

Ten Tools for Remote Teams

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If you've got team members in multiple offices or working from home, you probably already use a fair amount of technology. But are you using the right tools for the right job? The best way to communicate depends on a lot of variables, including the urgency of a message, its complexity, and who you're talking to. It also depends on the strengths and weaknesses of the tool itself, so we've assessed ten popular workplace technologies to tell you what they do best and how to work around their challenges.

1. Instant Messaging

How It Works: Sends and receives written messages within a single pop-up screen shared by two or more users. Users with desktop cameras can use video chat to add a more personal component.

Pros: Makes remote workers feel like they're in the office. Faster and more intimate than email. Allows you to see who's online. Tracks and transcribes exchanges.

Cons: Distracting when you have work to do, and too easy for your friends to see that you're online. Not good for in-depth conversations. Often used for nonurgent matters with the expectation of an immediate response. Public IM clients aren't secure.

Best for: Immediate feedback. Quick question-and-answer exchanges. Seeing if someone is available for a phone call. Sending links during a conference call. Reminders or alerts ("That file is ready for you"). Video chat is good for check-in meetings.

Tips: Find a good program, like Trillian or Adium, that supports multiple IM clients. Turn it off when you're using NetMeeting or otherwise sharing your screen. If you're getting too many IMs, change your setting to "invisible," create separate IM addresses for personal and professional use, and tell colleagues that you prefer to use IM for urgent issues only.

2. Personal Digital Assistant

How It Works: Bundles phone, email, calendar, and other features into one handheld device.

Pros: You're always connected. Fast way to stay on top of things while away from your computer and office. Real time so you don't need to sync the device like the old days.

Cons: You're always connected, which cuts into personal time. Small size makes typing slow, and screens can be hard to read. Brevity of emails you send can be misinterpreted as curt or overly direct.

Best for: Traveling. Managers who need constant access to email and calendar.

Tips: They don't call it "crackberry" for nothing. Set guidelines for when you'll use it and when you won't. Turn it off now and again, or you'll go nuts.

3. Teleconference

How It Works: Allows multiple users to dial into a phone call. Can be hosted internally or through a third-party service provider.

Pros: Connects multiple people simultaneously. Real time. Inexpensive. More personal than email.

Cons: Not always clear who's talking. Time lags result in people talking at the same time. Callers often multitask, so their attention is divided. If most of the group is in one location, people calling in feel left out of the conversation. Hard to show people what you're talking about or give visual presentations.

Best for: Small groups and teams already familiar with each other. Short meetings or planning sessions.

Tips: Send out an agenda or any visual aids before a meeting. Avoid the whiteboard; use specifics when reviewing visual aids ("at the top of the left column" instead of "this item over here"). Don't continue the meeting informally when the call is over.

4. Videoconference

How It Works: Adds video to a conference call with cameras posted in conference rooms or at individual workstations. Voice activation allows the camera to focus on whoever is speaking.

Pros: A thrifty alternative to meeting in person. Seeing gestures, expressions, and body language improves communication. Invaluable tool for recruiting departments.

Cons: Requires expensive equipment on both sides. A hassle to set up if you don't use it often. Awkward delays and potentially poor sound and/or video quality. With some systems you can see yourself onscreen, which is very distracting for presenters. If your company needs to do simultaneous videoconferences, you need bandwidth of T1 or greater.

Best for: Scheduled formal meetings when traveling isn't feasible. Team-building across locations. First-round interviews with job candidates from other cities.

Tips: Arrange for a training class for all users of the equipment and request that users on the other end do the same. Set up the call in advance to assure the meeting will begin on time.

5. Web Conference

How It Works: A web site or software program like NetMeeting allows users to meet online in real time. Features include slide presentations, whiteboard annotation, live video, text chat, and real-time audio (using voice over IP).

Pros: Enhanced ability to share documents, so you can show and tell with a remote group.

Cons: Hard to launch and set up if you have large groups and multiple offices. Often relies solely on shared documents for visuals, so you don't get the collaborative feel of videoconferencing.

Best for: Presentations. Sharing ideas with remote parties. Complicated discussions that require visual diagrams. Troubleshooting with a team.

