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Evaluation of Polycom RealConnect for Teams

Hands-on testing of a pre-release version of a cloud-based video interop service for use with Microsoft Teams.

RECON RESEARCH

This evaluation sponsored by:

Polycom™

Background

Founded in 1990 and headquartered in San Jose, California, Polycom develops, manufactures, and markets voice, video, and video interoperability products and services.[1]

Today, Polycom offers a broad range of video endpoints and infrastructure solutions, many of which offer native support for Microsoft Skype for Business.

In 2017, Polycom released RealConnect – a cloud-based interoperability service that enabled standards-based video conferencing systems to participate in Microsoft Skype for Business (online or on-premises) meetings.

In July 2018, Polycom commissioned the Recon Research (RR) team to perform a third-party assessment of a pre-release version of the RealConnect Service designed to support Microsoft Teams.

This document contains the results of our hands-on testing.

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[1] Polycom was acquired by Plantronics in July 2018.

Traditional SfB Interoperability Options

Traditionally, an organization's video conferencing environment consisted of hardware video endpoints installed in shared meeting rooms, and video meetings were hosted on expensive video bridging systems. In some (but not most) organizations, users could schedule their own video calls, while in others support staff were needed to coordinate such meetings.

In the past, due to high cost and complexity (of deployment, use, and management), video deployments remained relatively small (e.g. a deployment of 200 video systems was considered quite large).

In the late 2000s, a new breed of communication tools emerged. Often dubbed unified communications (or UC) solutions, these tools offered a compelling combination of cost effectiveness, ease of use, high performance, and scalability. In the last decade, deployments of UC solutions, such as Microsoft Skype for Business[2], have exploded.

Unfortunately, interoperability between the traditional (standards-based) video conferencing world and the UC world was extremely limited.

Approximately 15 years ago, Polycom entered into a strategic partnership with Microsoft, and via this partnership Polycom offered customers two ways to bridge the gap between these video communication silos:

- Polycom group video systems could join a Skype for Business meeting and act like Skype for Business clients.

- Polycom RealConnect as a gateway (audio, video, and content-sharing translator) between Polycom's video bridges and the Skype for Business meeting servers (AV MCUs).

These approaches allowed customers to continue leveraging prior investments in video conferencing technology, and enabled mixed Skype for Business and standards-based video meetings.

However, each of these approaches required some form of compromise – either in cost, complexity, flexibility, scalability, or workflow. And each depended on the purchase, installation, and management of on-premises hardware or software. Finally, none of these methods made it easy for externals (clients, prospects, partners, etc.) using standards-based systems to connect to Microsoft meetings.

To eliminate these barriers, Polycom created the RealPresence Connect Service.

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[2] For simplicity's sake, within this document, the term Skype for Business (SfB) also refers to prior versions of this platform including Office Communicator (OCS) and Lync.

# Understanding the RealConnect Service

To understand the RealConnect Service, one must first understand the basics of meetings hosted on the Microsoft Office 365 cloud.

As shown in the image at right, the Microsoft Office 365 Cloud hosts cloud-based meetings (dubbed Skype for Business online sessions).

Meetings hosted on Microsoft's cloud can include Microsoft Skype for Business clients / systems only.

The RealConnect Service is a cloud-based, video interop service that was co-developed by Polycom and Microsoft, and is managed and sold by Polycom. When first launched in 2017, this service allowed standards-based (SIP / H.323) video conferencing systems, like those from Polycom and Cisco, to join Skype for Business on-premises or online meetings.[3]
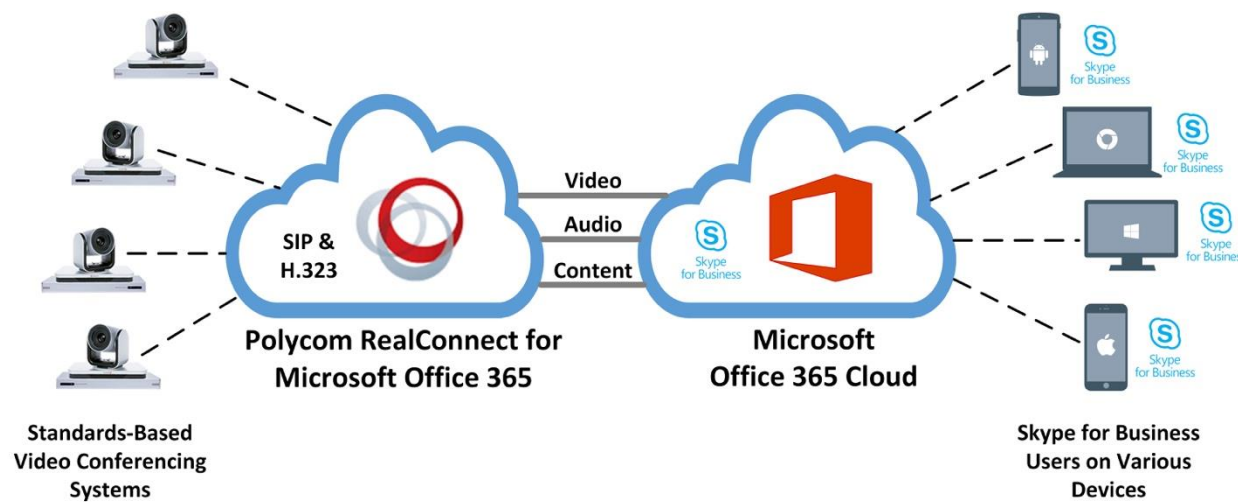
A key feature of the RealConnect Service is the <u>automatic</u> insertion of video conferencing dial-in details into meetings booked using Outlook via the Skype for Business plug-in.

