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A quick guide to video conferencing



Following the coronavirus outbreak, many businesses around the country will have a significant proportion of their staff working from home. This is likely to continue for some time and, as a result, interest in video conferencing technology has risen sharply. These systems allow you to visually stay in touch with colleagues, clients and suppliers via a high-quality video feed. Essentially, they allow you to be in the same (virtual) room as the other participants.

While many advice firms will already have video conferencing solutions in place, others are looking to install a system for the first time. There are many different options available – but which one is right for your business? Here we highlight some considerations that may affect your choice – we also give some tips on participating in a call.

What to think about when choosing a solution for your business

Today most video conferencing systems are easy to install and simple to use and can be accessed through desktop computers, laptops, tablets and even smartphones. They typically make use of a device's built-in camera and microphone. Most providers will offer a range of services – with the price dependent on a number of factors. Aspects which may affect your choice could include:



Ease of use

How simple a system is to install and administer could be an important consideration, particularly if remote employees will need to organise this from home themselves (or if IT resources are limited). You may also wish to check how user-friendly the interface is to use – scheduling and hosting calls, for example, should ideally be straightforward tasks.



Price

This will largely depend on which package or plan you subscribe to – a higher price plan will typically offer lots of value-added features and services. Licenses may also be required. Some plans may be completely free of charge, although they may not offer many of the features highlighted here – they may also restrict the number of participants and the length of each call.



Number of participants and locations

The maximum number of participants that can take part in a call is normally dependent on the selected package – this may be up to 50, 100 or in some cases more than 1,000 individuals. Premium plans will typically allow a higher number of participants. Some plans are free but the number of users will usually be limited, although even some basic plans allow up to 50 or 100 participants – more than enough for most small businesses. The number of locations may also be restricted.



Quality and number of feeds

The quality of the video feed may be an important consideration, particularly if your firm plans to conduct calls with clients. Some providers offer high definition video and so you may wish to factor this into the decision-making process. The number of video feeds shown on screen may also be restricted (this may not be an issue if you plan to have only a relatively small number of participants on a call).



Phone dial-in facility

This option may be important if you want to allow colleagues or clients who are unable to connect via a computer or other device to participate in a call. This feature will allow the individual to hear and speak during the call but they will not be able to see the other users. Most solutions offer this facility.



Recording and transcripts

Many providers offer the ability to record conferences and there may even be a transcription facility. These services can be very useful for calls where a permanent record is required – such as board or even client meetings. The availability of these services will usually be dependent on the chosen plan (they may not be offered as part of a free/basic package).



Screen and file sharing

This function allows participants to share their computer screens or files with others on the call. It can be a particularly useful option if you want to run an interactive session or if a demonstration is required as part of the call.



Security and privacy

Like most online services, video conferencing does present some security and privacy risks. This may be of particular concern if, for example, client information is discussed over a call. Some providers offer end-to-end encryption, for instance, which gives more safeguards. Other security features that may be available include randomly-generated meeting IDs with password protection and the ability to lock-down a meeting, limiting it to invitees only and preventing unintended guests from joining. You may also want to check a provider's privacy policies as part of your due diligence process and consider the desirability and legality of recording meetings, if your conferencing application has this feature. And do remember, if you are discussing sensitive information, or sharing classified documents on-screen, protect your own and your clients' privacy by ensuring your screen can't be seen, or your conversation overheard, by anyone in your environment who isn't part of the conference.



Training and support

To help users get up to speed with a particular system, the video conferencing provider may well provide online training videos and tutorials (such as how to schedule and join a meeting, for example). This may be particularly useful if employees are unable to come into the office for training. Other support – such as dedicated helpdesks – may also be offered as part of a package.

Video conferencing providers may well offer other features and services which could appeal to your firm (although these may come at an additional cost). It is also worth bearing in mind that some solutions may be quicker to get up and running than others.