Tips: If your charts are boring and your employees are at home or in their cubes, it's very easy to lose your audience. Make your visuals dynamic, and use polling and messaging to keep them engaged.

6. Wiki or ftp Site

How It Works: Online archives where you can park large files that colleagues and clients need to access. With a wiki, participants can also add and update information over time to keep the files current.

Pros: Highly accessible. Wikis allow for interlinking of documents and make it easy for multiple users to modify files. Ftp is better than email for exchanging large files because it keeps them off your email server.

Cons: Most people don't remember to look at a wiki for updates. Not real time. Can be difficult to learn. Requires a lot of effort to update and maintain.

Best for: Gathering feedback or updates from a lot of people. Project planning across multiple teams.

Tips: To keep a wiki from becoming too long, break sections into separate pages and link them. Designate one person to update the wiki regularly, so that it doesn't become outdated. Set

ground rules so people don't override each other's updates. Third party sites include Jot.com and Typepad.com.

7. Collaboration Technology

How It Works: Project-specific online workspace allows colleagues to exchange and modify information. MeetingPlace is real time and allows one user to share his desktop with another. SharePoint doesn't have to be real time, which is good for coworkers in different time zones.

Pros: Easy to share files and applications. Reduces problems with multiple versions.

Cons: Each member of workgroup needs to download software. Some security risk.

Best for: Brainstorming. Customer presentations. Storing company and client information in a central location accessible to remote employees. Small, tech-savvy groups.

Tips: You can also use collaboration technology as a training or repair tool. MeetingPlace allows you to share your desktop, so tech support staff can use it to fix some problems remotely. Since SharePoint is not real time, you may want to use it to work on documents, then launch Live Meeting to talk about the documents in real time. SharePoint 2007 adds a social networking component.

8. Unified Communications

How It Works: Software integrates your various communications platforms, including office phone, cell phone, PDA, IM, and email. It builds on voice-over-IP networks and integrates with calendar functions. It can also combine all your messages in one place.

Pros: Makes you more accessible and potentially more productive by, for example, sending all your office voice mail, cell voice mail, and faxes into your email box.

Cons: People know where you are and what you're doing and expect to be able to reach you at all times. Can cause problems with the performance of other applications on your server.

Best for: Road warriors and other people who carry multiple devices or receive a lot of communication.

Tips: Before you choose a vendor, come up with a complete IT strategy and make sure vendors can meet all your needs. Don't expect to switch to voice over IP and unified communications in one fell swoop. It's less hectic to migrate one technology at a time.

9. Presence

How It Works: Software links communications devices and calendars to find availability and automatically set up meetings between multiple users.

Pros: Saves the back and forth communication of trying to set up meetings among busy people.

Cons: You need to update your calendar often, and in granular detail.

Best for: People with extremely full schedules, teams who have a hard time scheduling meetings.

Tips: Be specific in your calendar entries. If you want colleagues to know you're available for a conference call during a long commute, for example, you need to specify in your calendar entry that you're not in the office but you are available by cell phone.

10. Telepresence

How It Works: A high-definition, high-bandwidth version of videoconferencing. Multiple oversized plasma screens and speakers throughout a conference room and real-time audio give you the closest match to meeting in person, for upwards of \$500,000.

Pros: See expressions and make eye contact. No audio delay. Cost (if it's a long-term substitute for traveling to meetings).

Cons: Cost (if you don't use it enough). Requires dedicated conference rooms, high-bandwidth audio, and modern voice-over-IP switching infrastructure. Because many systems operate on proprietary networks, they only work for in-company meetings.

Best for: High-level executives who want to cut back on their travel.

Tips: If you go for it, find creative ways to get your money's worth. Food manufacturer Tate & Lyle used telepresence for a meet-and-greet among administrative assistants in different offices. Admins work together across multiple locations every day, but they rarely meet each other because they're almost never included in travel budgets.

Sources: Andy Abramson, principal, Comunicano PR; Mitchell Hershkowitz, principal consultant, converged communications, Dimension Data; Michelle LaBrosse, president and CEO, Cheetah Learning; Merrily Orsini, managing director, Corecubed
