TECHNOLOGY

Entrepreneurs tap tech to skirt U.S. travel uncertainty

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Concerns over connecting with U.S. clients, opportunities spark travel alternatives search

Simon Fraser University Prof. Carman Neustaedter has been using technology to solve some of the concerns business executives and others now have about travel to the U.S. | Photo: Rob Kruyt

Ahead of a May lecture in Edmonton, Nejeed Kassam is cutting it tight between the time his plane lands and when he's expected to speak.

"I can't do that in the U.S. anymore," said the CEO of Vancouver-based Keela, a startup that builds management tools for the non-profit sector.

Kassam, a practising Muslim, has cancelled two trips to the U.S. since the beginning of the year over concerns he'll be held up at the border. Just weeks after U.S. courts dismissed U.S. President Donald Trump's ban on travellers from seven Muslim-majority countries, one of Kassam's family friends, an academic at Stanford University, was detained at the border for two hours.

"That's terrifying," said Kassam, who was born in Canada and whose family hails from Tanzania, a country not affected by the original ban.

In March, he planned to hit the Nonprofit Technology Conference in Washington, D.C., to promote his startup that launched its flagship product last summer. After conferring with Keela's team, they decided to send the growth and product manager instead.

"In this climate, at the border, a passport reading Jeffrey Hemmett sounds a little different from one reading Nejeed Omar Ali Kassam," Kassam said in a followup email. "Unfortunately, this is a reality that I never dreamed I'd have to consider."

His story isn't unlike the ones Simon Fraser University (SFU) Prof. Carman Neustaedter has been hearing the past few weeks. Neustaedter, who specializes in human-computer interaction at SFU's School of Interactive Arts and Technology, has been looking to technology

to solve some of the uncertainty surrounding travel to the U.S. ahead of the ACM Computer-Human Interaction Conference in Denver this May. The conference has been hearing from academics concerned about Trump's original ban and recruited Neustaedter as its telepresence co-chairman. He's been tasked with deploying 10 "telepresence robots" that will act as surrogates for up to 35 attendees. These aren't the anthropo--morphic androids one would see in movies like Blade Runner, Alien or A.I. Artificial Intelligence. Instead of heads, these Segway-like robots have monitors that stream real-time video feeds of users' faces while they control the robots remotely from a desktop computer. An academic from Iran, for example, could beam into a telepresence robot and control its movements, talk to attendees over a video feed and park the device in front of a stage to watch a presentation. No need to speak to U.S. border agents before beaming into the conference. This is the fourth conference at which Neustaedter has helped deploy the devices, and he expects the number of users to increase.

"We're at a point of time politically where the climate is such that people are not necessarily wanting to travel," he said. "Even if they can't travel because of certain travel bans in place for certain visas, there's also a growing perception that 'Maybe I should hold off on travel right now because I'm not sure what's happening.' And given that, we're probably seeing increasing numbers as well."

Renting a robot for two days costs around US$3,000 – a pricier option for organizers compared with offering a live stream of a speakers panel. But Allen Devine, founder of the Telus (TSX:T) Innovation Lab, said the human-interaction benefits of these devices are tough to quantify.

"The big value I see in these units here is, often in our research at Telus, sometimes driving to the meeting, who you bump into in the hallways is of more value than the meeting itself."

Devine added that people were initially awestruck when he began using the telepresence robots. "It doesn't take people long to forget that they're talking to a machine in the room," he said. "They just feel like it's an actual person." Event Presence CEO Steve Ernst, whose company provides these devices – he calls them Beams – to conferences and organizations, said using them to avoid U.S. travel uncertainty makes sense for many of his clients. Company growth has been steady over the past five years, he said, and Ernst expects even more Beams to be deployed in the near future. So far Event Presence has deployed more than 1,000 but fewer than 10,000 Beams throughout the globe, according to Ernst. The Vancouver Convention Centre, for example, has at least two Beams on standby. It's far more cost-effective, Ernst said, to have them based at specific sites for rental than to ship them upon request to conferences. Kassam, meanwhile, said he's still going to have to rely on person-to-person contact if his company hopes to raise additional capital in 2017's third quarter.

"I need to be able to go jump on a plane and go rally in New York and in the [Silicon] Valley," he said. "I owe it to my shareholders, to my clients and what's best for my company. Will I be scared to go? Yeah."

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