

## Ageing Well in the Netherlands: The City of Almere Pilots Innovative Video Services

### Executive Summary

#### CUSTOMER

City of Almere, the Netherlands

#### CHALLENGES

- Grow substantially
- Foster strong, innovative communities to improve quality of life and attract investment
- Take strategic advantage of:
  - People living longer, healthier lives
  - Communication technologies changing how people of *all* ages live, work, play, and learn

#### APPROACH

- Created a program to extend the social and economic participation of older citizens
- Used retail-inspired techniques to identify new opportunities, then conduct a proof-of-concept pilot to assess their value
- Addressed video-enabled services to overcome constraints of location and mobility

#### RESULTS

- Citizens' active participation and enjoyment increased markedly
- Providers found new ways to increase the relevance, reach, and efficacy of their services
- Policymakers saw the strategic value for their priorities on growth and well-being
- Almere's approach inspired further innovation, locally and internationally

### Background

Almere, the Netherlands, is one of Europe's fastest-growing cities. It is also one of the newest—the first house was completed in 1976 on land reclaimed from the sea. Approximately 190,000 citizens live in the municipality, with this number expected to reach 350,000 by 2030.<sup>1</sup> The fastest-growing age group is the over-60s, hence they will play an increasingly significant role in Almere's future success.

### Challenges

Almere is an outstanding example of two significant global trends. First, people are living longer, healthier lives. Second, communication technologies are changing how people of all ages work, live, play, and learn. This is a potent combination that will have major significance for Almere, as well as other cities and regions, over the next 10 years.

In addition, Almere plans to grow substantially as part of a national strategy for the country's northwestern region. This involves attracting new businesses, building new houses, and fostering strong, innovative communities—communities whose members are living longer than ever before. In 2009, Almere's leaders recognized these new realities and raised the question: How can new communication technologies help increase the participation of an aging population, and thus boost social interaction and economic growth?

Already an innovative city, Almere had invested in an extensive high-speed fiber network. Using broadband to increase engagement within aging communities was a natural next step. To explore possibilities, the city created the "Verzilvering" program in April 2009. Cisco® Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG) provided strategic advice to help establish the program, as part of IBSG's Ageing Well initiative.<sup>2</sup>

From the outset, the main objective of the Verzilvering program was to identify innovative ways to help older citizens overcome the constraints of location and mobility. Doing so would enable more social and economic activity, strengthen communities, and make Almere a more attractive place in which to live, work, and invest.



Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG)

"For policymakers, it is really important to start thinking about how to use instruments like video to make policies for the future more affordable and attractive. If we no longer did experiments, we would not bring society further."

**Annemarie Jorritsma**  
**Mayor, City of Almere**  
**Chair, Dutch Association of Municipalities**

## Approach

### Proof-of-Concept Project

A core idea of the Verzilvering program was to investigate how video-based services could be used to achieve its objectives. Video was chosen because its highly personal and interactive nature makes it relevant to people of all ages.

**Figure 1.** Annemarie Jorritsma, Mayor of Almere, Enthusiastically Supported the Video Pilot.



Source: Almere Breed TV/ Cisco IBSG, 2010

The project was led by the municipality in collaboration with Cisco IBSG and government foundation Almere Kennisstad ("Almere Knowledge City"). Community welfare group the Schoor, the Kunstlinie Theater and Cultural Center, and Almere Breed Community TV were heavily involved, and service providers BT and UNET also played an active role.

A unique approach was used, combining techniques from previous IBSG Ageing Well projects with a "customer experience" approach more commonly found in the design of retail services and experiences. By gaining insight directly from the people who live in Almere, the project innovations could be driven by their needs and contexts. By profiling different personal circumstances as "personas," different aspirations and needs could be represented throughout the idea-creation process. Finally, the end-to-end "customer journey" could be anticipated and designed to minimize problems—for example, by increasing comfort with the enabling technology.

### Phase 1—Discovery

- **Understand**—Gaining insight into the aspirations and constraints of Almere's citizens was a critical starting point. Interviews were conducted in-person with a small but diverse group of citizens aged 60–85. Profiles were then created to reflect and segment the main considerations identified.

