

Working at home to avoid coronavirus? This tech lets you (almost) replicate the office

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Working from home is already so common it has its own acronym, and it's about to get even more common still. Companies [like Apple](#), [Amazon and Microsoft](#) are now advising employees to "WFH" to avoid

exposure to the novel coronavirus.

But working from home can be a real challenge for employees who find themselves doing it for the first time. To address this concern, many employees are turning to digital solutions to help them interact with colleagues and stay productive away from the office.

Here are some tech options for three styles of work: formal meetings, informal discussions, and team projects. But none of them, as we shall see, is without drawbacks.

Formal meetings

The first question on most people's minds is how to conduct meetings with colleagues or clients. One of the most common answers is [Zoom](#), a video communication platform that combines conferencing, online meetings, chat and mobile collaboration.

Zoom is widely used as an online substitute for formal meetings, and last week its [share price surged by 12%](#) in anticipation that coronavirus quarantines will see it adopted even more widely. Among the platform's selling-points are its ease of use, and ability to stream presentations as well as host meetings.

But while digital solutions like Zoom offer useful way for colleagues to meet, they are arguably less satisfactory for interacting with customers. Research [suggests](#) that online meetings fail to deliver the same feelings of connection and empathy, compared with a face-to-face meeting.

Informal discussions

While video conferencing is useful for formal meetings, it is less

appropriate for informal chats, brief queries or rapid status updates, such as "have you sent that invoice yet?". This task is more suited to instant messaging platforms or group chat apps.

A common tactic is to use Facebook messenger, WhatsApp or gchat. But these can be distracting and intrusive, particularly at high volumes, causing workers to lose focus and concentration.

Many companies have instead adopted [Slack](#) and [Microsoft Teams](#), which offer instant communication without the distraction of social media. IBM has reportedly adopted Slack for [all of its 350,000 employees](#). And Slack has reportedly [asked its own employees](#) to work from home in response to the coronavirus outbreak, prompting wisecracks on social media about how they will stay in touch with one another.

But while these channels are great for zapping quick messages between team members, it can be hard to build real rapport. Research shows that being [authentic, realistic and making time](#) with colleagues is a more natural way to build effective work relationships, and this is hard to do purely online.

Team projects

So much for meetings and chats—what about actual project management? Two options already in widespread use are [Google Drive](#) and [Microsoft One Drive](#), which allow people to upload documents to the cloud and collaborate on them in real time.

These two platforms have already become the industry standard for sharing documents. But (and you may be sensing a theme here), sometimes team discussions require face-to-face conversations or brainstorming, which can be [challenging to replicate in a purely online](#)

[environment](#).

There's no doubt that the coronavirus has struck at a time when we have more digital options than ever before, giving a wider range of employees the opportunity to work from home with minimal disruption.

But it's also undeniable that people still need face-to-face interactions for companies to function at their best. The likes of Zoom, Slack and Google Drive will likely see an uptick in use during the epidemic, but once it's over they should be considered complementary solutions rather than substitutions.

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