

Dialing Into Videoconferencing

“It's green, convenient and more personal than voice-only conference calls.”

by Pete Choppin

When you can't meet face-to-face, meeting Web cam-to-Web cam is the way to go. Whether you want to chat with a friend or have an informal business meeting, videoconferencing is more personal than voice-only conference calling, and it's a lot cheaper (and greener) than today's plane trips.

With the economic problems many companies have had to face, cutting costs is a common practice. The company I work for is no exception. We realized that videoconferencing can accomplish the same thing as a face-to-face meeting for a fraction of the cost.

Videoconferencing is more personal than voice-only conference calling, and it's a lot cheaper than the cost of airfare, hotels and food. But you need the right software and Web cam to get the most out of your video meeting.

The newest videoconferencing applications feature improved interfaces, smoother video streaming and clearer audio. While updated favorites [Skype](#) and [SightSpeed](#) still offer the best free video calls on the Web, newer options have arrived on the scene with their own unique contributions to video communications. Here are some of the services available as well as some of the top Web cams that add video to enhance your communication.

Services



[ooVoo](#)

ooVoo gives you videoconferencing with up to six participants in a slick, well-thought-out interface. To this it adds file transfers, group text chat and community search. Though the video quality is acceptable, it still lags behind that of SightSpeed, and audio tends to stutter.



[Paltalk Express](#)

Plenty of user-generated and original content and a good voice- and video-chat system make this a useful service for large group chats, demos, seminars and more. Don't plan on doing any PC-to-phone calling, however. For that, you'll need Paltalk Scene.



[SightSpeed](#)

With 30 frame-per-second video, SightSpeed offers the sharpest Internet video calling around. Version 6.0 brings an improved interface as well as some new features, such as the ability for Pro users to record a video call locally. The new Web interface option and social-network integrations make SightSpeed even more useful.



[Skype](#)

This impressive, mostly free voice-communications app and Web service just keeps getting better. It offers free and easy voice calls, video calls and chat between Skype users as well as Skypecast conference calls that delve into any topic imaginable and can

include up to 100 Skype users from anywhere in the world.



[TokBox](#)

TokBox is a one-stop shop for all your video communication needs: video mail, conferencing with an unlimited number of participants, and a public stream for your video rants. Its Web interface is attractive and clear, and the desktop client, based on Adobe AIR, allows you to be available to your fellow video chatters without requiring you to be logged into the site.

SIP-Based Softphones

Another popular technology for communication is the ability to use your mobile device as a phone. The software application that allows you to do this is generally referred to as a softphone. Softphones communicate over a protocol called SIP, short for Session Initiation Protocol. SIP is an IP telephony signaling protocol used to establish, modify and terminate VoIP telephone calls. The advantage of a SIP-based softphone is that it allows you to set up a full videoconference using a cell phone or laptop computer.

When used in conjunction with VoIP, softphones can then become a very economical alternative to standard communication using LAN lines or cellular phones. Plus you have all the advantages of video and collaboration conferencing. This is especially attractive for mobile users who may not always be able to get to an office for conferences. But it can be equally useful for long-distance communication with family and friends. Instead of paying high prices for traditional phone calls across long distances, using SIP-based softphones is free or low cost and offers voice and video chat.

One such service, X-Lite from CounterPath, offers a full set of softphone capabilities including voice and video through your mobile device as well as Instant Messaging, and a fully integrated personal address list. You do need to have a VoIP or broadband service to use X-Lite.

Web cams

[Logitech QuickCam Pro 9000](#) \$59 - \$99

Logitech's QuickCam Pro 9000 Web cam easily outperforms other similar Web cams, and its high-quality video feature makes it the best choice for Skype users. However, the high-quality video comes at a performance price. Just make sure you have a high-quality computer to handle the video capabilities.

[Microsoft LifeCam VX-5000](#) \$24.99 - \$39.99

Despite its mediocre software, the Microsoft LifeCam VX-5000 proves its worth with outstanding image quality, useful design and low price.

[Logitech QuickCam Pro for Notebooks](#) \$60.99 - \$99.99

The Logitech QuickCam Pro for Notebooks provides unmatched image quality, but its design

could be improved. The reviews claim a clear, bright video output, but constantly readjusting the camera atop your laptop will get annoying.

[Creative Live Cam Voice](#) \$48.99

With its beefed-up audio features, the Creative Live Cam Voice is one of the best overall cameras for IM and Internet-based voice conferencing.

[Microsoft LifeCam NX-6000e](#) \$50

A decent Web cam for work or play—but don't believe the high-res hype.

Long-distance and international calling is still fairly expensive using conventional phone calling, but if you want to avoid these charges there are plenty of alternatives with VoIP and SIP-based softphone services. Voice, video and messaging services are now possible using a computer and an Internet service, allowing a more feature-rich communication experience.