Once RealConnect is activated, users can book their Skype for Business meetings the same way they have in the past, but now those calendar entries will offer a way for standards-based video systems to join the session.

The takeaway is that the RealPresence Connect Service offers customers the ability to include standards-based endpoints in Skype for Business meetings without the need to purchase, install, and manage additional video conferencing technology.

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[3] RealConnect is also available as software for installation on a server behind the customer firewall. In addition, the RealConnect Service can be deployed in a hybrid mode to support Skype for Business server (on-premises) deployments. The study focuses on using the RealConnect Service to join Office 365 online meetings.

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Understanding RealConnect for Teams

In March 2017, Microsoft launched its next-generation, cloud-based communication <u>service</u> called Microsoft Teams.

Today, both Skype for Business and Teams are in use in the field. However, the writing is on the wall - Skype for Business users and organizations will eventually need to migrate over to Teams.

Notably, Teams is available as a cloud-service only.

And like Skype for Business was accessible to SfB clients only, Teams is accessible to Teams clients only. That's where RealConnect for Teams comes in.
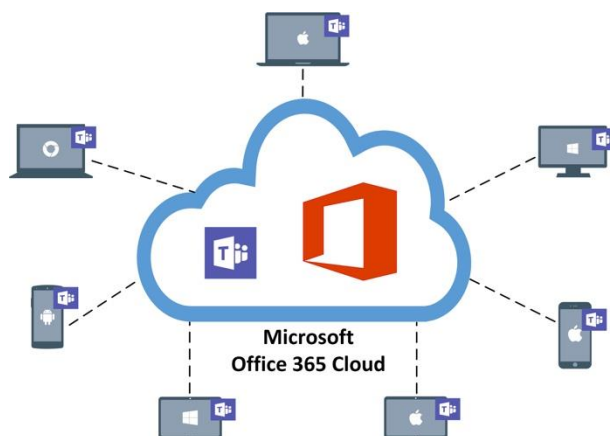
RealConnect for Teams is a version of the RealConnect Service designed to support Microsoft Teams.
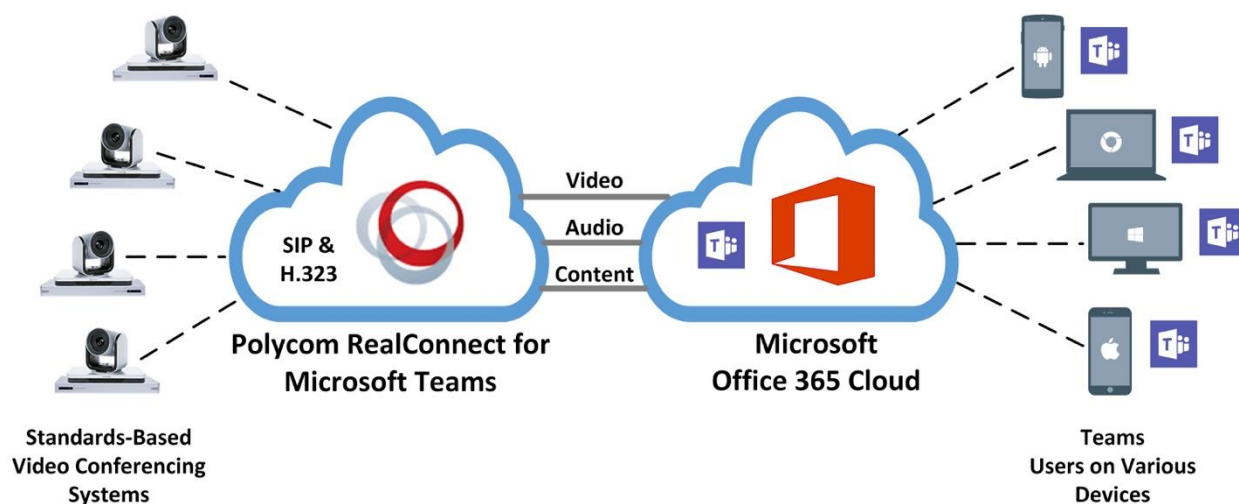
Like the standard RealConnect Service, RealConnect for Teams allows standards-based (SIP / H.323) video endpoints dial directly into meetings hosted on the Office 365 cloud. In this case, however, RealConnect connects those video systems to Teams meetings.

