

Chapter 1

What's All the Hoopla about Skype?

In This Chapter

- Introducing Skype
 - Using Skype for more than a phone call
 - Enhancing Skype
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Do you know what happens when you speak to someone over a phone line? Your conversation is converted into an electronic signal and sent over a copper wire or some wireless network to someone else's phone. The phone companies have set up vast networks to seamlessly connect you to just about anyone on the planet and these days, the networks are all digital even if your phone is not. In addition to managing the call, phone companies track where you are dialing to and how long the call persists so that they can send you a bill at the end of the month.

Wait a second — if the zeros and ones pushed through the phone lines are the same as the zeros and ones found on computers like yours, networks, and the World Wide Web, why can't you push those zeros and ones through the Internet? Well, you can. That's what Skype is all about.

In this chapter, you find out what makes Skype different from regular telephones, along with surprising ways to use Skype and a quick overview of ways to make Skype fun and productive.

Seeing What Skype Can Do For You

Skype can dramatically alter how you exchange information, how you meet new people, and how you interact with friends, family, and colleagues.

Although you can make calls on Skype, there is oh so much more to it. For starters, here are some things you get or can do with Skype:

- ✓ Call to or receive a call from a regular telephone, a cell phone, or a computer on the Internet.
- ✓ Send or receive files over the Internet to and from fellow skypers.
- ✓ Search your Outlook contacts and call them within Skype.
- ✓ Search the Skype database of all Skype users on the planet.
- ✓ Hold a conference call with a group of people. Besides participating in audio conferencing, you can “simul-chat” with your conference participants — exchanging text, live Web links, and files.
- ✓ Make live video calls.
- ✓ Initiate a group chat.
- ✓ Hold a Skypecast for as many as 100 people at a time.
- ✓ Transmit secure and encrypted voice conversations, text, file transfers, and video.

Skype (the basic stuff) is free

To use Skype, you need only three things:

- ✓ **A computer with access to the Internet:** Your Internet connection should be faster than dial-up. Just as Web access with dial-up does not work very well, the same is true of Skype with a dial-up connection. You're best off using a high-speed broadband connection DSL or cable
- ✓ **A free software program called Skype:** You can get this program from www.skype.com (see Chapter 2).
- ✓ **A microphone and headset:** Plenty of audio device options are available (see Chapter 11), ranging from inexpensive (\$20 or so) to a little more pricey.

That's it. To be able to make your first call, you just download the Skype software from the Internet, create a Skype Name for yourself, test your audio connection through Skype, and you're good to go. You can talk to fellow Skype users around the world without any time limits and without having to pay anyone.

If you want more than just the basic service, however, you will have to pay. Skype is free when you talk to another Skype user on a PC. But what if you want to call, say, your grandmother, who doesn't have a computer? For a small fee (as low as two cents a minute or even free), you can “SkypeOut” from your computer to a conventional phone. The cost depends on whether

she's in the same country as you are and how long you speak. Similarly, someone who doesn't have Skype can call you using the "SkypeIn" feature. (See Chapter 8 for more about using SkypeIn and SkypeOut.)

You can use equipment and services you already have

Why would you want to use the Internet to manage phone conversations? First, you already have it (and pay for it). Internet use is widespread; it seems that nearly everyone has it. The technology keeps improving every day. If you already have access to the Internet, you can handle much of your long-distance calling over the Internet for very low cost or for free, and often with better sound quality than you get from cell phones and regular phones. Also, you may be able to do things with an Internet-based phone system that you can't do with a conventional phone system. You can run a Skypecast with a hundred people. You can send and receive files that would choke your email system. You can send and receive live video from anywhere in the world. Better yet, all these transmissions over Skype occur on secure and encrypted lines of communication.

It's great for personal communications

The Skype community is international. People from all corners of the globe show up in the searches, so it helps to provide identifying information in your Skype profile, such as your language, country, and perhaps city.

