



How to Pick the Right Web Conferencing Software

By John Edwards | December 5, 2008

If you've decided to take advantage of Web conferencing's cost-saving and productivity-enhancing capabilities, selecting the product that's best-suited for your business is key. Pinpointing the software that most closely matches your company's needs and budget parameters is a task that requires a fair amount of research and planning. These ten steps will guide you through the software-selection process:

1. Understand the technology. Web conferencing isn't rocket science, but you'll want to have an understanding of the technology's basic concepts before you begin shopping for a product. Vendor Web sites and other online and printed resources, such as Wikipedia, can fill you in on the basics.

2. Define your needs. What tasks do you want the software to accomplish? Web conferencing can be used for a number of different applications, including staff and customer meetings, training and Webinars, so you'll want to make sure that the software you select is designed to support your goals.

3. Select a platform. All Web conferencing products fit into one of two basic categories: on-premises or hosted software. "On-premises" means the software is installed on your company's servers and/or workstations. Hosted software, also known as SaaS (Software as a Service), is provided on a subscription basis via the Internet. There are benefits and drawbacks to both approaches, such as more customization options for on-premises software and lower up-front costs for SaaS offerings, so consider your options carefully.

4. Assess your assets. Take a close look at your business's technology infrastructure, including workstations, servers and networking capabilities. Even if you decide to use hosted Web conferencing software, you'll still need to think about things like webcams, workstation graphics capabilities, network performance and broadband speeds.

5. Look around. There are dozens of Web conferencing software vendors, all anxious to sell you their products and services. Get a feel for the market by checking with several vendors and comparing costs and features.

6. Seek advice. Unless you're already a Web conferencing technology expert, you'll want to seek input from staff members, business colleagues and other knowledgeable individuals. Ask vendors for customer references and arrange to talk with these people about their Web conferencing experiences.

7. Narrow the field. Once you've finished your research and have decided on the type of software you want, it's time to begin serious negotiations with a handful of software vendors. Features and pricing will be your top concerns, of course, but you'll also want to define other crucial deal aspects, including training, support, service quality (for SaaS software), contract terms and agreement termination rights.

8. Complete the deal. Pick the vendor that offers the best terms, but also pay close attention to deal "intangibles," such as the company's track experience serving businesses in your field and its financial condition (you don't want your vendor to go out of business and stick you with an "orphan" software product or a dead SaaS link).

9. Plan a staged deployment. If you intend to use Web conferencing across several departments, such as production, sales and HR, roll out the technology in stages. That way, planning, training and troubleshooting obligations won't overwhelm you.

10. Run a pilot. A series of test Web conferences conducted with staff members will help you identify any technical bugs or training issues before you begin applying the technology to business-critical missions.

Web conferencing has the potential to boost revenue, build strong customer relationships and enhance employee productivity. On the flip side, a poorly planned Web conferencing initiative can quickly blossom into a frustrating, money-burning nightmare. If you take the time to do your homework, you should be pleased by the results.

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