

If Zoom's out, what about WebEx, Google Meet or Skype? We tried them all, here's what we found

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The popular Zoom video meeting app went out this week, for many on of all days, the first day of school, and people freaked out.

With stay-at-home remote work and learning the new norm during this pandemic, what were people supposed to do?

We agree that Zoom is the easiest, by far to connect to, when it's running, but what if it goes down again? One option is to explore a different video [meeting](#) app.

We took a good hard at four competitors this week, which all offer tiers of free service. Zoom is still far and away the most popular of all of them, top-ranked on Apple and Google's app store download chart, along with Messenger (No. 10), Microsoft Teams (No. 14) and Google Meet (No. 15).

We examined all, along with the granddaddy, Skype, which started the video chat explosion back in 2003 and WebEx, which used to only be available for a fee, but now has a free tier.

Google Meet

No other app has been pushed as aggressively this year. There's an extensive TV campaign touting how Meet, which formerly charged a subscription, is now 100% free through Sept. 30. (Google has decided to keep it free forever, with paid upgrades.)

And beyond the airwaves, Google has looked to make Meet a daily staple for Google users, by inserting tabs within Gmail, the most popular e-mail program, to start or join a Google Meet.

Compared to Zoom, Meet is very much of a bare-bones app. You can connect to people for a video meet, and have up to 100 in the room. The silly bonus features seen on Zoom of adding a blurry background to your image are not there. You can share your screen, as with Zoom, and access different cameras or microphones. However, you can't record the

call, something Zoom and other programs allow.

Tools like background blur, whiteboarding and hand raising are features Google says are "coming soon."

Meet's best feature, however, is maddening. Google will display a transcript of your call, in real time, and it gets the words pretty much right on. Fantastic! But does it offer translation for those speaking in different languages? Nope.

Can you download the transcript afterwards to have notes of the meeting? Nope to that, too.

With Zoom, there are hundreds of third-party apps that enhance the experience, including building transcriptions and translations, from the apps Otter.ai and Lingmo.)

Google limits the amount of time you can chat for free to one hour. Zoom allows 40 minutes.

Rate: 2.5 stars. For minimalist video chat, it does the job, but it gets two big knocks: the video defaults to a super low-resolution 360p (which you can change) and there's that transcription issue. How hard can it be to offer a download button to save the meeting notes? If anyone could do it, it would be Google, which has set the standard for translations via its acclaimed Google Translate app.

WebEx

An app aimed at enterprise has stepped up to the plate during the pandemic by offering its services for free. WebEx doesn't charge you for meetings of up to 50 minutes, with as many as 100 people in the room. For features like higher-resolution video recordings saved to the

cloud and longer meetings, rates start at \$13.50 monthly.

Rate: 3.5 stars. WebEx is just as easy to connect to as Zoom is, and it gets a brownie point for a cleaner, less cluttered menu with an easier to read "Mute" button front and center. That should help some audio-challenged attendees and make it easier for the rest of us to hear what's being said on the meetings.

Skype

This is the app that popularized video chat, especially for free communication (Skype to Skype calls) with loved ones overseas, and it still offers all that. But the neglect from corporate owner Microsoft, and emphasis on Teams (see below), perhaps explains why Skype isn't even in the top 50 rankings on the iOS and Google Play charts.

Skype's problem has always been that it was buggy. You could only initiate a chat with someone if they connected with you first and became a member of your contacts. And both parties had to download the hefty Skype app.

This remains true today, but Skype now has a Zoom-like "instant meeting" feature that lets people connect to you without downloads or registration. This usually works, until it doesn't. Just ask my brother, who couldn't see me on his screen when we tested it this week.

Rate: 3 stars*. Skype gets the rating if you know other people who downloaded the app. Then it works like a charm, with better audio quality than rivals. If they have to connect via other avenues Skype can be challenging.

Microsoft Teams

Teams is not just a video conference program but an element of a huge Microsoft business messaging app aimed at enterprise. Anyone with a Microsoft account can use Teams and have as many as 50 people on a video meeting, as long as those people also have Microsoft accounts. What you can't do for free: use Teams to make audio calls to others in your organization or have much storage space for sharing photos and videos. Pro memberships start at \$12.50 monthly.

Setting up video meets with people within your organization is relatively simple. Just find the person (or persons by adding them to the conversation) and click the video call button.

But going outside your corporate "team"—if you're using the program at work to connect with people who don't work for your organization—can sound awfully convoluted with Microsoft-required administrator permissions.

A better idea. Just go to the Calendar or Meeting section of the app and invite someone. It works rather easily, but with caveats. There will be no meeting held if you use Apple's Safari browser, and if you opt for Firefox instead, you'll get a meeting that can only be held via chat, sans video and audio. Microsoft would prefer you to download their app to make it work instead.

Rate 3.0 stars: If you're using Teams at work, you either love it or hate it, but odds are, it does the job. Video meetings will work as advertised—you'll be able to connect, blur the background and record the conversation.

Messenger Meeting Rooms

Facebook would like this private meeting room to be considered a "Zoom Killer," but the reality is, it's still Facebook, where the first

choice, after you've selected your meeting room, is to put the [video](#) on your timeline for everyone to see and join.

So that pretty much knocks out educators and enterprise.

Rate: 2 stars

When all is said and done, nothing beats Zoom for simplicity. WebEx may not have the outside apps to enhance the experience, but it does have the reliability of Cisco behind it. Google Meet could certainly do the job for those needing a backup, but without the bells and whistles you'll get elsewhere.

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