

# FACE TO INTERFACE

Video-conferencing technology continues to evolve at an astonishing rate, but there are good budget options too. **Mark Prigg** surveys both ends of the market

Video-conferencing has come a long way since the days when a dedicated meeting room equipped with racks of kit were needed. In fact, for many firms it has moved entirely out of the boardroom, past the desktop PC and laptop, and on to the mobile phone. It's now easy to take part in corporate meetings via your handset – even seeing slides in real time as your colleagues do.

However, while the technology has moved on to phones and even living-room TVs – some of which now have Skype video-conferencing built in – there is still a place for high-end dedicated solutions.

Crucially, they have changed beyond all recognition over the past 18 months, with banks of high-definition screens and video cameras really making you feel you are in the same room as the other participants (for a price). For companies that can't afford the huge cost of installing a top-end system, the answer is to combine the two – relying on desktop and mobile devices for day-to-day meetings and renting video-conferencing facilities from companies such as Regus ([regus.co.uk](http://regus.co.uk)) for important events.

Whichever end of the market you go for, there's no doubt video-conferencing has become a part of everyday business life. And while engaging with people face-to-face will always be necessary, for many businesses it can save a fortune in travel and lost productivity, as well as making working from home a viable option for plenty of staff.

VEER



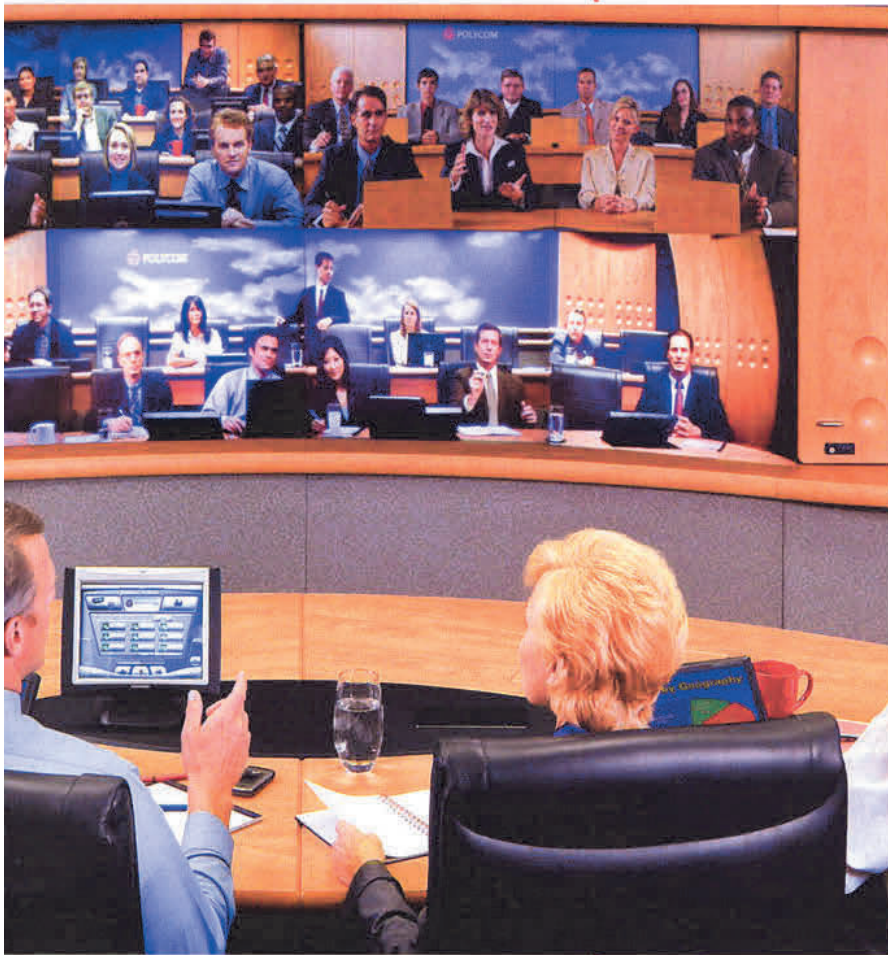
## CITRIX GO TO MEETING US\$49 per month [citrix.com](http://citrix.com)

Along with the other old-time video-conferencing providers (which in internet terms probably means they're about 12 months old), Citrix has reinvented itself as an online remote access firm, allowing you to get into your meeting from the road via a PC, phone or iPad.

It's a great service and is extremely simple to use, with all the features you'd expect, such as being able to view slides, take minutes and even control who is on the call, all from a mobile device.

For small companies, however, it faces a lot of competition, particularly from Skype (see page 53) and other services, which offer similar products for

Visit [business traveller.com](http://business traveller.com)

**POLYCOM RPX**

**Price on application**  
**polycom.com**

Described as "immersive telepresence" rather than video-conferencing, Polycom's RPX (Real Presence Experience) system is the firm's new flagship product and is the stuff of science fiction, making last year's top-of-the-line ATX (Architected Telepresence Experience) system – which is still available – look almost archaic by comparison.

