2017 Video Conferencing Buyer’s Guide

From Budget to Implementation
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More and more businesses are investing in video conferencing. The business benefits of video conferencing are well-established, with more than 90 percent of businesses who regularly use video conferencing benefit from improvements in productivity, better teamwork, and reduced travel expenses.

Improvements in technology have reduced many of the problems traditionally associated with video conferencing, in addition to making video conferencing widely available to businesses regardless of budget.

But video conferencing in 2017 has become such a robust market that purchasing a video conferencing system can be a complicated decision. Here’s how to determine your business’ needs for a video conferencing system and purchase the right solution.

Why You Should Invest in Video Conferencing

Given the high price tag associated with a high-end video conferencing, you may be reluctant to take the plunge. But video conferencing offers significant ROI in the long run. A survey of more than 4,700 enterprise video conferencing users conducted by Wainhouse Research and Polycom revealed the top four benefits of video conferencing.
1. **Improvements in productivity:** 94 percent of users experienced a surge in efficiency and productivity as a result of implementing video conferencing. Travel for business is hugely inefficient, resulting in lost time as your employees travel by car or plane. In person meetings can also be slow to begin, as most people who’ve ever attended a staff meeting know well. But with video conferencing, a meeting can begin in an instant.

   Technological improvements have sped up video conferencing so that users don’t need to consult with IT as frequently. [More than half of regular users] rarely or never require assistance from IT.

   More than 90% of businesses who regularly use video conferencing benefit from improvements in productivity, better teamwork, and reduced travel expenses.

   eWeek

2. **Collaborations have greater impact:** 88 percent reported that video conferencing enabled better and more meaningful collaborations. Although email and phone conferencing have their uses, it’s more difficult to convey nonverbal meanings via these channels. Real time communication with a video component enables better communication and collaboration. An excellent video conferencing system allows users to converse with each other meaningfully, as they would in person, without all of the costs associated with travel.
3. **The ability to make decisions faster:** In a corporate environment, decisions can take a long time as different stakeholders weigh in. Video conferencing enables businesses to reduce the amount of time they spend waiting for approval for major decisions. Even if stakeholders are on different continents, video conferencing enables all decision makers to meet together, thereby expediting business processes. 87 percent of video conferencing users were able to make decisions more quickly as a result of their investment.

4. **Lower travel costs:** Saving money on travel expenses is one of the clearest benefits of video conferencing. 87 percent of survey respondents saved money on travel by implementing video conferencing. Travel for a single executive can cost $1,000 per day if not more, so the yearly savings are considerable. In addition to the financial benefit, video conferencing enables your employees to spend less time traveling. This tends to reduce burnout and improve employee satisfaction by allowing them to spend more time at home.

As these results indicate, the benefits of video conferencing go beyond saving money on travel expenses. Companies that utilize video conferencing are more efficient, productive, and collaborative.
Trends in Video Conferencing

Video conferencing is a rapidly evolving field. There are some trends buyers should be aware of.

UC or Unified Communications is becoming dominant in business telecommunications. The principal of UC is that all communications should be unified technologically in order to facilitate better communications and collaboration. Now, UCaaS—Unified Communications as a Service—is advancing. Many top vendors are now offering cloud-based UC platforms. UCaaS enables video conferencing to be integrated with other forms of communication, such as texting, social media, and email.

More than half of regular users rarely or never require assistance from IT.

eWeek

At the same time, use of video conferencing is expanding to include more uses, such as job interviews and meetings with prospective customers. Video conferencing is also being used to enable the expansion of a remote workforce. Data suggests that 55 percent of employees who don’t currently have the option to telecommute would like to do so if they had the ability. Video conferencing can reshape the way we work.
New tools for video conferencing, such as WebRTC, are becoming more widely used. In fact, web conferencing software will grow at an annual rate of 8.4 percent in the coming years and will reach $2.41 billion in 2020. The growth in web conferencing is converging with the UC trend and more vendors will incorporate web conferencing options into their UCaaS offerings.

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PGI

As video conferencing becomes ubiquitous, many companies are also seeking to brand their systems so that conference participants view the company logo during a conference. The future of video conferencing means more usage, more customization, and more integration with other forms of communication.

In the future, we can even expect Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) to enter video conferencing for a more immersive experience. While this technology is not yet widely available, it is something to consider for long-term planning.
Types of Video Conferencing Solutions

Business buyers have a wide range of video conferencing systems to choose from—anything from a PC with Skype Business installed to a full immersive telepresence system. Before narrowing your search, you need to decide what kind of system best fits your budget and needs. The different types of video conferencing systems are as follows:

Telepresence

Of all the different types of video conferencing, telepresence comes closest to approximating a real life meeting. Using large HD screens, HD audio, HD codecs, and HD microphones, telepresence solutions allow conference participants to feel like they’re in the same room with each other. Although there are (large) portable solutions available, telepresence solutions are usually integrated into the architecture of the room.

Integrated

While less expensive and immersive than telepresence solutions, integrated solutions are commonly used in boardrooms and conference rooms. They are permanently mounted in the rooms. Oftentimes, they’re used for other purposes such as presentations.
Set-Top

Set-Top solutions are all-in-one video conferencing solutions that include a camera, microphone, and codec. Some Set-Top solutions include monitors, but users can also use a monitor of their own choosing. Set-Top solutions are relatively easy to set up and portable.

