



10 BEST PRACTICES

for Making **Video** Part of Your Collaboration Strategy

Incorporating video collaboration as a standard business practice can result in tighter employee and business partner relationships, increased productivity, faster decision-making and many more lucrative benefits.

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In the business world, the human factor must never be overlooked. A company that has a great product may be lacking in sales due to poor sales support or customer service. Or perhaps an internal project shoots way off track as team members in different locations struggle to make themselves and their requirements understood. Conference calling and web conferencing have become standard practices but are too limiting for companies looking to engender more highly collaborative and productive work environments. So often, attaching a face to a name and, even more significantly, being able to read someone's facial expressions and body language can make the critical difference in the success or failure of a business communication.

In this day and age, with 24x7 web-based, global business operations commonplace and mobility a growing workplace trend, companies are seeking the best way to enable clear and effective communications among employees, business partners and customers. Video conferencing offers the next logical, often essential, step in evolving a communications strategy for optimizing collaboration. →

■ CHANGING THE BUSINESS

Applications of video communications are endless, and companies that embrace video as part of their communications strategies stand to gain a wide range of benefits. As they collaborate across town, the continent or the globe, the potential benefits include improved competitive positioning; faster, enhanced decision-making; a reduction in repeat meetings and misinterpretations of business intentions; and decreased travel and other expenses.

With increasing business pressures and benefits such as these in the offing, corporate management increasingly identifies video conferencing as a cost-effective and useful—even crucial—tool. Such has been the case at Quincy Newspapers, Inc., a news operation in Quincy, Ill., that runs 14 TV stations and two newspapers. Since the company began using video conferencing two and a half years ago, it has found it to be “an amazing tool that’s revolutionized not only what we do but also how we do it,” says Brady Dreasler, director of broadcast engineering at Quincy Newspapers.

At the company, video conferencing sessions are so quick and easy to launch that they’ve become part and parcel of daily work life for managers, who routinely conduct department meetings and remotely manage staffs and oversee projects, Dreasler says.

With video conferencing at its disposal, Quincy Newspapers has even been able to do a better job, far more cost-effectively, than it did when executives relied on a corporate plane, now retired, to fly between locations, Dreasler says. Case in point: When the company’s TV stations had to convert from using analog signals to digital for programming, video conferencing came in handy. “This required a lot of coordination, and even if I still had that plane, I couldn’t have gotten to 14 locations in one day. Video conferencing enabled me to talk to 14 locations over a period of a couple of hours, so I could ensure that the conversion was coordinated and working—that’s why video conferencing is so effective,” he adds.

Likewise, video conferencing has had a positive impact on streamlining and improved year-end fiscal meetings as well. “What used to take days, if not weeks, we can now get done in hours, because we can meet face to face and have everyone working from and sharing the same documents and notes,” Dreasler says.

Indeed, with improvements on both the network and video system sides, few, if any, gating factors stand in a company’s way of using video conferencing. For example, broadband and converged networks are here, and IP is ubiquitous in most business settings. IP-enabled high-definition (HD) video systems for business also have arrived, delivering video conferencing quality of 1,280 x 720 at 30 frames per second over 768-Kbps connections. For even better motion handling, 60 frames per second is achievable at 1.1 Mbps.

Additionally, measurable increases in quality at lower bandwidths are attainable. For example, DVD quality is achievable at just 384 Kbps. So, for even for rates of less than 1 Mbps over the public Internet, phenomenal video quality is now a reality. Most businesses are capable of allocating this amount of bandwidth for video communications, especially when the cost-to-return component is so favorable. In some cases, it is desirable to use a quality-of-service (QoS) network, but it’s not always imperative.

■ 10 BEST PRACTICES FOR VIDEO COLLABORATION

As Dreasler points out, video conferencing has become easy to use and offers such high quality that having a meeting via video can be more effective than connecting in person. But that’s not to say that a company should launch into a video conferencing program without careful examination of how the technology best fits into its environment.

