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TIPS

Column: Tricks & Tips

Dec. 01, 2008

From the Nov. 2006 Issue

Oh, the joys of modern air travel. Many road warriors and even some occasional business fliers are increasingly despairing at the thought of long airport security lines, bag searches, shoe and belt removal, and inconsistent policies on personal care products such as shampoos, creams and gels. Even for those in areas where rapid rail transport is available, travel is becoming more difficult. Most of us accept these inconveniences as some of the costs of security, but that doesn't mean we don't wish for a better way.

For many routine client visits that require air travel, or especially those firms or client businesses with multiple locations, there is an alternative. Video conferencing has obviously been around for decades, usually inspiring thoughts of large (and very expensive) conference room video systems. In the past decade, large businesses have increased their use of these systems as the technology has become more reliable and the costs have moderated. But these systems, usually tied directly into the business' data network for streaming of the video and audio signals, still start at several thousand dollars, sometimes reaching \$30,000 or more, and require an on-site IT person for troubleshooting.

Faced with these unappealing costs, smaller businesses have traditionally ignored video conferencing options, or have opted for less appealing technologies. Let's face it, \$50 to \$100 desktop web cams may be fine for talking to friends or sharing pictures and rough video feeds, but they are not even close

to adequate for business purposes. Thus, these businesses have lost out on the

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high-dollar video systems, the company also makes the ViaVideo II, the second generation of the company's desktop video appliance, which costs around \$500.

The main component of the ViaVideo is the camera unit, which sits somewhere on the user's desktop. The unit is three to four times bigger than a web cam. But make no mistake, that isn't the only difference. The system houses its own processor, so it doesn't slow down the user's workstation.

For the user, the video and audio capabilities are instantly appreciated. The system has full-screen, full-motion video up to 30 frames-per-second. And since Polycom is an expert at audio technology, too, ViaVideo includes full-duplex audio that lets people on both sides talk and listen at the same time, with echo cancellation and noise suppression. The system can contact the other participants

by IP address, ISDN or several other methods, allowing it to act as a videophone, with up to four parties simultaneously conferencing. Through included software, ViaVideo II also offers advanced conferencing benefits including simultaneous video and XGA content sharing and secure calling.

There are a few other comparable systems on the market, including the new QuickCam Ultra Vision from Logitech (www.logitech.com) and a net phone from Packet8 (www.packet8.net). Both of these systems have lower price tags, but the video and audio quality of the ViaVideo is far better, and only the ViaVideo includes the built-in processor. Of course, keep in mind that each end of the conversation needs to have a video system, so if you have two or more offices, plan on at least one per location, and clients would also need a system.

Business travel will always be a necessity, especially for audits and sales presentations, but for many accounting professionals and firms, enterprise-quality

video conferencing can reduce the need for travel. The cost is attractive enough

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multiple monitors — increased productivity by being able to have full windows open at the same time showing your tax application, source documents, review sheets, or research resources. For those who still haven't done so because they were worried about having to get a new video card or other tech issues ... well, your excuse is gone. The DualHead2Go from Matrox (www.matrox.com) makes creating a multi-monitor system as easy as plugging in a cord. Okay, three cords. The DualHead2Go graphics expansion module, which can fit in your hand (or hide under your desk), plugs into your computer (desktop or laptop), and then the two monitors plug into the device. That's it. No opening up the PC box. Another big benefit of this external multi-video module is that you can easily take it on the road or between office and home. All you have to do is connect the monitors. The system includes software that automatically manages window positioning and other tasks. Matrox also makes a triple monitor version called the TripleHead2Go. The Dual model costs about \$169 at major electronics retailers, while the Triple model is about \$299. □

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Technology

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