



How to make sense of Microsoft's Office 365 application suite

Collaboration Tools

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Microsoft Collaboration Tools

One of the great advantages of Office 365 is the huge range of apps available. But this often comes as a surprise to businesses moving over from the traditional on-premise version. With so much choice, it can be hard to know how to choose, especially when some of the apps available may be less familiar to you.



In this ebook, we'll focus on Office 365's collaboration stack, and give an overview of some of the key apps and how they might suit different business scenarios.

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About Office 365

Office 365 offers a huge range of collaboration tools, with different apps suited to different scenarios and ways of working. Using the wrong tool can make collaboration harder though, so it's important to consider the different options available to your business.

If your business is using every tool available, you're probably not operating as efficiently as you could be. The tool stack is designed to provide a suite of options to choose from, to suit your individual organisation's way of working, rather than to be used in its entirety.



So, how can you pick the best tools for your organisation?

Office 365 Business Applications

One of the key benefits of Office 365 is that you always have access to the most up-to-date apps being produced. This means that the Office 365 application suite is constantly evolving, with new apps being added over time, and others being retired. The current apps include:



Calendar



Delve



Dynamics 365



Excel



Flow



Forms



OneDrive



OneNote



Outlook



People



Planner



PowerApps



PowerPoint



SharePoint



Stream



Sway



Tasks



Teams



To-Do



Video



Word



Yammer



Skype for
Business



Kaizala

File Sharing

Being able to collaborate and share files both internally and with customers is important to all organisations. Microsoft's collaboration tools make this much easier and slicker than in days gone by. There are two key tools here, depending on exactly what you need to do with your files.



OneDrive for Business

OneDrive for Business is designed for the storage and sharing of personal files, ie. files specific to your own role and tasks rather than the wider business. As well as being easy to search, it also enables you to share documents if required, giving colleagues access to view and edit. This is great for version control – no more emailing files across to different people and having more than one copy in circulation.



SharePoint

For business files and assets, such as those relevant to your team, department or the organisation as a whole, SharePoint is the best tool to use. Functioning as both an intranet and file store, it's designed to be easily structured and searched, in order to provide a central information depositary for your business. With the ability for structured permissions and control, this can be decentralised to give different departments or groups access to manage different documents and information. As with OneDrive for Business, documents can be shared with selected colleagues or customers, maintaining version control.



If you're currently using file sharing websites such as Dropbox or WeTransfer to send large files to customers, you could instead send links to access the files on your SharePoint. This not only keeps your files in one place, but presents a more professional image.

Formal Communication

You don't need telling that Outlook is Microsoft's top option for communicating in a formal or official way, both with customers and internally. However, email is not the most appropriate or efficient way for more informal work communication with colleagues, so it's worth being mindful of the other more suitable options. More on that in the next section.



Outlook

Outlook is the best solution for formal communication as it creates a clear audit trail, is easily searchable, and is straightforward to use. For sending files, you can use Outlook alongside SharePoint or OneDrive for Business to send links directly to files, rather than adding them as attachments. As discussed earlier, this is not only best practice for version control but is also a more professional way to send larger documents than via external file-sharing websites.

The other advantage of Outlook for formal communication is of course the widely-used calendar feature, along with the ability to manage tasks and schedule meetings both internally and externally.



Formal communication



SharePoint



OneDrive for Business





Send larger documents



Calendar

Email vs Chat

We hear about “communication overload” a lot these days, and the overwhelming number of communications hitting you from all angles is often exacerbated by the misuse of different channels. Using the right communication tools for the right type of information increases productivity and efficiency. It can also help you manage and respond to messages much more easily, reducing the stress of communication overload.

	 Email	 Chat
Communication type	Formal	Informal
Audience	Primarily external communication	Primarily internal communication
Style	Detailed, official or important information	Quick questions or short messages
Benefits	Audit trail	Real-time, fast response conversations

Online Meetings, Calls and Chat

Outlook is great for communicating formal business information, but not the best place to ask colleagues quick questions, have informal message conversations or hold online meetings. Depending on the size of your business, structure of your teams and ways of working, there is a range of options available for this kind of activity.



