

Video conferencing could help resolve conflicts at work and at home, researchers say

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The latest video technology could help to resolve conflicts between employees at work, neighbours or even family members, researchers from the University of Bath, UK, believe.

At present, conciliators and mediators from organisations such as Acas are called in to help tackle hundreds of thousands of serious conflicts each year, ranging from disputes between employees or between management and unions, to violent breakdowns in relations between neighbours and family members.

Leon Watts and Matt Billings, of the University's Department of Computer Science, believe that video conferencing will become more common now that the spread of broadband has allowed good quality video and sound to be created and shared.

They believe the technology could be useful because it has more potential for social and emotional communication than the telephone, but cuts out the chance that one or both disputing parties are intimidated by the other's physical presence.

“Video can help in two ways,” said Dr Watts. “Most of the conciliation to sort out disputes between employees is done by phone because for the conciliator, who may have as many as 70 or 80 cases to deal with at once, it can be difficult, costly and slow to arrange to see people in

person.

“In situations of high conflict, it can be hard to get to the real issues, to judge what people really care about, on the phone. So using a video link, in which the conciliator can in addition see each of the disputing parties, is a step forward: it gives them a new options for appreciating parties’ depth of concern about different issues.

“But video is more than just a way of improving on the telephone. It could be part of a new strategy for conciliation, in that once the parties have met separately with the conciliator and there is some solid common ground, they can set up a video conference as an intermediary stage before a full meeting of all parties face-to-face.

“For instance, one of the disputants may have a physically intimidating presence – something that cannot be projected as easily in a video link as in a face-to-face meeting - so this can make negotiation easier.

“In this way video conferencing forms another tool for conciliators and mediators.

“Disputes between team members in companies or between neighbours or within families can be vitriolic and acrimonious, so any way that conciliation can be helped is useful.”

He said that the latest technology allows much better quality images than the jerky first webcams could, and disputing parties can be given a camera and the appropriate technology for their computer, so they can set up the video link.

This would help independent and impartial organisations in their work with people to help them see new possibilities for moving forward and to settle their disputes.

Matthew Billings interviewed 12 experienced conciliators for their views on how they would feel about using video technology, and most thought that not being able to see the parties' body language would hinder their work. At present videoconferencing is not used in conciliation in the UK.

But when a highly experienced conciliator took part in a mock dispute, with actors playing the part of aggrieved parties, she found it was a surprisingly similar process to normal conciliation.

“The conciliator was much more relaxed about using video after the trial,” said Mr Billings. “We think that the conciliation profession will be interested in the potential of this technology.”

Dr Watts and Mr Billings are now planning to work with a conciliation training organisation to inform conciliators about the potential of video conferencing.

Source: University of Bath

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