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FEATURES - TECHNOLOGY
Videophones put new face on old idea - PAUL TAYLOR - PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY.

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The videophone made its debut 40 years ago at the New York World's Fair, when visitors lined up to try out American Telephone and Telegraph's Picturephone. Five years later, sales of Dollars 1bn by 1980 were being predicted.

Of course, it turned out people did not necessarily want to see who they were talking to, especially if the video was jerky and out of synch, and definitely not if it was going to cost the equivalent of Dollars 800 a month at today's prices.

Since then I have tested dozens of videoconferencing systems but delivery of low cost, high quality videophone telephony to the mass market and a lifelike videoconferencing experience to the boardroom has remained elusive.

Recently I tested two new video telephony systems that, although at opposite ends of the cost spectrum, seem to overcome many of the issues that have dogged their predecessors.

Santa Clara-based 8x8 (www.8x8.com) launched its Packet8 "consumer friendly" broadband VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) and videophone package a few months ago with the aim of making the service as easy to use as an ordinary phone.

8x8 has lots of experience in the market. It made the videochips that powered AT&T's Videophone 2500, an attempt to crack the videophone market in 1992. Five years later, 8x8 introduced its own ViaTV, which sat on television sets and sent video at 12 frames per second over ordinary phone lines.

But 8x8's latest videophone has several important innovations. It plugs into a standard broadband cable or DSL connection, it is cheap to operate and offers near-TV quality video at up to 30 frames per second. Unlike previous offerings that could only communicate with other videophones and computer-based VoIP services, the Packet8 phone feels and functions like an ordinary desktop telephone, except it comes with a large built-in LCD (liquid crystal display) and camera.

The phone costs around Dollars 300 and is available from electronics stores in the US or online from Amazon. The company offers several monthly service plans.

Setting up the phone and service was a breeze. Most of the time it is simply a matter of plugging into a power socket and using the supplied Ethernet cable to connect to a broadband internet line. A corporate or home office "firewall" may mean tweaking some of the security settings but my system worked behind a D-link wireless router and firewall without adjustment.

With a cable broadband connection in my home office, the Packet8 system provided a reliable, versatile broadband VoIP audio service and excellent clear video although the company warns video quality may not be quite as good over a DSL line with a slower (less than 256Kbps) connection.

Either way, the Packet8 outshines all videophones I have used and will appeal both to small business users and consumers.

The other video telephony system I tried is designed for big companies and other remote users who need to conduct "face to face" meetings.

TeleSuite (www.tele suite.com) offers big videoconferencing systems with one particular advantage - the system delivers life-size images using standard-based technology and custom designed conference rooms.

I tried the system in a virtual boardroom in the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in New York connected over ISDN lines to a similar facility in the Savoy hotel in London and TeleSuite's headquarters in Ohio.

It was as though the participants were all seated around the same boardroom table. On average, the system costs about Dollars 20 per user per hour.

The company's flagship TeleSuite Enterprise 400 Series Virtual Conference Room costs from about Dollars 100,000 and is based on a panoramic 16 x 3.5 ft video wall that "wraps participants in an immersive, collaborative meeting environment". It can accommodate eight to 28 participants in each location and uses four distinct and separable video streams, enabling users to link from two to five separate physical locations.

There are no visible cameras or microphones to manage or manipulate.

The system produces very high quality, life-size images, super clear sound and suffers from none of the "latency" problems that plagued earlier systems. paul.taylor@ft.com

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