# Technology Tips: How to Select the Technology that Meets Your Needs

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how CILs and SILCs are supporting consumers and meeting the needs of their communities. As most centers aim to provide all services remotely during this time, the initial transition of appropriately utilizing technology can be a challenge.

However, the use of technology often results in employees being more productive and focused by working from home[[1]](#footnote-1), and consumers who have difficulties accessing in-person services because of mobility, communication, accessibility, transportation, or other barriers also benefit from virtual services[[2]](#footnote-2).

Despite the advantages of technology, the greatest obstacle can be knowing which technology platform or application best meets the needs of your organization. To do this, you will need to identify the factors that are important to your organization to determine the requirements the technology needs to meet. Why is this important to do? Because selecting the wrong technology can lead to additional expenditures, loss of time, decreased productivity, and the inability to effectively provide services.

However, before determining the factors used to assess technology, consider involving all individuals who will be using the technology to provide feedback and to create buy-in. This is vital especially when selecting a technology that consumers will utilize since their preferred technology use and limitations must be considered. Many CILs and other CBOs have conducted technology assessments with consumers. [An example from The Ability Center of Greater Toledo can be found here](http://www.ilru.org/sites/default/files/resources/emergency_prep/COVID-19/COVID19%20Response_Ability_Center_Greater_Toledo.docx).

Factors Commonly Considered When Selecting Technology

* Purpose/Intended Use
* Accessibility
* Security
* Price

Please note that your organization may select different factors of importance such as reliability, technical support, integration and interoperability, etc. However, regardless of the factors selected, these broad categories should be used to help map out the specific features needed for each factor considered.

## Purpose/Intended Use

What is the intended use of the technology? What is the purpose of having the platform or application? Some of the different uses of platforms and applications can be:

* Webinars
* Internal staff meetings
* Meetings with consumers
* Document sharing
* Telehealth

Some platforms may be used for multiple purposes such as meetings with your staff and meetings with consumers. However, the purpose of the platform may change your organization’s specific requirements for the technology. For example, when considering security, a telehealth platform used to provide care coordination services will need to be HIPAA-compliance; whereas, a video conferencing platform used for staff meetings will not.

## Accessibility

An important consideration is to select programs or platforms that are accessible for all users. Understanding your staff and consumer’s specific needs to access technology is vital, which can be achieved by asking consumers and staff for their feedback. When working with and/or providing services to individuals in need of accommodations, never assume the accommodations they will need. Ask them.

Many platforms have accessibility features, but they may not work for everyone or may not be sufficient. [The Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology (PEAT) developed a website to guide organizations in selecting accessible platforms](https://www.peatworks.org/content/how-pick-accessible-virtual-meeting-platform).

### Captioning

IL organizations often rely on closed captioning for meetings and trainings. Automatic captioning is often available, but it is recommended that organizations check the quality before use. Questions to consider when assessing platforms are:

* Does the platform integrate third party captioning services?
* Is captioning text-based or graphical? Text-based is of advantage to those who are deaf and blind who use Braille displays as their only form of access. Characters must be ASCII.
* Can the captioning window on screen be moved and sized?
* Has the platform been tested systematically by captioning users and providers of captioning services? If so, describe the categories and expertise of the individuals.
* Has the platform been used successfully to facilitate communication between two parties when one of those parties uses sign language interpreter services?
* The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Technology Rehabilitation Center has developed a [step-by-step guide on embedding interpreters in Zoom](https://www.deafhhtech.org/rerc/accessible-virtual-meeting-tips/).
* For more tips on interpreters, view the [Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL’s) guide on interpreters](http://www.ilru.org/sites/default/files/resources/cil_mgmt_and_operations/Interpreters_for_Deaf_and_Hard_of_Hearing_in_Remote_Working.docx).

Below is a comparison of captioning capabilities for platforms created by ACS Captions:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Integrated captions?** | **Compatible w/ Streamtext?** | **Instructions with Notes** |
| **Adobe Connect** | Yes | Yes | <https://streamtext.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/210923003> |
| **Big Blue Button** | Yes | No | <https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=feC_zm1y3N4> |
| **BlackBoard Collaborate** | Yes | No |  |
| **Facebook** | Yes | No | Encoder required |
| **Google Hangouts & Meet** | No | N/A | Captions can be viewed using our captioning page URL in a second window (streamtext) |
| **GoToMeeting / GoToWebinar** | No | Yes |  |
| **Microsoft Teams** | No | No | Microsoft Teams does not allow embedded captions. They only have automatic speech recognition, but not real live accurate captions. |
| **Panopto** | No | N/A |  |
| **ReadyTalk** | Yes | No |  |
| **Skype** | No | N/A | Captions can be viewed using our captioning page URL in a second window (streamtext) |
| **Twitch** | Yes | No |  |
| **WebEx** | Yes | Yes | Two methods: Closed Captioning - Keyboard Macro or Steno Keys or through Media Player/StreamText |
| **Workplace by Facebook** | No | N/A |  |
| **Wowza** | Yes | No |  |
| **Youseeu** | Yes | No | Keyboard Macro or Steno Keys |
| **YouTube** | Yes | No/Yes | Two methods: Direct connection through captioning software or through StreamText link (streamtext) |
| **Zoom** | Yes | No | <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/207279736-Getting-Started-with-Closed-Captioning> |

