THE VALUE OF VIDEO COLLABORATION TOOLS

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In the past decade the economic climate—and therefore the business climate—has changed drastically. Markets have become tougher all around, and competition is fierce. Success in this environment has come to mean making tough decisions and operating more efficiently than ever before.

Add to these challenges the myriad changes in the nature of how we do business and with whom. Markets are now invariably global, and workforces must therefore be distributed, flexible, and mobile. Demand for products and services can shift suddenly, and client expectations can turn on a dime. Successful businesses need to be flexible, responsive, and proactive—all while faced with tighter budgets.

Fortunately, many of the factors that have played a role in changing the demands placed on a modern business can also be instrumental in helping those businesses cope, adapt, and even thrive. Markets are global because customers and clients are connected with the world. By embracing the capabilities presented by Unified Communications and Collaboration (UC&C) technology, businesses can become more responsive, more effective, and more efficient—often while simultaneously cutting costs and boosting profits.

Video conferencing technology in particular has shown itself to be one of the most effective tools available for reaping the well-established benefits of face-to-face communication without incurring the costs—both financial and time-related—associated with face-to-face meetings.

The ability to see body language and facial expressions when communicating is indispensable when it comes to efficiency and understanding, particularly when that communication occurs across a language or cultural barrier. In fact, when combined with some of the other functionality provided by UC&C solutions such as desktop sharing, working on shared documents at the same time, and virtual whiteboards, video conferencing can actually be more effective and more productive than face-to-face meetings.

The purpose of this white paper is to examine the idea that the advanced communication capabilities offered by UC&C are not just beneficial to a modern business—they are necessary. It will look at how video conferencing enables collaboration rather than simple communication, as well as factors to consider when procuring a video conferencing solution.

OH, HOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED

These days, it is vital that companies are able to make decisions quickly, and the expectation regarding time to market is aggressive. The pressure is on to increase productivity and take advantage of every opportunity—most of which appear and then are gone in an instant. At the same time, the directive to reduce costs remains a priority.

This means that staffing is frequently at an absolute minimum and any remaining human resources are spread as thinly as is feasible, which quite often leads employees to need to be in several places at once.

The end result of all this is that fewer and fewer people are going to work. Instead, work comes to them. Employees are increasingly working from home as they try to balance work and family, or from the road as they travel from business location to business location. None of this alleviates the need for effective communication, however. On the contrary, the additional workload and increased responsibility shouldered by each employee in a lean-running organization makes communication and collaboration that much more valuable.

We are now operating in a knowledge economy where knowledge isn't just power—it is the only power. Collaboration in such an environment is crucial to success. The more intellects that can be brought to bear on a problem, the better the solutions that can be formulated, and the faster a decision can be made and action taken. All of this adds up to a competitive advantage that can mean the difference between success and failure.

In addition to the organizational benefits of easy and effective communication within the business, one should also consider the advantages of a more mobile workforce. Allowing employees to work from anywhere and at any time increases productivity. There are hard savings to be found in facilities and operational costs, and soft savings from more satisfied employees, less turnover, and the ability to find and promote talent from anywhere within the organization.

It is also worth noting that more effective communications are not just useful internally. The ability

to communicate and collaborate easily and inexpensively with customers, clients, and suppliers can result in many benefits, including identifying and solving problems, strengthening business relationships, and even the creation of new products and services.

THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE

Advances in technology enable novel ways of doing business. This results in changes to the marketplace that bring about new demands on businesses that in turn spur the development of new technologies. It's a never ending cycle of development that results in better businesses and happier customers.

Technological advances allow the workplace to become largely virtual in many cases, and provide the foundation for geographically dispersed employees to become members of the same virtual team. Now that those teams are being tasked with increased productivity, new tools are necessary to provide the communicative abilities they require. Web-based video conferencing and other advanced UC&C tools allow individuals and teams from multiple locations—and even multiple cultures—to communicate effectively through a single, user-friendly interface.

THE VALUE OF VIDEO

Research has shown that much of the information we receive in interpersonal communication is transmitted visually. More can be conveyed in a single glance than by a thousand words. Studies have shown that being able

to see the other person results in a 600% improvement in understanding when compared to only hearing them.

