

skype™ as Conference Tool

Using familiar technology such as Skype in groundbreaking ways doesn't have to be difficult or costly: just ask library staff who are taking advantage of it to plan or participate in conferences. Skype is used by millions of people every day as a means of making free long-distance phone calls via the internet. It combines visual, aural, and typed communication on one screen and can be downloaded and used free of charge from www.skype.com.

It proved spectacularly successful as a videoconferencing tool for the more than 200 attendees who saw it in action at the "Future of Libraries, Part III: Embracing the Invisible Customer" conference held at San Francisco Public Library last year. Audience members were able to see and hear librarian Char Booth live from Ohio University Libraries. Conference comoderator Sarah Houghton-Jan kept things moving in San Francisco by relaying audience questions to the off-site presenter.

Remarking on its potential for other uses after the event, Houghton-Jan wrote in her Librarian in Black blog, "I want to do this. Now!" Audience members were equally enthusiastic in their comments.

As an audioconference tool, Skype serves as yet another reminder of how easily new technology can be used by library staff in unanticipated and productive ways.

The logistics of using Skype for conferences are fairly easy. Presenters download Yugma, a free piece of software associated with Skype, to control their PowerPoint presentations from remote locations. With both pieces of software downloaded onto a laptop, linked to a site's audiovisual system, and connected to an inexpensive webcam (readily available for under \$100), those attending the conference can see and hear the presentation and interact with the presenter through a moderator. The presenter can also view what is happening from his or her own desktop if the webcam in an auditorium or meeting room is properly positioned.

Presenters interested in using Skype in this way can quickly determine what problems they might face by scheduling one or two practice sessions with the presenter and the onsite moderator sitting exactly where they will sit during the conference. The onsite coordinators in San Francisco found it extremely helpful to have a few colleagues sit

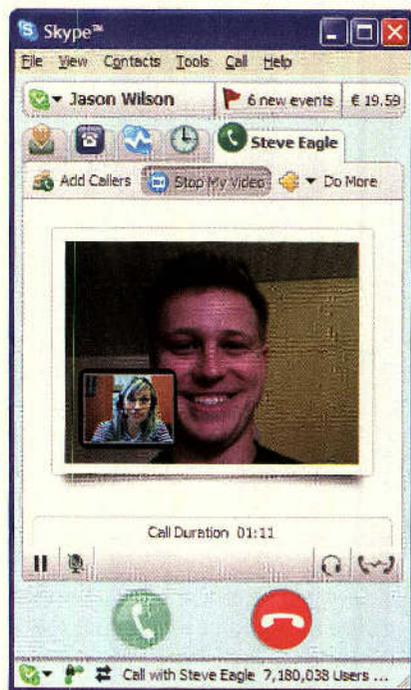
in the auditorium during the practice sessions so their reactions could help resolve any problems that developed before the presentation went live.

Booth continues to be interested in a Skype as a conference tool as well as for use in providing reference assistance in Ohio. She has written an article about Skype as a reference tool that is scheduled for publication this year in the peer-reviewed journal *Internet Reference Services Quarterly* (Vol. 13, No. 2).

As an audioconference tool, Skype serves as yet another reminder of how easily new technology can be used by library staff in unanticipated and productive ways. It also shows how new services and new uses of technology can be quickly and inexpensively adopted when they augment library operations rather than serve as novelties with no clearly defined purpose.

While videoconferencing is far from new, the use of Skype has made it more accessible than ever before. The technology can be used to provide online reference service and as a presentation tool for meetings and conferences. Between 5 and 10 million people worldwide are logged on at this very moment.

—Paul Signorelli, consultant and former director of staff training and volunteer services, San Francisco Public Library, paul@paulsignorelli.com



Skype combines visual, aural, and typed communication on one screen and can be downloaded and used for free.



For more information visit www.skype.com



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