

Making the Most of Videoconferencing

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Videoconferencing has become more and more common as the technology behind it became more affordable and reliable. Today, two or more people can easily communicate using simple and reliable audio and video devices — some built into their desktop computers. If you are considering videoconferencing, remember the following:

- In addition to saving money on travel, it saves time and allows more frequent, interactive, collaboration.
- Train users in how to make the most of videoconferencing and help them become comfortable using it.
- Videoconferencing doesn't completely substitute for meeting one another in person.

What You Need to Know

Why isn't the use of videoconferencing more widespread?

Videoconferencing has been possible since the early 1970s. However, it failed to become widely used because:

- the technology was too expensive and unreliable. It was also cumbersome to set up and the output frequently suffered sufficient delays to make it awkward to use.
- it needs high bandwidth to function smoothly. This is only now becoming widespread.
- only a few people used it. It suffered the consequences of the network effect. Since videoconferencing is a network technology, few use it until a critical mass is achieved and then, it seems, everyone is suddenly using it.
- videoconferencing was seen as a way of replacing, not augmenting face-to-face meetings and was resisted. Deals are closed and relationships built when people meet in person. Physical proximity is important to people working together and videoconferencing still isn't able to bridge the effects of being physically close to one another. When large amounts of money are involved, people prefer to get together and the expense of meeting face-to-face is not a deterrent at that point.
- relaxing in front of a camera and hearing one's own voice is still difficult for some people.

Why is videoconferencing becoming more practical now?

Many factors have converged to make videoconferencing attractive. For example:

- the technology is now relatively cheap and prices are falling all the time.
- it is becoming increasingly easy to use across IT platforms.
- necessary bandwidth is widely available and will soon be universal.
- PC/Web-based videoconferencing places the capacity on individual desktops
- telecommuting is increasing.
- videoconferencing is an affordable alternative to many meetings, though not all.

What are videoconferencing's key benefits?

Key benefits include:

- cost savings;
- virtual teams can be formed and utilized globally, thereby reducing relocation expenses;
- videoconferencing makes scheduling easier because distant participants can call in as long as they have an Internet connection and a portable PC camera.

What to Do

Promote Videoconferencing

While videoconferencing can save money, if it is only used to replace staff travel, employees will be disappointed. If it enhances relationships and builds effectiveness in between physical meetings, it will be embraced, not sabotaged.

Promote videoconferencing emphasizing the positive aspects of its use. Show staff that it is a way to:

- quickly get important decisions made by instantly bringing together key people;
- more frequently bring the team together;
- encourage more active collaboration and knowledge sharing, easily and frequently;
- have meetings when they can't travel and can conduct business chores such as holding interviews and receiving technical training easily.

Train Users

Users need to learn how to best utilize videoconferencing. As with any tool, it can change the way people work, organize their time and plan collective activities. Some people hesitate to use it simply because it is an unfamiliar technology and they don't know how to use it. Looking foolish is an inhibitor to participation. The idea of using video seems special, formal, and expensive, so people feel the need to always be at their best and not waste the time and money. Though being at their best isn't a bad idea while using videoconferencing, or at any meeting, some people unconsciously would rather not use the technology because they see themselves being put on the spot. It is very important that training and education be carried out to help people understand the benefits of videoconferencing and become comfortable using it.

Emphasize the benefits to the users and the positive outcomes they can expect. Mentioning that it is a fun way to connect with colleagues is also a good idea. And, yes, the organization will become more productive. Want to make it more easily understood and more acceptable? Try these ideas:

- Show that senior managers use it. It gives the weight of a formal endorsement that also is perceived as an expectation. That can be motivational.
- Encourage a videoconferencing advocate to spread the word and involve other people.
- Regularly demonstrate the videoconferencing system and show how user friendly it is. Let people try it out and get comfortable with it.
- Inform everyone how the system is being used successfully by other departments and teams
- Encourage users to have fun when using it for routine team meetings.

Ask Employees to Reassess Their Need To Travel

Slowly begin replacing travel requests with videoconferencing schedules. Eventually everyone should ask whether or not they can save time and money by using the videoconferencing system. If scheduled travel involves meeting internal colleagues, encourage them to have a pre-meeting videoconference. Perhaps they will decide that the trip isn't necessary after all. Even if the original meeting does take place, it is likely to be more productive because of the preparation.

