Top communication tools for remote working

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⬢ Introduction

The Coronavirus outbreak has turned into a massive work-from-home experiment for some organisations, with many using remote working technology for the first time. While some communications tools will be familiar to people and may already be used in the business or by individuals at home, they may not have experience of others.

If you zone out every time someone mentions their WhatsApp group or their Zoom chat, or go cold at the thought of using Slack or Basecamp, then this guide is for you. Likewise, if you're looking at the best remote working communication tools for your organisation, this guide will be a good introduction to some of the key tools available. Because of the massive increase in remote working, many of these tools are offering free trials, so shop around for the best option for you.

⬢ Video calls

Video conferencing, already seen as a good way to reduce business travel and the associated carbon emissions, has exploded since the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown. Whether it's virtual coffee chats between teams, company-size town halls or client catch-ups, everyone seems to be getting camera-ready. And that's without the online quizzes, virtual pubs and family catch-ups happening outside of work hours. Most of the video conferencing tools aimed at business use have much of the same functionality – video and audio calling, screen sharing, call recording, background blur and chat functionality – but check out each individual one if you're not sure what's right for you. Many offer a free service for their basic option.
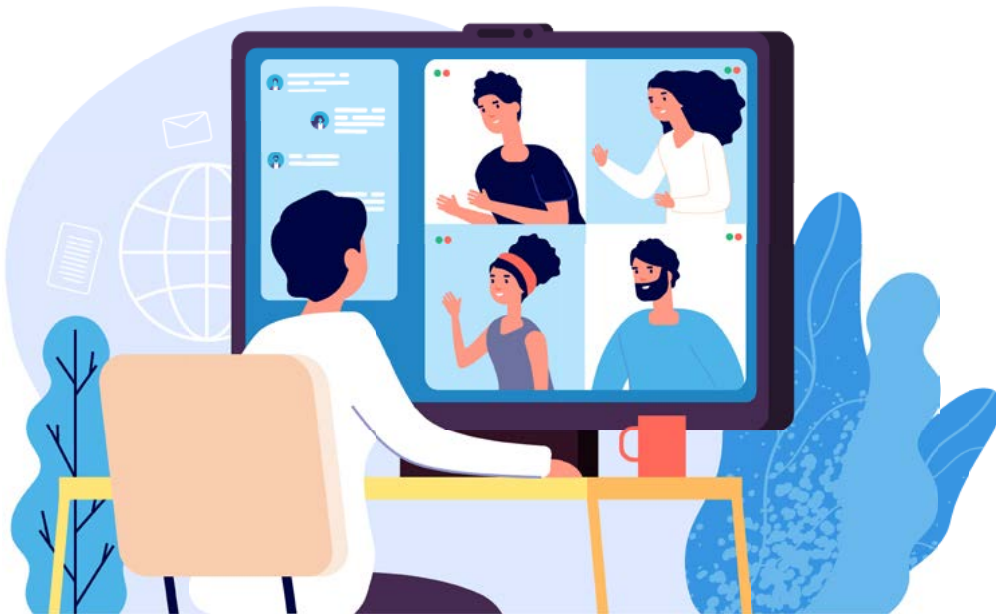
BlueJeans

There's no free option with Blue Jeans, but the company, which has been around since 2009, has a 30-day free trial to see if it works for you. Prices start at around £12 per month. It has a high standard of video quality but few add-on features.

Google Hangouts

Google Hangouts Meet is part of the wider G Suite platform. The application is aimed at businesses primarily as you have to be a G Suite customer. It's well integrated with other parts of the G Suite, so you can add files in the same window and organise video calls through your Gmail calendar. It has a simple interface, typical of the Google brand. There's also a basic Google Hangouts service which is free.

GoToMeeting

GoTo has been around since 2004. It's business focused and provides audio and video conferencing as well as screen-sharing. It's great on mobile – you can set up and run a call on your phone using their app. There's no free option, but the starting fee is c£10 a month, for 150 participants and no time limits, which suits most small businesses. There are professional plans with more functionality for bigger organisations. Like most other tools, GoTo is priced per host. GoToWebinar and GoToTraining are part of the same family.
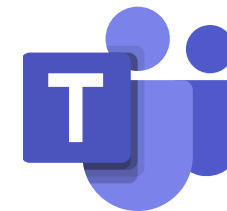
Microsoft Teams

Microsoft Teams is again aimed primarily aimed at businesses as subscribers are already using Microsoft365. It's fully integrated with all the other Microsoft products which makes it seamless. It's expensive if you're not already using Microsoft365 but cost-effective for businesses which have already gone down that route. There are small business rates as well as enterprise solutions. Meetings can include up to 10,000 participants and people can easily join without downloading the application. Teams has all the usual functionality you'd expect.