Group workshops and individual discussions helped validate and refine that early picture, allowing personas and scenarios of desirable future states to be developed. This analysis enabled a rich understanding to be gained of community issues and opportunities, alongside government policy priorities.

- **Identify**—Brainstorming sessions were then conducted to generate ideas for video-enabled services that could make a significant difference. Those sessions involved an array of citizens and organizations from different industry sectors. More than 40 initial ideas were identified, then prioritized based on two main benchmarks:
  1. Impact for location-independence and personal control. (These are two notable benefits enabled by connected communication technologies.)
  2. Impact for people, providers of relevant services, and policymakers. (Significant, large-scale benefit requires high value for each of these groups.)

It quickly became clear that helping people overcome constraints and pursue their personal passions was one of the most significant and recurring issues. “Sharing a Passion” therefore became the focus for the Verzilvering program’s first tangible pilot.

### Phase 2—Pilot

A six-month proof-of-concept pilot began in July 2010.<sup>3</sup> Its goal: to assess the degree to which different types of video interaction could help citizens share their passions, benefit providers of services, and achieve city policy objectives. Music and keeping fit generated most enthusiasm among pilot participants, so were the first topics addressed.

Three types of video-based solutions were tested:

1. **Live Interaction.** Live, immersive interaction was enabled using Cisco TelePresence® advanced collaboration technology. One of the oldest buildings in the city, the Corrosia Community Centre, was connected with one of the newest, the Kunstlinie Theatre and Cultural Center five miles away. Both centers already had fiber connectivity; installing TelePresence enabled this connection to take on a new, highly interactive purpose.

In one example, Karin, a fitness instructor, led two groups of older ladies simultaneously—one in the Corrosia Centre with Karin in-person, the other in the Kunstlinie building. This enabled people to participate who otherwise would not have done so—being able to do so locally, rather than traveling several miles. They were able to work out and have fun with their friends, as well as share the experience with others across town.

In another example, music lovers in different parts of the city were able to share their passion for rock and roll, and share their pianist, by walking to the nearest of the two community centers. The “choir,” all aged over 60, met in this way each Wednesday, joined in their musical passion. As well as rehearsing their repertoire, they used these sessions to experiment with other ways in which video interaction might be used to desirable effect.

"Like other cities, we have a fast-growing, increasingly able and active aging population. Enabling their participation and contribution in Almere's communities is an important priority for us."

Wytse Miedema  
Program Director  
Verzilvering

2. **Personal Recorded Video.** Recorded video enables different interactions compared to live options. Twenty small, easy-to-use video cameras were therefore shared across the project team, including the participants in the music and fitness experiments.

The choirmaster, Gerard, used his video camera to create "homework" videos—enabling choir members to practice at home. Meanwhile, those members who were unable to attend practice in-person were sent short personal greetings from those who were there, making them feel appreciated and involved.

For many project participants, their involvement was a new, collaborative experience. By using the video cameras to record their own experiences, then sharing this with each other, mutual understanding was heightened and social bonds strengthened. For example, one lady particularly wanted to share how her new friendships had been of great help following a recent bereavement.

3. **Broadcast Video.** Broadcast video was used to raise public and cross-sector awareness. Local television station Almere Breed TV provided cameras and production services, and established the Verzilvering web-TV channel.<sup>4</sup>

Pilot activities were recorded each week, with participants interviewed frequently for their reactions. More than 50 video clips were broadcast publicly, attracting 10,000 hits during the pilot's duration. As public visibility increased, other media groups used their own video channels to give further publicity to Almere's innovative work, at home and abroad.

These formal recordings, together with the many informal, personal ones, also helped the project team compile a concrete record of work and capture the most useful insights. These in turn helped bring the project report "to life" in video form for Almere's board of directors—the first time that video had been used in the city for this purpose.

