

Google makes its video meeting service free to all

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Google's videoconferencing service Meet will now be free to all users, offering an alternative to Zoom for people seeking connections during the virus lockdowns

Google on Wednesday made its business videoconferencing service free to all users, ramping up competition for Zoom as people flock online to stay connected during the pandemic.

Google Meet had previously been reserved for subscribers to the premium G Suite software tools for businesses.

Meet will be available "to all users around the world, to enable people from all walks of life to communicate, collaborate and really stay in touch more effectively through the pandemic," G Suite vice president Javier Soltaro told AFP.

Google touted security and reliability features of Meet, and its foundation in the California-based internet giant's computing cloud.

Use of video calls and conferencing has rocketed as people work, learn, and socialize remotely while staying home to avoid the coronavirus.

Many people have turned to Zoom, which has scrambled to stem security problems such as data hacking and harassment by individuals who crash sessions in what is referred to as "Zoombombing."

Google said in a blog post that it has "invested years in making Meet a secure and reliable video conferencing solution that's trusted by schools, governments and enterprises around the world."

People will need to use or create free Google accounts to take part in meetings, which will have a 60-minute time cap that will be enforced starting the end of September, according to the company.

Google said free access will roll out gradually in coming weeks.

Some six million businesses and organizations from hospitals and banks to manufacturing facilities and warehouses already using G Suite already have access to Meet video conferencing, according to Google.

The announcement comes a day after Google parent firm Alphabet reported higher revenues and profits, while highlighting its efforts to help people affected by the pandemic.

Earlier this week, Facebook unveiled a new video chat service with virtual "rooms" where people can pop in to visit friends.

Through the Facebook Messenger application, users will be able to start video call sessions that as many as 50 friends can join and linger in as long as they wish, even if they don't have Facebook accounts.

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