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VIDEOCONFERENCING APPS

Although I've never found a reliable source, it's been said that the initial reaction to the telephone was that nobody would want to do business over one. Today, a substantial amount of business is conducted by text message – try getting millennials to even answer a phone. At the same time, there is a variety of technology that could make our remote interactions with people all the more like in-person interactions. Much of that technology remains unused. For enterprising lawyers who want to access clients across the province or work remotely, there are a number of tools that offer better interactions than phone or email can alone.

Even physicians are starting to assess patients remotely. Medeo is an app that lets you meet with a family doctor or specialist by videoconference after filling out a questionnaire of your symptoms. Many conditions can be diagnosed and treated remotely and others can be referred for an in-person appointment.

Videoconferencing can be helpful for preparing witnesses who have difficulty travelling and can also save significant time. I prepared one witness by Skype videocall when she could not find a babysitter to come meet me. At least one Quebec law firm I know witnesses documents and commissions affidavits over video-calls with the blessing of the Barreau du Quebec, which specifically approves of the practice. Currently, the Law Society's Code of Professional Conduct specifically requires that deponents be physically present before the lawyer. The practice advice I received was that this rule should be interpreted to preclude commissioning documents by videoconference.

In this article, I touch on a few options that exist for meeting and interacting with colleagues and clients. Each comes with its own pros and cons. There are many other platforms out there, but I have focused on those that are free for, or commonly-used by, potential clients. For any tech solution, my golden rule is that it has to be simple and intuitive to use or people won't use it. Here, that primarily means that users should not have to download software or open any kind of user account.

High definition videoconferencing requires at least 1.2Mbps internet speed, whether on home or office internet connection or on cell network. Here, faster is always better, especially where small lags can be frustrating and interrupt the flow of conversations and meetings. (So plan on needing at least 5Mbps to be safe since patience is often slim and acute demand for bandwidth can cripple your streaming). More users mean you will need a faster connection. If you are wondering whether your current internet plan is up to the task, visit www.speedtest.net to run a test. For mobile devices, you can download the app. Be sure to test while other users or apps are using the internet connection to give you a better idea of how your device will perform in practical circumstances.

APPEAR.IN

Appear offers free videoconferencing through your web browser for up to four people at a time (group chats up to 12 people as well as a few additional features are available for a price). Users don't need their own accounts to sign in – all they need is for the host to email a link that can be opened in any web browser (except Safari).

Mobile users have the option of downloading an app or using their Chrome browser on their device. Unfortunately, the mobile app receives mixed reviews.

The ease of access is a significant advantage. All users need is an internet connection and web browser – no debate about iOS vs. Android (e.g. FaceTime) or having to download software (e.g. Skype or GoToMeeting).

Users have the ability, albeit limited, to share screens in the free version, which makes reviewing documents much easier.

A similar solution, Google Hangouts, runs from a browser, is free, and integrates with Google's other apps. I have not used this particular videoconferencing platform, but online reviews suggest that it can be resource-intensive on your computer and that calls will degrade quicker if your internet speed isn't quite fast enough.

GOTOMEETING

This is one of the most popular videoconferencing tools. Although hosts pay a monthly fee (\$26 - \$64/month), they can invite up to 250 people to join the meeting for free on any type of desktop or mobile device. Desktop users can participate via their web browser or by downloading the GoToMeeting software. No user account is required unless you are hosting meetings.

Like Appear, a significant advantage of GoToMeeting is that participants can share their screens with each other. There are also other functions that might be superfluous to some but handy to others. For example, meetings can be recorded and automatically transcribed (think how happy that would have made Michael Cohen). Participants can also call-in via a regular phone line, which might be handy if some participants do not have a fast-enough internet connection to use the videoconferencing features. Meeting hosts can also hand over control of their mouse and keyboard to other participants where that might be useful, such as if trying to mark up a document on someone else's computer.

Many of these additional functions require participants to download the software, but the basic functionalities do not.

SKYPE

Skype built up enough market penetration fast enough that the brand name soon evolved into a verb.

To use Skype, users have to download the Skype software and sign up for an account on either their mobile or desktop devices (the software is automatically installed for Windows 10 users). Many clients will already have this, but not all. The need to download software or have an account might be a barrier for those that don't already have both. I have had a Skype account as long as Skype has been around, but I rarely use it because long-distance calling is cheap and all the people I would phone overseas would just as soon use FaceTime as a platform.

