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The Use of Slack and Other Communication Platforms in Government

The recent rise in online work has led to a large increase in use of apps and websites that have been created for the workplace. There have been many challenges and questions emerging with this transition and these apps are attempting to ease this burden. This report examines one of these apps called Slack, as well as a few similar apps. We begin by looking into the features of Slack and the security practices of the app. We then look into the use of Slack by other US government agencies as well as international governments. We then examine two similar apps, Microsoft Teams and Google Chat. We conclude with our responses from other state legislatures on the technology they have utilized during the pandemic.

Slack Description

Slack is a messaging platform that utilizes different channels for communication among groups. Slack was created to send and receive and messages as well as upload files and creates a searchable log of all the messages and files that can viewed on public channels at any time.¹ Within the Slack platform there is the ability for users to create both public and private channels based on the level of security required for the information.² The public channels can be viewed by anyone within a given company or group.³ The private channels can be utilized for sharing sensitive or confidential information and requires an invitation from the organizer to be able to access.⁴

Slack Connect is a feature within the Slack platform that allows users to create channels with up to 20 different organizations within a single channel.⁵ Additionally, Slack offers a wide variety of supplementary tools that can be used within the platform to increase the usefulness and accessibility for users. These apps can include Zoom, Google Drive, and Drop Box.⁶

¹ Slack, "Channels," Slack, last modified 2021, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://slack.com/features/channels>.

² Slack, "Channels," Slack, last modified 2021, accessed March 15, 2021.

³ Slack, "Channels," Slack, last modified 2021, accessed March 15, 2021.

⁴ Slack, "Channels," Slack, last modified 2021, accessed March 15, 2021.

⁵ Slack, "The Value of Slack for Government," Slack, last modified 2021, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://slack.com/resources/why-use-slack/the-value-of-slack-for-government>.

⁶ Slack, "Slack App Directory," Slack, last modified 2021, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://slack.com/apps>.

The New York Times conducted tests of the 19 most popular messaging apps for the workplace and concluded after two months of testing that Slack was the most effective app of this nature.⁷ Their research looked into six different categories when evaluating the apps, including privacy and security, file sharing, and search quality. Slack was unanimously ranked first among all criteria.⁸ Some of the features highlighted in the report of the findings were the ease of setup and use, organization of conversations, and the ability to connect it with other apps. Some of the concerns raised with respect to Slack were limited storage of messages without purchase and limits on the number of third-party apps that can be downloaded.⁹ The researchers also found Google Chat, Microsoft Teams, and Discord to be similar apps that are nearly as useful as Slack.¹⁰

Security Practices

Slack is currently FedRAMP authorized at the Moderate level.¹¹ This certification is a standardized security evaluation required for all cloud products used by the United States federal government.¹² To become FedRAMP authorized means that following the initial security testing and evaluation by a third party, Slack must send monthly security reports to every agency using the platform.¹³

An external review by the National Security Agency has reported that Slack also utilizes multi-factor authentication, invitation controls, and minimal third-party sharing.¹⁴ The platform also uses secure deletion for both the client and server.¹⁵ Slack does not have end-to-end encryption for text chat, voice calls, video calls, file sharing, and screen sharing.¹⁶

Within the platform, Slack claims some basic security for all users, however, more advanced options are available to those with paid versions.¹⁷ All administrators can require two-factor authentication for users as well as view every time an account logs in, including the type of

⁷ Melanie Pinola, "The Best Team Messaging App is Slack," *New York Times*, March 16, 2021, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/wirecutter/reviews/best-team-messaging-app/>.

⁸ Melanie Pinola, "The Best Team Messaging App is Slack."

⁹ Melanie Pinola, "The Best Team Messaging App is Slack."

¹⁰ Melanie Pinola, "The Best Team Messaging App is Slack."

¹¹ Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program, "Slack Technologies – Slack" FedRAMP, accessed March 21, 2021, <https://marketplace.fedramp.gov/#!/product/slack?sort=productName>.

¹² Christina Newberry, "FedRAMP Certification: What Is It, Why It Matters, and Who Has It," *Hootsuite*, November 5, 2020, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://blog.hootsuite.com/what-is-fedramp/>.

¹³ Christina Newberry, "FedRAMP Certification: What Is It, Why It Matters, and Who Has It."