### Screen Readers

Screen readers are software programs that allow blind or visually impaired users to read the text that is displayed on the computer screen with a speech synthesizer or braille display. Platforms and applications must be compatible for screen reading software[[3]](#footnote-3). Some questions to consider when selecting a platform are:

* Are all user controls accessible to and readily usable by screen reader users? Are fields and controls properly and well labeled using alt-text? Is layout logical, simple, and structured hierarchically (e.g., grouped under headings, organized in groups of similar and related controls)?
* Are the controls for hosting, moderating, and operating the platform accessible to and readily usable by screen reader and Braille display users?
* Are participant lists, chat content, and question and answer segments readily navigable accessible?
* Has the platform been tested systematically with screen reader and Braille display technology? Have users of this technology been involved in testing the platform?

Consumers and staff may also have accessibility issues with technology platforms and websites from other organizations. You may need to be an advocate and train organizations on why and how to be accessible. Be creative and proactive in solving problems so that everyone can access technology.

## Security

Whether your organization is small or big, rural or urban, security of platforms is needed to avoid security breaches that could damage individuals’ and consumers’ trust in the organization. A few questions to consider:

* Does the platform offer a secure HTTPS login? [For more information on the importance of HTTPS login, view this blog post on https.](https://www.howtogeek.com/181767/htg-explains-what-is-https-and-why-should-i-care/)
* Is there data encryption to deter hacking? [To learn more about data encryption, view this blog post that defines data encryption and provides best practices.](https://digitalguardian.com/blog/what-data-encryption)
* Do you have a need to ensure HIPAA-compliance? If so, is the platform HIPAA-compliant? [View the Office of Civil Rights’ Notice of Enforcement Discretion regarding telehealth services during COVID-19.](https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2020/03/20/ocr-issues-guidance-on-telehealth-remote-communications-following-its-notification-of-enforcement-discretion.html)
* Is there a way to setup a unique meeting IDs or meeting passwords unique for each meeting?

Other useful tips regarding security while working remotely and providing remote services:

* Use secure, private Wi-Fi. Consider adopting a policy that prohibits using public Wi-Fi for confidential or sensitive information.
* Computer screens should be locked when not in use. Laptops or cell phones should never be left unattended and should be protected by passwords.
* Change existing passwords, especially those that were defaults. Use different passwords, so if you are hacked, access will not be given to multiple accounts. Turn on multifactor authentication (MFA) whenever possible. Information about where and how to enable MFA can be found at: <https://www.nist.gov/itl/applied-cybersecurity/tig/back-basics-multi-factor-authentication>.
* Be careful of phishing emails. These attempts have recently increased. Do not click on links, download or open anything that looks suspicious. Do not bypass security warnings for websites. More information can be found at: <https://blog.logmeininc.com/a-guide-to-staying-secure-while-working-remote>.

## Price

Arguably one of the most important factors in selecting a technology is the price. However, organizations do not always factor in additional costs outside of the upfront price. This error that can cost your organization down the line, can be avoided by analyzing all costs. Other questions to consider regarding costs are:

* Is the cost annually, monthly, etc.?
* Is there a fee per person/user for the platform?
* Are there additional fees to consider such as support/maintenance, installation fees, software, hardware, warranty, etc.?
* How much staff time is needed for implementing the technology, maintenance, training, etc.?

Federally funded (Part C) CILs received CARES Act funding to respond directly to the needs of their communities related to the COVID-19 pandemic. To learn more about CARES Act funding, access the Administration for Community Living’s (ACL) Frequently Asked Questions for Centers for Independent Living: COVID-19 Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act of 2020 (CARES Act) Funding on ACL’s website at under <https://acl.gov/COVID-19> “Guidance for ACL Programs.”

