

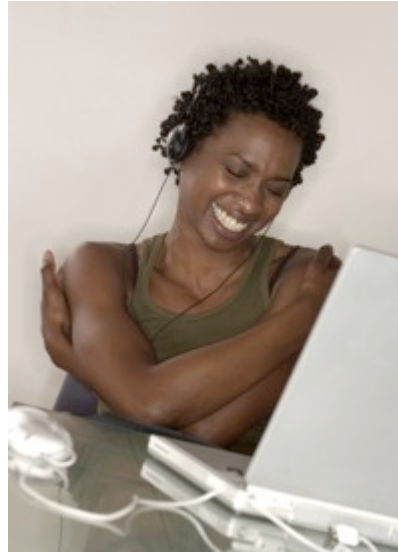


Skype Signing Off?

They say that all good things must come to an end. The truth of this maxim might be proven very soon in the case of Skype.

Skype is the globally popular voice over Internet protocol (VOIP) application that enables users to conduct free video phone calls with far-flung friends, co-workers, and family members. The service was conceived in 2003 by the Estonian creators of the popular Kazaa music sharing software program.

Since its inception six years ago, Skype's popularity has grown geometrically, especially as the underlying technology has improved and facilitated a clarity and speed of worldwide communication that would make George Jetson jealous. Unfortunately, it is a key component of Skype's powerful infrastructure that threatens the continuing viability of the service.



A piece of software code licensed to EBay (parent company of Skype) by a company called Joltid is at the center of the core of the controversy. Joltid claims that EBay has violated unspecified terms of the applicable licensing agreement and is therefore suing EBay to regain exclusive rights to the code. For its part, EBay denies breaking any of the provisions of its contract with Joltid and warns that if EBay loses its legal rights to the software then "Skype's business as currently conducted would not be possible."

To obviate the disruption in service that would result from an adverse legal ruling, EBay has begun development on its own proprietary software code that would replace the Joltid-written code currently undergirding Skype. This new software, however, is years from being workable and according to a Skype spokesman, "may not be successful, may result in loss of functionality ... and will, in any event, be expensive."

For the time being, however, customers continue to enjoy the impressive voice and video quality that has made Skype the premier VOIP communication application, but barring any pre-litigation settlement, the continuing availability of this imminently reliable, popular, and (most importantly) free product may soon be at the mercy of the courts.



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