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50 Years of Growth, Innovation and Leadership

Boosting the Value of Conferencing through Peripherals: Choosing the Right Webcam and Headset Can Make All the Difference

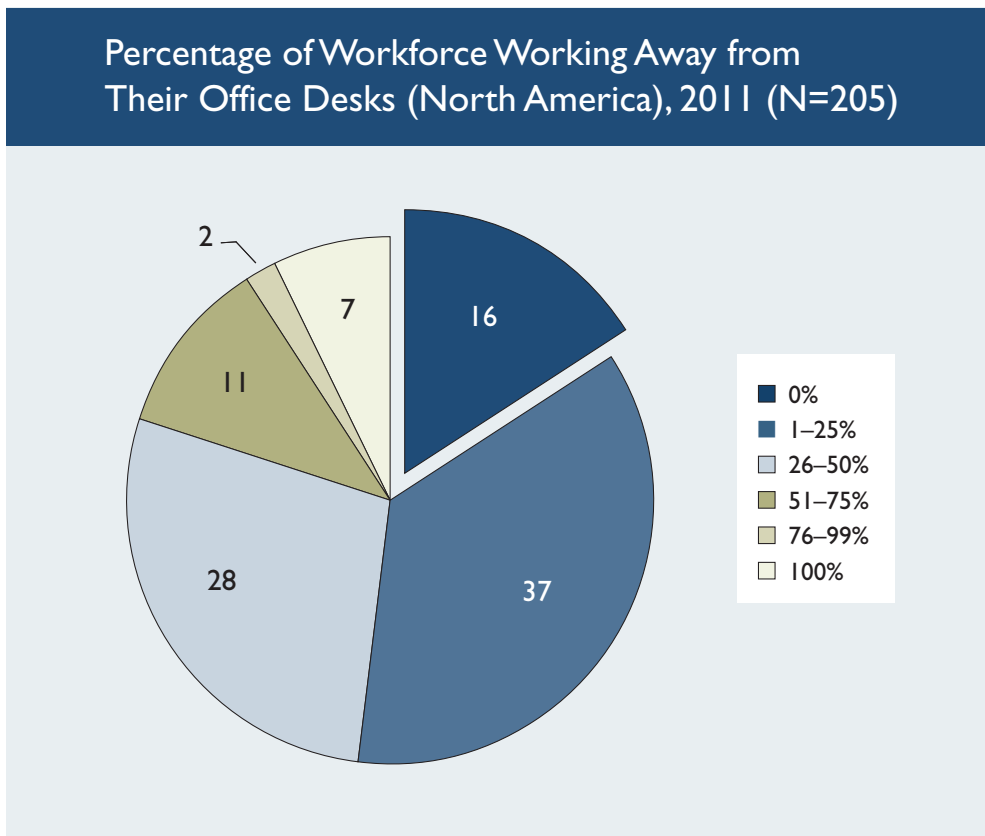
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Frost & Sullivan research shows that most companies support a virtual workplace—with more employees working from locations that are different from those of their colleagues than ever before. In a recent survey of more than 200 C-level executives, a vast majority (84 percent) report that some percentage of their employees regularly work outside the office. (Please see Figure 1.)

As companies strive to support these remote and home-based workers, they are deploying advanced communications technologies to enable collaboration across cultures, geographies and time zones. And for good reason: 86 percent of enterprises that have deployed such technologies say the tools have improved innovation within the organization, according to Frost & Sullivan research. And we believe that companies that deploy unified communications and collaboration technology now will see a two-to-five-year competitive advantage from using the tools ahead of the competition.



Source: Frost & Sullivan

A recent Frost & Sullivan study shows that almost a quarter of respondents who use video conferencing do so every day, and nearly half rate it as “very important” to their operations.

Reducing costs is the prime driver for soft phones and video conferencing, while companies use audio conferencing for improving collaboration and productivity, and Web conferencing for better customer service.

Virtual Healthcare: A Changing Paradigm

Web and video conferencing are changing the face of healthcare, as more practitioners are able to care for patients in far-flung, rural and underserved locations. Using a webcam and PC, specialists can literally examine a patient in his or her primary caregiver’s office, review charts and other data, and make a diagnosis—all without leaving their practice. Doctors and nurses can also leverage Web conferencing for collaborating on papers and cases, and for professional training, keeping their skills up to date without incurring high travel costs or time away from patients.

THE GROWTH OF UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY IN THE WORKPLACE

Indeed, while technology has enabled the virtual workplace, now it must also support increasing communication and collaboration across virtual teams. Audio, Web and video conferencing can deliver significant value by making it easy for employees to replace in-person meetings with virtual collaboration sessions that support visual communications and active work. By letting people see everything from facial expressions to body language, video conferencing increases understanding, even across language and cultural boundaries; the interaction is more personable, and that personal connection enables deeper and more effective business relationships. That, in turn, increases productivity, shrinks cycle times, and improves decision-making.

