

The South Bay Mug

MAGINTOSH

A Monthly Cupful For South Bay Apple Mac User Group Members, Oct. 2006

MACHinations

A personal view from Bob

Phone for Free

People are increasingly using the Internet to make phone calls. I've been using Skype, now owned by eBay, for a couple of years. Phoning between computers for free. Phoning to landlines (regular telephones) in the US, Canada and most major countries is about 2.3¢ a minute. You can also send text messages, transfer files, and now do video chats using an iSight and other web cam. All you need is the free Skype software and a free account. Skype is similar to iChat, except it works with Macs, PCs and Linux computers, and even some handhelds.

Like other instant messaging programs Skype uses a "buddy list", except the list can include regular telephone numbers as well as your Skype friends. A buddy's icon tells you its status — online, away, not available, etc. If they're online, double-click the name to call and they can answer or decline. If they accept your call, you're connected. Just start talking. You need a microphone, but most iMacs and laptops have one built in. Skype does not have it's own servers so the audio quality can vary, depending on the connection. Usually it's good but sometimes it sounds like you're talking in a barrel. For best results get a microphone-earphone headset to minimize echoes. I got mine at the swap meet for a couple of dollars, but they're available many places, including the Skype store.

Landline Calling (Skypeout). To call a regular telephone or mobile phone, type in the phone number and ring them. It costs about 2.3¢ a minute to call most major countries. For landline calling you need to buy a block of Skype credits for about \$12 using a credit card. That gives you about 8 hours of calling to North America, Europe, and most of Asia.

Skypein (optional) costs \$38 a year and gives you a phone number that friends who don't use Skype can use to call you. If your family lives in Chicago, get a local Chicago phone number they can use to call you from their regular phones. Skypein comes with a Skype Voicemail subscription (otherwise \$18/yr.). When someone calls and you're away or busy they can leave a voicemail message. You can also have your incoming Skype calls forwarded to your regular phone for about 2.3¢ a minute. (Until the end of 2006, calling and forwarding in the U.S. and Canada is free.)

Conference Calling. I haven't use this feature, but you can talk with up to five people in a conference call. (As you add more people, you get more communication delays and you may get people talking over one other)

Recording your chats. Ecomm.com sells a \$13 program, Call Recorder, which can record both sides of a Skype conversation. Audio Hijack Pro (\$32) also lets you record your chats as MP3 files and does many other nice things. I highly recommend it if you use your Mac for audio.

Video. Skype now supports video chatting. Although it's still beta it's working well for me.

Skype has become so popular that there are now cordless phones that let you make Skype calls without being chained to a computer. A Belkin model looks like a cell phone and only needs a wireless connection to a hotspot to make calls.



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