Using banks of HD video screens up to five metres wide, which are set up in a dedicated suite, life-size images are used to give the impression you are in a room with the other people in your meeting. And, astonishingly, it's not just for small gatherings – the RPX can be expanded to create a mini-lecture theatre seating up to 28 participants and virtually connect them with people all around the world.

The effect is extraordinary – you really do get a sense that everyone is in the same location, and the screens are detailed enough that you can even see subtle facial expressions. Smart software uses cameras and microphones to track who is talking, but most impressive is that in many of the installations, these are hidden, so the conversations appear completely natural.

Suites are custom built, so while there is no "standard" price, ballpark figures of about US\$600,000 for a basic system are to be expected – there are also monthly fees to pay. It's possible to patch in users with other, cheaper Polycom systems, but to get the best results, both parties really do need

the RPX. It is possible to hire suites too, and firms such as Regus offer this facility.

There are also all the usual shared screen features, so participants can see the same Powerpoint slides, but the key to the Polycom system is its breathtaking quality – and while that comes at a price, for companies that would otherwise need to fly in participants, it could be an attractive alternative.

**PROS** Astonishing technology

**CONS** Equally astonishing price tag



far less. But if ease of use is key then Citrix is definitely worth considering. The iPad version, in particular, is impressive if you need to take part in meetings while out and about.

**PROS** Straightforward interface, easy to take part in conferences

**CONS** Cheaper alternatives work just as well, it requires you to download software or an app

**WINDOWS LIVE MESSENGER 2011**

**Free**  
**microsoft.com**

A recent overhaul has seen Messenger completely redesigned, and has brought it into line with the rest of Microsoft's products. It has also helped Windows Live Messenger to remain one of the most popular instant messaging systems. And because of the huge numbers of machines running Windows software, it has also found a home on a lot of corporate machines, simply because it's pre-installed on them.

Boasting more than 350 million users, it's a simple text- and video-based chat system. The interface is unashamedly consumer focused but is also good for keeping in touch with colleagues, particularly for quick queries. It's also easy to set up group chats, although they can become a little confusing with several people typing at once. For more advanced tasks and external meetings, it's best to look elsewhere.

**PROS** Free, and probably already on your machine

**CONS** Few corporate capabilities



**MEEBO MESSENGER**

Free  
meebo.com

With the vast increase in use of instant messaging programmes, many companies are struggling to keep up with the different services their clients use to communicate. However, Meebo offers the answer,

giving you one simple interface for several different instant messaging applications, all without having to load dozens of different pieces of software on your machine.

With several accounts loaded, the on-screen interface can be a little confusing at times – there's a lot going on. However, once you've spent some time playing around, it's relatively easy – and the free iPhone app even simpler, giving you an easy way to chat online. Most major services are supported, including MSN, Yahoo, Google Talk and ICQ.

It also has the neat trick of giving you access to your instant messaging accounts even if they are blocked at work, because as you're simply accessing a web page, it's usually not a problem defeating the office security system.

**PROS** Great way to keep your instant messaging accounts in one place

**CONS** Web interface can be a little confusing

**CISCO WEBEX**

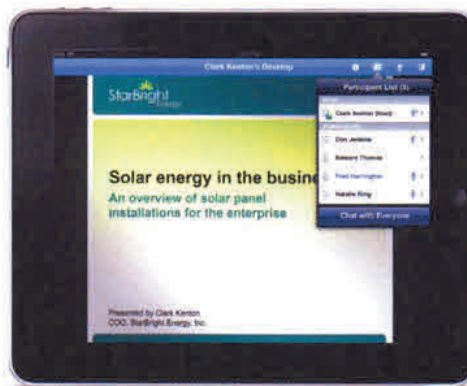
£30 a month  
webex.co.uk

At first glance Cisco's Webex system seems like something of an oldie in the video-conferencing market, having been around for several years. However, it has moved with the times extremely well, with apps for Android, iPhone and Blackberry devices having recently been launched, so despite stiff competition from the likes of Skype, it can just about hold its own against any of the more corporate offerings here.

Webex takes the entire meeting process online and into a web browser or phone app. Up to 25 people can take part in sessions, with up to six webcams being used on screen at any one time. It's also very useful as an online training tool as a maximum of 1,000 people can watch the same live broadcast at once, with another version available for sales calls where you can demo products to hundreds of clients at once. It's impressive, and with support for the latest mobile devices, it has to be a contender for larger companies looking to use video-conferencing to sell or train, as well as to chat one-on-one.

