Information Technology Committee

Background: The U of I switched to the new videoconferencing system and disbanded central technical support and scheduling because of lack of funds to cover the old system that was overseen by IT. Individual units are now responsible for providing their own equipment and technical personnel, and there are several rooms on campus that have been updated with modern hardware. A committee evaluated vendors who could provide a less expensive solution for videoconferencing software and internet services, and chose Scopia because it seemed more reliable, easier to use and less expensive than other choices. Currently, IT is waiting for the administration and faculty to decide the academic needs (e.g., distance education) for which videoconferencing will be used, because these decisions will impact IT's proposed solutions.

1) what are the specific issues/problems with Scopia

We have changed this question to read, "what are the specific issues/problems with videoconferencing" because problems with Scopia are only one part of the whole. Videoconferencing depends upon having quality hardware that can pick up and deliver audio and video. It depends on an internet bridging service that can efficiently move audio and video between multiple locations; Scopia provides that bridging service. Videoconferencing also depends upon the knowledge of those who are setting up and using the equipment and software.

Although units in Boise and at other locations have newer video equipment, units with videoconferencing capabilities on the Moscow campus are largely working with older equipment. Properly engineered rooms have fewer problems with video and audio quality because they were designed with the correct equipment for the space. Mobile videoconferencing equipment has restricted capabilities, because they are designed for smaller spaces than those in which they are often used. Boise's newer video equipment is also becoming outdated. It might help if it were easier to schedule the rooms that are set up for videoconferencing, but scheduling is by unit.

There have been issues with getting Scopia to work properly. Scopia has been very responsive to fixing these issues, which often are caused by outdated video equipment. One important problem was with recordings that were often lost or terminated; Scopia believes that they have fixed the recording problems. Although the videoconferencing facilities in Boise have also had problems with recording sessions, they are not experiencing the other problems that Moscow is, probably due to their newer equipment.

The third part of the videoconferencing whole, is the technical expertise to run the video equipment. The units with videoconferencing equipment employ individuals with the expertise to run their equipment. IT no longer provides a central service supporting videoconferencing, although they will provide mobile services for a fee. Providing technical information on the IT website is difficult because equipment isn't standardized across units, and there are security concerns related to advertising specific details. However, it would help to have some type of easily accessible information about video-conferencing on the UI
website so that answers to questions about who to contact for assistance with scheduling or technical problems can be found quickly.

2) can Scopia solve the issues

As mentioned above, Scopia has been very responsive to fixing the issues that have arisen. Boise reports few problems once the system was setup.

3) are there other solutions

Several units (Engineering, Science, to name two) do not use Scopia for videoconferencing, relying upon other methods such as Skype, Google Hangouts, Zoom and Go-To-Meeting. These resources work well for collaboration, but do not work well for classroom or state-wide meetings. IT believes that other bridging services would have the same problems that Scopia is having, and therefore it is not worth changing vendors until U of I Moscow has a firm plan for distance education.
1) GIS/Scopia provides core functions previously provided by the U of I operated bridge

There are many U of I events every day that depend on the GIS/Scopia system.

   a) Bridging multiple sites
   Most videoconference units in the university are limited to a single connection. Many classes and events involve multiple sites.

   b) Avoiding firewall problems
   The bridge capability is often necessary when connecting to non-Ul sites because of firewall restrictions at many sites.

2) GIS/Scopia has provided some enhanced capability that we did not have with the old bridge system

There is a lot of functionality that we did not have before and users are starting to take advantage of them.

   a) High definition video
   The GIS/Scopia system runs at HD720 while the old system ran at SD480. This is a substantial improvement in video quality and lets us take better advantage of newer video equipment at many university locations.

   b) PC/Mac/mobile device support
   The GIS/Scopia system integrates videoconferencing on the high end systems in many university locations with a more distributed solution based on personal devices. This has already been used in ways that were not possible with the previous system. We have barely started to tap the potential here.

      i) Connecting U of I classes or events to external locations that don't have VC capabilities (example Law classes connecting to external Law firms for guest speakers).

      ii) Providing convenient access at home for students with special needs or who are ill or injured.

      iii) Lower cost "VC lite" rooms that are much cheaper than conventional videoconference rooms

   c) Programmable connections
   The system can be programmed in advance to connect to sites at a designated time. This has been used in locations where there is not always a technician available to operate the video equipment.

   d) Easy recording of videoconferences
   This could be a very valuable new capability. To date, it has been problematic (but we did not have it at all with the old system).

3) There have been problems with some of the GIS/Scopia functions, and there are some improvements that we will need in the near future.

There have been some real problems with the system. Most of these are around capabilities that we didn't even have on the old system.

   a) Recordings
   There have been multiple problems with audio/video synchronization and with lost or aborted recordings. These are being worked on by GIS and Avaya but progress has been slow. For groups that have moved quickly to use these new capabilities, they are having serious problems. It might be best for us to take a more cautious approach to adopting new functionality.

   b) 1080HD
   We need to see further improvements in video quality to keep up with the newer hardware being installed at many university locations.
4) Many of the problems users experience are not due to the GIS/Scopia system.

When we switched to the new system, U of I also disbanded the central technical support and scheduling group. Much of the dissatisfaction from users comes not from technical problems with the GIS/Scopia system, but because of lack of U of I technical support or U of I business process problems.

   a) No central technical support

   All of the centers and several units have technical support for videoconferencing, but many units are not covered. This is especially a problem in Moscow. There are no good self-help facilities; and providing technical information on the IT website, for instance, is difficult because equipment isn't standardized across units.

   b) No central videoconference facilities/aging facilities

   There are no centralized videoconference facilities in Moscow. If units do not purchase and operate them, they do not have access to them other than on a "ask as a favor" basis from units that do own them. Several units (Engineering, Science, to name two) do not use Scopia for videoconferencing, relying upon other methods such as Skype, Google Hangouts, Zoom and Go-To-Meeting. Much of the hardware in use is outdated.

   c) No central scheduling support

   Again, all of the centers and the units with videoconference facilities have people who do scheduling for videoconferencing. If you are not in one of the centers or those units, it is very difficult to figure out how to arrange a videoconference.