## Other Resources

* [Technology and Equipment for Remote CIL Service Delivery](http://www.ilru.org/sites/default/files/resources/cil_mgmt_and_operations/Technology_and_Equipment_for_Remote_CIL_Service_Delivery.pdf) developed by The Research & Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities (RTC:Rural) at University of Montana and APRIL.
* To learn more about the Assistive Technology Act Program and to access contact information for State AT Programs, visit the [State Assistive Technology Program Directory](https://www.at3center.net/stateprogram) on the Assistive Technology Act Technical Assistance and Training (AT3) Center website at <https://www.at3center.net>.

## List of commonly used web conferencing and communication platforms and applications:

* A summary of different web conferencing and video chat features and programs is available at: <http://telecomtoolbox.ri.umt.edu/communication/video-chat-and-web-conferencing/>.
* Zoom (<https://zoom.us/>) provides a useful way for all staff to electronically check-in and share challenges, ideas, information, and resources. Some CILs are also checking in with consumers served within the last year to ask them what they need, what their situation is, and suggest resources. Zoom is also excellent for teaching an IL skill or other class or holding a peer support group. You can set up meetings so that only one person can share the screen, which can be helpful when training or helping consumers fill out applications. A free Zoom version times out after 40 minutes. Consider purchasing a Zoom license for longer video and audio conferencing. Tech Soup ([www.techsoup.org](http://www.techsoup.org)) offers a Zoom discount. Search for Zoom how-to training on YouTube.
* Skype (<https://skype.com>)is a free app that works well for both one-on-one and group (up to 50 people) video and audio calls. It works via mobile, PC, Xbox, and Alexa. There is a small charge to call phones or use SMS messages with either pay as you go or subscriptions. A comparison of Zoom versus Skype is at: <https://www.dgicommunications.com/zoom-vs-skype/>.
* WebEx ([www.webex.com](http://www.webex.com)) is another video conferencing option with captioning. There is a free personal plan or three different business plans.
* The Discord App (<https://discordapp.com>) will allow communication with employees through voice, video, and text. Although a gaming platform, it is free, and simple and smooth to use and set up. Once downloaded, anyone can post, ask questions, make requests, and share resource information. There is the option for both group and individual voice or video calls.
* Google Meet (<https://meet.google.com>) is Google’s video conferencing service that connects up to 25 people. Higher paid membership increases that number to 50 or 100. With a paid G Suite account users may set up and start [Google Meet](https://www.businessinsider.com/category/google) video conferences, but anyone with a standard Google account can join and participate in a session.
* Google Hangouts (<https://hangouts.google.com>) is free and works well for individual or group meetings, with up to 100 people.
* GotoMeetings (<https://www.GoToMeeting.com/Free-Trial>) can host meetings with up to 250 participants. There is a 14-day free trial with plans currently starting at $12.00 monthly.
* GoogleChat is another way to communicate and can be set up in Gmail ([www.gmail.com](http://www.gmail.com)).
* Facebook live broadcasts are another way to connect with staff or consumers who are on Facebook. More information is available at <https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/solutions/facebook-live>.
* FaceTime is a video and audio calling service for iPhone, iPad, iPod touch, or Mac to call others using one of those devices.
* Bluejeans (<https://www.bluejeans.com>) offers secure webinars, conference calls, and online meetings.
* Groupme (<https://groupme.com>) **is a group messaging app that w**orks on every device and over SMS.
* Slack (<https://slack.com>) provides a messaging tool to connect your staff and stay engaged with what is happening. Slack is an instant message communication channel or email alternative that provides a way to contact people in your channel (or group) and organize your conversations. Slack may be used in a web browser or via an app.
* StreamText ([www.streamtext.net](http://www.streamtext.net)) provides the technology for real-time captions for any platform or device with Internet access. It also provides text-based chat on all browsers.
* WhatsApp ([www.whatsapp.com](http://www.whatsapp.com)) is free and allows users to send text messages and voice messages, make voice and video calls, and share images, documents, user locations, and other media. WhatsApp Business (<https://www.whatsapp.com/business>) offers tools to automate, sort, and quickly respond to messages.

## Acknowledgement to Contributors

The members of the Accessible Technology for CIL Service Delivery Work Group have been major contributors to this factsheet.

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1. Maftean, R. (2019). The Ins and Outs of Remote Work for Nonprofits. Retrieved from <https://npengage.com/nonprofit-management/the-ins-and-outs-of-remote-work-for-nonprofits/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Telecom toolbox. (2020). Asynchronous communication. Retrieved from

   <http://telecomtoolbox.ri.umt.edu/communication/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. American Foundation for the Blind. (n.d.) Screen Readers. Retrieved from <https://www.afb.org/blindness-and-low-vision/using-technology/assistive-technology-products/screen-readers> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)