

Video conferencing steps out of the office

June 8 2012, By Eve Mitchell

Video conferences have largely been confined to offices. Not anymore. New technologies developed by Polycom and other video-conference vendors let employees use smartphones and tablet devices join in no matter where they are.

It's a "game changer" for Chris Plutte and his line of work - using video conferencing to connect students from countries around the world with students in American schools to help them better understand each other and the countries they call home.

"This opens up a whole new opportunity for us. It's about access for us," said Plutte, executive director of New York-based Global Nomads Group, a nonprofit he co-founded in 1998 that is currently linking several schools in the United States with those in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo for town-hall type meetings.

"It's pretty amazing. In the past, students and schools that participated in our programs had to have a (wired) [Internet connection](#). They needed to have a computer. They needed to have electricity," he said. "This is a game changer for us in that (video conferencing) can now reach more rural schools in [developing countries](#) like Afghanistan and the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#)."

Such technologies make it possible for companies that are customers of video conferencing vendors such as Polycom, Cisco and Avaya to connect with employees who are on the road and not in an office.

"It's pretty much now a given that (video conferencing companies) all either support it now to varying degrees or will have to, or have it on their [road map](#)," said Rich Costello, a senior [research analyst](#) at IDC. "The tablet growth in businesses is just starting to take off and that really enhances a mobile video app."

Polycom donated video-conferencing software and equipment that is used by Global Nomads. The Polycom RealPresence [mobile application](#) the nonprofit uses became available as a free downloadable application for Polycom customers last October for the [Apple iPad 2](#) and for certain Android tablet devices made by Motorola and Samsung. In February, the application was launched for the Apple iPhone 4S and will soon be released for Android 4.0 smartphones.

In the past few years, more employees have begun using their smartphones and tablets in the workplace. At the same time, some employees want a way to join a video conference when they are away from work. That is prompting demand for technology solutions that link people with mobile devices to video conferences, say observers.

"It's called the consumerization of IT," said Costello, the IDC analyst. "These devices are coming into the workplace."

Total [smartphone](#) shipments worldwide reached 472 million in 2011, up 53 percent from 2010, said a Gartner report. Tablets are also growing, with Gartner projecting that by the end of 2015, more than 900 million will have been sold.

"This is about the ability to connect to different types of people on different types of devices on any network. It's device-agnostic. You can have a smartphone connected to a tablet to a laptop to a high-end HD video conferencing in an office," said Randel Maestre, vice president of worldwide industry and field marketing for Polycom.

"Our vision is to make video collaboration and video conferencing ubiquitous," he said.

Polycom isn't the only company with that vision.

Last year, San Jose, Calif.-based Cisco rolled out Jabber, a free downloadable application for smartphones and tablets that allows multi-party video conferencing as well as access to voice, instant messaging and voice mail for existing Cisco customers.

"Work is not a place you go to - it's where you are at. You can work if you happen to be at the airport," said Michael Smith, Cisco's senior director for collaborative application marketing. "These mobile devices like tablets now give us the power to do [video conferencing](#) even when we're not in the [video conference](#) room."

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