Here are 10 tips on how to make video an essential part of a corporate communications and collaboration strategy:

1. Take stock of your company’s collaborative environment, and explore how video might enhance the experience.

Audio calls, instant messaging and e-mail are all examples of useful corporate communications tools that help engender collaboration. But they can all be improved upon with the face-to-face experience video conferencing enables.

“Body language really speaks volumes. When you’re trying to drill down into areas that may become uncomfortable for a general manager to answer, you just can’t see that over the telephone. Being able to keep your eyes on folks is really important,” says Greg Baxter, director of IT and targeted marketing at Vanguard Truck Centers, a longtime video conferencing user.

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— Brady Dreasler, director of broadcast engineering,
Quincy Newspapers



2. Assess organizational requirements, and account for the scalability of your implementation. A good strategy is to deploy video conferencing in main conference rooms and boardrooms and start with executives as the first users, says Rafi Anuar, product manager at LifeSize, a maker of high-definition video communications products. Connect a couple of offices first, and then branch out from there.

“When you first start deploying, it’s easy to put a system in each location and have those systems place direct calls to each other. That’s pretty straightforward, requiring no major network overhauls,” he says.

Once those are up and running effectively, consider installing desktop software so you can take video out of the conference room and enable an individual with video conferencing from wherever that person might be, Anuar says.

And don’t overlook the potential need to conduct multipoint video conferences—say in an instance where the CEO wants to gather top-level directors from a dozen sites for a strategic overview. You’ll need a multipoint bridge to facilitate such a video call, with participants dialing into a bridge and entering a conference code, just as they would for an audio call. The bridge should feature advanced controls such as muting and view restriction.

3. Evaluate bandwidth requirements as well as connectivity between ISDN and IP networks. Although most video communications today will traverse IP networks with 1 Mbps of bandwidth, users might sometimes be connected via ISDN links. If so, you’ll need specialized gateways that connect the two.

Depending on the number of sites, you might consider Multiprotocol Label Switching (MPLS) services for video conferencing use or running videos over an internal IP network, Baxter advises.

“Video conferencing doesn’t really take a lot to run. A lot of HD will run at T1 or higher, but we get a good conferencing experience at 512 Kbps,” he says. “But, as a best practice, make sure you’ve got a good QoS setting on the network.”

4. Plan for mobility: How will you ensure that traveling users can participate in video collaboration sessions? “As your video conferencing use evolves, you might want to let people who travel have the ability to participate in video calls from wherever they are. But doing that successfully means that you need more than a webcam and PC software. You also want a solution that will enable them to punch through the local firewall to place the video call,” Anuar says.

But be sure to take security into account as you select a firewall traversal product. As a best practice, look for a product

that supports standards-based H.460 and Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) tunneling for secure video communications. Also helpful for mobility is the availability of a SIP registrar that enables dialing by e-mail address or conference room name, for example.

A project manager might input rafi@lifesize.com to connect him into a video call rather than having to find and use his laptop’s current IP address, Anuar describes. “Part of the challenge will be that the PC is moving from place to place and people need to know how to reach you even if your IP address keeps changing,” he says.

Similarly, whether in a mobile or stationary environment, “Users should be able to go to a corporate directory, hit a button for Boardroom at AcmeCompany.com and be in the call rather than having to dial 127.35.623.whatever. It’s about making it easier for end users.”

5. Make a commitment to ease of use and a quality user experience. For example, look for video conferencing systems that have complete room coverage and use MPEG-4 AAC algorithms for super-wide-band audio of up to 16 kHz for high-fidelity sound. Superior audioconferencing sound quality will eliminate echoes, shield against distracting buzz and otherwise make the meeting experience more effective.

“Audio is really what it’s about,” Dreasler says. “You want the audio quality to be so good that you feel that the person is in the room with you. You don’t want telephone-quality audio affected by limited bandwidth and bad frequency response.”

Besides high-quality audioconferencing capabilities, also look for video systems that integrate seamlessly with voice-over-IP (VoIP) phones and IP-PBX systems.

