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## VIDEO CONFERENCING PROVIDES UNPRECEDENTED FLEXIBILITY

As recently as a decade ago, most business was conducted either via the telephone or in person. Business travelers were constantly on the go, either driving to nearby cities, flying around the country, or traversing the globe. The costs associated with business travel were astronomical, both in terms of actual travel expenses and in terms of employee downtime and unavailability. With the advent of the Internet and video conferencing, however, the face of business has changed dramatically.

Although conference calling has been available for years, there are times when a phone conversation simply isn't good enough. Video conferencing used to be prohibitively expensive, involving either meeting at a telecom company's facilities or setting up complicated systems in-house. Today, however, video conferencing via the Web is available to virtually every company, no matter what the company size or budget. Indeed, it provides amazing flexibility, enabling businesses to create instant meetings with clients or employees at other locations, as well as to hold large-scale events.

If you are in the market for teleconferencing solutions, there are a number of factors to consider when deciding which provider to use. Needless to say, you want to partner with a provider that has 24/7 customer service, that has competitive pricing, and that has a technologically advanced conference calling system. Beyond that, you should ensure that they have myriad tools to meet all of your video conferencing needs.

For example, you should be able to assign roles during web conferencing. There is a conference host, presenters, and participants. The video conferencing solution you choose should have the capability to switch roles, to expel disruptive participants, and to open or close the "doors" to the conference.

Another vital feature is document sharing. A sales team or a training team, for example, should be able to easily incorporate PowerPoint presentations into their web conferences. Similarly, collaborative work is enormously facilitated when Microsoft Word or Excel documents can be shared.

Application sharing can also be an integral component to successful video conferencing. You should consider a provider that enables an application to be viewed by everyone in the conference, and that - if desired - allows both the presenter and the attendees to remotely control the keyboard and mouse.

Another important feature is shared Web browsing. Whether for demonstration purposes, training endeavors, or regular meetings, it's important that everyone in attendance is literally on the same page. Video conferencing that incorporates shared Web browsing keeps everyone's attention on the matter at hand, and bypasses the need to communicate complicated URLs.

Whiteboard functionality is also extremely helpful in web conferencing. Just as a whiteboard facilitates mapping out ideas in an in-person meeting, it can serve the same purpose when used remotely. Taking notes, making key points, and brainstorming can easily become a routine part of Web-based meeting.

Perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of Web conferencing - and a critical function to consider when selecting a provider - is seamlessly integrated, multiparty video. Seeing all of the meeting participants in real time adds both breadth and depth to any online meeting. With the best providers, the host can control video settings ranging from the size, quality, and frame rate to who may or must view the video.

There's little doubt that video conferencing will continue its trajectory in replacing business travel. The right video conferencing provider can dramatically cut costs while increasing productivity - a definite win-win proposition!

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