

# The French Ministry of the Interior, When Communication Becomes a Matter of Life and Death



## The Ministry of the Interior and its Remit

The French Ministry of the Interior is one of the largest and most important government organisations in the European Union, and its remit is extremely broad. It is responsible for the general interior security of France, including both the French National Police and the Gendarmerie; civil defence and the French fire brigades. It has overall responsibility for the relations between central and local government, it organises political elections, and it issues passports, identity cards and driving licenses to members of the public.

As it also looks after the French overseas territories, the so-called “DOM-TOM”, including island territories in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans, the geographic reach of the Ministry of the Interior, almost spans the entire Globe. With a land mass well in excess of half a million square kilometres, metropolitan France is the largest country in the EU, divided into one hundred counties called “départements”. In each département, the Ministry of the Interior exercises its duties through a central prefecture and local sub prefectures.

## Handling Crisis Situations

Video conferencing was first introduced in 1998 in connection with the Football World Cup in Paris as a means of dealing with the extraordinary challenge of the sudden influx of people. Since then, the Ministry has continued to enjoy the particular benefits that video conferencing provides in difficult situations, not least when strikes call for immediate emergency measures. Spearheaded initially by Paris, video conferencing is spreading to all of France as representatives of the various offices and prefectures come to Paris and experience the concrete benefits of the systems.



If there were to be a major crisis in the Ile-de-France, the region around Paris, all the prefects of its eight départements would connect to each other via video conference to agree and co-ordinate measures. They could also connect to the Minister of the Interior herself, if needed. The already congested roads of Paris would be clogged, and just going the nine kilometres from the prefecture in Nanterre to Hôtel de Beauvau, the headquarters of Ministry of the Interior in Paris, could be unpractical and a waste of valuable time.

The Ministry of the Interior needs to plan for the unlikely event of a national crisis, and video conferencing has a central role in those plans. France is divided into seven “zones de défense”, each zone de défense comprising one or more regions. A zone de défense is headed by the prefect of the département in which it is headquartered. Each prefect heading up a

zone de défense has video conferencing facilities available and would use them to co-ordinate efforts with the other prefects. They would do this in case of war, internal unrest, large-scale accidents, fires or natural disasters, during which special powers are bestowed upon them, and advanced communications are critical to their ability to co-ordinate the efforts.

## Containing Costs, Increasing Productivity

Containing costs is an important challenge for the Ministry of the Interior. The overall workload of the ministry is increasing but, at the same time, staff members who retire are not necessarily replaced. Consequently, the Ministry of the



Interior needs to do more with fewer people. To continue to provide a high level of service to the citizens, the remaining staff members must seek ways to work more efficiently.

With the current focus on containing costs, the conservative approach to processes and procedures is rapidly giving way to a high degree of sensitivity towards new technology-enabled work practices. This has provided a boost to the development of video conferencing as a replacement for traditional face-to-face meetings, as limiting travel is a natural part of the civil service's strategy to limit its expenditure in a country as large as France.

The French civil service has traditionally not been at the forefront of adopting new technology, and many of its employees have not received any relevant training in using it, but this has not hampered the adoption of video conferencing. The prevailing experience is that it is as easy to use as a TV set with a remote control and so video conferencing is used

more and more, both in and outside of Paris. Most video meetings take place point-to-point between meeting rooms. In Paris alone, the Ministry of the Interior has four main office locations, and in France's regions and départements there are also several locations that need to be linked.

## Distance Learning, a New French “Revolution”

Distance learning has done much more than reduce travel costs, it has provided vast efficiency gains and reductions in the time it takes to roll out a training course. Rules and regulations change, and few areas of government have seen a more dynamic development of its legal framework than those related to public safety and homeland security. Consequently, the Ministry of the Interior needs to constantly organise courses to make sure its employees are up-to-date, because the



correct and uniform application of rules and regulations across the country is not only a fundamental principle of the civil service, it is a democratic right of the citizens of France.

Using video conferencing, experts are able to hold training sessions in one lecture theatre, typically in Paris, which are then transmitted simultaneously to the video-enabled lecture theatres in the prefectures around France. Considering that, before the introduction of video, those training courses took place locally, and that the expert lecturer had to travel to the individual prefectures and hold the same lecture time and time again, it is no exaggeration calling distance learning a small “revolution”.

## Shortening Emergency Response Times, Saving Lives

No matter how substantial they may be, no cost savings or efficiency gains can quite compare to the value of saving human lives. And it is in its use of video conferencing for operational purposes, in the handling of emergency response situations, that the Ministry of the Interior has identified potentially life saving benefits.



To this end, video conferencing is even used internationally. A good example is the 8.6 km long Tunnel de Somport which links France and Spain, through the Pyrenees. This is a very modern tunnel, opened as recently as 2003, and it was planned taking the most recent communication technology into account. In the case of an accident or incident in the tunnel, the exchange protocols between the prefecture of the Pyrénées-Atlantique and their Spanish counterparts in Aragon call for the use of video conferencing between the authorities in order to co-ordinate the rescue efforts. Reaction times become very short, and this is fundamental to the success of the rescue efforts.

