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http://www.avinteractive.com/features/analysis/57909/facilities-management-av-still-support

AV facilities management and support is still an important, if changing sector – and clients are resistant to an IT take-over, says Peter Lloyd.

Support requirements are changing, with new technology bringing in its wake stronger links between AV and IT, the need to accommodate BYOD meeting room strategies, increased use of videoconferencing and collaborative working.

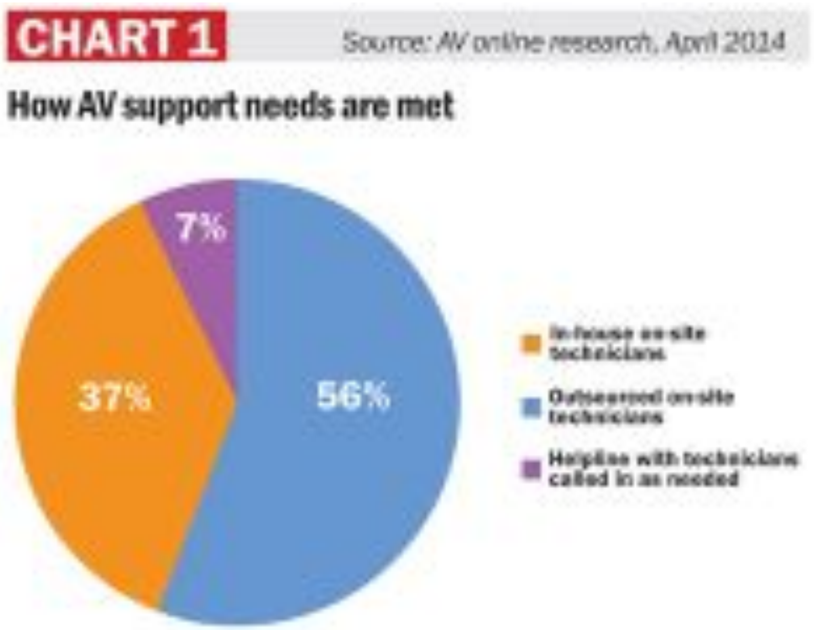
However, the commercial scene is only changing relatively slowly, partly because many outsourcing contracts are very long-term and user organisations are averse to the risks involved in changing suppliers.

Most client companies have also been reluctant, so far, to spend capital sums on remote management technologies or improved AV infrastructures. But new needs are emerging.

"We can expect to see significant changes not in the service offering, but in the technicans' skill set," says Feltech operational services director, Vince Smith. "A lot of the tenders we are seeing from consultants are putting enormous emphasis on digital media and future technicians will have to have the skills to handle DM."

Service levels are also changing, he adds: “There will always be strong emphasis on client meeting spaces, but there has been a move to introduce self-service rooms where the installation has been geared to ease of use.”

AVM Impact service director, Terry Wilson, who runs an operation which now has 180 staff deployed on client sites, agrees: “Consumption of video has gone up dramatically, but we are introducing new service models to encourage and enable self-service.”
More and more clients, he says, require lighter-touch, less invasive support, and growth areas outside conferencing – such as content management and production for signage, capturing and editing events, and video distribution – are becoming important.

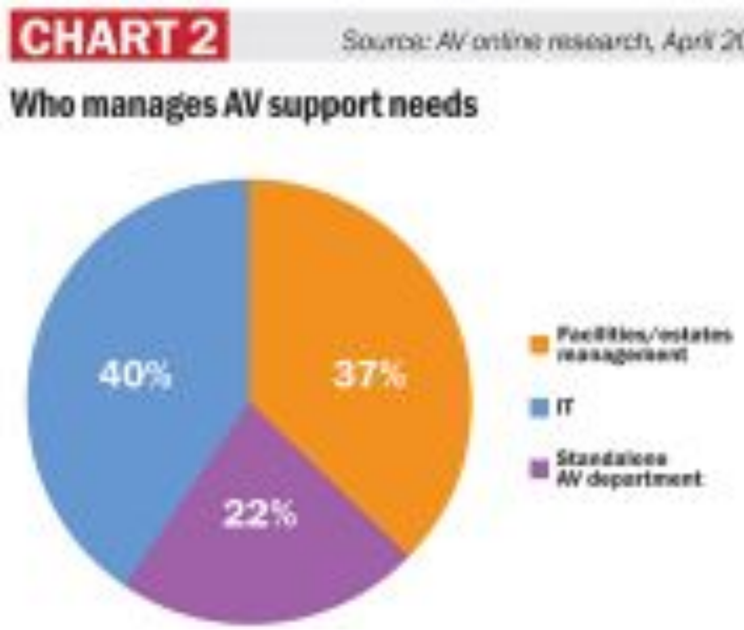


Video as a service
Videoconferencing has always been an area that’s needed high levels of on-site AV support, although streaming is challenging its “most needy” status. Wainhouse Research’s investigations into US videoconferencing services support our UK findings. A 2013 Wainhouse Research (WR) survey found that internal support was key for end users, with 69 per cent of the client companies surveyed handling room conference systems support internally and 70 per cent providing their own support for personal video systems.