Skype

Skype was one of the original video conferencing platforms and the brand is well known having even become a verb – people talk about Skyping one another even if they're using a different tool. The company is now part of the Microsoft family and offers a free service. It's seen more as a way to keep in touch with friends and family (especially in a period of lockdown) although is also good for video calling up to 50 people. Skype for Business offers a more sophisticated paid-for upgrade.

WebEx

Owned by Cisco, WebEx offers a free version which works for most uses. It allows you to have video calls with up to 100 people for an unlimited time, screenshare and have private chat rooms. Once you have set up an account, you have a personal URL through which you can manage all your meetings. There's a choice of using the desktop app, mobile app or website.

WhatsApp, Facetime, Messenger, SnapChat, HouseParty and Instagram

These consumer tools also offer video calling. Although they're more for consumer to consumer than business, they are used by teams to keep in touch via remote working and for one-to-one chats. You'll need a free account to take calls.

Zoom

If there is a winner from from the Covid-19 outbreak, then it must be Zoom. Previously a smaller player in the video conferencing arena, the app now a household name with a 380% increase in subscriptions. Everyone from your boss to your grandmother is busy Zooming. Zoom launched in 2013 and offers free 40-minute video calls for up to 100 participants (or unlimited for one-to-one meetings) with paid-for Pro, Business and Enterprise options. Its gallery screen option, whereby you can see everyone on the call at the same time, makes it great for everything from team calls and family catch-ups to virtual keep-fit sessions. You can create custom backdrops from company brands to family photos.

Top tip: looking for advice on how to come across well on a video call? Listen to our recorded webinar on the topic:

LISTEN

Top tip: Make sure that people turn on their cameras when using these tools, rather than just relying on audio or screen sharing. Seeing people helps to reduce a sense of isolation and improves communication. It also allows people to receive visual feedback and makes sure everyone is engaged with the discussion.

➡ Group messaging

If you weren't part of a WhatsApp group before, then you'll no doubt be inundated with news, gossip or the latest lockdown memes now. It's a great opportunity to bring teams together – particularly different groups such as furloughed employees or those working on a particular project. Primarily used for social interaction, there are a range of tools which offer this service although WhatsApp is the most well-used within the business community: Facebook Messenger, SnapChat, Viber, Kik, Discord, Instagram as well as good old-fashioned text messages.

➡ Collaborative tools

Collaboration used to mean booking a meeting room with a flip chart. The idea of collaboration on a document with a group of colleagues in different geographies was the stuff of sci fi plots. Data was held in one physical place (usually that hot, dark room in the basement where the IT department was based). Now with the cloud, your data (and your colleagues) are just a click away. A range of tools have been developed to support this collaboration, all offering different functionality. Some may be familiar and others completely alien. Thanks to the proliferation of tech start-ups all vying to make our working lives easier, smarter and more collaborative, the list is continually growing.

Airtable is reminiscent of an Excel spreadsheet (which is what people typically used to manage their to-do list before apps like Airtable came along). Part spreadsheet, part database, Airtable is a project management tool which assigns tasks, prioritises workflows, before enables document sharing and messaging.

Top tip: Small morale-boosting exercises such as asking people for their best remote working tip, their favourite film or box-set or a good Spotify playlist can be a fun way of encouraging people to share ideas and kick-start some discussions on group messaging tools.

Top tip: Consider informal communication tools like WhatsApp groups or Messenger which can temporarily replace the chat across the desk and make people feel connected.

Basecamp is the ultimate team collaboration and project management tool. It allows people to message individually or in a group chat, and shows a clear to-do list for every member of the team. It's also a central storage place for documents and files meaning that all work and comms happens in one place.

Doodle is a great tool to help people find the most convenient time for a meeting, chat or even weekend away. It saves checking people's calendars or sending around group emails with long lists of suggestions.

Dropbox is a file-hosting service that allows people to share files wherever they are in the world. Described as the world's first smart workspace, it brings together traditional files, cloud content, paper documents and web shortcuts into one place. It's essentially replaced the on-site server for many organisations.

Front is the inbox for teams, bringing together all forms of team communication from email to social media in one place and enabling it to be assigned to different team members.

