

Talk isn't cheap, but it's important at Oil Sands work camps

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Ten years ago, one would not imagine to be able to send fax and electronic mail into the middle of the bush.

But with the advancement of technology, nothing in the communication business seems impossible anymore.

"Everything that exists today in the most urbanized setting is going to be available in the oilsands because the technology is catching up with the ability to do that," Telus vice president for marketing Jeff Lowe told Today after a Wednesday presentation at the Oil Sands Trade Show and Conference.

Telus presented a program called Camp in a Box, which offers oilsands companies technologies ranging from new high-speed wireless, television on demand, to safety services and geomatics solutions.

All these are designed to facilitate doing business in remote areas, and also to improve the quality of life of workers in the oilsands campsites.

Communication is one piece of the puzzle, but it's not the only way oilsands companies try to make camp life pleasant. "Syncrude already provides high-quality camp facility for our temporary workers," said spokesman Alain Moore. There are different services in place at the camp such as high-quality meals and recreational facilities for the workers to unwind after a day of work, said Moore.

Recreation is also one way Suncor Energy tries to provide good quality of life in the campsite. The company set up a baseball field and at one time workers even had a recreation co-ordinator to help organize events, said spokeswoman Brenda Erskine.

But Lowe said the Telus program goes beyond what is already in place at the sites. "You look back at the camp several years ago, there may be a common room with a television, an Internet kiosk or phone booth, that's not where Camp in the Box is going.

"We're talking about those equipment being in the room itself, where you can

have movies on demand, play interactive games, having phone in individual units in a multiple-dwelling unit situation."

With the availability of high-speed wireless Internet connection, workers can enrol in distance education programs. Instead of maybe having to travel for meetings, people can now do it over video conference or web conference, Lowe said. "The sky is the limit. We're already talking about tracking people through satellite technology, so you would know where exactly are the workers within the campsite."

Last summer, Telus conducted a study with Ipsos-Reid at the Poplar Point work camp, 80 kilometres north of Fort McMurray. Camp residents were asked about their preferences and requirements for personal entertainment in a remote camp setting. "What we've done is we've looked across all the Telus products and services, where we might want to partner with a third party."