

Desktop Video: Keeping Employees Connected

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With the growth of the virtual workplace, more employees are working from far-flung locations, be they airport lounges or home offices. This is good news for just about everyone—studies routinely show that flex-time and teleworking improve not just employee morale, but also employee productivity, often by as much as 35 percent. What's more, such policies allow companies to keep their best and brightest, even when life throws them curveballs, like pregnancies, illnesses and moves to new cities or states.

But there is a downside to all this virtual work, especially among work groups: People get disconnected from their colleagues very quickly. Out of sight isn't exactly out of mind—e-mail, IM and even social media help people stay in touch—but relationships take a hit when people don't literally see each other on a regular basis.

Think about it. When you see people, you feel a closer connection to them. You are better able to develop a relationship, and that relationship runs deeper. Just knowing what they look like, what their smile says, how their eyes change to express emotion—all those visual cues go a long way toward enabling people to positively interact and ultimately become friends. Those friendships make a great basis for professional relationships, especially in a virtual work environment in which team members are constantly reaching out for help, seeking new skill sets and information, often from people they've never actually met.

But in the current economic climate—and with more people struggling to balance work lives and home lives—such in person encounters among far-flung team members aren't going to happen on any kind of regular basis, if they happen at all. I've been in my current job for three years, and I have yet to meet my boss; this is an increasingly common story. The annual retreat has gone the way of the dial-up connection, and fewer of us are traveling to conferences and client sites where we might meet up with colleagues and business partners, too.

So what's the solution? Videoconferencing. Specifically, desktop videoconferencing. Because videoconferencing captures facial expressions and body language so well, it lets people make those personal connections that are such a big benefit of in-person meetings—cost effectively, and without the need for travel. That's good for team meetings and strategic discussions among groups—and it's what has fueled the growth of room-based videoconferencing, including high-definition and telepresence systems.

But when it comes to communicating and collaborating with colleagues on a daily or even hourly basis, few of us want to get up and walk to the nearest conference room—assuming we even have access to such a thing (those of us who work at home, or from the road, rarely do). Enter desktop videoconferencing, which allows users to see one another and interact on a deeper, more personal level with the push of a button, right on their PC. Users who have access to desktop videoconferencing report that it quickly

replaces simple telephone calls—almost overnight, people place video calls instead, which makes every encounter with a co-worker that much more valuable and productive.

I expect desktop videoconferencing to grow precisely because it takes some of the isolation out of the virtual workplace, easily and for everyone. Only by connecting on a deeper level can teams truly collaborate, using the wide variety of other communications tools available to them.