¹⁴ National Security Agency, "Selecting and Safely Using Collaboration Services for Telework – UPDATE," National Security Agency, last updated November 2020, accessed March 15, 2021,

https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/14/2002477670/-1/-1/0/CSI_%20SELECTING_AND_USING_COLLABORATION_SERVICES_SECURELY_SHORT_20200814.PDF.

¹⁵ National Security Agency, "Selecting and Safely Using Collaboration Services for Telework – UPDATE."

¹⁶ National Security Agency, "Selecting and Safely Using Collaboration Services for Telework – UPDATE."

¹⁷ Slack, "Security Practices," Slack, accessed March 21, 2021, <https://slack.com/security-practices>.

device used and IP address.¹⁸ Data is automatically backed up nightly to data centers around the globe, with tests every 90 days. Primary Owners can initiate deletion of all of their organization's data, and paid users can customize the length of their data retention.¹⁹

Government Uses

Several government agencies currently use Slack for their internal communications. According to a 2019 *Vice* article, Slack reported that “many local, state and government agencies and legislatures’ use the service.”²⁰ Slack also has a webpage devoted to the potential uses of Slack for government.²¹ Although Slack does not release the names of which agencies use their service without consent, many government agencies have provided publicly accessible information on how and why they use Slack.

The United Kingdom has created a Slack channel open for access by anybody working for the United Kingdom central government, with several subchannels for different topics and departments. The platform allows government employees to “share what they’re working on, ask questions and deepen community knowledge.”²² Additionally, the United Kingdom Government Statistical Service (GSS) has a Slack channel of its own, which allows users to “find and communicate with colleagues across the GSS who may be working on similar projects to you.”²³ Like the general United Kingdom government channel, this GSS channel is open to anybody working in the government.

Slack also has contracts with several agencies of the United States federal government. The Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program (FedRAMP), which is the agency that provides security authorization for federal government agency contracts, has categorized Slack as a service of “moderate” impact level, in which a “loss of confidentiality, integrity, and availability would result in serious adverse effects on an agency’s operations, assets, or individuals.”²⁴ FedRAMP has granted Slack authorization to be used by 31 agencies, including the Department of Defense, the Federal Trade Commission, the Small Business Administration,

¹⁸ Slack, “Security Practices.”

¹⁹ Slack, “Security Practices.”

²⁰ Derek Mead, “The NSA Uses Slack. Why?” *Vice*, August 15, 2019, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/59np93/fearful-of-americas-enemies-the-nsa-refuses-to-tell-us-the-name-of-its-slack>.

²¹ Derek Mead, “The NSA Uses Slack. Why?”

²² United Kingdom Civil Service, “Technology in Government,” United Kingdom Government, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://technology.blog.gov.uk/join-the-conversation/>.

²³ United Kingdom Government Statistical Service, “How to get the most out of Slack,” Government Statistical Service, December 4, 2019, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/policy-store/how-to-get-the-most-out-of-slack/>.

²⁴ Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program, “Understanding Baselines and Impact Levels in FedRAMP,” United States General Services Administration, November 16, 2017, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://www.fedramp.gov/understanding-baselines-and-impact-levels/>.

and the Department of Veterans Affairs.²⁵ The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) website attributes its use of Slack to the platform's ability to "solve the problem of lost time through inefficient communication and fragmented conversation."²⁶ VA users "direct message each other, set up group channels, share documents, conduct conference calls, and use video."²⁷

Alternative Communications Platforms

Microsoft Teams

Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) is a part of the Microsoft Office 365 hub. MS Teams works as a collaboration hub that allows users to video chat, message, schedule meetings, and collaborate on documents. Users can create new teams, comprised of others within their organization. Within a team, users can meet, message and share files. Through the meeting feature, users are able to schedule virtual meetings and invite other Teams users.²⁸

As of April 2020, all employees of the Canadian government's Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) agency have access to Microsoft Office 365, including MS Teams, for all unclassified information.²⁹ The ECCC has two groups, with additional channels created as necessary.³⁰

Google Chat

Google Chat is another messaging platform that allows for group messaging, file sharing, and searchable message history.³¹ The app is free for users and is built into the Google interface and can be accessed through a Gmail account. Google also offers a Google Meet feature that offers video chatting and screen sharing abilities for up to 250 participants.³² Google Chat or as it was

²⁵ Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program, "Slack Technologies – Slack," United States General Services Administration, May 20, 2020, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://marketplace.fedramp.gov/#!/product/slack?sort=productName&productNameSearch=slack>.

²⁶ Department of Veterans Affairs, "Slack," DigitalVA, last modified March 22, 2021, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://www.oit.va.gov/services/cloud-software/catalog/item/itemid/1>.

