

Skype Review

Skype is nearly a household name for most. It offers free video and audio calls to other Skype users and cheap phone calls to LAN lines (credit is required).

Skype comes in two flavours, Free and Premium. Premium has all the same features as Free but with the addition of screen sharing, multipoint video calls and no annoying advertising.

The Skype setup file can be downloaded and installed for free and account creation requires minimal effort. Once installed, by default, Skype runs in the background and is ideal for keeping in touch with friends and family.

One of the main advantages of Skype is its ability to almost always work over even the most restricted network, making it a great backup VC method.

Skype has many of the same features as most other VC products, the main being:

- Point-to-Point calls.
- Screen sharing.
- Multipoint Calls (Premium only).
- File sharing (being able to send files to participant).
- Chatting and Instant Messaging.
- Bandwidth optimisation (fully automatic).
- Local address book.
- 3rd party application add-on's (e.g. programs allowing Skype recording etc.)
- Automatic NAT and firewall traversal.

Testing

Signing up for an account via the Skype website steps you through the installation of the Skype application. Once installed, I needed to input my user details to start the full application. Account details can be saved at sign in and the program, by default, will start when the computer starts, allowing an always-online presence, if desired.

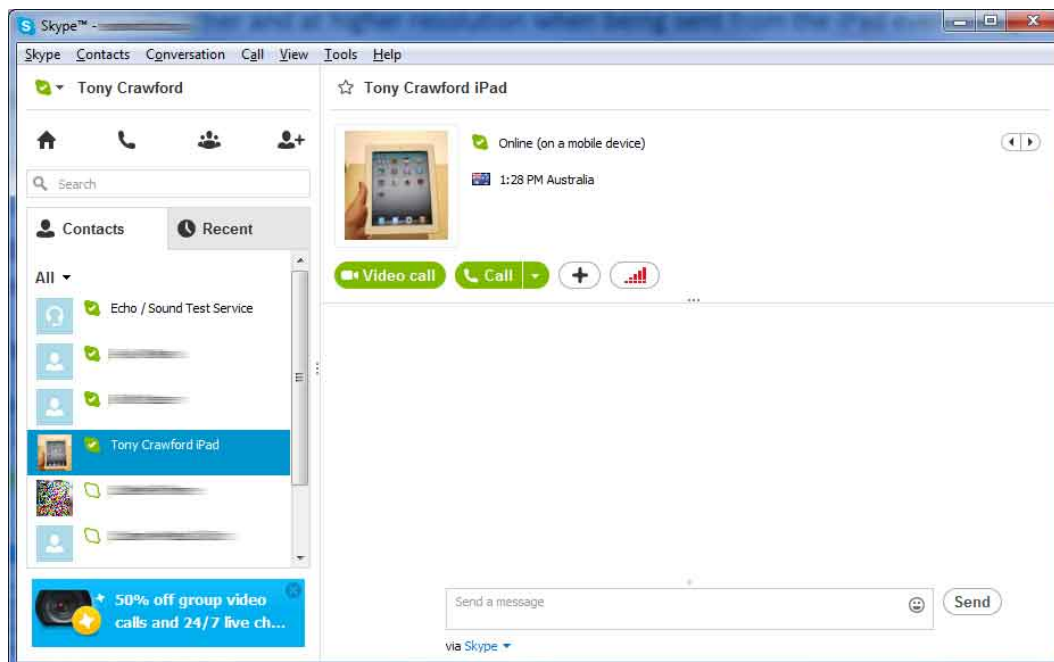
Calling a new participant required me to send an invitation to an existing Skype account holder and for that person to accept, before calls can be made. This is achieved by searching for the participant's details (Name, Skype Name or email address or phone number) through the contact area of the Skype application.

Once the desired participant was found and invitation had been sent and accepted, their details appeared in my Skype contacts. From here I simply clicked on the desired contact and chose to make a Video Call, Audio only Call or send an Instant Message. Additional information is displayed as an icon indicating whether the contact is online and available to contact.