## Results

Pilot results were highly positive: they combined with other innovative video-enabled initiatives in the Netherlands, such as Dialogue Cafe,<sup>5</sup> Smart Work Centres,<sup>6</sup> and the increasing use of international video conferencing by the mayor and her team, to trigger a significant increase in awareness across city leadership of the power of broadband-enabled communications. The energy, desire, and capability of the pilot participants also helped reinforce the significance of the over-60s to Almere's economic and social success.

Specific pilot success was measured in two main ways:

1. The value offered for the three main stakeholder groups by each of the three video types piloted
2. The degree of useful "grass-roots" innovation generated, the potential seen for scalable solutions, and the replicability of the approach used

## Value for Stakeholders

### Almere's Citizens

One strong conclusion from detailed interviews and observations was that removing constraints of location and mobility brought joy to people's lives. More than 95 percent of participants reported that the pilot had increased their social contact, and that they felt mentally and physically improved as a result.

Specific findings from the pilot included:

- Live, immersive video enables people to interact effectively over distances. Eighty percent of pilot participants said they saw how this type of capability could be put to desirable and practical use.
- Personal recorded video helps increase social interaction. It also facilitates information sharing and learning—for example, reporting personal experiences or the progress of a project. All pilot participants said that this capability added significant value.
- Broadcast video is a powerful vehicle that warrants wider usage by the city. Doing so would raise awareness of city projects and stimulate interest, involvement, and potential funding, cross-sector.

Many personal and often unexpected stories were observed during the pilot, adding strong human meaning. The most powerful of these included:

- A woman in her late 60s who suffered from severe loneliness showed considerable improvement after being shown a web TV broadcast of the choir. She ended up joining the choir herself, with her caregivers reporting that she now has a “new lease on life,” and her doctor visits and care demands have decreased considerably.
- An 86-year-old woman who was nearly blind began attending the cross-city choir practice with her neighbor. Although she was not able to see the live video interaction clearly, the camaraderie that it facilitated was of great benefit. She was also able to watch the broadcast recordings in her home later, using a special lens, providing a further happy experience.
- Before the pilot, less than 30 percent of participants who had computers used them. Now they all have email and share their videos with each other, with relatives, and with acquaintances. One lady stated, “I couldn't live without email now. It's so easy and practical! I send the links of the videos to all my friends and family.”
- Once the pilot was completed, many participants reported that they felt better equipped to help others increase their participation and that video could significantly help. Some of those participants have now developed music shows that they broadcast to various eldercare facilities across Almere, using video.

### Providers of Services

The pilot generated insights that are useful to providers of a wide array of services, including government-related ones, other community and citizen services,

and related technical services. These insights have wide relevance, prompting the project leadership team to recommend that video be positioned centrally to the provision of services across Almere, and that Almere's experience be used to inspire other governments and service organizations across the Netherlands and beyond.

Relevant findings included how the innovative use of video-based approaches:

- Helps extend community services across geographic boundaries, thus increasing the reach of scarce resources
- Improves the provision of information, communication, and cooperation—for example, for gaining insights from service users, or for tracking the progress of projects
- Increases visibility of what's available, thus driving improved demand for services
- Helps extend the range of relevant service offerings—whether new ones facilitated by video enablers, or the provision of those enabling services themselves
- Reflects customer environmental objectives by, for example, reducing travel and carbon emissions through increased use of video interaction

### Policymakers

The pilot provided strong evidence of the increasing power of video-based approaches—and of Almere's older, more-experienced citizens—at both a policy and practical level. Such approaches proved consistent with Almere's core principles, which include “anticipate change,” “connect place and context,” and “empower people to make the city.” This mindset was also recognized as being central to realizing the ambitious goals for growth within the northwest region of the Netherlands, and to developing Almere's own growth strategy within that—referred to as Almere 2.0.

Improving the health and well-being of Almere's citizens by increasing community interaction and self-sufficiency is also a priority for Almere. The pilot gave strong anecdotal evidence of the impact of increased stimulus and human interaction in this regard.