²⁷ Department of Veterans Affairs, "Slack."

²⁸ Microsoft, "Welcome to Microsoft Teams," Microsoft Support, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/welcome-to-microsoft-teams-b98d533f-118e-4bae-bf44-3df2470c2b12>.

²⁹ Government of Canada, "MS Teams: Planned Improvements and Upcoming Training," Government of Canada, April 24, 2020, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/corporate/covid-19/working-remotely/ms-teams-improvements-training.html>.

³⁰ Government of Canada, "MS Teams: Planned Improvements and Upcoming Training."

³¹ Google, "The latest on Google Hangouts and the upgrade to Google Chat," Google, published October 15, 2020, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://blog.google/products/workspace/latest-google-hangouts-and-upgrade-google-chat/>.

³² Google, "FAQ: Google Meet, Google Chat, and Hangouts," Google Workspace Learning Center, last modified 2021, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://blog.google/products/workspace/latest-google-hangouts-and-upgrade-google-chat/>.

formerly called Hangouts Chat has been approved for use by the US General Service Administration and is described as “an intelligent and secure communications tool, built for teams.”³³

What Other Legislatures Are Doing

American state legislatures currently use a variety of platforms for communications between legislators. We reached out to legislative clerks in other states, and of those who responded, none of them reported that their legislatures are currently using Slack.³⁴ Instead, legislators currently rely on Microsoft Teams, Zoom (Delaware Senate and House of Representatives, Kansas House of Representatives, Minnesota House of Representatives, Nevada Assembly, New Hampshire House of Representatives, Washington Senate and House of Representatives), WebEx (Colorado Senate, Kansas House of Representatives), UberConference (Minnesota House of Representatives), Skype (Delaware Senate), and Box (Colorado Senate). Besides these platforms, email (Delaware Senate and House of Representatives, Kansas House of Representatives, Louisiana House of Representatives, Nevada Assembly, New Hampshire House of Representatives), phone calls (California Senate, Delaware Senate), and text messages (California Senate, Washington Senate) remain the primary forms of communication between legislators.

We also reached out to several municipal legislatures, and Oklahoma City reported that its government uses a combination of PrimeGov, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and email for internal communication.³⁵

Conclusion

Digital technology has provided several new options for workspace communication, and there are several options for teams looking to shift away from email. Slack is one of these platforms, and its technological capabilities allow for secure communication between colleagues through channels and file sharing. Slack is currently used by several governmental agencies both within

³³ U.S. General Services Administration, “Google Hangout Chat,” last modified January 29, 2020, accessed March 22, 2021,

<https://www.gsa.gov/reference/for-gsa-employees/on-the-go/google-hangout-chat>.

³⁴ We reached out to state legislatures by emailing each body’s clerk or secretary through email, and we found contact information through the legislatures’ web pages. There were some legislatures where this information was unavailable, so we did not reach out to them. The state legislatures of the clerks and secretaries that we contacted are: the Arkansas Senate, California Senate, Colorado House, Colorado Senate, Delaware House, Delaware Senate, Florida House, Hawaii House, Hawaii Senate, Idaho House, Idaho Senate, Iowa Legislature, Kansas House, Louisiana House, Maine Legislature, Maryland House, Michigan House, Minnesota House, Montana House, Nebraska Legislature, Nevada Assembly, New Hampshire House, North Dakota Legislative Assembly, Oklahoma House, Oregon House, South Carolina House, Tennessee House, Virginia House, Washington House, West Virginia House, and the Wisconsin House.

³⁵ Although we only received a response from Oklahoma City’s mayor, we contacted other mayors and city councilors through email, which we found on each city’s official website. The city governments that we contacted are: Detroit, Michigan; Memphis, Tennessee; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; San Francisco, California; San Jose, California; and Seattle, Washington.

the United States and abroad, but many American state legislatures still currently rely mainly on email and phone communications. None of the legislatures that we contacted reported that they use Slack, but these bodies have adopted several other platforms for internal communications, including Microsoft Teams and Google Chat. For legislatures looking to transition away from email and towards a more streamlined messaging system, platforms such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, and Google Chat provide options for secure collaboration and communication.

This report was completed on April 7, 2021, by Nola Farrell, Holly Kuhn, and Emily Sheftman under the supervision of VLRS Director, Professor Anthony “Jack” Gierzynski in response to a request from Representative Barbara Rachelson.

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