The impact of tablets on video conferencing

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Video conferencing has had many false dawns, but perhaps something is changing. Some of the technology perceptions that have affected its adoption for a long time still persist. There are concerns about interoperability between different vendors' products, the quality of the sound and video, the communications costs and impact on network bandwidth. Most of these concerns are no longer valid, yet something stills seems to be holding adoption back.

In part, the industry has addressed interoperability issues through standards, but also there has been some consolidation amongst suppliers and a recognition that video is not a standalone conferencing system, but part of a larger communications infrastructure.

In the recent years, most of the specialist video conferencing suppliers have recognised the need for a range of products from desktop to dedicated whole room systems for different types of use, and that these should all integrate together and with other companies products as part of a complete video system.

Quality has improved a lot, with cheap low-end cameras on laptops capable of delivering high definition images, and tele-presence systems capable of not only multi-screen high definition images, but directional sound and eye contact.

The highest quality systems do have an impact on networks, requiring high and sometimes dedicated bandwidth, but even moderate home broadband connections are now more than enough for reasonable quality video communications.

With a sorting out of the technology issues, the user experience has been massively improved. The initiation, control and operation of visual communications no longer needs a resident engineer or expert. Software has improved and by and large allowed video to be unified with other forms of communications.

Most operators, Internet service providers and network managers would say that there has been a big uptick in the amount of video traffic on their networks, but the overwhelming percentage of this is one way, media consumption i.e. YouTube, iPlayer and so on.

So why are there still only a few groups of users for two-way or more communications?

Acceptance of the experience and appreciation of its value seem to be at the heart of the issue. It is no longer difficult or necessarily expensive, but what is missing is a killer application need to justify its regular use.

The mobile industry thought it had found it with personal mobile video calling. It is true that the fixed line telephony industry has had a number of abortive attempts with personal video telephony from the AT&T Picturephones onwards, but with the advent of their high bandwidth 3G networks, mobile operators finally thought they could sell video calling on the move. It was heavily promoted when the new generation of devices and networks first appeared, but bombed, and despite further marketing pushes, most people are more likely to see a meteor than a person making a video call on their mobile.

Many marketing campaigns promoting the use of video have focussed on what it takes away. There is no need to travel, damage the environment, waste time or meet face to face. The key question when bringing video into the communication should be 'what does it add?'

Fixed video conferencing systems show one roomful of people another roomful. That's great for multi-person gatherings, but with one person at both ends all you see is their head and torso and the office they are sat in. They may be able to bring things into view for a 'show and tell', but in many cases that will not be convenient e.g. Dr Jones, let me show you the patient, or take a look at this manufacturing process etc.

Personal mobile video can either do a head and shoulders shot of the person (generally distorted due to the effect of being close up, so not very flattering), or a 'see what I see' shot away from the individual. Neither is completely satisfactory.

In the first instance it might be ok if the two on the call know each other well enough to not be put off, but what really does the close up image of them talking add to the conversation? While 'see what I see' has some merit, the loss of the facial expression of the individual takes something away, even though further context has been added.

However, it might be that with the current generation of mobile tablet devices – lighter and longer battery life than laptops, but larger screens than mobile phones – will deliver the form factor that video communications has been looking for as they deliver a different kind of mobile video experience.

A user facing camera embedded in the edge of the device can incorporate both the individual's expressions and the context of the surrounding area but the device is sufficiently portable to be taken to points or subjects of interest. The wider visual element can now add value to the call.

While it might not be acceptable or comfortable to make video calls in crowded public places ("here I am, on the train, as you can see it's packed with irritable commuters"), within the work place it is a different story. The way a tablet has to be held – like a clipboard – means it can readily be shared with others who might need to be involved in the visual communication, but in a far more ad hoc and natural way than perched in a line looking at a full sized conferencing system. Video can be incorporated to supply information and communication into a business process without getting in the way or forcing the user to move away from where the 'action' is.

Tablets are already being used as a casual information access devices within businesses, with some users starting opt for them instead of laptops. With several new tablets being launched with cameras, the recent appearance of communications oriented devices like the Avaya Flare and even Apple's iPad2 purported to have a camera, it seems like there will be a sudden influx of smart, mobile, full screen video ready platforms.

Does this mean that these tablets are the only tools where two-way video communications will make sense? By no means, since fixed desktop and tele-presence systems have their place and valid use cases. But unconstrained video on a tablet, unified into the other on-device communications tools available could be the key to unlocking much wider adoption of visual communications.

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