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50 Years of Growth, Innovation and Leadership

Visual Collaboration:
Boost Employee Productivity and Drive Customer Interaction

A Frost & Sullivan
White Paper

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Companies are wrestling with many challenges as they try to compete in an increasingly global marketplace, including how to reduce expenses and boost productivity across geographical boundaries. As a result, more employees are working from remote sites and home offices to save operational costs and deliver better customer service to their customers and business partners worldwide.

Savvy companies are realizing that the key to success in the 21st century workplace is to implement enterprise communication technology that can increase virtual collaboration. This is ever more critical for the new generation of employees who are comfortable using various communications technologies in their home lives, and who now expect to use those same tools at work. As companies look to deploy new unified communications (UC) technologies, they are considering where and how visual collaboration applications, such as video conferencing, fit in. And, by adding more advanced collaboration capabilities like interactive whiteboarding and integration with other UC technologies, companies can make their video conferencing more effective and improve their overall ROI.

This white paper will detail the changing nature of business communications today; outline the benefits of video conferencing in supporting advanced collaboration; detail the business and integration considerations companies must weigh before deploying a new solution; and offer best practices for choosing, implementing and supporting a complete visual collaboration solution.

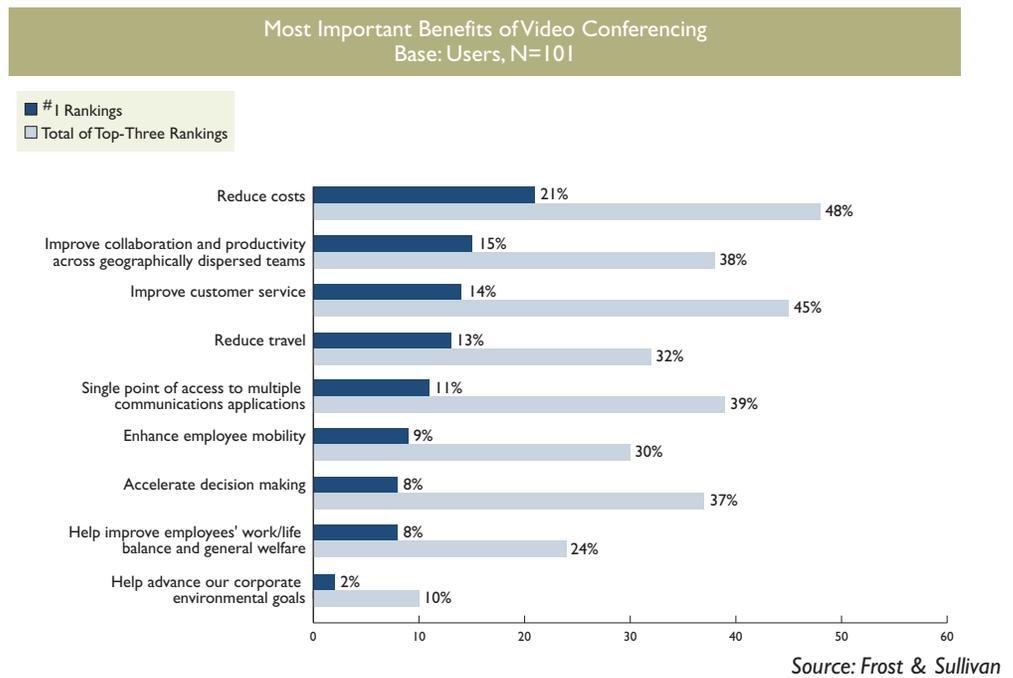
THE CHANGING NATURE OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

As the business world grows increasingly virtual—with employees, partners and customers working in a variety of locations and on a variety of devices—organizations face a difficult challenge: they must ensure that virtual teams can collaborate regularly and cost-effectively to drive revenue, boost productivity and seize new opportunities as soon as they arise.

Even five or 10 years ago, it was relatively easy for employees to collaborate—they could simply walk down the hall or across the corporate campus to work with a colleague, or schedule a team meeting in a conference room. But with employees working from myriad locations and across geographies, it's now harder to schedule in-person meetings, and it's impossible to rely on ad-hoc interactions to get things done.

Therefore, technology must replicate the office-based experience of sharing information and expertise—but in a virtual world. Smart companies are embracing this shift by leveraging technology such as video conferencing. By giving all employees access to tools that support and encourage not just communication, but true collaboration, companies will see a clear competitive advantage.

Figure 1: Benefits of Video Conferencing



Key Uses for Visual Collaboration:

- Education
- Training
- Product Announcements
- Healthcare
- Elder and Child Care
- Project Follow-Up
- Professional Services
- Product Development

VISUAL COLLABORATION: HELPING VIRTUAL TEAMS WORK TOGETHER

Video conferencing has long been recognized as a valuable replacement for in-person meetings, since it lets team members meet face-to-face without the need for lengthy and expensive travel. This is critical, since in a recent Frost & Sullivan survey, reducing costs is the number one reason respondents gave for employing the technology.

Because it lets participants see one another, and react to facial expressions and body language, video conferencing helps users interact as though they were in the same room and creates a “you are there” experience that makes it easier to understand exactly what’s being said and heard. (It also makes it easier to understand people who are not native speakers, because you can see their lips move and better grasp their message.) By leveraging such technology, companies can improve meeting effectiveness and attendee performance, actively increasing the amount and value of collaboration in the enterprise.

What's more, by incorporating interactive whiteboarding and other collaboration features into the experience, companies can make video meetings even more effective than their real-world counterparts, since attendees can work on and mark-up documents in real time, with the results captured and saved for future use. This has uses across industries and companies of all sizes, including education, manufacturing and healthcare. For example, doctors across the country, or even across continents, can collaborate on a case by annotating and whiteboarding on a patient's records, CAT scan images and surgical procedures to provide better patient care in less time and at significantly lower cost.

