Living with Lync

Peter Nock
Christchurch Polytechnic
Institute of Technology
Christchurch
peter.nock@cpit.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

In 2012 Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT) upgraded to a full Windows network environment and introduced Microsoft Lync as part of the upgrade. The seamless integration of Lync in the Microsoft Windows/Office environment has enabled distributed staff in community learning centres to effectively use online video calls and sharing, to reduce travel costs both in terms of dollars and time and allows for rapid information sharing at short notice. However, experience has shown that Lync cannot always replace face-to-face meetings – especially when discussing contentious issues.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.4.3 [**Communication Applications**]: Computer conferencing, teleconferencing, and videoconferencing

General Terms

Management, Documentation, Economics, Human Factors

Keywords

Lync, online meetings, video conferencing, costs.

1. INTRODUCTION

CPIT switched from a Windows environment running on a Novell network to a full windows network in 2012. One software package that came with the Windows environment was Microsoft's Lync video conferencing software. Lync is fully integrated within the MS Office suite and you can make calls via Lync, from Outlook contacts or calendar appointments. The software also allows IM, audio only calls, online status visibility, the sharing of desktops and even allows remote access for desktop control in meetings.

2. Life before Lync

Campus Connect has five community based branches (one at the main campus), each with a Team Leader and the Head of Campus Connect is based at the main campus. The management team for Campus Connect (Team Leaders and Head of Campus Connect) meet once a month to discuss the business, issues and planning that is required. Prior to the introduction of Lync, the meetings were held in-person, usually at the main campus. At times, extra meetings might be required for urgent issues.

3. The cost of doing business

Meetings were usually scheduled for Friday afternoons, as this was the easiest time for the Team Leaders to leave their branch and travel into the main campus. For some Team Leaders, at least an hour would be allocated to travelling into the main campus, finding a car park etc. and they would also claim for petrol costs. Two of the Team Leaders are in a part time role, and the meetings were often outside their normal hours, so they would claim for the time of both travelling in for the meeting and the time for the meeting. Post-earthquakes (especially the February 2011 quake), travel around Christchurch has become more difficult and more time is required to get from place to place, and now with the rebuilding underway it is sometimes even harder to get around than before.

4. Life after Lync

MS Lync was introduced to little fanfare at CPIT. It was put onto the system and some links to training materials were provided. Campus Connect was an early adapter of Lync as we immediately saw the potential in being able to hold meetings and video conferences across our branches, saving both time and money.

We trialled a few one to one meetings to try it out and while it worked well (good audio and video), it took quite a while to get used to being in front of a camera and seeing yourself and the other person on your screen. We had some humorous moments too trying out different camera positions and noticing things in the background of each person's room!

We can schedule a Lync meeting as an Outlook appointment and send it out to the team members. At the appointed time, you open the appointment in your calendar and click on the link to the online meeting. Once in you can set up your video and microphone (we use Logitech headsets and webcams) and talk to the other people attending the meeting. When there are more than two people in a Lync meeting, you only see the person talking at the time. This sometimes causes odd moments when someone is talking and another person coughs or makes a loud noise and the video suddenly switches to them! Another issue to deal with is microphones rubbing on things or otherwise picking up ambient noise (you can mute people if required).

As mentioned previously, running online meetings where you are on camera takes a bit of getting used to. During the first few meetings people felt very self-conscious and awkward and found

it hard to treat it as a "normal" meeting. After a few weeks of using it people become used to it and it became a more natural part of our roles. Another factor that became apparent was the ability to schedule online meetings at short notice and at times that were more convenient than face-to-face meetings. Friday afternoon meetings were scheduled then primarily because we were all available to travel into the main campus at that time. Now we hold Team Leader meetings on Tuesday mornings when we are much more awake and productive! We have also arranged several short notice meetings with all or some Team Leaders to cover urgent issues that arise.

5. Cost reductions

The cost of face-to-face meetings for businesses can be high (one estimate of $7 billion a year in the pharmaceutical industry [1]. In our case the costs are not massive, but they are still significant, especially in the time taken for travel. When we hold face to face Team Leader meetings, each person can claim petrol costs for the travel to and from the meeting as per IRD's guidelines. For one meeting this cost was approximately $86 (Table 1). Travel time and disruption could also account for up to one hour either side of the actual meeting.

Table 1 – Petrol costs for face-to-face meetings

Branch	per km	Return Distance	Cost
Person 1	0.77	60	$46.2
Person 2	0.77	16	$12.32
Person 3	0.77	22	$16.94
Person 4	0.77	14	$10.78
Total		112	$86.24

6. Other Useful Lync Features

Lync software allows one-to-one calls, many-to-many calls and online meetings. During meetings you can allow remote access to your desktop. It is also integrated into Outlook so you can check a person's availability based on their Outlook calendar. If someone is busy they show as red, if they are available they show as green and if they are away from the keyboard ("inactive") they show as yellow. While this might make some readers think of this being used to monitor your work activity to ensure you are working, in practice it is useful in determining how you interact with other staff. If I need to contact someone urgently, I can see at a glance if they are available and then either give them a call or go to their office or if they are unavailable, write them an email or make other arrangements. For outside participants or staff working from home, there is a freely available Lync has a web app that allows them to join in a meeting.

7. Sharing

Lync allows the meeting owner (or caller in one-to-one calls) to share their desktop and even allow the remote person to control the environment. This can be useful in meetings when another person is discussing a document that they have produced or when you are showing/helping someone with a feature or program that they need assistance with. An example of this is when I might be the meeting owner, but another member of staff wants to discuss a new process. I would call up the document on my screen and then allow the other person control of my computer. They can then take the meeting participants through the document and scroll through the pages, zoom in and out and highlight particular items. They are also able to edit the document based on discussion feedback.

8. What not to do with Lync

Lync video calls/meetings are not quite like "being there" in a face-to-face meeting. For this reason it can be hard at times to judge the mood of a meeting and to determine how other people in the meeting are feeling. We have tried a couple of Lync meetings where contentious issues were discussed and the outcome was that we needed to have a follow up face-to-face meeting to resolve the issues. Why? Because, with Lync calls (current version), you only see the person talking at the time. If person A says something that persons B and C do not like, then you cannot see how they are reacting and facial expressions can sometimes be misunderstood. If two or more people get into an animated discussion about something, it can be difficult to hear and see everything that is going on. Another issue is that people like to interrupt and cut in on others when they are talking. This is not in an attempt to shut them out of a conversation as it often occurs in brainstorming sessions where everyone is actively contributing to get ideas out. Because of variable connection speeds sometimes video and audio will pause or cut out so you might miss a part of a conversation. Essentially Lync meetings/conversations work better when the participants talk one at a time –this is not easy for smart, active thinkers.

CPIT has two main campuses and a number of staff travel between them for meetings. Greater use of Lync's online meeting features could reduce travel times and cost and potentially allow for more, rather than less, communication between them.

9. Future Focus

Lync 2013 has some new features with the ability to see all members of a meeting and the ability to connect with Skype users. The Skype connection may enable online connections with other stakeholders

10. Conclusion

Lync is a useful tool that has allowed for flexibility in organizing our business communications, for easily checking availability of staff and for sharing and discussing ideas at a distance. Using an online meeting/collaboration tool such as Lync can save costs and time and increase flexibility in communicating at a distance. More research, reading and discussion into making effective use of Lync needs to be undertaken with the aim to encourage other staff at CPIT to look at the possibilities of using Lync in their day to day work.

11. REFERENCES

1   Converse, L. 2004. Make the most of Online Meetings. *Pharmaceutical Executive*. (Apr 2004), 42