DAWN OF A NEW ERA IN VIDEOCONFERENCING

Forget hard-to-set-up, stodgy video boardroom meetings. The future is In rich, convenient video chats by laptop or mobile.

By Bob Romano,
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What's the future of video collaboration? I can quickly sum it up: exponential growth in the number of people and the number of places from where people will be collaborating via video.

We are already at the start of a great era in Internet-based video collaboration. With the consumerization of IT, the popularity of consumer mobile devices and apps in the last several years has reinvigorated the stagnant enterprise mobile market. Similarly, the popularity of powerful, inexpensive tablets and smartphones, along with apps such as FaceTime, Skype, and Google Talk have not only made consumer-grade video chat available to the masses—it's also jump-starting demand for high-quality enterprise video in the workplace.

"Videoconferencing is entering the mainstream of enterprise use at the personal [mobile] level, not at the telepresence or room-based system level," declared Andrew Davis, an analyst with Wainhouse Research, in late 2012.

So we're seeing many more schools and universities using video to conduct distance learning or teacher training in a more collaborative fashion. First responders are able to use their smartphones to see what is happening at the site of an emergency. Doctors across town or across the country can share video and records and collaborate to help make better treatments, all over super-secure connections.

Two-way mediums like video benefit from the "network effect": The more connected devices and endpoints there are, the more useful it is for everyone. That is drawing more people to video, creating a feedback loop. Armed with laptops and mobile devices, these new users are demanding that business video be as convenient and agile as its consumer counterparts.

Learning by Seeing

Inherently, we are visual creatures. Yes, the corporate world offers an incredibly rich menu of collaborative tools, including telephone, email, instant messaging, live or stored presentations, even shared desktops. All of this is good, necessary, and powerful. But as soon as I turn on a TV in the corner of a full meeting room, everyone's eyes will be irresistibly drawn to the live screen.

According to Forrester Research, video's usefulness arises out of its ability to "replicate face-to-face interactions and communications—conversing in real time and seeing each others' reactions no matter where they are located ... **[video] helps to put a face and mannerisms to a name and voice**, enabling remote and distributed teams to feel more connected and more committed to shared goals."

Done right, video collaboration can also save enterprises money (think travel savings) while boosting sales and keeping customers happy. That's all happening today,

But as I mentioned earlier, video collaboration is transforming to become both simpler and more open. It needs to be. By the middle of next year, the number of smartphones and tablets in use worldwide is expected to surpass the 1.5 billion PCs. These devices are rockets in our pockets. By 2015, 80 percent of smartphones will have stereo 3-D cameras and screens, both of which enhance video chat, according to Jon Peddie Research.

Also, corporate BYOD ("bring your own device") policies have become mainstream. According to a survey published in 2012 by *CIO* magazine, more than half of companies (52 percent) plan to encourage or require employees to BYOD in the next 12 to 18 months. >>

"You don't look at all like your e-mail."

Source: *The New Yorker.*

BYOD is a boon for the growth of business video, which is why companies should welcome, not ignore it. No longer is it about connecting only to those who have pre-approved software installed on a corporate desktop or tablet. It's about connecting to anyone, anywhere for the rich communication only video can provide.

Big Is Out

Here's some evidence of this shift, courtesy of IDC. In their tabulation of the Q3 2012 market for enterprise videoconferencing, IDC found that sales of multi-codec immersive telepresence (i.e., oversized room-based videoconferencing systems) continues to "decline rapidly," down 35.8 percent year-over-year. Other big-ticket video system gear—things like gateways and firewalls—also declined 26.8 percent. By contrast, single-codec video systems and personal videoconferencing systems both grew, up 0.4 percent and 8.7 percent, respectively.

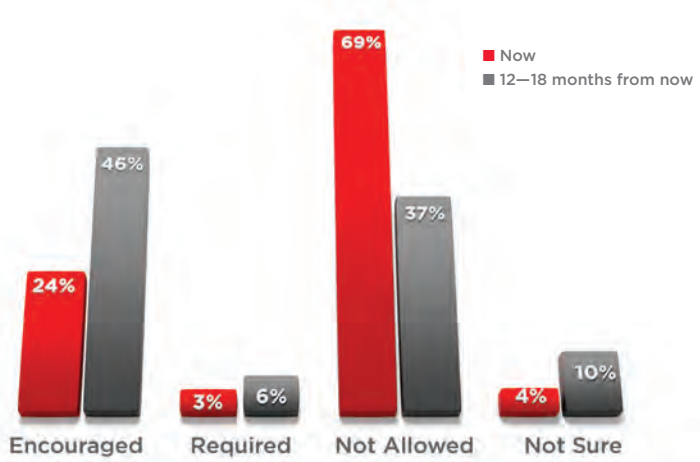
Consumer video chat is creating a generation of workers who are now familiar and at ease with it. Instead of reserving a videoconferencing room that may require broadcast technicians to operate, these workers want to conduct video chats on a smaller, less formal basis. At the same time, they expect business-grade features like data sharing, multiple party support, and a reliable latency-free connection. They're at work, after all.

That's why companies who want to stay on the cutting edge of video collaboration will also need advanced tools for the desktop and workgroup level, in order to support mission-critical enterprise tasks like sales, training, and executive discussions. To really support rich collaboration, what you need at the core is a system that supports advanced media processing, multiple client formats, and high-definition quality.

