the new system, guest complaints evaporated,” he said. “We were getting a lot of pushback from guests and meeting customers, so addressing and solving guest issues really was the impetus behind the upgrades for us.”

Clapp believes that, for the meeting and event clients he works with, paying a premium for connectivity is becoming easier to justify as a discussion of the entire audio-visual package. “We’re selling the whole experience on a client-by-client basis, and when we’re in the preplanning stage I sell the connectivity with the meeting planner that they get soups to nuts: AV technology and high-speed Internet access.”

The ability to meet these wireless connectivity needs will continue to increase in importance. According to MMGY Global’s “A Portrait of Digital Travelers” (2013), digital travelers, those active travelers who own at least one portable electronic device (including laptop computers), typically own at least two devices.

Peter Yesawich, vice chairman of MMGY Global, cites the ever-increasing importance of internet access — in 2012, 75 percent of active travelers rated free Internet access from guestrooms as extremely/very influential when selecting a hotel or resort — as an opportunity to leverage the connected traveler. This is a statistically significant increase over 68 percent in 2011 and 63 percent in 2010.

“It’s a reflection of contemporary life, not necessarily an area where hotels are falling short,” Yesawich said. “The length of the work day is expanding dramatically and it’s a direct function that we have access all the time.”

He affirmed: “It’s not a fad. Who knows where the trend is going to go, but it’s the challenge and opportunity of business right now.”

Within the meetings business, there is an opportunity to leverage the “connectivity explosion” to rein in the “attention deficit of attendees,” Yesawich said. “It means exploring and inviting more ways of participation.”

Consequently, bandwidth demands will continue to grow. At the Hilton - San Francisco Union Square, Blackburn said the hotel industry rule of thumb is to

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Todd Shallen, VP and general manager, Hotel del Coronado



expect a 50-percent increase in usage every year.

He shared that the Hilton had a 45 mbps circuit just a year ago, it currently offers 100 mbps and it is likely that the need for more than 100 mbps will occur more frequently and will require the hotel to upgrade again in the next six to nine months.

“It comes down to what’s running into the building, what speed it is coming in, how much you can split it and how many access points you have,” said the Westin New York Grand Central’s Clapp. “Even five

years ago the access points compared to what is out now are night and day. They are not going to be as good as new ones. It’s an investment, but if you want the best you’re going to have to pay for it.”

It’s an important lesson for hotel operators who are striving to protect customer satisfaction and optimize meeting space revenue in a competitive market. The latest WLAN solutions ensure that meeting planners and attendees can focus on their events and not the wireless connectivity.

## What Does Today’s Digital Traveler Carry?

Digital travelers, those active travelers who own at least 1 portable electronic device (including laptop computers), typically own at least 2 devices, particularly laptops and smartphones; almost one out of five (**17 percent**) owns a laptop, tablet and smartphone, and these “Digital Elite” represent more than half (**55 percent**) of all tablet users and **35 percent** of all smartphone users.\*

*\*A Portrait of Digital Travelers, MMGY Global, 2013*



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