**PROS** Feature-rich, works with existing hardware

**CONS** Relatively expensive

**YAHOO MESSENGER**

Free  
messenger.yahoo.com

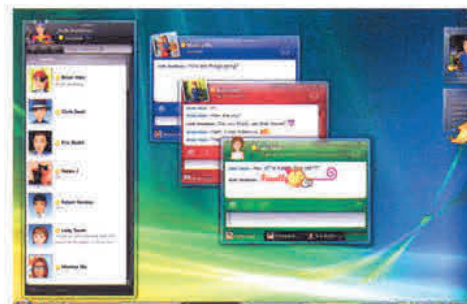
Yahoo's Messenger is one of the oldest instant messaging clients on the market, and has evolved at an astonishing rate, now boasting everything from access to Ebay to the ability to play music.

At its heart is still the same simple to use text-based messaging system, but time has seen voice and video added, which work well. However, there is still very much a consumer focus, and Yahoo Messenger does feel a little childlike at times. It also suffers from having every feature imaginable thrown into the interface, along with some garish advertising.

Overall, it's really a way to keep in touch with your friends, and perhaps your kids when you are on the road, so it is unlikely to impress in the boardroom.

**PROS** Simple to use

**CONS** Too much going on

**APPLE ICHAT AND FACETIME**

Free (59p for Macs), apple.com/uk

Apple has completely reinvented its previously basic chat software, now offering Apple users the ability to video-conference easily, along with a plethora of extra capabilities.

This new direction is down to Facetime, the video-call software available for Macs, iPhone 4s, the new iPod Touch and the newly released iPad 2. It makes life incredibly simple – assuming you have at least one of the appropriate Apple products – with all of the above able to call each other and take part in video sessions.

It's easy to use, although fairly simplistic compared with the other products here. The main drawback is that it really works best with Apple products only, although you can chat with PCs if their owners have an Aim (aim.com) chat account. You can also share slides, and even take control of another Mac's screen remotely – useful for fixing tech support problems when you are away.

**PROS** Software is very slick and attractive

**CONS** Limited functionality and, ideally, you need a Mac, iPad 2, iPhone 4 or new iPod Touch





## SKYPE

Free  
skype.com

Skype is still the benchmark for online voice services, and it is a position the company has worked hard to maintain, particularly in the face of some stiff competition from Microsoft, Apple and Yahoo (see pages 51 and 52).

It has, in recent months, been doing a lot of work on video-conferencing, in particular adding iPhone, BlackBerry and Android apps that can use the service, including making video calls on some devices. It's a big step forward for the provider, and goes some way to making sure Skype stays the automatic choice for many small and medium-sized enterprises.

The key to Skype is its simplicity. It's a very well designed service, with text, audio and video chat all easily available. As well as this, it's possible to call landlines using the service, offering a big saving on traditional voice calls, especially when employees are stationed all over the world.

Call quality is excellent and video in particular works extremely well – more so than almost any other product on the market, in fact. It's also very simple to set up conference calls.

Overall, Skype has grown from being a bit of an enthusiast's product to something you really can run your business from – and with a lot of newer TVs having Skype built in, it is giving the old guard of video-conferencing sleepless nights.

**PROS** Great features, slick and well-designed interface

**CONS** Little inter-operability with other services

## A NEW DIMENSION

If you think video-conferencing is impressive now, then just give it a few years. In research labs across the world, firms are closing in on the holy grail – 3D. There are already prototype holographic projectors capable of making your colleagues appear *Star Wars* style, while more traditional 3D systems, similar to those found in cinemas and home TVs, are set to hit the market soon.

One of the more unusual advances has come from Microsoft, in the form of its Kinect sensor (xbox.com/kinect). Currently sold as an add-on for the Xbox 360 console, with a plethora of high-tech microphones and 3D cameras that can capture you accurately as you move around, allowing you to play games by waving and jumping, Microsoft has big plans for the sleek gadget. In fact, according to Guinness World Records, it has already become the fastest-selling consumer electronics device to date.

Microsoft is already hard at work on business uses for the technology, so don't be surprised if the next big thing in video-conferencing has a Microsoft logo on it. With the level of innovation happening in its labs, it seems inevitable that in the next 12 months, video-conferencing will be changed forever with the addition of a third dimension.

■ Mark Prigg is science and technology editor at London's Evening Standard

## SPECIAL OFFER

Receive 10% Off\*



## CUSHY DIGS FOR LESS

Business travel | Relocating employees | Consulting projects

Stylish serviced apartments offering pure comfort and room for productivity, at rates that go easy on your budget. Our apartments place temporary residents in distinctive neighborhoods, where they can live like true locals.

**FURNISHEDQUARTERS®**  
The Hotel Alternative. Stay Different.™

NEW YORK | NEW JERSEY | MASSACHUSETTS | WORLDWIDE  
800 871 3446 | furnishedquarters.com

\*Mention offer code BTUK0411 to receive 10% off your next reservation. New reservations only. 30 day minimum stays. Valid through May 31, 2011.