The utility and value added by video are clear-cut and undeniable, but another key benefit is the ease of use of modern implementations. The current state of the art business video conferencing technology is as intuitive and easy to use as email or the telephone. User-friendliness makes the technology more likely to be used by employees, and the added features combined with a broader set of UC&C tools make it a great deal more useful. Users are able to share, edit, and collaborate on documents in real-time, as well as share desktops and virtual whiteboards and give online presentations—all from a distance and with ease.

The true value of video isn't in cost savings, even though UC&C solutions are often priced equivalently to more limited traditional phone systems. The real value is in the boost to productivity, creativity, and collaboration between employees. The extra responsiveness and the ability to take advantage of sudden business opportunities afforded by modern video conferencing tools can be the advantage that allows a business to stay competitive.

THE TYPES OF VIDEO CONFERENCING

There are four general categories of video conferencing endpoint:

Executive Desktop Systems

These systems are generally self-contained "video-phone" units with a built-in camera, microphone, and screen that

communicate over an IP or ISDN network. This category also includes executive office desktop systems.

Room-based Systems

These systems allow for an entire room to take part in high-quality video conferencing. This is usually installed in a meeting room, conference room, or board room and is most often used when some, but not all, of the members of a group are in the same physical location.

Telepresence

Though much less common than the other categories, this new class of video conferencing provides a sense of immersion by allowing users to control a robotic avatar that allows them to navigate a physical office space as if they were really there.

Desktop Video Conferencing

These systems use common, off-the-shelf web cameras and standard issue laptop or desktop computers to provide adequate video conferencing capability to almost any employee.

Most of the time and for the majority of businesses, Desktop Video Conferencing is the most cost effective way to provide video collaboration tools to the largest number of employees. Since its rollout to consumer markets some years ago, the cost of implementation for this category of video collaboration has come down remarkably.

ROI

UC&C services can have a remarkably short payback period—one often measured in months rather than years. Research puts the average cost per person of a business trip that involves air travel at approximately $1,000. As a result, the cost of even a medium-sized meeting can be prohibitive. With UC&C, however, those meetings can happen as frequently as needed and without requiring advanced planning or travel arrangements.

THE DEPARTMENTS THAT BENEFIT THE MOST

It is true that UC&C can positively impact almost any aspect of any business in any sector, but some parts of a business are likely to benefit more than others.

Human Resources

The human resources department must wear a variety of hats in most businesses. The tasks where UC&C can make the biggest impact are those of training staff and informing workers of policy changes. The ability to reach employees at any time wherever they are means that employees get information when they need it, not just when they are available. The use of video conferencing tools when delivering training means that employees will retain the information six times more easily, and that HR can evaluate in real-time if the training is effective or not.

Sales

Sales and marketing is the face of any business, and is the department that has direct contact with customers and clients. The more widespread those customers and clients

become, though, the harder it is for sales and marketing to forge meaningful and long-lasting relationships, and the harder it is for clients to get help when they need it. UC&C provides more meaningful communication between the sales department and clients in a more cost-effective manner. This results in more frequent communication, which equals greater customer retention.

From strengthening existing client relationships to developing broad-reaching and innovative sales campaigns, the marketing applications of this technology are astounding.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Reliability and Scalability

For UC&C to be a valuable tool it has to work when it is needed, and it has to scale with demand as it is rolled out to more of the company or as the company expands. As adoption spreads throughout the organization, employees will come to rely on UC&C to accomplish their work, so reliability is very important.

Usability

Another key factor in adoption by staff is how easy the applications are to use. The more intuitive the software and equipment are, the more employees will want to make use of the new tools, and the faster the company will benefit.

Security and Manageability

The need for secure, easily managed applications cannot be overstated. The more a business uses a communications platform, the more likely sensitive information is to be sent

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across that platform. Security is immensely important. Likewise, IT is as prone to staffing and resource shortages as any other department. The easier a UC&C solution is to manage, the less likely problems are to arise.

Cost Effectiveness

The more cost effective the implementation is, the more widespread it will be within the organization. The more widespread it is, the more useful—and therefore cost effective—it will be. The most valuable video collaboration implementation is one in which every employee uses the system.

CONCLUSION

We live in the age of global commerce and decentralized workplaces. Employees are expected to always be on and available, but they shouldn't be expected to always be in the same place. UC&C technology allows forward looking businesses to make the best use of their staff by boosting their productivity and increasing the speed at which ideas propagate through the organization. The end result of implementing the right UC&C solution is a more productive and more efficient business that is adequately equipped to compete in the modern business world.