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Mobile Video Conferencing Comes to the DoD

The technology enables telehealth and reduces travel for agencies.

Because a growing number of retired and active armed forces personnel have brain injuries or psychological health-related issues, the Defense Department has become creative in providing appropriate care. The job falls to the National Center for Telehealth and Technology (T2), which develops and promotes technology solutions for the nation's soldiers and veterans.

Video conferencing allows the agency to connect patients residing in any care facility to real-time assessments and treatments by a healthcare provider. Historically, conferencing occurred between healthcare providers and patients who were both located in clinic rooms outfitted with room-based video conferencing systems. For those with mobility constraints, one option has been to roll a cart with a desktop video conferencing system to the patient's bedside.

"We use video conferencing when there is no face-to-face care available, when the patient needs to see a specialist or when the patient can't travel to the specialist because of a disability," says Matt Mishkind, a research psychologist and program lead for T2's clinical telehealth division.

What's really needed, Mishkind says, is a way for patients to receive the same standard of care from their homes via mobile video conferencing. Although this technology is available today, current DoD policy prevents it. Some of the sticking points are network security issues and screen size and resolution limitations. He says pilot tests and research are underway to determine what types of care are appropriate for various screen sizes and resolutions.

"Policy won't change until there is evidence that changes are required, so we're working on it," Mishkind says. "Having mobile video conferencing available creates a lot more flexibility for patients. Sometimes they aren't mobile enough to get to a clinic easily, and some feel that there is a stigma in visiting a mental health clinic."

Implementation on the Rise

While the reasons for deploying mobile video conferencing are different for everyone, the technology is taking off, says Andrew Borg, a research director at Aberdeen Group. "From a behavioral perspective, there is a generational shift; younger workers have come to expect mobile video access all the time, while older workers are taking their time getting used to it," he says. From a technical standpoint, manufacturers are working out bandwidth, end-user presence and system compatibility issues. It will take some time before video conferencing becomes a viable alternative to phone calls, e-mail and instant messages, but growth will be inevitable.

Adoption has increased because mobile video conferencing eases collaboration and accelerates decision making, Borg says. In addition to using mobile video conferencing for formal meetings, the technology is extremely useful for ad hoc meetings and for improving customer service. All of the major video conferencing players have mobile solutions, including Adobe [1], Cisco [2], LifeSize [3], Microsoft [4] and Polycom [5].

Reducing Travel

While the DoD has been using video conferencing in some form for decades, the implementation of Defense

Connect Online (DCO) in late 2007 made desktop conferencing available to parts of the agency. Since the introduction of Adobe [1] Connect Mobile to DCO in 2011, some workers have informally been using DCO on personal mobile devices. This year, the first formal support for DCO video on mobile devices — the DISA Mobile Project — got under way.

80%
Percentage of smartphones that, by 2015, will have stereo 3D cameras and screens, both of which will enhance video conferencing capabilities

SOURCE: 2012 "Mobile Devices and their Semiconductors Market Study," Jon Peddie Research

"Our mission partners expect DCO to have the best-of-breed technologies and provide us requirements based partly on what they see in the commercial marketplace," says Karl Kurz, program manager of the Defense Information Systems Agency's enterprise collaboration services. "The ability to respond to visual cues and to see dynamic content on another person's computer makes this form of communication much more effective than other less media-rich methods."

Kurz says he has personally used mobile web and video conferencing to participate in planning sessions while on temporary duty (TDY). He also has seen deployed soldiers communicate with their families via a Wi-Fi connection to DCO. DCO also is the primary driver for enabling DISA to have an effective telework program, he adds.

Although it is difficult to quantify how much TDY is actually avoided through the use of DCO, Kurz says that even if a very small percentage of DISA's current 150 million user minutes per quarter are avoided, the department and taxpayers see a huge savings. Other benefits include more-effective collaboration. "It also helps department employees to establish a better personal connection to members of other parts of the department for future collaboration," he adds.

Conquering Federation

For organizations that have standardized on a single video conferencing system with mobile capabilities, such as Polycom RealPresence [6] and RealPresence Mobile, Cisco WebEx [7] and WebEx Mobile, or LifeSize ClearSea [8], which includes a mobile component, compatibility isn't a problem. But for organizations that allow their workers to use other systems on their device of choice, compatibility can be a real challenge.

"When you're dealing with a situation where a smartphone user with Skype wants to participate in a video conference with a dedicated room-based system, there might be issues," says Andrew Borg of Aberdeen Group. "What's really needed is a way for these disparate systems to talk to each other as a federated system."

A few service providers are tackling this problem with vigor. These solutions use a common standard for video conferencing, in essence creating multiplatform video conferencing. Often, these solutions take advantage of the cloud to make video conferencing accessible to anyone with any type of video-enabled device, regardless of location.

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