Teams

The current jewel in Office 365's crown is Teams. It is receiving the most investment in new features, and is therefore the frontrunner for most businesses in terms of functionality and improving collaboration.

For informal, fast communications, Teams is by far the best option. With functions including planning boards, the option for multiple teams of people, discussion boards, individual and group messaging, files and calls, Teams is the all-singing all-dancing option which can be used as basically or extensively as you require.

From communicating within individual departments to running cross-departmental projects, Teams offers a comprehensive, all-in-one UC experience. If you're using it for projects, it also has guest access options if you have any team members from external organisations.



Skype for Business



Skype for Business has a core focus on chat and calls, making it more focused than Teams, but also significantly more basic in terms of the features and functionality offered.

A popular business solution for a number of years, it's still widely used but is no longer receiving investment in new features, and is falling far behind alternatives such as Teams. Many organisations continue to use it as it's what they've always used and are familiar with, but it has an end of life date of 31st July 2021 so users will need to switch to Teams before then.

Teams vs Skype for Business

Skype for Business was formerly the top option for a lot of businesses, but Teams has now absorbed all of its functions and encompassed many more, so it's hard to find any significant advantage of Skype for Business now for most organisations.

While both Teams and Skype for Business offer the capability for calls, online meetings and chat, Teams offers additional features on top, including meeting recording in the cloud, more comprehensive collaboration features, and a better mobile interface.

	 Teams	 Skype for Business
Calls	✓	✓
Chat	✓	✓
Group boards	✓	
Meeting management	✓	
File management & storage	✓	
Reporting & stats	✓	
Search function	✓	
SSL security	✓	

Maintaining both platforms would be unsustainable for Microsoft in the long term, so Skype for Business is being killed off in favour of Teams. While both are still available, Microsoft's investment in this area is now focused on Teams, so you will need to decide when, not if, you'll be migrating across.



Microsoft have announced that Skype for Business will reach its end of life on 31st July 2021, so if you're still using it, you'll need to move to Teams before then.

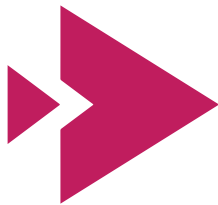
What other collaboration tools are in the stack?

While the tools outlined in the previous sections are the key ones applicable to the majority of businesses, there are several more collaboration tools available via Office 365 which are in some ways a little more niche, but may be just right for your business depending on your requirements and structure. These are a few which you may find useful.



Yammer

Yammer is typically useful for medium and larger sized companies, and offers an internal social network. This is not always the most efficient or effective option for small businesses, but for organisations of a larger size, it provides a practical solution for engaging with a large workforce and can help break down silos and bring the organisation together. Yammer can be used for sharing and exchanging information, asking questions in a social, informal environment and helps drive an open culture based on collaboration.



Stream

Stream is Microsoft's video streaming service, much like a corporate version of YouTube. Specifically for sharing enterprise videos such as trainings, presentations and seminar recordings, Stream enables you to organise videos into channels and groups, and provides secure control over who can access and watch them. It works well in conjunction with the other Office 365 apps and aids collaboration through features which enable you to tag video timecodes in descriptions and comments, to aid discussion points with colleagues.



Kaizala

Kaizala is a mobile-first solution providing a corporate equivalent of messaging platforms such as WhatsApp. Designed with dispersed workforces in mind, it enables organisations to communicate internally, along with remote workers, suppliers and customers. As well as messaging, Kaizala also offers the ability to assign tasks, run performance reports, conduct surveys, share attachments, and manage workflows.