What else does a complete video system for the future need to do? It first needs to work well so that there are no barriers to acceptance. Second, it needs to be able to synchronize users from different client platforms and different connections, so that the "network effect" can really kick in. Third, it should be able to incorporate all kinds of supporting media, like presentations. Some older systems forced users to train a camera on a whiteboard in order to "share" material.

Wainhouse Research did a good job of putting together the table stakes: "Everyone from senior staff to knowledge workers like product marketing managers understands that if a solution were not intuitively obvious and highly reliable, it would not be adopted permanently. For sensitive sales situations or for B2B calls, a videoconferencing solution simply has to work, and has to work every time." **>>**

Approach to "Bring Your Own Technology"



Source: *CIO* magazine, August 2012.

The Power of (Many) Platforms

Consider the Bainbridge Island, Washington, police department. It had installed a fixed camera on a police boat patrolling the Puget Sound to survey ferries and help in any emergencies for the water-bound commuters in the Seattle area. Then one detective discovered that he could use his Android smartphone to connect into the desktop-based conferencing system.

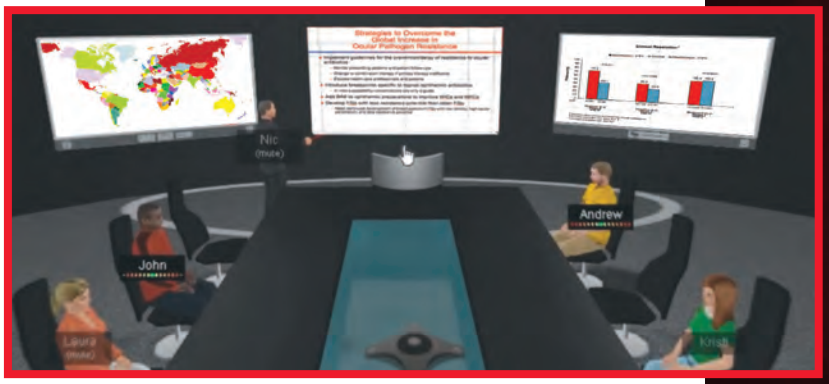
"I could shoot live feeds and still photos and feed it to others in the videoconference, and we had the same capabilities as the original system—the ability to interact, share files and data, text, and talk via [Voice over IP]," he told *State Tech* magazine.

Video collaboration has spread rapidly throughout the department. Today, it encompasses reports from auto accidents, hazardous material spills, and even interoffice communications.

But just having a mobile video component, one officer said, made the department perform better: "We've learned that information sharing and communication in a timely manner saves lives, so the faster we can get this information out, the more lives we can save."

Mobile videoconferencing allows police boats in Washington's Puget Sound to respond faster and more effectively to emergencies.

For first responders, better information like live video can mean the difference in saving a life or getting to a building before it burns down. For enterprises, it can mean a closer relationship with existing customers, or a simple way to powerfully tell your story to new prospects. Either way, having the ability to share video collaboration anytime, anywhere, with anyone, is where the future is headed.



Future of Culture: Collaboration Via Avatar

While many in the business world are just getting comfortable with the fact that they may "appear live" at any point in the day, there is another interactive video tool emerging that may solve the bad hair day problem, among others: 3-D interactive environments, where digital avatars can interact in real time.

Such "virtual reality" environments seemed far out when Second Life launched a decade ago. But there is actually a large segment of the population today that is extremely comfortable spending hours upon hours in an interactive 3D environment—except they just call it gaming.

While TV commercials for video games seem to focus on the ability of people to blow up things, it's easy to imagine business video collaboration taking advantage of the rendering engines of 3-D games to allow people to interact in real time.

Already, 3-D environments are used for training and workplace simulation. Carroll University in Waukesha, Wisconsin, uses our AvayaLive™ Engage to offer distance learning to students and alumni, as well as for new teacher training. The liberal arts school has saved money on travel—$11,400 in its International Studies program alone—while doubling its participation in the virtual events over in-person ones. It has also been able to make tutoring and other similar services available to students at more hours of the day through the 3-D environment. >>

According to John Arechavala, Director of IT infrastructure, AvayaLive Engage "creates exceptional value to enhance communications and collaboration, expand access, and provide enormous 'green' savings for many different functions."

What happens when the generation raised on gaming moves to the business world? I can already foresee an industry of virtual-meeting experts. I predict that today's gamers and game developers may build the 3-D business environments of the future—a place where "more" gets done, faster, whenever it's convenient for people to participate.

Conclusion: Onward and Upward

Enabling personal videoconferencing doesn't have to be a tomorrow project. After Avaya purchased my old company, Radvision, we rolled out our Scopia® desktop and mobile videoconferencing system to 4,000 employees in just five weeks. Within the first six months, more than 100,000 meetings had been held with Scopia®, with over 310,000 attendees participating in point-to-point and multipoint video calls. According to a case study by Wainhouse Research, we have also armed the salespeople with a useful tool, helped build internal rapport, and made meetings more effective.

As video collaboration systems become easier to use, more economical to purchase, and more a part of our overall business culture, everyone will see the payoff—from more personal connections with clients and faster and better internal communications to hefty cost savings from evolving past the old way of doing things. ●

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