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The technology for Video-conferencing was originally a set of closed circuit television cameras joined by wires and very expensive. In the 1980s the introduction of digital telephony created a new wave of video conferencing solutions but they still required highly specialist equipment and expensive dedicated rooms. As an alternative to expensive and time consuming international air travel this was considered value for money by some large international businesses but was by no means a general application.

The internet and the availability of bandwidth has brought video conferencing to a different level. Anybody with a computer can now have a video based conversation with someone else anywhere in the world using webcams and applications like Skype. This unstructured and universal access to the technology has made it much more acceptable.

Most of the new solutions differ from videoconferencing in that they serve individuals rather than groups. However that distinction is becoming increasingly blurred with sophisticated software clients that can allow for multiple parties on a call. In general everyday usage the term videoconferencing is now frequently used instead of video phonecall for point-to-point calls between two units.

A videoconference allows two or more locations to interact via live two-way video and audio transmissions simultaneously. This is generally accomplished by the use of a multipoint control unit (a centralized distribution and call management system) or by a similar non-centralized multipoint capability embedded in each videoconferencing unit. Again, technology improvements have circumvented traditional definitions by allowing multiple party videoconferencing via web-based applications.

The traditional benefits of video conferencing include reduced travel cost and time, increased collaboration between remote teams, more effective knowledge sharing and greater productivity. Many organisations are now embracing the technology in a drive to reduce air travel and the big impact that has on their greenhouse gas emissions.

The main problem with video conferencing arises when technical difficulties from software, hardware or network failure interrupt or disrupt important meetings. The facility manager must ensure that appropriate technical support and user training is provided to mitigate this problem.

Another disadvantage is the lack of personal interaction. Communications experts suggest that video and audio conferences are most effective between parties who have previously established relationships and that they be interspersed on a periodic basis with actual face to face meetings where the more subtle social aspects of communication can be reinforced.

BT has a variety of conferencing hints, tips and guides available at www.conferencing.bt.com/infocentre/guides