



WEAVING A VIRTUAL PRESENCE: WEB MEETINGS

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When Cornwallis surrendered to Washington at Yorktown, the British army band played the comic ditty "The World Turned Upside Down." Boy, hasn't it in the last few months. Schools closed. Non-essential economic activity halted. Most people who could, became home-bound hermits. And, of course, "work from home" went from being a sideshow to the main event. As I write this in June, we haven't had a physical office presence since mid-March. But work continued and will likely continue this way for some time.

Several characteristics impact one's opinion of remote work; among them are age, personality, and environment. At present remote work is more attractive to younger employees for flexible schedules and location, less attractive to extroverts who thrive at the water cooler, and more enticing to those whose living arrangements provide space and privacy comparable to an office. Wherever you land on this tripartite scale, remote work is here to stay. After early 2020, major companies are on the fulltime, remote work bandwagon, including Twitter, Facebook, and Walmart.¹

WORK CONTINUES APACE

As part of our COVID environment, everything from major conferences to cross-town coffee dates has gone virtual. People are discovering how terrible most laptop webcams are and those in need of monitor-mounted webcams have found them out of stock for months; only available on the secondary market at prices that would make a scalper blush.

Despite such bumps in the road and more than a few early hiccups, our tech infrastructure proved resilient. For example, Microsoft Azure's Chief Technology Officer, and author of four engrossing tech-thriller books,² Mark Russinovich, detailed steps they've taken since virtual became the rule:

- Microsoft Teams, a communications platform, saw an increase of 200% in "meeting minutes" between March 15th and 31st; 2.7 billion up from 900 million. That number climbed further in April to 4.1 billion.
- The company added 110 terabits of capacity to its data fiber optic network. For reference, this is approximately 1 million times the capacity of a 100 megabit home broadband connection.

¹ See respectively, <https://reason.com/2020/05/19/twitter-is-going-permanently-remote-first-will-other-firms-follow/>, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/21/technology/facebook-remote-work-coronavirus.html>, and <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/28/walmart-says-its-thousands-of-tech-employees-will-continue-remote-work.html>.

² See <http://www.trojanhorsebook.com/books/>.

- And, for Xbox users, Microsoft saw a 50% increase in gameplay as well as a 30% increase in peak concurrent usage.³

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Points two and three above are interesting, though the third may seem an underestimate to parents. But I doubt anyone is surprised by the first statistic. Anecdotally, I've attended more web meetings since COVID began than in the whole of my prior career. And, like any good technology snob, I've found things I like and dislike about our web meeting platform options. We won't cover all of the features in detail (visit PracticeHQ (<https://www.isba.org/practicehq/productsservices>) for a complete comparison chart), but let's hit the highlights:

ZOOM

I've never seen a product capture such attention and notoriety so quickly. Like Kleenex and Xerox before it, Zoom became a verb. I believe one reason for this that it offers a free tier. If you keep your meetings to one-on-one, you can host a 24-hour meeting for free, and if attendees number three to 100, 40-minute meetings are free. You could meet clients one-on-one, or couples at the same computer/smartphone/iPad, get what you need, and never pay Zoom a dime. And who doesn't love the fun virtual backgrounds?

Zoom has suffered some security blunders, including sending conversations not involving mainland-Chinese participants through China-based servers, but they appear to be learning. They instituted a 90-day feature pause to focus exclusively on security. Originally only paying customers were going to enjoy end-to-end meeting encryption; now it appears all will. Finally, there's the network effect⁴ and safety in numbers⁵; as more people use it, even more people are likely to use it; a virtuous cycle. I think they rightly see this as their go-big-or-go-home moment.

GOTOMEETING

GoToMeeting is the granddaddy of web meetings. They've been around forever. Unlike Zoom, there is no free tier. Pricing starts at \$12/mo. for up to 150 participants; 50 more than Zoom's entry-level paid tier. For \$1/mo. more than Zoom, you can host a meeting for up to 250 participants. You also get unlimited cloud-based meeting recording at the mid-tier, whereas Zoom limits you to 1GB of cloud storage. However, one recording-related fact I sadly discovered through personal experience is that Zoom can be set to automatically record when the meeting starts. You must tell GoToMeeting when to begin recording.

WHAT YOU ALREADY OWN (MICROSOFT TEAMS AND GOOGLE MEET)

Both Microsoft and Google have made their meeting platforms free for all during the COVID period. If you are a Microsoft 365 (nee Office 365) subscriber, Teams is likely already included in what you pay Microsoft. If you're not a Microsoft 365 subscriber, you can still signup for and use the "freemium" version of Teams. See <https://tinyurl.com/msteams-covid> for details. On the Google side, Google Meet, its premium video conferencing solution, is free to everyone until at least September 30th, at which time Google may implement changes, including limiting meetings to 60 minutes. See <https://tinyurl.com/googlemeet-covid> for details.

Whichever service you have, or want to try, the core features are unsurprisingly similar: video and audio conference, screen sharing and collaboration, chat, and more. Both services have iOS and Android apps. People can join meetings in either platform without downloading and installing software; a nice feature if your clientele skews older. All you need is an email address to give either a whirl.

THE OTHERS

If you visit the PracticeHQ comparison chart, there are additional options to consider. They are mostly feature and price competitive with what's described above. But I would start with the ones above and, unless lack a needed

³ See <https://azure.microsoft.com/en-us/blog/azure-responds-to-covid19/> and <https://news.microsoft.com/innovation-stories/azure-covid-19/>.

⁴ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network_effect.

⁵ The eponymous phrase in the early days of business computing was: "No one ever got fired for buying IBM."

feature or another provider offers a compelling synergy with your existing technology, I would stick with the big four players.

SECURITY

After “what are my options”, attorneys’ biggest question about web meeting software is security and confidentiality. I divide this question into two parts: 1) can an uninvited person breach or “zoom bomb” your ongoing meeting; and 2) if you utilize cloud-based recording, what security does the provider offer.

On the first point, I believe we’ve passed the “zoom bombing” phase, particularly after Zoom made a series of updates in April after “zoom bombing” gained prominence. Zoom suffered the embarrassment, but all platforms share the weakness. See <https://tinyurl.com/bombs-away> for details. The key to security on this point is three-fold: 1) manually approve entry into meetings; 2) password-protect meetings; and 3) use unique meeting IDs for each meeting.

On the second point, this question of encryption is fundamentally the same one you’re hopefully familiar with regarding cloud storage. The recordings are encrypted in transit and at rest, but the vendor holds the keys, so it could turn over readable data if served with a warrant or subpoena. Therefore, the same precautions apply. You can avoid this problem by recording locally to your computer or foregoing recording.

THAT’S A WRAP

Take this month to experiment with web meeting vendors and whatever equipment - camera, audio, and lighting - you have handy. Next month we’ll discuss how to make your audio sound great.