Overall, advanced communications can cut costs, improve productivity, speed decision-making and shrink cycle times. C-level executives understand the value of these communications tools, and they recognize different benefits from different technologies, and from different levels of usage.

No wonder, then, that the use of unified communications is expected to increase in 2012. Frost & Sullivan research shows that 43 percent of companies that currently use video conferencing plan to increase their use in the next 12 months.

EXTERNAL WEBCAMS AND HEADSETS INCREASE THE VALUE OF UC

There is a clear shift in how employees use the telephone and computer today, compared with only a few years ago. Thanks to soft phones and UC clients, more people are placing calls via their PC; thanks to Web and video conferencing, more people are collaborating in real time on their computers. Both changes save money, boost productivity and deliver significant management efficiencies. But they also require changes in the tools and devices enterprises give their end users.

It is impossible to expect employees working in a crowded office or series of cubicles to speak on the “phone” using only their PC’s embedded mike and speakers—the din in the room would be unbearable. Furthermore, embedded PC mikes and speakers do not deliver the level of quality that most people need and expect while on the phone. At the same time, as employees leverage Web, audio and video conferencing to collaborate inside and outside the organization, they are spending hours at a time on conference calls. These users need headsets and webcams that allow them to multi-task even as they participate in virtual meetings and events.

Manufacturing Makes the Most of Web and Video Conferencing

With manufacturing operations spread across the globe—suppliers in one or more locations, designers in another, and the actual production facilities in yet another—Web and video conferencing are a must-have to keep productivity high and costs in check. Since they offer mobility; a clear, high-quality picture; and the ability to focus in on specific details and specifications, external webcams let production teams collaborate on materials and design, both inside the organization and with partners and outsourcers. That can cut costs and speed production timelines, which improves the bottom line.

Maintaining Professionalism:

To maximize the value of their voice and conferencing solutions, organizations should give their users access to an external high-definition webcam and quality audio headset. This is the only way to ensure a professional image, since the audio/video capabilities built into most PCs simply are not up to the task of delivering a high-quality experience. Using an external HD webcam, which can be positioned and adjusted according to a specific user’s needs, ensures video conferencing participants see a clear, crisp picture—one that will deliver an experience that is close to actually being there, and which allows users to clearly read facial expressions and body language, or see the materials and products under discussion. Headsets, too, add to a user’s professional appearance: in-ear devices allow users to maintain their “game face” without distraction, while all devices ensure employees have their hands free while on a call, allowing them to access files and applications as needed, and without delay in the conversation.

Increasing Productivity:

Likewise, as more people use audio conferencing on a daily basis—whether on its own or as part of a Web or video conference—they should have a headset that supports high-quality audio, minimizes feedback and chatter, and enables privacy. Headsets also enhance comfort, especially for those who spend hours on the phone—typical of today’s knowledge workers. Webcams, meanwhile, allow employees

Frost & Sullivan estimates that global revenue for the headset market was \$835.2 million in 2010, an 18.8 percent increase from 2009. That will grow to roughly \$1.7 billion by 2017.

In 2010, about 7.3 percent of the headset unit shipments comprised UC-enabled headsets; this is expected to grow to 50.5 percent by 2017.

to actively participate in video calls right from their desk, which saves them time in scheduling, finding and traveling to a room-based videoconferencing system.

Mobility:

Wireless headsets enable both mobility—since people can move around the office while still participating in a call—and multi-tasking, allowing users to have their hands free for taking notes, collaborating on a presentation, or answering e-mails and IMs during the course of a call. Webcams also enhance mobility by making it easy for employees to join videoconferences from anywhere—be it a home office or a hotel room.

Using Conferencing to Drive Internal Collaboration

More employees are using Web, audio and video conferencing to improve collaboration across the organization. IT staff use the technology to support far-flung users in real time, without the need for travel or downtime when a PC is sent back to HQ for repair. HR teams can deliver training, information and benefits enrollment to new and existing employees, as well as interview job applicants regardless of where they are located. And managers and executives can hold strategy sessions, regular meetings and team-building exercises with all their reports, across time zones and geographies. In all cases, virtual collaboration keeps costs down while expanding productivity.

Tangible ROI:

As an added bonus, giving employees a high-quality webcam and headset will also increase usage rates for a number of advanced communications, including audio, Web and video conferencing, and Voice over IP. If workers are more comfortable while engaging with such tools, they are much more likely to use them—and that will increase the return on investment such technology can deliver.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT WEBCAM OR HEADSET

Once you decide to give your employees an external webcam and/or headset, you will need to choose from an array of devices, at various price points. But you should always look for certain features that will maximize your investment and make the external device worthwhile.