When signed in I had the ability to change my online status, some of the status options are:

- *Online* - Contactable
- *Away* - Indicates to my contacts I may be away from my computer. Contacts can still send IM's or try to call me.
- *Do not disturb* - I am online and contactable but I won't be alerted of a call or IM with sound (silent)
- *Invisible* - I appear offline to my contacts and am un-contactable.

The Skype Application



Skype's application layout is simple and easy to navigate. When contacts have been accepted, they are presented down the left hand side of the application window (under contacts) and the status icon is the first place to look before placing a call. When my desired contact was online and contactable, I simply clicked the contact and selected *Video Call* (or *Call* if audio only is required). This presented my contact with a dialogue box asking to accept the call. They have the option to receive the call with video and audio or audio only.

I found this worked reliably when calling from PC to PC (Mac included) but I often had issues with contacting an iPad or iPhone, where it sometimes took several attempts to show video. Disconnecting and reconnecting with the device until video was achieved often remedied this.

The Video Call Window

When my video connection initially connected, my display changed to show my contacts video feed, a smaller self-view letterbox window and a chat banner across the bottom of the screen. This view is useful when chatting but I found that maximising the window is more suitable for Telehealth consultations. When maximised the window looks like the below image.



A small menu bar appears down the bottom and will auto hide when no mouse movement is detected. The menu bar offers all the necessary functions when conducting a video call. These include:

- *Show/Hide Contacts* - Useful for adding contacts to your VC.
- *Chat* - View or hide the chat feed.
- *Camera* - Turn on or off your video feed.
- *Mute*.
- *+ (Plus Button)* - Offers multiple options; Take a picture, Send file, Send contacts, Share screens, Add people to this call (Premium only) and Show dial pad.
- *End call*.
- *Call quality information* - Checks your computer components like, sound, webcam and computer speed and offers suggestions to improve quality and basic troubleshooting.
- *Full screen/Dynamic view* - Used to change to full screen and also to turn on Dynamic view. Dynamic View can be utilised in multipoint calls, which highlights the person speaking by enlarging their video feed and shrinking everyone else.

All the features in Skype are well placed and self-explanatory and you should feel comfortable using it in no time.

Video and audio quality is unpredictable but usually acceptable when conducting a VC on good to high bandwidth connection. Skype will automatically switch throughout a VC between high quality video/audio when conditions are optimal and low to very low quality when conditions are compromised. This feature although necessary to maintain a connection, it is unpredictable and can be frustrating at times. Even with this audio/video optimisation, calls are often dropped sometimes requiring you to call several times to finish the VC. Unfortunately Skype currently has no means of prioritising audio or video settings. If a connection is compromised (audio is sometimes dropped and/or video freezes), it is sometimes necessary to disconnect and reconnect several times to establish a fresh and more reliable connection.

Screen sharing

This feature works well allowing you to show content on your desktop or an open window, i.e. program or webpage, to your participants. The content is sharp and clear. Motion pictures also reproduce well over screen sharing although audio will not transmit to the participants. When using Screen sharing with the free Skype account you are first presented with a confusing popup window that indicates that you need Skype Premium to share screens, however there is a greyed out button down the bottom of the popup 'Continue with a free call' that allows you to bypass the premium signup and then allows you to screen share. The only difference with the free version is that you are unable to send your webcam video at the same time, which is usually not that much of an inconvenience.

Pricing

Skype to Skype calls are free.

Summery

Skype caters for the masses and has evolved of the recent years to encompass almost every feature needed to conduct a point-to-point VC. Skype's ability to traverse firewalls and its compatibility with most computer systems makes it a real contender for the entry-level market.

Unfortunately in comparison to a purchased VC solution, its video and audio quality and call reliability lets it down. I would suggest using Skype to get a feel for VC and to use as a backup VC solution, then investing in a professional VC solution when user adoption increases and more reliable connection is required.