Google Drive is a file storage and synchronisation service developed by Google. It removes the risk of having conflicted copies of documents as people are working on the same document at any one time so there's only ever one version of the truth. It offers free cloud storage for personal use up to 15GB.

I Done This is a simple collaboration tool for teams and personal users that turns the information you log into reports so managers know what their teams are spending time on.

Microsoft Teams is the ultimate Microsoft package combining workplace chat, video meetings, file storage, and application integration. It's everything that you'd expect from Microsoft but comes with a price tag and is aimed at the business market rather than personal use.

Monday is a more sophisticated version of Trello (see below) essentially a project management tool for teams which can also be used as an individual to-do list.

TOP COMMUNICATION TOOLS FOR REMOTE WORKING
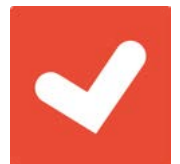
ProofHub describes itself as an all-in-one project planning software. It's another project management system that allows people to see their agenda for the day, create their own workflows for their teams, and message one another.

Serene is an organisational tool to help you plan your day. Essentially a glorified to-do list, it helps you to define one major daily goal for your day and then breaks your day down into sessions. When you enter a session, Serene shields you from distractions by blocking distracting apps and websites. And it can silence your phone, control Philips Hue lights, update your Slack (see below) status and more to help you create your optimal deep work environment.

Slack is a messaging platform designed for remote teams. Its aim is to replace inter-company email. Instant messages are divided into channels so everyone in a team or project can discuss a particular issue whether it be the latest client innovation or the plans for the next team get-together. There's also an individual chat function meaning that project-centric conversations don't get hijacked by people's personal agendas. Files can also be shared with the handy drag 'n' drop functionality. It also offers video and voice calls.

Taskade is a real-time organisation and collaboration tool for remote teams. Task lists, mind maps, workflows, and video chat all come together. It also has a team calendar.

Taskworld is another project management and collaboration platform designed to facilitate project and task management, collaboration, delegation, communication, knowledge management. It also measures progress and provide performance metrics for team evaluation.

Todoist is an online organiser which gives you a clear overview of everything on your plate so you don't lose track. It prioritises your tasks so you know what to work on next and you can delegate tasks to different team mates (or members of your family).

Trello is a project management tool which you can use as a simple personal to-do list or to collaborate with colleagues on a much wider project, assigning tasks and updating them on progress. People can add attachments, comments and due dates.

Troop Messenger describes itself as a unified comms platform for the office which combines one-to-one and group messaging, video calling and screen sharing and integrations with GoogleDrive and DropBox.

Wunderlist will be discontinued early May 2020 and replaced by Microsoft To Do. This is another daily planning tool which allows you to retrieve your tasks across any device. You can share tasks with family, friends or colleagues, add due dates and reminders and a host of other functionality that you'd expect from Microsoft.

→ Focus tools

Working from home can be distracting. Whether it be the laundry, cleaning, gardening, a furloughed partner or noisy children, there are plenty of ways to avoid your to-do list. And that's without the latest Coronavirus memes, the news headlines, social media and 'quick' Google searches. If you feel your fingertips wandering away from your work during the day, then use one of the host of apps to reduce unnecessary online surfing.

Cold Turkey describes itself as the toughest website blocker on the internet and works with both macOS and Windows. It lets you choose websites and apps to block. It also has a unique feature called Frozen Turkey which locks you out of your computer completely for a set period which is perfect if you struggle to switch off at night.

Forest is a great app to keep you focused and stop surfing. Rather than block websites when you want to focus on a project, you open the app and plant a tree. It will keep growing so long as you don't get side-tracked and leave the app. By staying focused you can build a lush forest, and complete your to-do list.

Freedom is an app and website blocker for Mac, Windows, Android, iOS, and Chrome to reclaim focus and productivity. It blocks specific websites and apps or the entire internet if you prefer. Users can set a timer, or limit the amount of time they spend online.

Top tip: Even daily office technology like Microsoft Office can be made more collaborative if people share calendars, for example. Encouraging people to share their diaries and keep them updated helps colleagues to understand when's a good time to contact them, particularly with teams spread across different time zones. Knowing in advance when your colleagues have calls or virtual meetings can save frustration and help you plan. It's particularly important for people to diarise if they're not able to work because of caring commitments or illness.

Top tip: It's also important to develop new routines and rhythms to support remote working. There may need to be more rigour around file-sharing and updating in progress documents, for example.

Hocus Focus is a great free app which only allows you to view one window at a time to avoid multiple browsing. It reduces clutter from your screen and helps you focus on one thing at a time.

