

Online conferencing takes off amid volcano chaos

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People watch economist and entrepreneur George Soros speaking by teleconference at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The volcanic eruption that has halted air travel in Europe for days has seen people turn to online teleconferences to conduct matters from business deals to weddings.

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"We have seen an increase in the past few days in terms of video-calling because of the situation," a Skype spokesman told AFP on Monday.

"I've heard of executives stuck in the United States on the way back to London running their companies via Skype."

Reports getting back to the Internet telephone company include one of a couple stuck in Dubai while traveling to Britain to wed conducting the service in a hotel lobby using Skype video to include guests in London.

Cisco also said Monday that the disruption of flights in Europe due to a dangerous layer of ash spewed into the sky by a volcano in Iceland has led to a surge in interest in its "telepresence" technology for online meetings.

"We have seen a huge spike in usage," said Fredrik Halvorsen, newly minted vice president of Cisco's telepresence technology group.

"We have had all our demo centers and all our video rooms across the world populated by everything from big corporate clients to (small- or medium-size businesses) to government ministries."

Cisco used telepresence to hold a virtual press briefing announcing that on Monday it completed a 3.3-billion-dollar takeover of Norway-based teleconferencing firm Tandberg, of which Halvorsen was chief executive.

"I would have loved to have been in Europe with you guys," Cisco senior vice president of emerging technologies Marthin De Beer said during a virtual joint announcement with Halvorsen.

"Thanks to telepresence we are still able to do this, although it is two in the morning here and I don't know how we can fix that."

De Beer had his flight to Europe canceled and was in California-based Cisco's office in the city of San Jose while Halvorsen was in Norway.

While the eruption has stalled air travelers it promises to add momentum to businesses, governments and regular folks saving time, hassle and

expense by simulating get-togethers using Internet gadgetry.

"A market transition is very often marked by a big external event or disruption," said Halvorsen.

The air travel dilemma prompted Cisco to launch a Fly Free program that lets businesses or governments with stranded key personnel have free use of the company's telepresence rooms.

"The Fly Free program is something we literally created on the fly as we saw a lot of need," Halvorsen said. "We think it is only the right thing to be doing."

Cisco has more than 700 specially-equipped telepresence rooms in 124 countries and the acquisition of Tandberg adds more facilities to that list.

Computer giant Hewlett-Packard told AFP that use of its Halo teleconferencing studios in Europe has surged and it is providing customers access on a "first-come, first-served" basis.

As with Cisco telepresence facilities, Halo studios are linked to one another to provide secure communications as well as enable collaboration using data shared online.

"As the world (has) seen earthquakes, H1N1 and other disasters, it has really made businesses pause to think how they can use technology to create a sustainable business model," De Beer said.

"What we are experiencing right now with one volcano eruption in Iceland disrupting not just flights but businesses around the world in a major way is an incredible example of how powerful this technology can be."

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