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Virtual Meetings – How to get together - Without getting together

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Under normal conditions, we’d probably be looking forward to a meeting where we can get together with friends, but during these coronavirus days, it’s better to get together without getting together. In fact, staying at least six feet apart is encouraged by everyone at all levels of authority. Fortunately there’s Video Chatting, or is it Video conferencing? I used to think there was a difference. I thought of Chatting as one person to one person, and Video Conferencing as one person to many, as in making a presentation to a group of people. But now it seems like Video Chatting or Video Conferencing are used almost interchangeably. So what is the current thinking? One definition provided is, “Chatting is a form of conversation between two or more members over the internet”. So Video Chatting would be a conversation between two or more members employing video-capable devices, over the internet; but that sounds like video conferencing. Definitions and terms may not be very important here, what’s really important is the fact that we can interact with others using video-capable devices, over the internet (sounds like client-server technology to me). And, conveniently, these devices can be computers, tablets, or smartphones from any manufacturer.

Video conferencing or chatting is being used for a variety of reasons like Team meetings (The Computer Club Board of Directors just had their first virtual BOD meeting while everyone was social distancing in their own homes.), Webinars, where there’s no interaction between attendees other than a textbox, One-on-One training and support, job interviews, attending religious ceremonies (We just attended church on Sunday in our living room.) and even telemedicine where you and a doctor interact via video conference.



Typical PC Video Conferencing Screen

Video conferencing allows people who are in different geographic locations to communicate by providing live audible and visual connections between them. Video conferencing technology includes audio and visual aspects so the following are the components of a typical Video conferencing setup: Internet connection (Ethernet, Wi-Fi), Displays (laptop, desktop monitor, smartphone), cameras and microphones (webcams with built-in microphones), speakers (built-in or external speakers), video conferencing software.

Fortunately, there are a lot of Video Chatting/Conferencing software options available today. Things were not as available a few years ago when I started having a video conference with three college friends. We were spread out in the US in four separate states. I was here in Florida, one friend was in S. Carolina, another friend was in Tennessee, and the fourth was in Arizona (so we had to deal with different time zones). At that time, the only practical/free application that we knew of, and could afford, was Skype. So we used Skype, once a month, every month for almost a year. Initially, it took up to a half-hour to get everyone set up and communicating, but by the time we stopped conferencing we had gotten it down to only a couple of minutes of preparation. (From what I’ve seen lately, Skype seems to be a whole lot easier to use now.)

But, nowadays, you have a lot of choices. Skype, which has been around since 2003, is still a good choice. Other fairly well-known choices are WebEx, GoToMeeting, Zoom, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Some other, possibly less known, choices are Microsoft Meet, Google Hangouts, Jitsi Meet, and BlueJeans. And don’t forget Duo and Facetime, which were initially intended for smartphones, though they say that under certain conditions they can work with appropriate computers. Duo is available for Android and Apple devices while Facetime is available only for Apple devices. Some of these Video Conferencing choices are free, some have a free version and some have only paid versions. Having an account or a subscription (if there is a cost) allows you to set up and initiate a conference; there is usually no cost for attendees. Zoom has been in the news lately, once positively, for its increase in stock price because so many people have been using it, and once negatively for its poor security and the infamous “Zoombombing”. (In fact, some companies have prohibited employees from using Zoom.) Some of the security concerns revolved around the choice of certain defaulted settings. These default choices have recently been changed to improve certain aspects of security, but the main security problem is the fact that communication between devices is not encrypted. Maybe this will be changed in the future.

If you are trying to decide which video conferencing software might be best for you, there are a few things to consider. Cost is always an important consideration, especially if it is only going to be used for personal use. If the software is used in a business it might be easier to handle the monthly expense. Next, the number of participants may be important, especially if you have a large number of people to communicate with. The free versions will probably have lower maximums. There may be a time limit for meetings, especially with the free version. Screen sharing, which may or may not be available, is the ability for one person to have their desktop or a specific window shown on all of the participant’s screens. This allows a presenter to show everyone the same information, like the slides of a PowerPoint presentation. Some packages may offer an amount of “free cloud storage” along with the software. That may be useful for sending large files (larger than could be sent in an email) to the meeting participants. This may also be useful if you intend to do cooperative document development. Messaging between participants during the meeting is the ability to send a short “text like” message to all of the participants, allowing inter-participant communications. Messaging may be desirable for large presentations. Having a permanent record of the meeting, for future review, may be important, so you may want a “Recording” feature. Some software might have Calendar syncing which is the ability to interact with certain calendars and allow meetings to be automatically put on the participants’ calendars. Whiteboard capabilities allow the participants to interact with programs, documents, and images, a feature may be only needed for business meetings. Security is always a concern and increased security probably comes with increased cost.

So, whenever you can, take advantage of Video Teleconferencing and your Windows PCs, Apple PCs, Android, and Apple mobile devices to help you get together without getting together.