Conferencing service margins run at 24 per cent, another WR survey found, but channel partners might not make all that money in future, as manufacturers threatened by declining hardware sales and prices look to develop service-based revenue streams.

Polycom, for example, has been actively researching service and support needs and is now acting to help provide them. “Users want to use soft clients and they want to get access to meetings from wherever they are,” says Polycom EMEA marketing director, Tim Stone. Video as a service (VaaS) will take off, he argues, with previously hardware-oriented partners starting to offer VaaS based around Polycom’s hardware and software. With US researchers expecting the VaaS market to grow at a CAGR of 34 per cent a year – nearly as fast as Lync – the current 90 per cent dominance of on-premise hardware will be eroded.

“We are already providing the hardware and software for the services market, but we are now looking at providing the infrastructure through a white label arrangement,” says Stone. This is already happening in the US. Stone adds: “We are looking to roll out to other theatres, but it would always be done with the channel.”



AV or IT?

The big question is “Which channel?” Some companies involved in the market believe that the future of AV support has to be at least “IT-like”. Specialist training provider N-vest’s parent company, Inbay, provides white label helpdesk and outsourcing packages, so it is not surprising that N-vest md Pip Thomas thinks that on-site, in-person support should be the last resort.

It is the most expensive to provide and the least satisfactory to users. Suppliers should add value by user training. “It should be backed up with first-line tech support provided online or by phone by a remote helpdesk and a defined escalation process to deal with any more serious issues. Actually getting an engineer to physically go to the room to fix it should be a rare occurrence,” adds Thomas.
Currently this is not the way it works and there’s little evidence of rapid change.

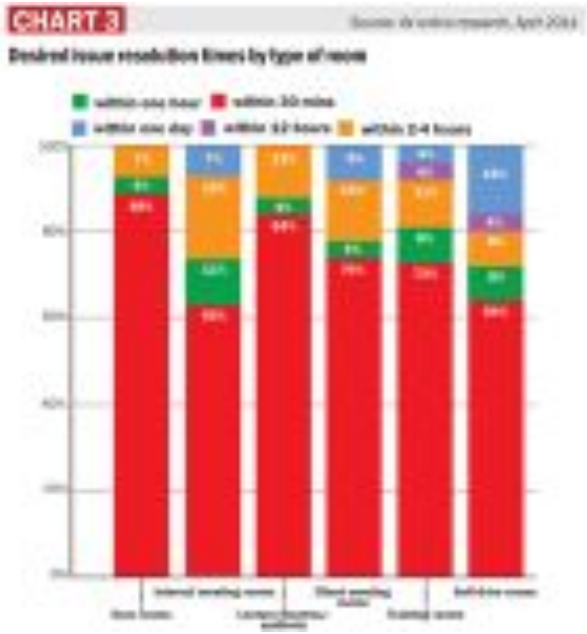
“Organisations can’t afford not to have standalone AV support,” says Wilson. “There are meetings at which it is vital everything goes right.”

But, he admits, the market has already moved away from “vanilla” support to differentiated service levels, and it is migrating towards IT processes. However, processes are not everything.

“The guys we employ now need strong IT skills and must be able to think the way IT people think to do their jobs. But they have to be more customer aware (than IT personnel),” says Smith.

“One of the differences between AV and IT staff is that the AV guys look the client in the eye most of the time rather than sitting behind a telephone. The IT folk still see themselves as managers of computers and mobiles, but they don’t get involved in the meetings aspect of what that equipment can do, and just because a device sits on their network that doesn’t make it an IT responsibility. The network is just a conduit to allow video functionality," he adds.

And, lest we forget, all the technology is only there, and the support is only paid for, to let people work better and communicate more effectively.



Researching AV support

In late 2012 we conducted two parallel AV support service surveys, comparing suppliers' and clients' view of the market. This April we concentrated on the client-side viewpoint, receiving a good cross-section of responses from financial/professional services (41 per cent of respondents), education (30 per cent), the public sector (19 per cent), pharmaceuticals/healthcare (four per cent), manufacturing (seven per cent), and retail (seven per cent).

Managing the need and the budget

Asked how they managed most of their AV support needs (see Chart 1), the clients who responded to AV's survey came out massively in favour of using in-house, on-site technicians with 56 per cent of respondents preferring this approach (against 52 per cent in 2012). Outsourced on-site technicians were used by 37 per cent (against 35 per cent). The proportion of respondents relying on a helpline with technicians called in as needed nearly halved, from 12 to 7 per cent.

When we asked: "Under which management remit/budget does your AV support operate?" (see Chart 2) we expected to see a swing towards IT. In fact the opposite happened – 37 per cent of respondents were responsible to facilities/estates management (against 28 per cent in 2012) and the proportion responsible to IT dropped from 54 to 40 per cent – 22 per cent (against 17 per cent) said they operated a standalone AV department.

