

Video conferencing - A Consultants perspective

Video conferencing has been tipped for the top for some time now, and finally its day has arrived. Here, Mike Entwistle, Managing Director for CCOMM Ltd, who started in the conferencing consulting space explains how the combination of the burgeoning 'green' movement, improved technologies, lower prices and a new generation that is ready and able to embrace video means that video conferencing will be the ubiquitous tool for communication in the 21st Century.

40 years ago the first video call took place, when AT&T introduced the Picturephone at the 1964 World's Fair in America. Viewed as a fascinating curiosity at the time, it never actually became popular and was too expensive to be practical for most consumers. At its peak, the Picturephone service had only 500 subscribers, and the service faded away by the mid 1970's.

Now, nearly four decades later, videoconferencing has come of age, with manufacturers such as Polycom, Tandberg and Life Size routinely selling tens of thousands of units a year worldwide. It's a growing market. In 2005 video conferencing was worth about \$1.15 billion globally, according to Frost & Sullivan. Now the market is expected to reach \$3.1 billion by 2010, growing at a compound annual rate of 22.1 per cent. Another research firm Gartner is even more bullish, projecting the video conferencing industry to be worth \$12.8 billion by 2011.

The success of YouTube and the rise of social media networking driven by sites such as Facebook and MySpace has made video today's tool for smart, modern trendy users. Video overcomes the distance barriers and has 'stickiness' for today's Y generation. Hundreds of millions of YouTube videos are watched each day, and even organisations are routinely posting their corporate videos on the site as a means of tracking comment and generating greater user familiarity. For example, companies such as Cadbury's are fully embracing the new technology as demonstrated by the recent advert featuring a drum-playing gorilla, which gained more than 1 million views on YouTube.

All this activity, not to mention the environmental pressures, has made video conferencing an accepted method of communication as organisations of all sizes try to save time, and reduce their emissions and carbon footprint. Environmental issues have turned the spotlight on the excesses of corporate travel – not just airlines, but simply say, from one side of the county to another. For example, CCOMM works with North West police forces including; Lancashire, Merseyside, Cumbria, Greater Manchester and Cheshire, who use video conferencing for weekly staff meetings. Lancashire Police Constabulary covers quite a wide geographically dispersed area in the North West of England and found it was wasting an enormous amount of time, resource and money, while officers drove for hours just to reach these meetings. Video conferencing has saved each Constabulary time, travel budget, enhanced general communication and addressed some of their 'green' concerns.

Time spent traveling is time wasted, so organisations are looking for an alternative. It's not so much air miles that are in demand these days, but carbon credits and video miles as a necessary measure of 'greenness'. With carbon footprint reduction an increasingly important consideration for today's businesses, video conferencing is one solution which can help meet corporate environmental goals by reining back on travel, especially once finance directors start seeing details of their likely 'carbon allocations'.

According to one recent Gartner research note, "Gartner recommends carbon footprint reduction as a more sustainable long-term objective than carbon offsetting (such as planting trees to compensate for carbon dioxide output), and video will be a key component of that reduction strategy for many enterprises."

However, it is not just green issues that have driven take-up of video conferencing. Technical developments too have made [video conferencing](#) a more user friendly and practical solution, less expensive than before to implement, and now offering better quality, on the desktop. These developments mean video conferencing is no longer solely the domain of the multinational. SME users too, hard pressed in running their own businesses, with no time to waste on travel are also prospective users. That's why analysts believe video conferencing will continue to grow during the next few years, spurred on by instant messaging (IM), desktop collaboration, and the casual and more-frequent use of video conferencing as a mere click from the desktop.

As an integrator of [videoconferencing](#) solutions, we are also really starting to see the industry fly and we are gaining more enquiries year on year about our services and the end-users knowledge and understanding of the technology is certainly improving dramatically. There is no longer any mystique about video conferencing. Organisations want to be able to use it: not in video suites where they have to rely on a technician to use smoke and mirrors to get it to work, but on the desktop, where using it is 'as easy as making a phone call', integrated with key desktop and networking software.

In fact, video conferencing should no longer be seen in isolation but as an element of real-time collaborative communications which also include video, data and the Web, delivered through partnerships with Microsoft, Cisco, Avaya, and Nortel which help create efficient, high quality, more scalable solutions for business users.

Many IT executives already consider their organisations to be a 'virtual workplace' with, in some cases, over 60 percent of employees working remotely from their supervisors. The rise of IP video conferencing, whether from desktop or room-to-room, now provides a more cost-effective way to communicate with remote employees than ISDN-based video conferencing, with estimated paybacks ranging from 12-18 months for companies that replace ISDN video conferencing with IP systems.

Unlike the old perception of video conferencing as expensive to implement and jerky to watch, today's desktop-based, IP friendly solutions are even flexible enough for someone to be patched into a conference while still in their car. You can even start with a phone call, and then 'add the video'. That's a long way from booking a video conference suite for 10.00, and asking your colleague more in hope than expectation if the call will start by 11.00.

The image quality offered by video conferencing has also improved markedly, to the extent that, with high resolution HD images, it is possible even to view stitching on products, or faults on printed circuit boards. That too has increasing 'video conferencing' marketability in the manufacturing sector. Audio bandwidth too (22 KHz) is now of the same quality you'd expect to have on your home audio system.

Looking ahead to 2008, organisations want to make collaboration more natural for staff who typically may be working in remote locations: from home, at other offices on a large campus, or with business partners in their offices. Voice or video on the desktop, at users' fingertips, offers the prospect of potential 'instant' collaboration every time the phone rings and avoids having to book a room for video conferencing. Such a desire for instant collaboration, allied to more efficient use of working time and the need to cut greenhouse gases and rescue the environment, means it is no exaggeration to describe video as 'the communications medium for today.'

Tim Vincent is a leader on the subject of [videoconferencing](#) and video conferencing equipment. For more information on this subject please visit <http://www.ccomm.co.uk>