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# Videoconferencing comes of age for CIOs

## It's time to get in the picture?

By Josie Sephton, November 2009

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The announcement a few weeks back on Cisco acquiring Tandberg seems to have raised the profile of videoconferencing, with other major players such as Polycom standing to benefit from increased discussion and general activity around the topic. This can be no bad thing for the industry. Videoconferencing seems to be one of those things that vendors bang on a lot about, but enterprises generally have been slow to adopt in a very meaningful way. Yes, there are numerous examples where senior executives are using videoconferencing to replace regular transatlantic travel, resulting in time, cost and carbon savings, but this represents only a relatively small portion of the overall market, namely a subset of senior people in multinational corporations. And even within this subgroup, resistance still exists for those technophobes for whom anything beyond pushing a simple button is just too scary to contemplate.

That said, the drivers to adopt videoconferencing on a wider and deeper scale are increasingly making themselves felt, even for smaller companies. Ongoing issues such as reducing office space to reduce costs, and cutting carbon footprints through less travel are omnipresent. But specific events such as swine flu also have a big role to play. The nature of these events means that companies have to be prepared for mass absences. From a business continuity perspective, this simply isn't feasible, and leads to the need for well thought out and well implemented teleworking strategies to be in place. Accessing company resources easily and securely is only one aspect of this. The other centres around the ability of all workers, irrespective of their location to be able to communicate and collaborate effectively. While traditional communications mechanisms such as phone, email and instant messaging play an essential role, they do possess a certain 'lost in translation' element. These have essentially been our staple communication modes for a number of years but, as we have to rely on them more, and for longer periods, their limitations are becoming more apparent. For example, anyone who has to conduct lengthy audio-conferences over standard quality phone lines will be all too aware of how fatigued they become during the call, and how the effectiveness of the call deteriorates over time. (Doing it over the average VoIP connection is even worse.)

Adding visuals to the calls can take this communication up a level, and provide a more interactive, true-to-life user experience. It isn't hard to see the potential benefits that this can bring, and numerous applications spring to mind. In healthcare, for example, being able to carry out consultations via video means that doctors can 'see' more patients, and patients do not have to

travel as far to see a doctor – critical for when people find travel difficult for medical or geographical reasons. Or, for a company discussing a major marketing campaign which has a heavy reliance on visuals and shared collateral, everyone no longer needs to be in the same room. Rather, discussions and reviews can be done via video, bringing in specific people as needed, irrespective of their location. As the need to bring remote parties together in a more effective way increases over time, the case for video across the business becomes more compelling, and not just at the upper echelons of the business.

Of course, it is easy to get carried away with the hype that video proclaims. And while it does have the potential to transform the way we work, a number of reality checks still need to be addressed. Some videoconference systems at the top end of the scale – typically the telepresence type systems – are indeed very slick. They are also very expensive. To achieve a permeation of video throughout the businesses, companies need more than just very high end solutions, but rather a range of products which take video down to the desktop in an affordable way.

As products move down the stack, issues around quality increase. The quality of a video call has to offer something over and above a standard audio call, particularly as users may not feel a compelling need to move to video. If the picture quality is poor, e.g. low resolution or low refresh rate, then the user experience will not be a good one. This issue doesn't just raise its head when lower level systems are talking to each other, but also when a lower end system is patched into a meeting being conducted with higher end kit. This might be the home-based fashion designer for a clothes company being brought into a senior managers meeting to discuss a specific design.

Another issue is that of interoperability. Video has its roots firmly in intra-company communication but, moving forward, the need to talk to other companies – for example to partners or distributors – will become a necessity. At present not all systems talk to each other. This leads back to the issue of standardisation – H323 is the umbrella recommendation from the ITU that defines the protocols to provide audio-visual communications sessions on packet networks – and some providers are better at following this than others.

All this suggests that a lot of work still needs to be done before video truly has a place across the business. But who is responsible for all this work? On the one hand, businesses need to consider at a practical level where video sits in the organisation, now and in the future, and how this can be implemented, and this requires proactive investigation and planning on their part. Drilling down into the business, there is a clear need to involve key stakeholders in any discussion around a possible implementation of videoconferencing, including senior management, and potential groups of users. The CIO, of course, will be crucial in underpinning the big picture thinking in this regard, helping to identify more specifically how videoconferencing will fit into the business and benefit it moving forwards. On the supply side, vendors will need to pick up on the opportunity and tackle it head on – by delivering high quality, broad product suites underpinned by a clear understanding of what users truly need.

*More articles by Josie Sephton available [here](#).*

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