

Web 2.0

Phil Bradley

Screencasting

In this column I thought that I'd take a look at some of the screencasting tools that are available for people to use. If you're unfamiliar with the term it basically means that you take a copy of your screen, together with everything that you're doing on it, such as moving the mouse, typing something into a search box, and you can then store this to share it with other people.

There are plenty of reasons why this is a really desirable thing to do. If you have discovered a bug or problem with a piece of software it can be quite difficult to describe exactly what is happening clearly, accurately and succinctly. However, if you're able to replicate the bug, take a screencast of it happening and hey presto! It's the perfect way to inform a technical support person of exactly what the problem is. Another really good use for screencasting is a training aid. Rather than try and talk someone through something on the phone, or in text simply record the appropriate actions on the screen, such as a complex Google search, or a walkthrough of a confusing series of actions in Photoshop.

In the dim and distant past, about three or four years ago, software like this was quite rare and usually fairly expensive. Nowadays however there's plenty of it, and it's often free. I'll run through a few resources that I've looked at, and

hopefully you'll have a chance to explore one or two of them yourself.

Apowersoft Free Online screen recorder at <http://www.apowersoft.com/free-online-screen-recorder>

This software allows you to record both video and audio on Windows or Mac computers. You can choose full-screen mode, custom screen size or webcam capture – this allows you to capture audio and video directly from packages such as Skype. It's web based, which means that you don't have to download anything at all – simply click 'start recording' and you're up and running. Videos are saved in the WMV format, and can be shared online at once, or edited for a little extra sparkle. It's a robust package with impressive features, especially since it's free!

Google+ Hangout

Google is continually improving the quality of its hangout offering, which allows you to have video chats live with up to nine other people, and one of the options that it now provides is the facility to share a screen with those people. It makes it really easy to talk through a subject, discuss a problem, run a training course and so on. There's nothing to download or install, although to use

the hangout functionality in the first place you do have to run a quick software install, which takes about 60 seconds.

Jing at <http://www.techsmith.com/jing.html>

This tool gives you a comprehensive set of resources to capture what you see, record what you've done, and you can then upload the recording and share it through email and social media. You are however limited to five-minute videos.

OCam at http://ohsoft.net/product_ocam.php#

This is a piece of software that you download - this may be off-putting for some people, but it's nice and simple. You can use it to capture a single screenshot or record some video. Simply choose the part of the screen that you want to capture, hit record or capture and you're pretty much done. You can then save the resulting output in a variety of formats such as AVI and MP4 and share it on somewhere like YouTube or send it directly to a friend or colleague.

Screencastle at <http://www.apowersoft.com/free-online-screen-recorder>

This is a basic tool – there's a big red button on the screen and you just click it. This launches the screencast, once you've installed the correct plugin; a Java control app. (This may set the hackles up on some of your technical team, so may not be an ideal solution for everyone.) Once you've done that, you simply select the portion of the screen you want recorded, and if you need audio from your microphone for a narration. Each screencast has a unique URL, together with an embed code to put it onto a webpage or blog. Unfortunately you can't edit the recording, so you

have to get it right first time or live with the errors.

Screencast-o-matic at <http://www.screencast-o-matic.com/> is also simple. Just click 'Start Recording' to uh... start recording!

Screenr at <http://www.screenr.com/> has been around longer than most of the packages, and there's the comforting knowledge that as well as the freebie version there's a commercial option as well. It's another of the packages that are used directly from the browser window - just click the record button, capture your screen and voice and then share the link. The commercial version allows private screencasts, embeddable recorders on clients support sites and player branding. However, for the vast majority of us, the free version will be more than adequate.

My preferred package is a product called BB Flashback. It's another of the products that you download, but it was quick and simple to install. As with other tools, you can choose the section of the screen that you capture, and I like the fact that you can also record your webcam at the same time, in a variety of different sizes, which allows for a nice personal touch. You can also zoom into part of the screen, annotate the screen and it comes with a really nice editing suite. I like it so much that I actually paid for the commercial version, and it's the tool that I use exclusively now. You can see an example of how it works on my YouTube channel at <http://youtu.be/do9POezXUcw> (I should point out that I'm nothing other than a satisfied user of the product by the way!)

If you haven't tried doing a screencast I can thoroughly recommend it. It's very quick and simple, and it's actually quite a lot of fun. Also, if

you're running quick training sessions, or guiding people through a product, a screencast is going to save you a great deal of time. Give it a go!