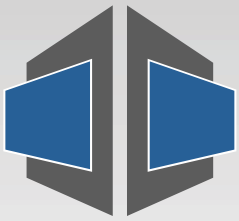
7 Questions to Ask Video Conferencing Providers



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CONTENTS

Introduction

There are a lot of video conferencing solutions available for businesses of every size. They fall into two main categories: premises and cloud, or hosted, solutions. Although the line dividing the two isn't as clear as it might seem, you may decide to use a cloud-based solution for some very good reasons. Chief among these is that it means you don't need to buy and operate that expensive piece of equipment known as an MCU, for multipoint control unit, which combines separate users' video streams into a single conference.

But opting for the cloud approach is just the first in a series of complex decisions you have to make. In fact, every cloud-based video conferencing service is different. As a result, it's easy to end up with one that doesn't fit your needs. To avoid this fate, you'll need to ask prospective providers some serious questions. Here are seven to get you started.

1. How many people can participate in your video conferences?

The basic question is fairly straightforward. You probably have some general numbers in mind for how many people you expect to have in your video conferences, and how often you expect to hold conferences. This may or may not fit the way the provider is selling its service. Some providers charge a flat rate for a specified maximum number of participants, with additional per-minute charges for more. Some simply charge per minute per participant. There are a variety of other approaches as well. And technical limitations may put a cap on the number of participants you can have regardless of pricing. So you need to figure out which provider's package will work best with your expected usage patterns.

But some unexpected factors may complicate the decision. For one, how many of the participants in your conferences do you expect to be active? If a lot of them will be just watching and listening instead of speaking, you might look for a service that offers a so-called broadcasting option as opposed to pure conferencing. And even if all of your expected participants will be active, you'll need to know whether they all have to be registered users, such as employees. The alternative is for some of them be guests, such as outsiders whom you can invite to participate on a per-conference basis. In that case, you'll need to know whether guests have to use a certain type of equipment or software to participate.

2. What kind of endpoints does the solution support or require?

There are two main ways to communicate via video. One is through specialized video conferencing equipment. These range from quarter-million-dollar room-based telepresence systems to video capable desk phones. The other is through PCs equipped with Web cams. PC-based systems may use downloaded client software or Web browsers. Each type of endpoint presents a number of issues you need to consider.

The use of specialized equipment raises financial and other questions. The most obvious is cost. In most cases you'll have to buy the equipment yourself. Depending on its price, adding this to the monthly fees you'll be paying could make video conferencing a lot more expensive than you expected.

In addition, when using desktop video phones, the small screen size may limit what you can view. You may only be able to see a limited number of participants' faces, for example. You may also have trouble perceiving their facial expressions, diminishing one of the central benefits of video conferencing. And it may be hard to make use of various optional collaboration capabilities (see Question 4 below).

Use of either type of equipment also affects issues such as the number of locations from which employees can participate in conferences (see Question 3 below).

3 Video Conferencing Endpoints
1. Specialized Video Equipment
2. PCs Equipped with Web Cams
3. Mobile Smart Phones & Tablets

Use of PC-based endpoints raises its own issues, however. For one thing, employees can only use them while their PCs are on. That's less convenient than just picking up a phone or pressing a key and making a voice or video connection. Software-based endpoints also have to share the PC's processing power with other applications. And as in many other areas, software-based systems simply may not deliver the quality and performance of dedicated hardware.

There's also a third endpoint approach that, although not yet mainstream, will become increasingly important to consider: video conferencing via mobile devices, including smart phones and tablets. This

development is in part a result of the BYOD (bring your own device) phenomenon, that sees more employees conducting business using their personal electronic equipment. Either way, it means you have to ask about the full range of devices your prospective provider supports, including consumer products, as well as the related services, such as consumer video chat, with which it can connect.

3. From what locations can employees participate in video conferences?

Modern companies, no matter their size, often have widely scattered employees. It would be nice to be able to bring all of them together in video conferences. But you'll have to make sure that your provider's system makes that possible. For example, if it confines itself exclusively to connecting room-based systems, only employees who are within reach of a conference room will be able to participate. This is fairly rare, of course. But services that depend mainly on desktop video phones will also pose problems. If employees are working from home, the road or overseas, it will be logistically difficult to get them all on video phones.

It might seem better if the service lets everyone use PCs with Web cams. This allows everyone to call in from their desks wherever they are. But it also raises more questions. If it requires client software, for example, you'll need to know what type of operating systems it works with. Some otherwise excellent services only work on Windows computers, for example. And some providers may rely on free services like Skype or Google Chat to connect users via PCs. This may raise some quality concerns.

> The ability to connect from mobile devices including smart phones and tablets will become increasingly important.

The ability to connect from mobile devices including smart phones and tablets will, again, become increasingly important in determining the number of locations from which employees can join video conferences. It will also raise some complex questions. Some tablets, for example, have excellent built-in video chat applications. But these may only work with proprietary services, and may not connect easily with commercial cloud video conferencing services. Either way, here again it's something you need to clarify with prospective providers.

