

Videoconferencing Managed Services

The Game is Changing

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Introduction

Videoconferencing has moved to the forefront for IT managers and business executives. No longer relegated to isolated applications and business situations, videoconferencing today is viewed by smart enterprises of all sizes as an important solution that can help them do more with less, cut travel costs, improve teamwork and efficiency, shorten time-to-market, and reduce carbon footprint, while simultaneously improving customer service and employee satisfaction.

Enterprises are interested in visual communications solutions that span from high end telepresence suites and dedicated conference room systems to executive systems and PC-based devices for personal use. In today's business environment, many companies need to be able to conduct collaboration sessions between PC-based devices located outside the corporate network and internal meeting rooms. These rich-media connections need to be reliable, easy-to-launch, and low cost. While planning for these deployments, many organizations are realizing that videoconferencing can be quite complex, and that supporting a videoconferencing service is not core to the enterprise's expertise or business model. Hence, many savvy organizations are looking to managed service providers with videoconferencing expertise.

Managed service providers (MSPs) have been around the IT industry for a long time. Typically, MSPs provide ongoing support for an enterprise's network and enterprise applications, enabling customers to focus on their core business, whether it be automotive, aerospace, pharmaceutical, or financial services, etc. The key is that the MSP has the expertise needed to monitor, maintain, and operate elements that are crucial to the customer's ability to do business, but are typically separate from the actual business itself.

Game Changing Factors

Organizations that combine managed services skills with videoconferencing expertise are known as video MSPs (vMSPs) or sometimes as collaboration MSPs (cMSPs). Whether working directly with their end user customers or indirectly in partnership with large IT MSPs, vMSPs are delivering benefits to videoconferencing users through three game changing factors.

A Shift to Automated Systems

Modern video endpoints and infrastructure products together with automated monitoring and management platforms make it possible to deliver videoconferencing managed services from centralized operations centers. A key technology foundation is the ability to connect systems over the IP network, enabling low-cost, 24/7 connectivity between remote operations centers, customer locations, and data centers. Hence, today's vMSPs are able to provide their customers with highly reliable videoconferencing services without the need for expensive on-site support staff.

Instead, automated intelligent systems can probe the status of video systems, infrastructure devices, and the IP network continuously; discover issues pro-actively; create and track trouble tickets automatically; and notify personnel appropriately. They can also provide detailed usage reports and real-time call statistics. This helps the vMSP provide a high quality service by expediting trouble identification and problem resolution. Equally important, these reporting systems employ user-friendly software interfaces that provide both customers and vMSP personnel with 24/7 access to the information they need.

Legacy videoconferencing deployments suffered not only from equipment and network reliability factors, but also from a lack of automated monitoring and remote operation capabilities. The only way to provide customer support and make sure the equipment was operating properly and that the call connected successfully was to have an operator physically present. Hence, for many customers, the quality desired for the videoconferencing service could be achieved only by having dedicated, highly-trained specialists on site. The result was high cost and limited scalability of videoconferencing managed services.

Support for Large Scale Deployments

As videoconferencing has become a mainstream business tool for global companies, the need has grown for managed service providers who can ensure a reliable, high-quality videoconferencing environment on a global basis. In short, customers with large-scale videoconferencing deployments obviously need videoconferencing managed services that can scale as well. vMSP companies are addressing this need by taking advantage of the Internet and IP-based network services, management capabilities built in to the latest generation of videoconferencing equipment, and the intelligent monitoring tools discussed above that can keep a watchful eye on both the equipment and the network. Remote operations keep costs down, while automated software scales readily and increases the reliability of the customer's videoconferencing environment.

New Business Models

New business models available from vMSPs are giving customers additional flexibility and choices very different from those offered by traditional models that required customers to initially purchase equipment and then pay a recurring monthly fee to have the MSP maintain and operate the equipment. Today, some MSP programs offer services that require no up-front capital investments by the clients. These programs, which come with a wide variety of options to meet a wide variety of client needs, turn what has typically been a mixed CapEX / OpEx investment into an all OpEx scenario. In addition, they provide built-in protection against obsolescence since the client does not have to purchase any equipment. Many enterprises see this business model as a way to stay abreast of technology developments and to always "own," or at least have access to and use the latest generation of videoconferencing gear.

Many managed service providers also offer additional services specific to the needs of videoconferencing customers, including NAT-firewall traversal, video bridging, and gateway services that enable B2B communications as well as internal calls across multiple network topologies. Some vMSPs go even further by providing custom solutions to address specific customer needs or to bridge the gaps between commercially available appliances.

The Bottom Line

Videoconferencing managed services no longer cost an arm and a leg and no longer require a large up-front capital investment. And with intelligent remote services, vMSPs can address the needs of both large and small enterprises cost effectively. Video managed services are no longer limited to just the Fortune 500.

Technology developments and the shift to IP networks have changed the game as well. vMSPs are able to provide their customers with videoconferencing services that are high in reliability and quality and provide high satisfaction levels – factors that drive higher utilization of videoconferencing resources, leading to further cost savings and higher returns on investment.

A Specific Example: PerfectMeetings Managed Video from AGT

One example of a next-generation vMSP service offering is PerfectMeetings Managed Video from Applied Global Technologies, the sponsor of this whitepaper. The PerfectMeetings Managed Video service is based on a single enterprise platform, the PerfectMeetings Server, that provides a variety of videoconferencing features for the customer, including H.323 video bridging services for both room and desktop video systems, recording and streaming, video endpoint monitoring and management, network quality monitoring and testing, NAT-firewall traversal, and usage reporting.