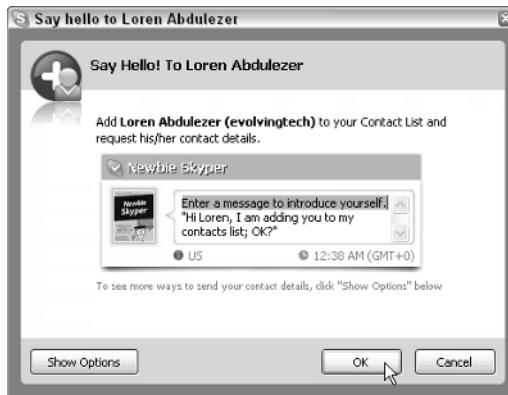
Click the Profile icon to get public information about any Skype user selected in your search results (see Figure 1-1).



Figure 1-1:
The Skype
Profile page.

More important, you can add a person to your Contacts list (see Figure 1-2). Adding someone to your Contacts list entails seeking that person's permission and receiving his or her contact information. See Chapter 3 for more details about contacts, including how to find and add them.

Figure 1-2:
Adding a
Skype user
to your
Contacts
list.



You'll quickly find that people enjoy working with Skype and are usually eager to exchange information on how to best use Skype.

After you start making the rounds, you'll want to try the chat or instant messaging capabilities. You can find plenty of information about chats in Chapter 6.

And great for professional services, too

Chats are fun, but Skype can be good for your career, too. Think about how Skype can serve you. Say, for example, that you're sitting in an airport waiting for your flight. The Director of Sales has just attended a briefing with a major customer and found out that the customer needs double the amount of merchandise that was negotiated six months ago. Now the two of you need to validate that you can fulfill the revised production schedule, and doing so involves the Product Development Manager. Why not set up an impromptu conference call that includes all three of you? You're in an airport in Chicago, which has a public Wi-Fi network. The Sales Director is in the Dallas office, and the Product Development Manager is at home in San Diego. But that's okay — it doesn't matter where you are.

One of the marvels of this technology is that any of you can instantly convene a conference call, and you can all be in different cities around the globe. It is great to have the convenience of a conference call. This one sounds as

though it's pretty serious. Think you might need to exchange documents, such as spreadsheets or PowerPoint slides? Well, you can do just that. To find how to transfer a file, go to Chapter 6.

Hold on — what about the fact that you're sitting in an airport? An airport can be a favorite spot for industrial espionage. Skype, however, creates a roadblock for your corporate competitor: All the file transfers, all the chats, and all the conversations that take place are secure and encrypted!

Going Beyond the Basics with (Not Necessarily Free) Services

Skype does many things right out of the virtual box. But you can add a full complement of features and services provided by Skype and third-party companies.

Skyping in from a phone

How can people call you from a regular telephone if Skype runs on a computer? Well, for a small fee you can get a SkypeIn phone number that anyone with a regular phone can call. There are no surcharges of any kind. The person calling you calls your SkypeIn number. As far as he or she is concerned, the call is being made to a regular phone number. The charges incurred by the call amount to whatever they would be to make a call to a phone in your area code. When you sign in to Skype, SkypeIn calls are automatically routed to you. You can be anywhere on the planet. If you are connected to Skype, the calls get to you just the same.

Skyping out to a phone

Not only can people call into Skype using an ordinary telephone, but you can call out to anyone on a landline or mobile phone using SkypeOut. Making a call from a computer to a telephone is as easy as entering the phone number and pressing Enter. The charge for the call appears on your screen (if there is a charge; some calls are free). How do you pay for this? Buy a block of minutes with SkypeOut credits. When your SkypeOut minutes are used up, you can purchase more. Chapter 8 gives you all the information you need to get started with SkypeIn and SkypeOut.

Skype terms

These terms may not have made it into the Oxford English Dictionary yet, but who knows, maybe you can say you saw them here first!

to skype (verb, infinitive form): To communicate over the Internet using voice, video, text, and file transfers using a special program called Skype.

skyping (present participle): The act of calling over Skype.

skyper (noun): A person who skypes.