Ask for Feedback

Many people still find videoconferencing new, so find out how it is used and people's experience using it. Determine what barriers remain to overcome. After selected meetings ask for an evaluation of the technology but also ask about the impact that using videoconferencing has had on participant's effectiveness at work.

Know the Choices

You have two main choices in your selection of a videoconferencing system:

- A complete, dedicated videoconferencing center using ISDN lines, specific specialized equipment, and big screens. At one point this was your only choice. A center like this is expensive but can provide, at the moment, a higher-quality experience.
- The other choice is to install a PC/Web-based videoconferencing system. It is sometimes called Internet Protocol (IP) videoconferencing. This is much less expensive, since it is based on existing PC and Internet technology, but it isn't as reliable as the dedicated service—yet. You still need an ISDN line to get good quality. Before choosing this option, check minimum system requirements, the number of simultaneous participants you can have, the need for a video card, and compare the cost of your system requirements with your videoconferencing needs.

Understand the Components of a Videoconferencing System

The essential components of a videoconferencing system include:

- a camera and monitor
- a microphone
- speakers
- a computer or dedicated videoconference terminal, with the appropriate software and user interface
- for a large number of people working together, a large screen or individual terminals
- a network connection.
- a codec, which is either a hardware or a software component that compresses and decompresses the audio and video signals. (Hardware codecs are generally faster and more reliable.)

Be sure the equipment results in good quality signal transmission and reception. Remember the system is only as good as its weakest link, so don't overlook a decent microphone or other equipment that seems unimportant at first glance.

Don't Forget Security

Undoubtedly proprietary and confidential information will be shared during many videoconferences. Therefore build in a proper security process that includes encryption technologies.

Maintain Ongoing Vendor Support

Like all technology, videoconferencing equipment will eventually break down just when you need it most. Be prepared. Have a tech person available or at the very least, have a number to call to get the help you need.

Manage Videoconferences

For a successful videoconference, keep the following in mind:

- Prepare the room early and be sure that everything is working properly. A test run is recommended if this is the first videoconference at the location.
- See that everyone has an agenda, and all necessary documentation, before they arrive.
- Have a coordinator at each location for tech support and equipment operation so playing both roles doesn't distract participants. The technician will be responsible for adjusting and directing camera and sound equipment.
- Include a list of participants' names, titles and locations with the agenda.
- Be sure to introduce everyone and that they are on camera when you do so.
- Some systems still have a noticeable delay between the time one person speaks and others hear what was said. It is a good practice to pause after each person speaks to let the voice catch up before others begin to talk.
- Participants shouldn't add extraneous noise to the room since it gets magnified and interferes with the speaker—no matter where the sounds originate.
- Give everyone a chance to participate—they are there for a reason and have something to offer.
- If you use text or graphics in a presentation make sure they are visible to the others. Use large fonts, keep messages brief and graphics uncomplicated.
- Minimize movements since on some systems it looks jerky and distracting to viewers.
- Still, while conforming to videoconferencing etiquette, try to be natural!

What to Avoid

You Use an Overly Complex Videoconferencing System

Some companies buy all the bells and whistles only to find that they don't need the capacity and the complexity inhibits use of the system. Sometimes the system is so expensive that the organization fears breaking it so it is treated like a family heirloom, and only used on special occasions. Since

costs are coming down fast, consider renting videoconferencing facilities for awhile, determine your exact needs, become comfortable in that environment, and teach everyone how to make it a productive tool for your organization. Then consider purchasing the right system for your needs.

You Forget Murphy's Law

Remember, all technologies will fail you at just the moment you need them most. Videoconferencing is complex and requires varied components: cameras, microphones, and speakers. A lot can go wrong. Not only do you have your own equipment to worry about but problems can arise at any location.

You Don't Know the System

You need to be trained in the use of the tool and also in how to make it a productive technology for ongoing effectiveness. Design appropriate training for users.

You Use Videoconferencing for a Sales Call

Videoconferencing is not a replacement for every need to get together with people. Sometimes it is inappropriate. For example, it is not a good way to start a sales relationship for example, since that really needs the face-to-face spontaneity that, so far, can only be done in person.

You Ignore the Telephone

Video isn't always necessary; for many circumstances, teleconferencing is all you need. Thoroughly think through why you need a videoconferencing system.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Wainfan, Lynne, J., Challenges in Virtual Collaboration: Videoconferencing Audioconferencing and Computer-Mediated Communications. Rand Corporation, 2005.

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