Desktop

Desktop video conferencing is the simplest and least expensive form of video conferencing. They integrate with employees’ workspace. Usually, desktop solutions include a camera and microphone, but some solutions may be compatible with the camera and microphone already installed on a computer. If you have remote employees, they will likely be using desktop video conferencing.

In addition to these options, there are also options for mode of deployment. Cloud-based video conferencing solutions are becoming increasingly popular. This mode of deployment, which works on a subscription model, offers the advantages of the cloud. These include lower costs upfront, simplicity, and greater flexibility when scaling. Many SMBs prefer cloud-based solutions because of the lower costs upfront. In terms of maintenance and problem-solving, cloud-based solutions are less onerous for the IT team.
However, there are still advantages to on-premises video conferencing solutions. For companies that wish to control their own firewalls and security, on-premises solutions are oftentimes preferable. On-premises solutions are also easier to customize if you have extensive customization needs.

Defining Your Needs

Before you start researching vendors in depth, you should clearly define your needs in a video conferencing system. Ask these questions:

- How many users will be using video conferencing?
- How many users will be using the system at once?
- Where will they be using the system?
- Will any users be accessing conferences via mobile devices?
- What kind of support from IT will users receive?
- With whom will users be having conferences?
• What is the format of our conferences—do they involve many different speakers, or only a few?

• Will conference participants be using collaborative tools during conferences?

• Do we need to record conferences?

• What applications need to be integrated with our system?

• Will users be discussing highly sensitive information during conferences?

• Do we already have hardware that can be integrated into a video conferencing system?

• Are we willing to invest in new hardware?

Once you answer these questions in detail, you should have a pretty good idea of what type of system best meets your needs.

Budgeting

At this point in the process, budgeting is critical. You'll need to evaluate the features you’d like to see in a video conferencing system in terms of your ability to afford them. The good
news is that there really is a video conferencing system for every budget. While devising your budget, keep in mind that you’ll be responsible not only for upfront costs, but also bandwidth costs on an ongoing basis.

In fact, bandwidth is usually the largest ongoing expense associated with video conferencing. The amount of bandwidth you’ll utilize depends upon a few factors: 1) Number of concurrent conference calls; 2) Frame rate and resolution of your system; 3) Audio quality.

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**Frost & Sullivan**

The more concurrent calls you have, the more bandwidth you’ll need in order to ensure that all calls can go through without significant lag. Investing in higher-quality visual and audio systems will also increase the bandwidth budget.

Although it can be tempting to cut corners on audio and visual quality, that may not be wise if you are using the video conferencing system for critical business meetings, such as meetings with clients or high-level executive meetings. Although a little jitter can be acceptable for a weekly staff meeting, in other cases it can ruin the video conferencing experience.
Basic Requirements for Video Conferencing

Video conferencing has basic hardware requirements. Depending on your existing hardware, you may be able to repurpose it for a modern video conferencing system. If you are buying new hardware, here are some things to consider:

VoIP subscribership has been growing at a rate of approximately 14 percent, year over year, each year since 2009.

Infonetics Research

**Cameras:** Budget-friendly options for cameras include the camera integrated into a desktop computer or mobile device, or alternatively a consumer-grade webcam. On the higher end, there are cameras specifically for video conferencing. Some include features for detecting who is speaking at any given moment and focusing on the speaker. Video conferencing systems designed for large groups of people usually require multiple cameras.

**Display:** Any monitor can be used to display a video conferencing feed, including the monitors on your office PCs. However, there are also monitors engineered for video conferencing purposes. The advantage of these monitors is that they are better able to deliver high performance for a live conference, which requires considerably more bandwidth than other monitor applications.
Microphones: For basic video conferencing, the microphone built into a computer is sufficient. But depending on the number of people using a video conferencing system, you may require multiple microphones. Some microphones available have features for detecting speakers.

Speakers: To receive optimal audio performance in a large video conferencing situation, multiple speakers are required. There are a range of speakers available on the market, including “HD audio” speakers.

Codec/software: A codec or software is necessary for your video conferencing system to communicate with other systems. Usually, an open-standard codec is best so that the system is compatible with any other system regardless of hardware.

Next Steps to Take

Once you’ve clearly defined your needs and budgets, you’re ready to start talking to vendors. Many vendors offer free trials of their services. If possible, you should take advantage of trials so that you can evaluate services firsthand. Whenever testing a service, include end users in the testing process. Ideally, the IT team won’t need to be present every time someone needs to make a conference call.
Ask vendors to explain what support they provide for implementation, maintenance, and ongoing support. This can vary widely.

Before signing a contract, consult with references provided by the vendor. Questions to ask references may include:

- What video conferencing system do you use?
- How long have you used this system?
- How easy was it to learn the system?
- When using the system, how frequently do users need to call the IT team?
- What unexpected problems have you run into?
- How would you evaluate the support you’ve received from this vendor?

Once you’ve thoroughly vetted the vendor, you’re ready to purchase your video conferencing system and start reaping the benefits.
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