Better Customer Interactions

Few companies can afford to send employees to customer sites on a regular basis, and yet getting face time with key clients is critical to maintaining loyalty and driving business. With visual collaboration, sales people can get in front of prospects more often during the sales process. Video sessions may not replace all in-person meetings, but they can make the contacts in between client visits more meaningful.

Visual collaboration can deepen the strategic relationship between the customer and relevant employees, which leads to better service and satisfaction.

Improving Customer Interactions:

- Catch up to the consumer market. Video conferencing is replacing phone, e-mail and even chat-based interactions in customer service. Consumers use the technology with friends and family—they want to use it with your business, too.
- Stay close to your customers. When it comes to customer service, frequent exchanges are key. The more your customers see you, the less they see your competitors.
- Collaboration breeds commitment. Collaboration is not just beneficial for employees; working closely with customers to address their needs improves the value of the relationship and deepens their connection to the company.

Maintaining Corporate Culture

When employees are dispersed across offices, geographic locations and cultures, it can be difficult to maintain a single corporate identity, which can cause employees to lose a sense of belonging to the larger organization. This can affect performance, retention rates and even the perception of the organization to the wider world. With video collaboration, home-based workers stay connected without having to commute regularly into the office.

Frost & Sullivan research shows that more than a third of end users say they need to incorporate Web conferencing with their video conferencing. Companies should choose a solution that supports Web collaboration as part of a video meeting.

DEPLOYING VISUAL COLLABORATION—MAKING IT WORK

As companies implement more advanced communications applications, they must decide on the deployment model that works best for them, choosing among an array of endpoints and building a network infrastructure that can support advanced collaboration across business and geographic borders.

Pros & Cons: Systems and Services

Visual collaboration solutions come in a variety of formats. All have value, but some are better suited to certain use cases than others. New video conferencing deployments should be high definition (HD), which offers video resolution that delivers nearly 10 times the quality of traditional systems and will improve the video experience at any bandwidth.

- **Traditional room-based video conferencing** allows one or more participants in a room to interact with one or more participants in another room (or several rooms, in a multi-point call). But room-based systems are not ideal for remote workers, who typically don't have ready access to them.
- **Executive desktop systems** sit on a user's desk and typically include a high-quality display that can double as a PC monitor, a built-in, high-end camera, microphones and speakers, and content sharing capabilities. These systems can offer very high quality, but they are costly for individual users and so are usually deployed only to high-level managers and executives.
- **PC-based video conferencing systems** range from low-priced PC software to feature-rich videophones. As unified communications applications gain traction, the desire for PC-based video is growing, but it can place stress on the corporate network and requires proactive management.
- **Interactive whiteboarding systems** combine a whiteboard with UC applications and video to enable real-time sharing, creating and reviewing of documents and objects. This requires additional equipment and network management, but the benefit is a truly engaged collaboration experience that enables an iterative process and improves productivity.
- **Telepresence systems** are designed to deliver an "immersive" experience that makes the end user feel like he or she is literally in the same room as remote participants. Telepresence requires high bandwidth and specialized furniture and architectural details, and it comes with a steep price tag, but the technology is the best choice for certain industries and applications, including strategic executive meetings and manufacturing and development.

Getting the Infrastructure Right

Interoperability is critical for any visual collaboration deployment. Interoperability can be enabled in a number of ways, but companies must choose the option that best meets their company's business and technology needs now, and in the future.

A basic Multipoint Control Unit (MCU) can let companies connect multiple video conferencing sites into a single conference, but companies must deploy MCUs that support all endpoints and applications. And, as more employees go mobile, they need to access video conferences from a variety of handheld devices. Today, MCUs are often integrated into UC servers or network switches to simplify the setup and streamline deployment and operations.

Most companies need to integrate new systems with older endpoints, as well as more advanced UC applications. They also need to be able to extend visual collaboration to users outside the firewall—regardless of whether participants (including partners and customers) are using endpoints different from those the organization supports. Companies should also pay attention to management and performance, and ensure that they deploy a secure solution, especially if they are supporting conferences beyond their firewall.

They'll also need to manage bandwidth and performance in real time to ensure that all visual collaboration sessions occur at optimum quality, without degrading the quality of other events and applications running on the network, and regardless of the bandwidth available to every participant. That can be achieved by deploying network infrastructure and management software that lets IT prioritize conferences on the network, proactively monitor performance, and analyze detailed reports.

Finally, companies should evaluate the return on investment their visual collaboration solution will likely deliver. Most companies can expect to see payback within 12–24 months; some organizations tell us they justify the purchase in a single meeting, considering the savings in travel costs alone.

CONCLUSION

As companies strive to support an increasingly virtual workplace, they are also faced with a growing list of business challenges: how to lower costs and drive productivity; shrink times to market and decision cycles; grow their global business and respond to opportunities quickly; recruit and retain talented employees regardless of where they are based; improve customer service; and enable free collaboration among employees, partners and key customers.

Visual collaboration, which lets far-flung employees, partners and customers meet face-to-face without actually having to be in the same room—and which delivers advanced collaboration tools such as white boarding—can support these and other business goals.

As they consider a visual collaboration deployment, companies are faced with an array of choices around endpoints (room-based, executive, PC desktop, telepresence) and infrastructure (premises-based, hosted or managed services), as well as issues around integration and management. By choosing an experienced communications and collaboration provider, companies can ensure maximum value, enjoy a competitive advantage and see dramatic return on investment.



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