Skype (proper noun): The software and the company that makes it.

Skype Name: Your personal Skype ID.

SkypeIn: A service provided by Skype through which a person using a regular phone can call and connect to a skyper.

SkypeOut: A service that allows a skyper to call a regular telephone using the Skype software.

Skype Me: A mode of alerting the world that you are available for contact and making new friends.

Getting voicemail

What's phone service without voicemail? You can add voicemail to Skype with Skype Voicemail (a plain-vanilla service), or with Pamela or Skylook (both are packed with features). Skype Voicemail is bundled with SkypeIn. If you want Skype Voicemail without SkypeIn, you can purchase it with Skype credit. Pamela and Skylook have "lite" versions for free, but the good stuff costs a few dollars (really, just a few).

See Chapter 9 for more about Skype Voicemail, Pamela, and Skylook.

Getting a Load of Add-Ons and Accessories

Having more features and capabilities to enhance Skype can be highly desirable, and Skype makes it easy to integrate third-party applications and plugins to work with its software. Skype permits and in fact encourages third-party companies to bring enhancements to Skype. (Such enhancements are handled through something called Skype Application Programming Interface [Skype API], but that's more than you need to know.)

Going wireless

Skype delivers a new kind of freedom — the ability to make and receive calls wirelessly and without even needing a computer. A new type of phone, called a Wi-Fi phone, has Skype already built in and can tap into wireless or Wi-Fi networks. When you're connected to a network, whether from your office, home, or public Internet hot spot, you can use Skype. With these devices, you sign on to Skype as you would from your computer and you're good to go.

Software and gadgets, too

When you connect through Skype, you need some way to speak and hear your conversations on Skype. Most computers have an audio jack for a microphone and a speaker out line. If you don't already have a microphone and headset, you can purchase them inexpensively. Bluetooth (wireless) headsets, USB headsets, USB speakerphones, mini-plug headsets, and built-in microphones are available in all colors and sizes, some with noise cancellation, volume control, and mute buttons. You have many choices.

The capabilities of Skype are not limited to traditional "telephone" calls. Skype supports videoconferencing, for which you'll need a good webcam. You can record interviews and save them as media files with Skype, so you'll need recording and playback software. If you like to skype but don't like to be stuck at a desk, you can skype from digital handsets known as Skype Phones that work within 50 feet of your computer. You can even store your whole Skype operation on a USB drive, travel the world, and simply plug and play wherever you land. Chapter 11 covers a galaxy of Skype gadgets and software, so get ready to go where no one has gone before!

Making Skype Play Well with Others

Unlike telephones, Skype is a social butterfly capable of connecting a handful of people for a conference call, up to a hundred people for a chat, or a hundred people for a Skypecast. But as with all social butterflies, you have to set down some rules. These rules and guidelines are spelled out in the various chapters on Skype conferencing (Chapter 10), chats (Chapter 6), and Skypecasting (Chapter 14).

When enterprise security matters

Skype can pass text, data, voice, and video through firewalls and routers without requiring special setup. For this reason, Skype can bypass normal IT security controls. However, Skype can be deployed and configured to prohibit file transfers over Skype and using the Skype API. Chapter 12 provides some suggestions on how to deploy Skype in this locked-down mode.

When the Web is your playground

Skype mingles easily with social, business, and e-commerce networks, such as Bebo and eBay (see Chapter 13). Skype social communities of all stripes — for dating and friendship, education, special interests — are connecting people from all over the world.

When you sign on to these Web-based communities, your Skype Name is posted along with your email and any other contact information you provide. On these online communities, a little icon next to your Skype Name changes when you are online, offline, or just don't want to be interrupted. But the best part is that although everyone has your Skype Name, you can require people to ask permission to speak with you (see Chapter 4). A little different from annoying sales calls at dinner, isn't it?