Webcams

In a webcam, pay attention to how the camera handles low-light settings, which are common in office and home-based environments, and make sure the lens delivers a realistic, focused picture. Also, a wide field of view is desirable, so others can join the call or exhibits can be shared. You'll want a device that has excellent audio

performance and helps minimize background noise, especially for cubicle-based users, and one that offers high-definition (HD) video. And, of course, you'll want to ensure your webcam works well with whatever VoIP and conferencing solutions you use.

Key Features in an External Webcam:

Operability: Platform certification & application optimization

HD Quality: Resolution, frames per second, fluidity

Lens: Auto-focus, low-light performance, sensor size, wide field of view

The latest generation of webcams makes video conferencing a more lifelike experience for users. Full high-definition (HD) 1080p video requires almost one gigabit per second of data. New video compression techniques use mathematical algorithms to reduce the amount of data needed to transmit or store video. The new H.264 compression standard vastly improves compression performance, providing high-quality video at considerably lower bit rates. H.264 encoding cameras can help deliver a better user experience each and every time they are used while taking HD bandwidth off of your computer.

Headsets

When selecting a headset, look for a device that minimizes background noise. On-ear controls such as volume and muting are important, and a growing number of users will need a device that works equally well with a desk phone or soft phone. For cordless headphones, range matters: make sure the device you choose provides enough freedom and flexibility for workers to move around a room or cubical area as needed. And pay attention to battery life, especially for Bluetooth and dual-mode devices. Weight and comfort elements will matter to power users like contact center agents and salespeople, who wear the devices for eight or more hours at a time. Finally, some users will appreciate voice-activated controls, and many prefer over-the-head models to on-ear models, and vice versa, so plan to offer both options to your workforce.

Ensure Audio Quality in Your Headset

Headsets have either an omni-directional or a noise-cancelling audio feature. While omni-directional microphones pick up sounds from all directions, noise-cancelling microphones control the surrounding sounds, giving prominence to the caller in noisy environments.

Key Features in a Headset:**VoIP enabled:** Supports both desk phones and soft phones**Audio features:** Noise-cancelling control**Portability:** Bluetooth, wireless**Comfort:** In-ear, over-the-head, or earhook

Finally, before you settle on a device, consider that some solutions might be better for certain user groups than others—for instance, a desk-based knowledge worker may need only a basic headset, while a road warrior needs one that is also Bluetooth compatible, and a contact center agent requires a top-of-the-line wired device that offers maximum ergonomics, noise cancellation and voice quality. Likewise, your C-level executives will require superior webcams for strategic meetings with important customers and partners, but office workers may get value from a more basic model that delivers better optics and sound than built-in PC systems offer. Companies should also take user preference into account and deploy models that either fit over the head, or on the ear, as desired.

Match the Feature to the User**Cubicle Worker: Noise Reduction**

Minimize noise and disruption in a call through noise-cancelling headsets.

Convert your cubical space into a small conference room with a rotational camera.

Road Warrior: Bluetooth

Make any workspace as productive and comfortable as possible using a Bluetooth, over-the-ear headset, or any wired earbuds for an easy, always-charged connection.

Never skip a conference call and minimize costs using your soft phone with a VoIP-enabled headset.

Executive: Form and Style

Make faster decisions with clear expressions and body language using the highest-quality video glass lens and auto light-correction features.

Maintain professionalism without the bulkiness of PC headsets with in-ear PC earphones.

Home-Based: Multi-Modal Device

Eliminate clutter while optimizing mobility around the house with a wireless over-the-ear headset.

Increase productivity with team collaboration using a platform-certified webcam.

CONCLUSION

As employees increasingly work both from home and the road, they are communicating and collaborating with colleagues, partners and even customers across geographic and cultural boundaries. Technologies like VoIP, audio, video and Web conferencing, and UC clients such as Microsoft Lync, are supporting this virtual workplace, making people more productive while reducing costs, improving decision-making and shrinking cycle times.

Companies that want to see maximum return on investment from these advanced communications technologies should also invest in external webcams and headsets. When choosing a device, it's important to look at a variety of factors, including

price, flexibility, sound and picture quality, and compatibility. Select a vendor that supports a range of models at a variety of price points, and remember that one size doesn't always fit all.

External webcams and headsets can improve the overall experience, delivering a more professional engagement for employees and customers alike. Professional-grade peripherals can also increase UC attachment rates, improve employee comfort, and drive productivity.

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