Skype also allows users to share their screens. Skype for Business has a host of features such as instant messaging, PowerPoint uploads, and a whiteboard tool to draw and illustrate ideas and notes.

It's a Microsoft product now, so you can also expect less-than-intuitive customer support (N.B. I am a PC user) as well as Microsoft trying to sell you other products packaged with it.

FACETIME

FaceTime is great. It's simple, already installed on your iPhone, integrates with your smartphone's phone app, and, in my experience, has the fewest hiccups of mobile videoconferencing apps I've used.

For a quick catch-up, FaceTime is ideal. However, the limited number of participants (two) and the fact that you need to be on an Apple device to use it can be a barrier, depending on your needs. If you are working from your desk and using a mobile device for the conference itself, then it will require some kind of stand to hold up your device.

FaceTime does not allow users to share their screens with others. This, coupled with its limited functions, means that it is probably not what you want for more involved meetings that might require document review or for users to be working at their computers.

WHATSAPP

WhatsApp was one of the first messaging apps for data-based instant-messaging that users could log into with their cell numbers. This made it more akin to sending text messages and was useful for those not using data-based SMS systems like iMessage or Blackberry Messenger.

WhatsApp requires users to both have an account and to download the software. There are mobile and desktop apps for users, both of which are free. Many people have WhatsApp. As with Skype, I've given up using it since everyone I need to reach overseas uses FaceTime. However, it has become the de facto standard for group text chats for businesses with multiple mobile users.

WhatsApp also allows documents to be shared between users, but does not have screen sharing or many of the other functionalities. Because of its limitations, like Facetime, it is probably not a good solution for anything other than casual conversations.

FACEBOOK

Facebook Messenger, an app related to but separate from Facebook altogether, has a videoconferencing function. On your desktop, the Messenger app opens in a browser like any other website but must be downloaded separately from your Facebook App on your mobile device.

Messengers' videoconferencing function works much like FaceTime or WhatsApp and has many of the same advantages and limitations. Users need a Facebook account, but that is



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rarely a problem – as of June 30, 2017, there were 263 million Facebook users in North America (nearly three-quarters of the population). Many people know how to use Facebook, which can make it easier for getting people to use it.

One downside is that many people use Facebook for personal reasons, so if you want to speak with clients via Facebook messenger, you'll either need to disclose your personal Facebook information or create a dummy account. Here is an area where Facebook surprised me: many law firms use Facebook for marketing purposes. Although law firm pages can message users directly and book appointments, you cannot set up a videocall with potential clients.

The functionality of Facebook videocalls is similar to FaceTime and WhatsApp (i.e. limited).

VIRTUAL REALITY VIDEOCONFERENCING

For those unfamiliar with it, virtual reality (“VR”) involves users wearing goggles that turn their field of vision into whatever is displayed on the inside of the goggles. Many of the applications for VR involve videogames, TV, and movies. Estimates vary, but one suggests that 63 million headsets shipped in 2016 although 2018 has shown a sharp dip in sales (a few explanations beyond the scope of this article suggest that this does not mean that that VR is on the way out).

Currently, VR videoconferencing is not accessible for the level of work done by most lawyers. There is a dearth of software available (essentially none) but also significant hardware obstacles to overcome. Users would not only need a VR headset, but at least one camera to transmit their facial expressions, body language, and movements to other participants. Will it ever come to be? The most optimistic predictions say it is five years out. Most say 8 – 10 years out. A company called ARWorks has a VR system that allows users to join in on meetings using a smartphone screen instead of a VR headset and appears relatively simple to set up. Microsoft is developing a kind of VR meeting solution called “holoportation”. The technology is fascinating and the demonstration videos make the technology seem much more practical and easy to use than it probably is right now. However, it requires nearly as many cameras as a movie set. That amount of gear offends my rule of simplicity, but the potential to make remote interactions dramatically more “real” cannot be ignored. Lawyers are increasingly specialized and that raises (or should raise) the value that clients receive as well as the quality of service. However, many of those lawyers are concentrated in urban centres. Try finding an insolvency lawyer in Fort Nelson or an IP lawyer outside of just about any urban centre. Law remains a service-oriented industry and your connection with clients will always be a basis for competition and can allow alternative working arrangements. This stands to benefit our health and wellbeing and make the legal practice more accessible to women raising young children, both areas where the profession has plenty of room to grow. [V](#)

Appendix A