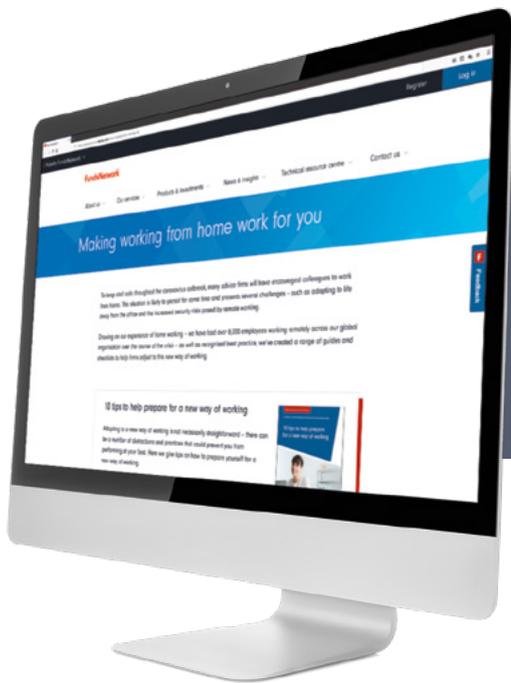
Top tips for participating in a video conference call from home

- ✓ **Select an appropriate room and backdrop for the call** – be mindful of what others might see behind you. Check your space for distractions.
- ✓ **Check your appearance** – be neat and mostly neutral. Dress appropriately as you would for a client meeting. Black, white, and stripes can distort the view.
- ✓ **Avoid distractions and interruptions** – let the family know when you are taking part in a call, for example, and keep pets well out of the way.
- ✓ **Ensure a good and stable internet connection** – ask the family not to stream or download films when a call is planned and don't use appliances that can interfere with the wi-fi signal (microwaves, TVs, cordless phones, etc.).
- ✓ **Check your position before the call** – sit square and make sure you're not too close or too far away from the camera or positioned too high or too low (the camera should ideally be at eye level). Avoid looking down at the camera, which is common when using a smartphone.
- ✓ **Get the lighting right** – ensure you are in a well-lit room (natural light is good too).
- ✓ **Know the technology** – familiarise yourself with the solution before you participate in your first call – make sure you know how to use the features and tools.
- ✓ **Circulate an agenda before a call** – let everyone know what's to be discussed.
- ✓ **Be on time** – arriving late for a call is distracting for everyone.
- ✓ **Introduce yourself at the start of a call** – this may only be necessary if some participants don't know who you are.
- ✓ **Be smart with your microphone** – test the volume before a call and turn it off when you're not speaking. Ensure it's on again before making a contribution.
- ✓ **Be mindful of your movement and posture** – treat a video call the same way you would a face-to-face interaction. Keep in mind all the communication techniques you'd use in a face-to-face conversation – appropriate gestures, facial expressions. Excessive gesturing and fidgeting are more pronounced on a video call.
- ✓ **Maintain eye contact** – look and smile into the camera. Pay attention to and be directed by non-verbal cues.
- ✓ **Consider your voice and words** – be warm, audible, calm but engaged. Don't be afraid to use silence. Pace your speech so there is time for participants to interrupt or respond.
- ✓ **Don't talk when someone else is speaking** – one at a time works best and signal when you want to talk.
- ✓ **Take care when sharing your screen** – close down or hide anything that's not relevant to the call.
- ✓ **Stay interested** – don't check your emails during a call and don't be tempted to surf the net or catch up with other work.
- ✓ **Finally, and importantly, don't forget about security** – it's always worth taking basic precautions to ensure your meetings are secure. For example, check the participants list throughout the meeting and be sure to end the call once it is finished, particularly if you have shared your screen.

Tips if you are leading a call

Have your introduction ready and fluid. Be practiced, clear, and deliberate. Watch attendees for non-verbal feedback. Give clear and logical transitions during introductions. Record yourself in advance to perfect these elements of your call.

Demonstrate the video conference tools. Quickly but clearly show participants how to use the video conference software. Assume not everyone on the call is familiar with it. Tell participants how to interrupt you, chat with you, and engage with you. Orientation should include mute and how to share the screen (if required).



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