Hands-On Testing

To test RealConnect for Teams, we added a RealConnect for Teams license to our company's Office 365 tenant. In full disclosure – installing the company-wide license took a few hours to complete. But the process is well documented, and any IT professional should be able to complete the necessary steps.

Once we completed the last step, every user in our instance had access to the RealConnect for Teams service immediately. In other words, assuming your users already have the Teams client and Teams Meeting add-in for Outlook installed, there's nothing your end-users need to do. We love "set-it and forget-it" installation.

We then spent the next few days scheduling Teams meetings the same way we always do - by clicking the New Teams Meeting icon within Outlook.

In each case, Outlook automatically inserted the proper video dial-in details within the Outlook calendar entry as shown below.

We then used the video dial-in details to connect both Polycom and other standards-based systems to Teams meetings.

After dialing the URI and entering the conference ID (unique for each meeting), we landed in the virtual lobby and waited there until an internal meeting participant admitted us to the meeting.
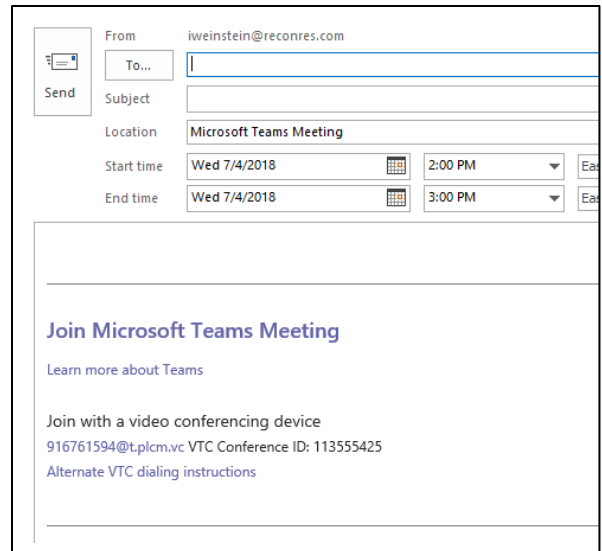
On Polycom endpoints, our Teams meetings were included in the on-screen calendar, and we could join with a single press, and without having to enter the conference ID.

We appreciated the support for one-touch-dialing on Polycom systems joining Teams meetings using RealConnect for Teams.

