

## Gateways to Justice: improving video-mediated communications for justice participants

Project Progress update 15 June 2009

### Project Summary

Justice hearings are increasingly using video communication facilities to provide access for remote participants. This 3-year research project tests the impact of that technology on participants' sense of presence and the effectiveness of their communication with the courtroom. Experts in law, communications, psychology, architecture and court technology are working to develop best practice guidelines for the most effective use of remote witness facilities in the administration of justice.

### Progress to Date

In the first stage of the project, members of the research team visited Victorian and West Australian courts and remote witness facilities to inspect and document facilities and equipment and collect statistics about use of the facilities (August – December 2008). User surveys have also been collected by the courts while the researchers have interviewed some thirty judicial officers, court staff, lawyers and expert witnesses who are experienced in the use of video-conferencing facilities.

### June Pre-Test

The surveys used for witnesses and jurors, and the script used for orienting and introducing the witnesses, were developed and tested in a pre-test at the University of Canberra in December 2008. During the week of 1-5 June 2009, we fine-tune the environments, instruments and technologies to be used in the August experiment. This took place on the ninth level of the Victorian County Court, thanks to the support of the Victorian Department of Justice. Lighting conditions, camera angles, witness positioning, and backgrounds were varied to get the 'best' remote witness environment. On 4 June, a group of volunteer witnesses and jurors were brought in to run through the process that will be used in August.

### August Experiment

The focus of the study is an experiment, scheduled for 3 – 21 August at the County Court in Melbourne, to measure the impact of improving communications technology, remote witness environment and witness orientation. It will involve some 200 lay participants and twenty expert witnesses provided by the AFP and other forensic organisations. Each lay witness in the remote witness room will be asked to view a short video of an incident and answer questions put to him/her by an interviewer over a video link. Forensic witnesses will be asked to testify on a topic of general application to their particular scientific discipline. Witnesses will experience either 'good' or standard remote witness environment and technologies, and 'good' or standard orientation. Participants' reactions will be recorded on a survey after each witness's testimony.

We are going to run two 'open days' to allow those with an interest in court technology to check out the facility, talk to the technology and architecture experts, participate as 'witnesses' and 'jurors' in a short version of the experiment and provide their own feedback.

The first of these will be on Friday afternoon, August 7, from 2 pm to 5 pm for judicial officers, and the second will be on Wednesday, 19 August from 2 pm for others, including industry partners.

### Transfer to University of Western Sydney

The study has been transferred to University of Western Sydney, College of Arts as part of the new Justice Research Node. Tamara Donnellan has been engaged as Project Manager, and Norma Meldon is now Research Program Coordinator. Contact details have been updated on the Justice Environments website.

#### Further Information:

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