4. Is the video conferencing function part of a broader Web meeting service?

You may start your search simply looking for a cloud-based version of traditional video conferencing. It would work almost like audio conferencing, letting you talk with group of people, but with the added ability to see as well as hear them. In reality, though, you don't necessarily need to limit yourself to video conferencing services per se. Video capabilities often come as an integrated part of other commercial conferencing services, particularly Web meeting services. The main selling point of these services is the ability to share slides and other documents online, while at least talking about them in an audio bridge. But increasingly, such services are offering video conferencing capability as a free or fee-based additional option.

If all of your conferences could benefit from online meeting or collaboration capability, this kind of service might prove a perfect fit. On the other hand, if your meetings are mostly about talking rather than showing, a self-contained video conferencing service might be better. At the same time, cloud-based video conferencing services themselves often come with integrated online collaboration applications, ranging from screen and document sharing to shared white boards and the like. So in the end, you may find the practical difference between a Web meeting service with video conferencing capability and a video conferencing service with integrated collaboration applications to be little more than marketing emphasis – and pricing. Either way, it's worth checking them both out.

One further note: online collaboration tools may be less effective and useful with desktop video phones, because of these devices' small screens and lack of keyboards.

5. What additional bandwidth or other network capabilities will I need?

Unsurprisingly, video conferencing can add quite a bit of traffic to your network. It's also a very demanding kind of traffic. Like other real-time applications, video conferencing can tolerate only minimal delay and variation if it is to work properly. That gives you two questions to look into: whether your network has enough bandwidth, and whether its quality of service (QoS) is sufficient.

For the first question, your provider should be able to tell you the amount of bandwidth a two-way video

connection requires. Multiply that by the number of participants you expect in conferences, and you'll have an idea of how much network capacity video conferencing will require in addition to what your existing apps use. You may find you need to boost your bandwidth.

The best way to ensure service quality is to use a so-called QoS router, which gives priority to delay-sensitive real-time services. If you currently aren't using such a router, ask your prospective provider which QoS routers it has certified to work with its service.

6. How easily or conveniently can I communicate by video?

There are several ways to evaluate the ease and convenience of use of a video conferencing service. One issue that receives less attention than it deserves is whether the service includes both video calling and video conferencing. Another important one is how easy it is to launch a video call or conference. A third is how easy it is to move from one type of call or conference to another. Yet another is how, or whether, video calling and conferencing are integrated with their voice-only counterparts. All of these issues are interrelated.

The ability to make one-to-one video calls can be very handy. It offers a communication experience that is closer to the spontaneous phone call than to the formal audio conference call. It's something users can do without planning and forethought. And it can significantly improve rapport and communication among employees.

But with some services, the only way to do it is through conferencing setups. This may require setting up scheduled conferences involving invitations and PINs, but for only two people. This is far from spontaneous. Other services offer so-called "meet-me" conferencing, which can work for two or more participants. These may have "instant" meeting capabilities allowing spur-of-the-moment conferences, or require some level of scheduling and notification.

Video conferences by themselves have similar ranges of formality, scheduling and notifications. They may require reserving a conference room or bridge in advance. They may require organizers to send out invitations via e-mail, or they may automate the process by inviting people to conferences through pre-established lists. They also may allow only one conference to go on at a time. The opposite end of the scale is being able to set up an instant conference at any time by simply clicking a button in a Web

browser or software window.

Particularly convenient is the ability to start with a video call, and escalate to a conference by simply adding participants with a click or by other means. With some services, this is not possible: the calling and conferencing functions are entirely separate. That makes it necessary to end a one-to-one video call to start a video conference. Depending on your expected usage, you may or may not consider this a major inconvenience.

Also convenient is the ability to easily switch from a voice to a video call or conference. More fundamental is the ability to include voice-only callers in video conferences. A complex set of issues involving compatibility, endpoints and infrastructure will determine whether these things are possible. In any case, they are something to ask potential providers about.

7. What other users can I hold video conferences with?

Video communication won't work like voice calls and conferences for a long time. That is, it will be years before you can conduct a video call or conference with anyone else in the world who has a video endpoint. For one thing, not all endpoints are compatible. And even when they are, the endpoints involved may be on physically separate networks. That means there may be no way to set up a video connection between them. And although service providers and vendors are working on solutions, they will be a long time coming.

In short, the ability to reach everyone you want to, including customers, suppliers and partners, via video links won't happen automatically just because you start using a cloud-based video conferencing service. It will be a lot more likely, however, if you and the companies you want to connect with are all using the same provider. And as providers increasingly connect their disparate networks via gateway services, the connectivity will spread. Either way, it's crucial to ask a prospective provider which other networks and companies you'll be able to connect with using its service. In fact, the issue is so important that you probably won't want to buy a service if you don't get the right answers.