Task Management

Microsoft's task management tools offer additional opportunity for increased efficiency and collaboration in managing workloads across projects and departments. The current trend is for Microsoft to integrate task management tools within their other apps in order to increase productivity and offer more turnkey collaborative solutions. A few key task management options available via Office 365 are outlined below.



Outlook Tasks

Available via the Outlook app, Outlook Tasks offers the ability to create tasks as well as flagging emails to also appear in the task list. A range of filters is available to help manage and order the task list, and tasks can also be assigned to colleagues or external contacts. Outlook Tasks remains popular as it's been around for a long time, however its integration with newer apps such as To-Do enables users to benefit from To-Do's enhanced capabilities and user interface to make the most of both.



To-Do

Designed with a mobile-first approach in mind, as well as having a desktop app, To-Do's mobile interface is clear and fast-loading, syncing quickly across devices. Tasks can be grouped within individual lists, with the ability to add due dates, notes and files to each task. To-Do's Suggestions feature then helps prioritise your tasks and recommends important ones to complete each day. Lists can also be shared with colleagues if you're working collaboratively on joint projects. Additionally, To-Do can integrate with Outlook Tasks, making it easier to manage all your tasks in one place.



Planner

Planner offers a Kanban-style interface, enabling you to build boards for each plan or project you're working on. Within each board, tasks can be organised into custom buckets, with the ability to assign people, due dates, categories and statuses to each task. Team members assigned access to an individual board can view all tasks, add comments to tasks, and filter tasks for easy management. While Planner can be used as a stand-alone app, it is also integrated into Teams, offering an even more collaborative approach with all the additional features offered by Teams.

Things to consider when choosing collaboration tools

When choosing collaboration tools, the best advice is to be selective. “Less is more” is certainly the best approach to avoid the potential chaos and inefficiency of trying to use every single tool available.

Thinking about your requirements

Before even considering all the tools on offer, we’d recommend thinking about what your business actually needs.



What are your objectives?



How is your business and work structured?



What do you need to achieve?



What kind of collaboration capabilities are important to you?

Once you’re clear on your current challenges, the issues you’re looking to solve, and the way you need to work, you need to decide whether the whole business will use the same set of tools, or whether variation between departments is more appropriate.

Choosing the best options

Having determined your requirements, you can then pick the selection of tools which your organisation will use (or choose from), taking into account any industry regulations you need to conform with.

As general guidance, it helps to align your company with Microsoft's current preferred tools, such as Teams, in order to have the best experience and benefit from the most up-to-date features. However, don't pick tools that are poorly-suited to your requirements just because they're the current popular choice.

Implementing tools in your business

When implementing your chosen collaboration tools, it's a good idea to offer best practice guidance to the organisation in order to communicate your decision.

Offering training sessions on how to use any new tools in relation to people's specific roles, as well as being clear on the benefits, will also help avoid patchy adoption across the organisation and the associated risks to collaborative working.



Once you've set up your new tools, remember to remove old ones in order to avoid departments or individuals going rogue and continuing to use old applications.

Final Thoughts

By considering all the factors and taking a pick 'n' mix approach to the collaboration toolkit, Office 365 will enable you to improve your internal and external collaboration, and simplify communication and efficiency within your organisation.

Key points



Maintain document control by using Office 365's file sharing options rather than external websites.



Improve productivity by choosing the most appropriate communication app for the type of message you need to send.



Futureproof your organisation by considering moving to Teams for online meetings, calls and chat.



Cut through the noise and increase efficiency by selecting the right tools for your specific organisation.



About PSU Technology Group

From our Cheltenham HQ, we've been supporting businesses across the UK for over 30 years.



We're technology specialists with a core focus on IT and telecoms.



Over 400 organisations, institutions and companies rely on us to keep their communications and infrastructure working.



We work with every industry from education to construction, and from finance to foodservice.



Our customer satisfaction levels are consistently high, with scores well above some of the industry giants.



We're committed to quality via ISO 9001:2015 and are ITIL® practitioners for IT service management.

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