

Jon Crowcroft

Working from Home during the COVID-19 lockdown

I am in a family big house (yay) with unfinished remodel of kitchen (boo) but OK because we had a temporary kitchen set up - Our builders are still coming in, so our ground floor is

a) a no go area (we and they are distancing, plus we don't want to trip over their wiring/tiling etc:) but its NOISY! Even though we're 2 floors up, the noise (e.g. cement mixers/tile cutters) makes video conferencing tricky ...

This is disappointing as despite being under a Heathrow landing flight path, and in a fairly busy city street intersection, there are no cars or planes... so when the builders stop, it's very quiet...but so is the Internet.

b) Since we're all fairly near our work, and we don't watch footie, we never went for one of the high-end fibre/TV broadband packages from Sky or Virgin or BT. We still live on an ADSL line over a regular old copper phone line. This is at the higher end as we're only 200m from the exchange (yay) and get about 15Mbps nominal downlink speed and about 1.2Mbps uplink. The provider is EE (i.e.BT) and is cheap (£8/months) so in normal life would be fine -- good enough for 2 different people in the house watching broadcast quality TV over the internet, and a 3rd person doing some work. However, a lot of the time now 2+ people want to conference with other workers over the net and the preferred tool for most seems to be Zoom.

Zoom is:

- i) easy to use/setup; there limits size/duration of conference unless you pay (they've been relaxing those)
- ii) good quality video/audio; OK security. initial worries have been largely addressed on that score very responsively by Zoom
- iii) really kills your uplink if you send good vid and if 2 people use it simultaneously forget about any remote desktop type work...
- iv) your mileage may vary with your ISP and your broadband router. For the very adventurous, ask the ISP if they can remote update your router to run FQ/Codel. If you're super risky, and your home router is WRT, you can patch it to do this. Some routers also let you, as administrator, config priority classes (e.g. EE's Brightbox system can give you low latency for desktop/ssh, and high latency/throughput for vid/aud...but you need to know what you are doing).

c) Alternative advice: try to persuade your fellow workers to try jitsi. It does a better job at low bandwidth, and its a good cause-open source/open standards, only needs a browser, doesn't leak your data to Facebook.

d) As explained the Homework project, someone in a multiple occupancy household will become the sys-admin/it crew (not a crowd). You will need to undergo a superfast course in understanding setting up various kinds of VPNs on a variety of platforms (Ios/iPad Mac OSX, Windows etc)

e) Finally. we're going to be in some form of lockdown for a while. It may relax as the curve flattens from this data/visualisation, it looks like the UK will know about this, this coming weekend.

<http://nrg.cs.ucl.ac.uk/mjh/covid19/>

So how long term reliable is all this tech if we use it all day?

Advice: if you have laptops and tablets and are using them on desks, keep them plugged in and running on mains - the battery will survive a lot longer.

Generally, a lot of workplaces have good practice on setting up working areas for avoiding back trouble or RSI or eye problems. See if you can find that advice and mimic it at home.

You may avoid covid-19 (or you may have already had it, even without knowing, but there's no need to add to our woes. See if you can find an external keyboard, put the lap top on some books so the screen is directly ahead when you sit up straight, and the keyboard right where your hands land on the desk, or whatever piece of furniture you work at. Try working standing up sometimes for a change. Added bonus is you are now much less likely to spill coffee on your laptop, which would be rather a minor disaster at this time.