

Microsoft Teams for Lawyers

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Background

Thrust into the Work-From-Home (often seen online as WFH) environment, many lawyers scrambled to learn the technologies that would allow them to continue their practice of law during the pandemic. Finding solutions that would allow lawyers to continue to take client meetings, albeit virtually, became a priority. The pandemic way of life was new to all businesses – law firms included - having the ability to continue to interact with clients was a must.

From the outset, Zoom dominated the video conferencing market. Over the past year, Zoom has grown in popularity and usage. According to Zoom, there are over 300 million daily participants – up from just 10 million at the start of 2020. As popular as Zoom is, that doesn't mean it's the only possible solution for your firm. There are other video conferencing providers to evaluate, including one that you may already be paying for – Microsoft Teams.

Microsoft Teams is a communication and collaboration platform developed by Microsoft and is part of the Microsoft 365 subscription service offering. Teams is often thought of as a competitor to Slack, offering workspace chat rooms, video conferencing, and file storage/sharing. Microsoft Teams replaced Skype for Business, which has been retired and is much more than a Slack alternative.

There is a free version of Teams for users who don't already have a Microsoft 365 subscription, but it comes with some usage limitations such as a participant capacity of up to 100 users and a maximum meeting length of 60 minutes. These limitations don't exist with the Business Basic, Business Standard, or E3 subscription levels.

Features Explained

Microsoft Teams offers a variety of features and is more than just a video conferencing solution. Teams allows users to message one another through chat, allowing users the ability to format text, send emojis, and share files. It supports both one-on-one as well as group chats.

Attorneys can hold one-on-one audio or video meetings using Teams, which can be quickly started from the chat window, contact card, Outlook, or Teams app. It's as simple as typing the name within the search box and selecting the type of call you want to make (video or audio-only) – and we know with attorneys, the simpler the better.

Teams allows Administrators to create a "Team," which is a group set up for a common purpose that users can join – such as your employees. Within the Team, Administrators can create separate channels which allow team members to communicate without the use of email or group texting. You can have separate channels, for example, one for all employees and one for firm management. Channels can be set up as Standard or Private. Private channels are only accessible to the Private Channel members and should be used when creating a channel around specific team roles or for attorneys working on an individual legal matter. All users of the Team can view the contents of a Standard channel, which can be used to post updates to company events, news, meetings, or policies for all employees to see – like a "Wiki."

Virtual meetings can be scheduled or created ad hoc. Users of a channel can see that a meeting is in progress and join. There is also a plugin for Microsoft Outlook that can be used to invite others into a Teams meeting. Video conferencing is provided by the software and supports the ability for users to call into the meeting, rather than having to join through the Teams app. Users who don't already have Teams installed have the option to join through their internet browser as well.

Admins can add company branding to a meeting, including the meeting waiting room or lobby. The lobby is where you can stage participants before joining the actual meeting. The host has granular control to allow specific individuals to enter the meeting from the lobby. Teams now supports live captions improving accessibility for all users.

Like Zoom, Teams allows users of a meeting to share their screen as well as use the Whiteboard, providing the ability to write, draw or sketch on the Whiteboard collaboratively.

For those firms looking to host webinars, Microsoft's Advanced Communications plan can be added to your Microsoft 365 subscription, allowing users to host meetings with up to 10,000 participants in "view only" mode – reported to be increased to 20,000 users by the end of 2021. Users can have interactive webinars for up to 1,000 users – if the attendance goes over this limit, Teams will swap over to a presentation-only mode. This is an added benefit if you're currently paying for GoToWebinar or a similar webinar hosting provider.

Microsoft has introduced Teams Calling, a cloud-based phone system. Again, the idea is to stay connected with your contacts through Teams, while working from home or shifting to part-home, part-office. For most lawyers, Teams Calling will be an additional monthly cost as the majority of firms don't subscribe to the E5 product, which includes it for free. This means that users will be required to use their computer audio connection and have very limited telephone dial options unless you pay for Team Calling. Frankly, the telephone dial limitations are a huge reason for push-back from clients using Teams.

Security

For a while now, privacy and security features have been lacking in Microsoft Teams. Only recently has Microsoft started to update the cybersecurity protections implemented by the Teams application.

In the first half of 2021, end-to-end encryption will be available for one-on-one ad hoc Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) calls. The data encryption will only be available to paying subscribers, and can only be used if both the caller and receiver have enabled the feature and opted in. Zoom introduced end-to-end encryption last year, so Microsoft is only now starting to play catch-up when it comes to security. For those meetings with more than one participant, end-to-end encryption is coming later and no exact time frame has been given.

Some additional security features within Teams that are worth noting – Hosts can now disable an attendee's video camera if needed and are provided with conferencing controls that can prevent other users from joining a meeting.

Microsoft Teams also supports Multi-Geo Capabilities, which gives firms with offices in more than one geographical location the ability to choose the location of data centers used to store their information. Microsoft will also be implementing a click-safe link feature that brings URL scanning and "time-of-click" verification of URLs in meeting links shared through email messages to prevent phishing attempts.

Final Thoughts

The adaptation to the current work environment was difficult for most firms to make. Many users have found it hard to stay as productive working remotely as when they were in the office. Some have become more productive, taking advantage of new technologies and the added time to their day without the need to commute to work.

Keeping in touch with clients has become the top priority for maintaining and nurturing existing and new relationships. Video conferencing apps have opened up a virtual door to staying connected with firm members as well as clients, and the Microsoft Teams app provides another solid option when evaluating these solutions.

While Microsoft Teams may not be the most widely used video conferencing option, it holds up when comparing its features against Zoom. It even offers some collaboration features which Zoom does not have. Best of all, you may already have access to the software at no additional cost through your firm's Microsoft 365 subscription.

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