In addition, Cisco IBSG assessed existing global evidence of how human interaction improves well-being and reduces care demands.<sup>7</sup> This secondary evidence highlighted major indirect benefits likely from extending participation. For example:

- Improvements to the immune system, the efficacy of medical treatment, recovery times, and longevity overall (as one report put it: “Connected people live longer.”)
- Less medication, fewer falls, and fewer doctor appointments, hence lower health and social care costs and increased impact from finite resources
- High therapeutic value from singing and other musical participation

## Grass-Roots Innovation, Potential To Scale, and Replicability of Approach

### Grass-Roots Innovation

The Verzilvering project fostered an excellent environment for grass-roots experimentation, leading to ideas and insights that reached beyond the immediate scope of the pilot. The sheer volume of relevant ideas generated throughout the project, and the enthusiasm shown for these, demonstrated that the inventive use of video, enabled by high-speed broadband, will play a large part in the future success of Almere.

### Potential To Scale

At a city level, enough evidence was gained from the experiments to show that similar practices and solutions would be relevant, desirable, and practical in other contexts—for example, to enable work, volunteering, and mentoring activities, and to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of various government operations.

Internationally, Almere's innovative use of video for social and economic benefit has already inspired others to think likewise. This has arisen through Almere's involvement in international forums, by collaboration with other partners in Cisco IBSG's Ageing Well program, and through the sharing of insights in video form, such as Mayor Jorritsma's perspectives on the relevance of video for public sector leaders.<sup>2</sup>

Unexpected spin-offs arose, too. In October 2010, the Almere choir joined one from the Emmy Monash Aged Care home in Melbourne, Australia, for a global sing-along via Cisco TelePresence. It was an uplifting experience that showed the power of human interaction, and how today's video capabilities can help bridge cultures, continents, and generations.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 2.** The Almere Choir Joined the Emmy Monash Aged Care Home in Melbourne, Australia.



Source: Cisco IBSG, 2010

The Australian event triggered the U.S.-based Young@Heart Chorus to use video to help their group prepare for a forthcoming tour to New Zealand.<sup>9</sup> Cisco TelePresence allowed relationships to be built between the countries, then video recordings enabled practices to take place across time zones. The December

2010 tour was a big success, causing its director, Bob Cilman, to note that this “could not have happened” without the use of video.

### Replicability of Approach

The unique approach developed for this project has been copied by other project teams within Almere and internationally to help gain insights, visualize possibilities, prioritize ideas, and act quickly on initiatives in a collaborative way. The Wisdom, Wealth and Wellbeing initiative, launched in the United Kingdom in March 2011, is one example; this program aims to unleash the growing wealth of wisdom of people aged 45-plus.<sup>10</sup>

Almere's approach was also recognized in 2010 by the Dutch National Government as an exemplar of public and private organizations working together, and hence was showcased in a national report of leading practices, compiled to inspire municipalities across the country.

### Next Steps

A clear roadmap is now in development to translate learnings from the Verzilvering pilot into policy and sustainable practices. Actions under way include:

- **Short term:** Pursuing specific ideas identified during the pilot, including extending participation into the home, and assessing how sharing video clips can help clinicians, patients, and their families collaborate to improve physiotherapy outcomes
- **Midterm:** Reviewing the most relevant city and Dutch regional policies in light of the pilot, and expanding the Verzilvering program to address:
  - Video-enabling *all* city buildings where people congregate
  - Defining links to emerging cloud-based services and architectures
  - Establishing a platform to foster video-enabled innovation in all city matters
- **Long term:** Using insights from the pilot, and from Cisco's related Smart+Connected Communities initiative,<sup>11</sup> to inform the “Almere 2.0” growth strategy for the municipality as this evolves

Video communication, enabled by high-speed broadband, is becoming increasingly central to economic and social success. The Almere pilot adds further evidence, in particular of how constraints can be overcome to enable useful human interaction. With people living significantly longer, and needing to participate socially and economically, new possibilities such as these will be increasingly important. Collaboration between the City of Almere and Cisco IBSG was central to the pilot's success.

“The lessons learned and actions taken—in fact, the Verzilvering program itself—would not have happened without the vision, expertise, methodologies, advice, and all-around professionalism of Cisco.”

Wytse Miedema  
Program Director  
City of Almere

## Endnotes

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## More Information

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