6. Automate and centralize video management. Look for solutions that ease the deployment and management of large numbers of computers and endpoints. In other words, look for management tools that will automatically apply settings

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based on user name and push out software updates and reconfigure endpoints as appropriate. “You should be able to update and manage all systems around the world from one central management application,” Anuar says.

You’ll also want real-time views as well as historical reporting to ensure that you’re optimizing the use of your video conferencing systems, he adds.

7. Incorporate video collaboration into overarching unified communications strategies. Document sharing and video conferencing have long gone hand in hand, but don’t be afraid to incorporate video into your unified communications (UC) strategy.

For example, integrate video conferencing with instant messaging/chat presence tools.

Look for a video conferencing solution that supports open standards and uses an application programming interface to ease integration with UC platforms, such as IBM SameTime, Microsoft Office Communications Server or Microsoft SharePoint. Such integration would enable a user to launch a video call by clicking on a video-enabled conference room in a UC buddy list. Likewise, the video conferencing system directory should let users initiate calls to people on a UC platform, Anuar says.

8. Account for recorded video as well as live feeds. Video conferencing no longer has to be a synchronous activity involving specialty equipment at both ends of the connection. At times, such as for new-product or human resources training, distance learning and all-hands-on corporate communications, recorded video made available on demand will more than suffice.

If this is a need for your company, look for a system that allows recording of video for live streamed delivery or saving for on-demand access later. “This would enable the video conferencing to be asynchronous, so users don’t have to be there all at the same time, with special equipment. They can just go to a web site and watch from their browsers,” Anuar says.

In addition, consider a system that will optimize the live and on-demand videos for the user’s device, be that a PC, laptop, tablet or even phone.

9. Ease potential discomfort for first-time users with video via Picture in Picture (PIP) suppression, and educate participants about video etiquette. Video participants tend to quickly get over any initial awkwardness they feel, but you can ease their way into regular video conferencing with a few tricks. For example, set up the system so they’re able to view only other callers, not themselves. “It’s seeing yourself that makes you self-conscious,” Anuar says.

Also conduct some basic video etiquette training. For example, encourage meeting participants not to have side conversations during the call, to avoid adding confusion to the main conversation. Remind them to keep their office or conference room doors closed during video calls to avoid distractions unrelated to the call, Quincy Newspapers’ Dreasler suggests.

In addition, meeting participants who are in the same room should be ultraconscientious about their behavior while another person is talking. “It’s very easy for a participant on the other end to become distracted by my body language. So when you’re talking, I’m going to turn and look at you and be very focused on what you’re doing, so I don’t distract the people on the other end,” he says.

10. Build video collaboration into business quality. Upper management should take on sponsorship of video conferencing, actively encouraging its use for internal and, as appropriate, external engagements.

With the state of video conferencing technology today, you’ll find a solution that meets just about any requirement.

At Atlanta-based Vanguard Truck Centers, for example, the ability to hold video meetings became crucial as the company expanded beyond its Georgia origins and into Arizona and Texas.

“We hold month-end meetings with general managers and department heads at the dealerships to go over monthly activity and project next month’s sales and sales activity. Our CEO and CFO were constantly flying to each location—the two combined had about 14 travel days a month to conduct these meetings. They were handcuffed by the travel schedule,” Baxter says.

Vanguard implemented video conferencing roughly six years ago to open executive schedules for other responsibilities and to reduce travel costs. “Video conferencing is a pretty important thing for us these days, especially being able to maintain face-to-face communications during month-end meetings even though our operations are widespread,” he says.

As companies such as Quincy Newspapers and Vanguard can demonstrate, incorporating video collaboration as a standard business practice can result in numerous benefits. To name a few, these include the ability to forge tighter relationships among employees and between employees and business partners, suppliers, customers and other external parties; increase productivity, shorten time to market; enable quicker decision-making; and reduce travel expenses.

As Dreasler says, “You can’t overstate the value of good communications. Video conferencing lets us operate more independently in addition to more collaboratively, and at the end of the day, we’re more effective.” ■