

Computer Weekly - Multi-videoconferencing for the many

By Clive Longbottom, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd

Travel budgets are being squeezed - gone are the days of leaping on the nearest plane and flying first class to have a 2 hour meeting on the other side of the pond. However, top-end videoconferencing suites, although highly effective, are not widespread in use as yet, generally due to the high costs of tele-immersion systems, and the need for dedicated rooms and managed high-bandwidth connections.

For most people, daily collaboration generally involves a quick discussion and the sharing of information. For example, one person based in London may want to show a colleague or customer in New York what they have been working on. E-mail may work, or it may be too slow, may introduce misunderstandings or complex round-robins of communications.

Simple videoconferencing, of the likes of Skype or Windows Live Messenger may be OK for one-on-one discussions, and where lack of complete video image and video clarity is not a major issue.

Video conferencing for SMEs

But what about when you want to bring together a virtual team of people to collaborate over an item? Can you bring multi-point videoconferencing with sounds and screen sharing together in a way that works, at a price point accessible to small businesses?

The problem here is that there are hundreds of small companies that state that they can do some or all of what a user could be looking for. From on-premises systems, through hybrid hosted/thick client models, to in-the-cloud models, there seem to be so many webconferencing, videoconferencing, teleconferencing and screen sharing companies out there that it has become very difficult to see the wood for the trees.

In such a crowd, the differentiators are not necessarily the quality of the video stream (important though that is), but rather security, pricing, client software design and so on. One company at least is worthy of being highlighted, as it appears to offer a few differentiators worth a look at.

VSee is a US-based company with a relatively simple system that covers a lot of bases for many users. Multi-point video is covered, and advanced algorithmic codecs working in the background ensure that the best possible video and voice quality is maintained during a call.

Any specific window or a complete desktop can be shared between people in the call, and control can be handed over as necessary for others to add comments and mark up on the original screen.

So far, so good, but these points in themselves hardly set the world on fire. What else can VSee offer?

Security

How about very solid levels of security? Its customer base includes the sort of groups that should not be mentioned in polite conversation, with an increasing number choosing VSee purely for its security capabilities.

How about its extremely low footprint? Although a hosted model, VSee is not dependent on downloading multi-megabyte clients that may, or may not, work successfully on the client machine.

How about this contextuality of connectivity capabilities? VSee recently ran a system for the UNHCR where a refugee camp in Chad was able to participate in a full video conference with the US, without the need for any special hardware or bandwidth.

VSee's business model is that each user needs a VSee account, which has a quoted cost of \$50 per user per month.

And herein lies the rub. VSee makes the greatest sense for relatively small organisations, but the pricing model does not attractively scale.

Let's look at a 10 user organisation: 10 licences at \$50 per month = \$6,000 per annum. Only one first class trans-Atlantic ticket, sure, but still a lot of money to stump up for an organisation of that size. When this is combined with the problem that few video conference systems are capable of interacting with each other, the perceptual issues may be too much in these circumstances.

As video conferencing is not just a tool for communicating with fellow employees, but rather one that gains value in line with Metcalf's Law, it would be nice to see a pricing model that rewarded existing customers for encouraging other businesses to sign up too. One existing VSee customer could enhance the penetration of VSee in the marketplace by encouraging the business partners with which the VSee customer needs to communicate with to also sign on to using the technology.

Free trial

VSee does, however, offer a 30-day free trial, so that organisations can see if works for them. As with most vendors, there are savings to be made for quantity purchases, but this is obviously something for individual negotiation.

It is also a relatively small and nimble organisation, and states that it is always looking at its cost models, which may mean that there is a degree of flexibility in how such organisations could draw up a subscription agreement.

But, in a world where remote collaboration is becoming increasingly important, VSee is worth looking at: you can even look at it with a VSee employee on the other end if you want to try it for real.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation’s environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca’s mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca’s clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, O2, T-Mobile, HP, Xerox, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

Details of Quocirca’s work and the services it offers can be found at
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