Throughout our testing and without exception, every group video system we tried connected to the RealConnect Service and the Teams meeting successfully.
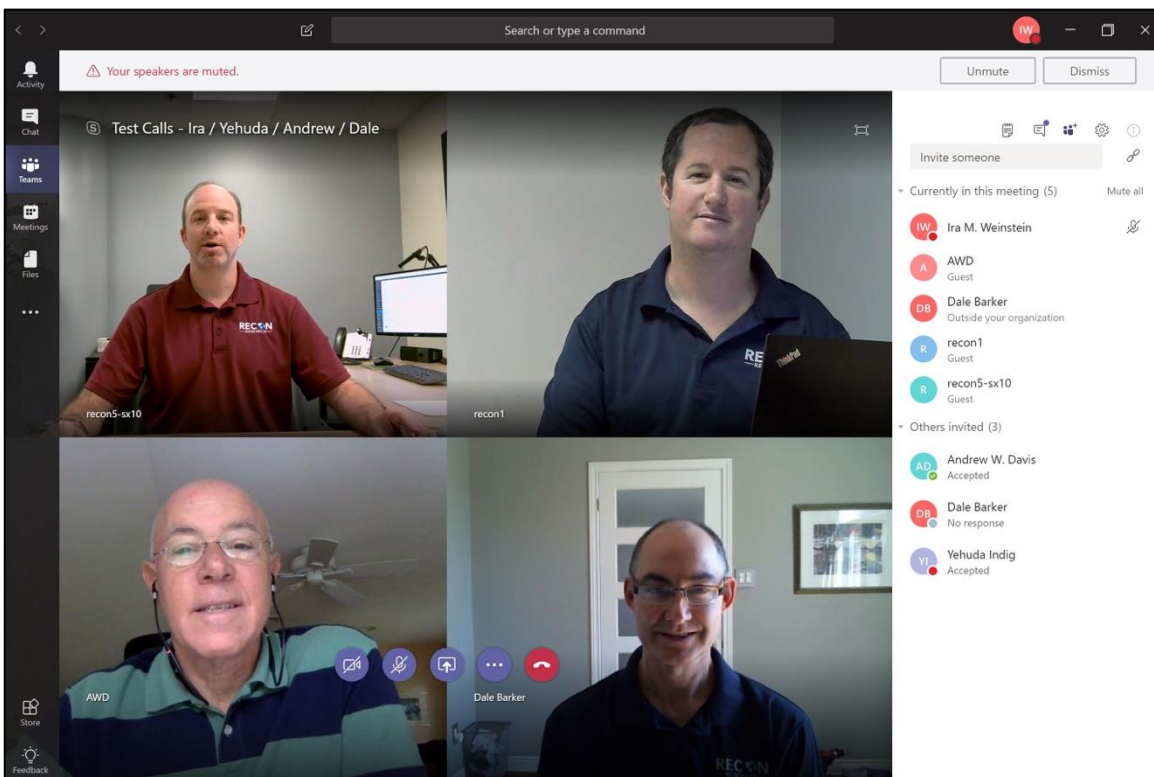
The screenshot above shows the Teams user experience during a Teams meeting including two Teams users (the bottom two participants) and two group video participants.

We were pleased that the Teams participant list showed Teams users and group video users individually. In addition, we liked the ability to disconnect group video users from within the participant list.

Without exception, every group video system we tested connected
successfully to our Teams meetings using RealConnect for Teams.

We were, however, a bit disappointed that the participant list view did not show the mute status of the endpoints connected via the RealConnect for Teams service. According to Polycom, this is by design.

The image above shows the meeting experience for a standards-based video system.

All meeting participants, whether on Teams or on a group video system, received a quad-screen layout showing the last four active speakers. The system even provided group video users with a current speaker indicator (see yellow border around the top right participant in the image above). Well done.

Next, we tested content sharing during mixed Teams / standards-based endpoint meetings. Our testing revealed that currently, content sharing from Teams users to standards-based systems worked as expected, and the standards-based systems received the shared content as a second (dual) stream.

However, we were unable to share content from standards-based systems to Teams meetings. But in all fairness, this is a pre-release version of RealConnect for Teams, so some glitches are to be expected. According to Polycom, this capability will be added before the service is officially launched.

Conclusion

Given Polycom's longstanding and close sales and development relationship with Microsoft, we knew that Teams support on the RealConnect service would be coming soon.

However, we were pleasantly surprised to see that the core functions (integration with the Teams Meeting add-in for Outlook, manual and one-touch-dialing from standards-based systems into Teams meetings, content sharing from Teams users, etc.) were already in place.

Overall, RealConnect for Teams performed extremely well during our testing. Both Teams users and standards-based participants enjoyed a high quality, quad-screen video experience with excellent video and audio.

Today, RealConnect for Teams is still in beta. Given this, we were not surprised to find a few minor glitches. But in this case, the good (meaning the features in place, overall user experience, etc.) massively outweighs the bad. And we give Polycom kudos for letting us test a pre-release version of this service offering.

So, if you're already (or soon will be) migrating your meetings over to Teams, but need to keep using your group video systems, don't worry. Polycom RealConnect for Teams will be available soon. And based on our testing, you won't be disappointed.

About Polycom

Polycom is now a part of Plantronics! Together, we are the premier provider of communications and collaboration technology that creates the most natural people-focused experiences.

Plantronics + Polycom's broad portfolio of solutions spans headsets, desk phones, audio and video conferencing, software, analytics and services that work with any platform — providing our customers and partners the best experience in every environment.

About Recon Research

Recon Research (RR) is an analyst / market research firm focused on the enterprise communications space. Our areas of coverage include unified communications, video conferencing, collaboration and ideation, audio visual AV solutions, wireless presentation, and more.

RR provides enterprise customers, vendors, channel partners, and investment professionals with the information and insight needed to make fact-based decisions.

What makes RR different is the depth of our knowledge and experience that comes from 15+ years of company briefings, market analysis, and hands-on testing of products and services in the space.

For more information, visit us at www.reconres.com.

Contact Information

Recon Research, Inc.
3111 N. University Drive
Coral Springs, FL 33065 USA

Contact us at: info@reconres.com

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