Convo Wants To Be The 'Un-Slack' Version of Slack for Big Companies

Want to kill email in the office? Most people immediately think of Slack , the beloved messaging app that companies such as AirBnB, Buzzfeed and Salesforce swear by. Slack has its share of brag-worthy accomplishments, from raising $160 million in venture capital(earning a valuation of $2.8 billion) in May to passing 1.1 million daily users last month.

But before Slack, there was Hipchat; before that, Yammer and Jive. Now there's a new platform, Convo, that's fighting its way into the spotlight.

Faizan Buzdar, co-founder of Convo, felt that Slack causes employees to become too relaxed—in his eyes, it creates an environment where workers, literally, slack. The app is frequently used for fun emoticons and inside jokes, says Buzdar, which isn't very productive. Buzdar created Convo, a communication platform for vital tasks, as a solution to this perceived problem. "Our mission is to let people get serious work done," said Buzdar.

Convo, which was created in 2011, has gathered an impressive list of clients, with Ogilvy, TechCrunch and NBC among the 15,000 companies it serves. It recently added an unexpected customer, The Department of Emergency Medicine and Residency Training Programs at the University of Arizona, which uses the software to help doctors educate residents on case studies. The company is backed by Morgenthaler Ventures, the same early-stage VCs behind Apple, Siri, and Evernote.

In a market dominated by Slack, how does Convo find room? Buzdar believes the key distinction is that Convo is designed from the ground-up for big enterprises, while Slack was a consumer-oriented company that pivoted at a later stage. "Convo is to collaboration what Box is to file sharing," explained Buzdar. In order to make his software enterprise-focused, Buzdar incorporated three features that (hopefully) allow Convo to stand out.

First, users can annotate or highlight images and documents within the software. They can upload PowerPoints, PDFs and pictures, and then comment or zoom in on specific areas for co-workers to see. Annotating at a very micro level allows people to put their messages into context, which saves time spent scrolling through attachments. Buzdar describes this feature as "comments on steroids," because it simulates the experience of a co-worker sitting next to you and pointing to specific things.