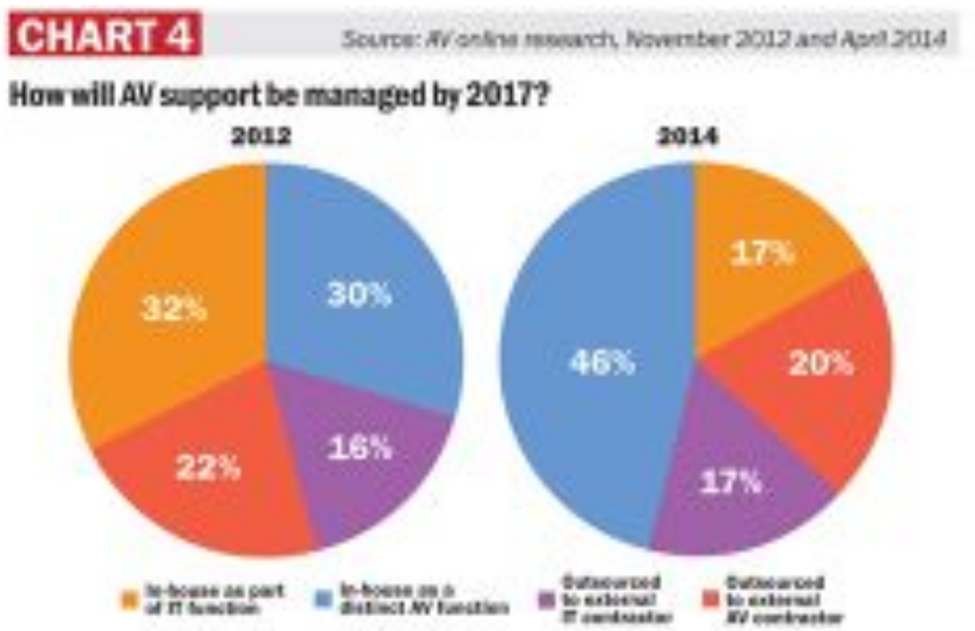
Rooms, technicians and ratios

The number of AV spaces needing support varied massively from respondent to respondent, from a low of 11 (with one tech) to "over 2,000". The median was in the 80-100 range.

The ratio of rooms per technician ranged from highly productive scenarios such as 100:1 (the highest) and 50/60:1 (a few) down to 3:1 or 4:1. The average was 20 rooms per technician – much higher than the 2012 respondents' average of 7.4:1. The implication is that the lessons just being learned in 2012 – that some spaces demand more support than others – are being used to increase productivity and at least control costs.

Managing call-outs

This year we asked how service call-outs were made and 37 per cent said that they were initiated by a telephone call to an internal help desk. The next most popular method was a direct phone call to on-site technicians (30 per cent), followed by email/messaging to an internal help desk (19 per cent) or an external help desk (seven per cent). A further seven per cent made direct phone contact with the external techs. "Others" included two-way radio and "all methods including carrier pigeon".



Resolution times

We asked how quickly respondents expected to resolve on-site issues and a pattern of priorities soon emerged (see Chart 3) – 90 per cent expected to resolve issues arising in executive meeting rooms within 30 minutes and the same 30-minute rule applied to 84 per cent of respondents' lecture theatres or auditoria. Customer meeting rooms were the next most urgently-attended (74 per cent within 30 minutes), followed by training rooms (73 per cent), self-drive meeting facilities (64 per cent) and internal staff meeting rooms (63 per cent). Almost all the respondents expected to resolve problems in executive spaces, theatres and customer-facing rooms within 1-2 hours at most.

Equipment in most need of support

Videoconferencing was seen as the technology most in need of support in our 2012 survey, but this year it has been overtaken by event recording/streaming, with 77 per cent of respondents saying that "frequent support" was needed.

Videoconferencing, meanwhile, seems to have become more user-friendly, with its "frequent support" need falling from 69 to 55 per cent (although another 37 per cent still said there was "some support" needed).

Looking to the future

The idea that on-site AV support will become part of the IT function has failed to gain traction amongst the people managing AV (see Chart 4).

We asked: "How do you think AV support will be managed in 2017?" Just 17 per cent of respondents thought it would be controlled in-house as part of the IT function, down from 34 per cent in late 2012. The highest proportion (46 per cent against 29 per cent last time out) thought that AV support would be managed in-house as a distinct AV function – 17 per cent thought it would be outsourced to an external IT contractor and 20 per cent thought it would be outsourced to an external AV contractor.

And then there were the others. Several of those mentioned the increased use of remote monitoring and control off-site by incumbent AV vendors' network centres.

And there is always one, isn't there? One respondent said: "We will be replaced by sentient androids who will take over the world". At least that's more advanced than carrier pigeons.