*The reaction time is really really short, and that is extremely important when the situation calls for decisions to be made instantly. Video conferencing is really an extraordinary tool.*

### P. Villemin, Préfecture des Pyrénées-Atlantiques

A very large part of the Pyrénées-Atlantiques is rural, and the emergency plans also call for the prefecture to use video conferencing in the case of a major health or veterinary crisis (hypothetical examples are bird flu or mad cow disease) where there is a natural desire to limit travel.

## Energy Savings and Reduced Carbon Footprint

Energy savings and environmental concerns are other important challenges to the Ministry of the Interior. Given its size, the huge organisation of the Ministry of the Interior can really make a difference, and any initiative it takes provides an important signal to French society as a whole.



The Département des Pyrénées-Atlantiques is again a good example of what this means in practice. Its main administrative centre at Pau is almost eight hundred kilometres from Paris, near the border with Spain. Pyrénées-Atlantiques belong to the region of Aquitaine. Top officials used to frequently travel to the regional capital of Bordeaux, 200 km away, to meet with their opposite numbers from the other four départements of Aquitaine. Now, the vast majority of these meetings are conducted using video conferencing, almost entirely eliminating travel and without compromising the quality of the interaction. The officials can discuss their various dossiers the way they always have, because they are able to share documents, drawings and other types of information.

Even inside the individual départements, the use of video conference facilities is on the rise. The Pyrénées-Atlantiques has a sub prefecture at Bayonne which is also equipped with a video-enabled meeting room, useful for maintaining communication with Pau. The day-to-day business that is attended to in this manner has reached such a level that the majority of Pau's video conferencing traffic is now with Bayonne.

## The Future

Usage of video conferencing at Ministry of the Interior will continue to evolve, and usage will spread to all levels of the organisation.

There has just been a case where a France police official was applying for a position at the United Nations headquarters. Instead of travelling to New York, the initial interviews were carried out via video conference. Many other routines like that will be improved.

The Ministry of the Interior wishes to introduce a single IP-based infrastructure to also cover telephony, which would ensure secure and dependable communications between all the Prefectures of France. This will provide a further boost to the usage of video conferencing, and more and more advanced solutions will be rolled out.

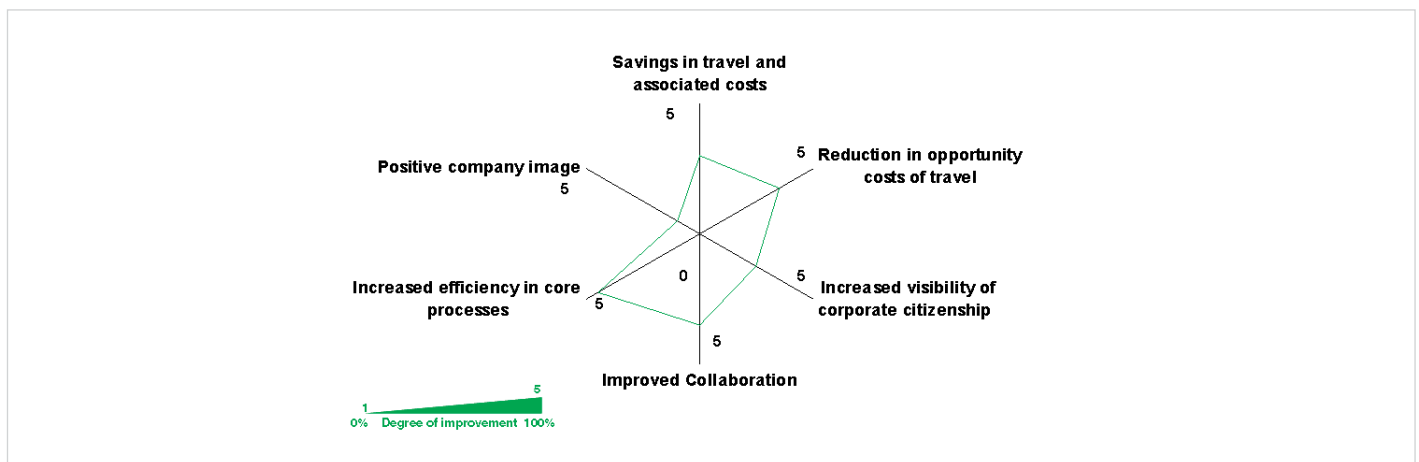
## Video Conferencing Benefits at a Glance

The most important benefits from the deployment of video conferencing solutions at Ministry of the Interior have been:

- Improved communications enabling better co-ordination in situations of crisis;
- Shorter emergency response times, potentially saving lives;
- Cost savings, better cost control and planning;
- Increased efficiency and more timely roll-out of internal training;
- Energy savings, reduced carbon footprint and increased personal safety for key staff members.

### Video conferencing benefits at a glance

The spider diagram summarises the importance of the business benefits of using video conferencing for the Ministry of the Interior. The scale of 1 to 5 reflects the degree of improvement that the Ministry of the Interior has observed as a result of using video conferencing facilities. For example, the Ministry of the Interior has observed that video conferencing contributed greatly to increased efficiency in delivering core services.



Source: Ministry of the Interior interviews