Larry Cannell, research director at Gartner, said, "For most collaboration software, if you post something, you'll comment about the whole file — but what's cool about Convo is that you can annotate on a particular paragraph of that document or area in a photograph."
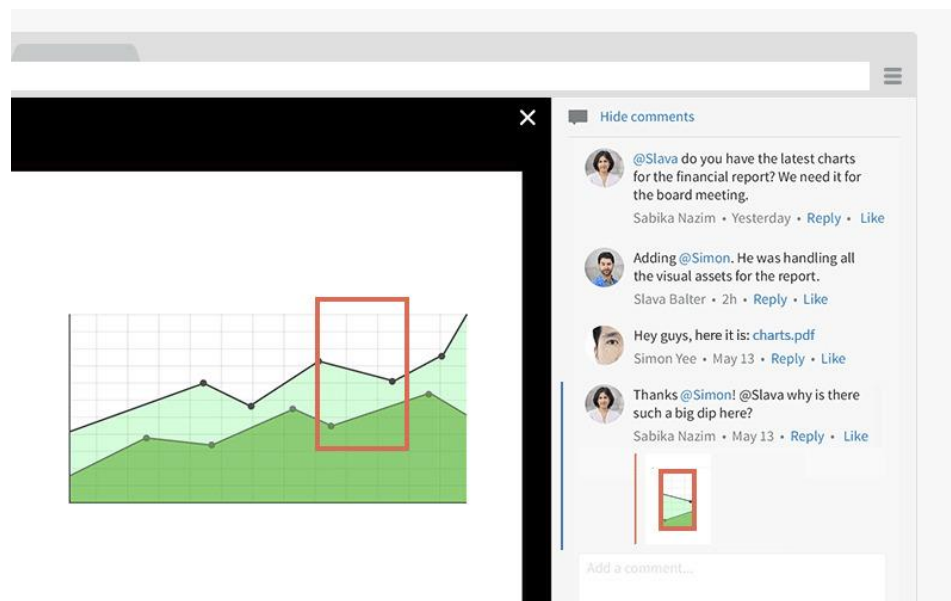
Second, threaded conversations bring all related messages into one place. Not only does this feature prevent the central news feed from getting cluttered, but it also allows users to tag conversations and return to specific topics whenever they want. While the software allows private chat messages for casual banter, the threaded conversations become a public space for work-related comments.
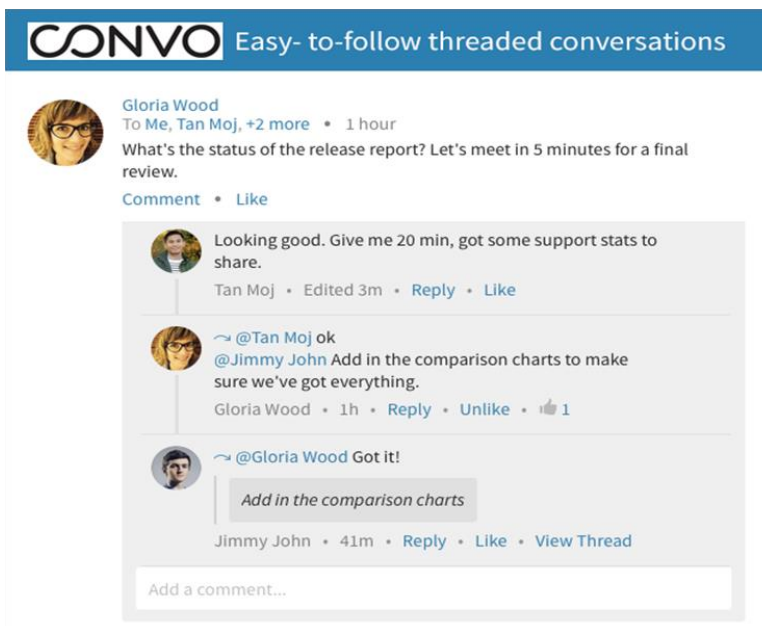
Finally, Convo has at-rest encryption, which provides a standard of security fit for large enterprises. This feature is particularly timely, given the Slack breach that occurred just a few months ago. "Slack obviously has to focus a lot on virality, because that's the key thing they talk about," said Buzdar. "As a result, its choices are optimized for utility, with less barriers for users." For example, Slack only recently launched two-factor authentication for logging on, and used to show the popular chat rooms in a given company before a user was fully verified during the sign-up process (the company tweeted that the feature was a "trade-off" between usability and keeping team names a secret). Slack's ease-of-access can come at a cost—it can conflict with enterprise security by making it more probable for someone to find a loop.

With this in mind, Buzdar designed Convo with security measures such as Ediscovery (an admin can have access to all content to check for compliance with company policy or legal issues) and Admin Controls (to restrict access to content in the cloud to a specific IP range, ensuring that content can only be accessed from office locations). Although these features may be unpleasant for users who desire full privacy or want to access work content from their homes, they allow Convo to prioritize the protection of sensitive information.

Despite Convo's features, however, some users still prefer Slack. For example, many find themselves unable to turn away from Slack's friendly user interface design. "Slack is much easier on the eye than Convo," said James Thornton, chief editor at app directory GetApp, who tested a previous version of Convo. "It's colorful and lots of fun to use ... Convo doesn't have quite the same chirpy, colorful web interface style and is conservative in comparison." Thornton concludes that Slack is more "hip" as a communication tool, while Convo works well for serious project management.

Buzdar is not afraid of the competition—in fact, he claims he wants Slack to be successful, because it creates market demand. "Box wouldn't exist without Dropbox. It's not 'winner take all' in the collaboration software space," explained Buzdar. Michael Ortner, CEO of software reviewing platform Capterra, explains, "That's a very common way that new vendors compete with each other: go really specialized." Buzdar wants the two software companies to go in different directions, with Convo's focus on security and Slack's focus on the ultimate user experience. "It's hard to be everything for everybody– focus wins," said Buzdar. "We can't do what Slack does. That's like asking: why wouldn't Facebook become WhatsApp?"

So what's next for collaboration software? Convo launched its mobile app for iOS and Android on Tuesday, with the eventual goal of having 70% of Fortune 500 companies on board in the next two years. Slack just announced 100% growth in paid subscriptions over the past year. Even Microsoft is jumping in on the action, trying to reinvent productivity with its new collaboration software Gigjam. With the $23B content communication & collaboration market expanding rapidly, there is high potential for growth. "There's definitely room for the competition, still a lot of movement," said Cannell. "We haven't figured out this space yet, I don't think anybody has."