LeechBlock is a web browser extension which blocks time-wasting sites. You can specify up to 30 sets of sites to block, with different times and days for each set. You can block sites within fixed time periods (e.g., between 9am and 5pm), after a time limit (e.g., allow up to 10 minutes in every hour), or with a combination of time periods and time limit (e.g., allow up to 10 minutes in every hour between 9am and 5pm). You can delay access to sites with a countdown to help you with your own discipline and even set a password or random access code for the options page to slow you down in moments of weakness!

Mindful Browsing does what it says on the tin. It beautifully interrupts mindless browsing, and gets you back to your life. You specify which sites you'd like to be mindful about your time on, and provide a list of things you'd generally rather do instead. It doesn't block you from visiting sites, it's simply the conscience on your shoulder.

Noisli saves you from noisy households. This app helps you stay focused and work productively by listening to ambient noise from rain, thunder, wind, seaside or specific sounds.

RescueTime also blocks distracting websites and apps. You can start a manual FocusTime session, set daily limits or schedule focused time directly in your calendar. It also records how long you spend on different apps and websites, which can make sobering reading.

SelfControl lets you block your own access to distracting websites, your mail servers, or anything else on the Internet. You set a period of time to block out, add sites to your blacklist, and click "Start." Until that timer expires, you will be unable to access those sites—even if you restart your computer or delete the application.

Or, if you really don't trust yourself, then unplug from the internet or ask your partner to change the WiFi code and turn on airplane mode on your phone.
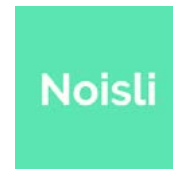
Top tip: Encourage the use of Do Not Disturb features on collaboration technologies when focused on specific tasks to avoid interruptions from calls and emails.

Top tip:
Resist the urge to look things up online which aren't directly linked to your current project. Instead write a list of things you want to research and do it later. Like wise, if you come across an interesting article or link, then copy and paste it to read later. If you have to search for something online, set your phone timer so you keep track of time.

⊖ Sector specific tools

There are also a range of communication and collaboration tools designed for different industries: InVision is great for design collaboration; GitHub is aimed at software developers; Instagantt is the go-to for project managers.

Top tip: Tread carefully when introducing any new tools as it can be an alienating experience for the technology challenged.

⊖ Do you need comms support?

For almost 10 years, Magenta has been the communication expert in the built environment, designing and delivering bespoke internal communication strategies. During this unprecedented period, we are here to advise and support organisations of all sizes through the remote working and internal comms minefield.

Many organisations have in-house built environment and comms teams who can manage most aspects of workplace communications and just need some extra support at either a strategic or operational level. Others require more comprehensive support. Whether you need a bespoke communications strategy or support in creating engaging material to deliver a strategy you've already produced, we can help.

With teams in London and Toronto, together with partners around the world, we can seamlessly support your organisation. Get in touch at **www.magentaassociates.co** or email **info@magentaassociates.co**

or call **+44 (0)20 3773 3622**

⊖ TOP TIPS FOR MANAGING A REMOTE TEAM

1/ Over-communicate: There's no such thing as too much communication when you're working as a dispersed team. Schedule one-to-one check-ins and be clear and transparent – ambiguity is the enemy of remote working

2/ Invest in good technology: A strong WiFi connection and an ergonomic set-up with keyboard, mouse and second screen is essential for long-term remote working.

3/ Swot up on comms platforms: Collaborative tools like those described above are brilliant ways for people to work together seamlessly when remote working. Work out what's best for you and your team or organisation.

4/ Turn video cameras on: Seeing people improves communication as it allows people to receive visual cues during discussions and ensures nobody drifts off mid-meeting.

5/ Stick to a routine: Adopt similar routines as you would in the office. An official start and end time to the day avoids work slipping into the evening. Do Not Disturb functions on tech tools can be used to give people the time and space to work on a longer project

6/ Give yourself a break: Instigate a virtual coffee break for your team. By getting everyone together on camera with a cup of coffee at a set time, you break the monotony and boost morale

7/ Encourage self-care: Consider producing a self-care guide which can help people maintain good physical and mental health while remote working. This could include tips on avoiding back and eye strain, the importance of taking a proper lunch break and getting fresh air, exercise ideas, advice on good nutrition and tips for a good night's sleep.

8/ Celebrate success: It's easy for great work to go unnoticed when teams are working remotely. By overtly celebrating successes and rewarding people for their performance in a public way, morale is maintained and people feel recognised for the work they're doing

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