The PerfectMeetings server is compatible with industry standard (H.323) room and desktop videoconferencing systems, and also includes its own desktop videoconferencing software for use with Windows, Macintosh (Intel based), and Linux PCs. PerfectMeetings Managed Video delivers multiple benefits to clients based on three design principles.

Automation

The goal of PerfectMeetings Managed Video was to take all the steps involved in providing manual support services and automate them, thereby increasing reliability for customers while enabling low-cost remote services by AGT. The PerfectMeetings service is based on four key components:

- FATHOM is a complete video network management device and an advanced assessment and monitoring tool for IP video networks and IP video endpoints. FATHOM monitors H.323 audio and video traffic on individual networks in order to prevent potential problems. Fathom can be used for detailed planning prior to videoconferencing or telepresence deployments, for troubleshooting IP video quality issues, and for preventive monitoring and SLA tracking. FATHOM works with all major video endpoint manufacturers, and can monitor status/activity for active calls and endpoints. FATHOM's alert capabilities automatically initiates e-mail notifications, trouble ticket creation, and automatic charting of data.
- ENCORE is an all-in-one, stand-alone platform that provides scheduled and reservation-less bridging for both H.323 video devices and web-based videoconferencing systems as well as streaming, and recording functions.
- ANALYTICS collects call detail records (CDRs) from Polycom's MGC and RMX bridges and AGT's ENCORE and FATHOM devices, and provides an easy way to create usage reports via a web interface.
- PRISM is a web-based software application that enables the distribution of desktop and server display consoles. A single server can provide access to multiple display sources and allows those sources to be viewed anywhere on the network.

Flexible Architecture

For clients with more than a handful of endpoints, the PerfectMeetings server would be deployed on-site behind the client's firewall with a secure connection back to the AGT managed services operation center. There, AGT personnel can take advantage of the company's automated equipment and network monitoring technologies to support the customer's room and desktop deployment. This service is sold on the basis of a fixed price per system per month – there is no usage fee, no infrastructure to buy or maintain, and no staff to train. For smaller customers, a network connection, either via VPN or the Internet, between the customer's premise and the PerfectMeetings server located at the AGT network operations center would enable AGT to provide the full range of services without the need for any onsite equipment.

Organizations that seek to adopt video for teleworkers and road warriors are often suffocated by secure corporate networks with closed firewalls. However, PerfectMeetings includes NAT/firewall traversal capabilities using port 80 or port 443. This allows the system to support meetings between internal and external people. PerfectMeetings also has automated proxy discovery intelligence to help navigate desktop connections over the corporate network where direct connections to port 80 or 443 are not available internally. The combination gives enterprise mobile workers both security and ease-of-use.

Innovative Business Models

PerfectMeetings Managed Video requires no up-front capital expenditure. AGT provides clients with the video infrastructure hardware and software for bridging, streaming, and recording, as well as remote video network management, and simply charges a flat, fixed monthly fee per conference room or desktop user.

AGT's business model for PerfectMeetings' clients future proofs their video deployments. Customers are protected against obsolescence as technology evolves and new features and standards become available. As usage grows or as additional conference rooms and information workers are video-enabled, PerfectMeetings can grow to meet the increased needs.

The PerfectMeetings Managed Video service also includes 24/7 support as well as pro-active management, monitoring, and troubleshooting for all client endpoints. Other services offered include meeting scheduling, remote call launching, and special pre-call audio/video checks

Summary

The PerfectMeetings managed video service integrates room and personal video systems, including at-home and remote workers outside the firewall, and allows client companies to enhance, expand, and improve their internal collaboration services while reducing costs and eliminating capital expenditures at the same time.

About Wainhouse Research

Wainhouse Research (www.wainhouse.com) is an independent market research firm that focuses on critical issues in rich media communications and conferencing. The company conducts multi-client and custom research studies, consults with end users on key implementation issues, publishes white papers and market statistics, and delivers public and private seminars. WR hosts the PLATINUM (www.wrplatinum.com) content website and publishes numerous market studies as well as a free newsletter, The Wainhouse Research Bulletin.

About the Author(s)

Andrew W. Davis is a researcher, analyst, and opinion leader in the field of collaboration and conferencing. Prior to founding Wainhouse Research, he held senior marketing positions with several large and small high-technology companies. Andrew has published over 250 trade journal articles and opinion columns on multimedia communications, videoconferencing, and corporate strategies as well as numerous market research reports. A well-known industry guest speaker, Mr. Davis holds B.S. and M.S. degrees in engineering from Cornell University and a MBA from Harvard University and can be reached at andrewwd@wainhouse.com.

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About AGT

Applied Global Technologies (AGT) is a 15-yr private company, actively managed by its co-founders, Ben Atha and Mike Valletutti. AGT's award-winning R&D has created innovative managed video services and service provider products. For company-wide video strategies, no other company provides a sustainable conference room-to-desktop experience offered by PerfectMeetings Managed Video, a managed service of AGT. For Federal/DOD and Civilian Agencies, AGTFederal - connecting people, anytime, anywhere, any distance, any situation - provides specialized, large integration projects and deploys solutions nationwide. AGT's international headquarters is located in Rockledge, FL; Hosting Zone/R&D center in Kennesaw, GA; Federal Integration in GA and VA, and teleworker field offices in Chicago, Dallas, Honolulu, Okinawa, San Diego, Seattle, and Virginia Beach.

The PerfectMeetings Managed Video client care team has multiple industry certifications and years of experience in the video industry, enabling AGT to assume responsibility for the performance and success of clients' video meetings.