## NEXTPLANE®

# FIVE COMMON PITFALLS OF GUEST ACCOUNTS AS A FEDERATION AND INTEROPERABILITY ALTERNATIVE

It is important for collaboration platforms to provide uninhibited and open collaboration with partners and customers. The reality in the enterprise is that it is often a mixed environment of different team collaboration solutions or they might still use a legacy Unified Communications platform. And when you look outside the company to customers, partners or suppliers, the number of platforms being used becomes even more diverse.

While these platforms provide some options for connectivity - often in the form of guest accounts - they are not truly open. There are limitations, cost considerations and security risks that IT should consider.

For Microsoft Teams users, Microsoft includes Guest Access, which enables inter-company (outside your organization) collaboration via chat or channels for external partners, customers, suppliers, etc. This means your users can invite ANY external user with a business or consumer email account, such as Gmail, to participate as a guest in Microsoft Teams with full access to team chats, meetings, and files.

Though this sounds like an easy way to provide external access to your organization, there are limitations and additional support that IT needs in order to maintain security and control while preventing cost overruns.

Let's walk through five questions you should ask before you implement a guest accounts strategy.

## Security and Access Control

Set up can be complex, and security is a concern. MS Teams guest accounts require corresponding Azure AD accounts. This means when your users invite their external colleagues to collaborate using an MS Teams guest account, their external colleagues have to create and maintain Azure AD accounts.

However, it's nearly impossible for you to control whether these external Azure AD accounts have strong security measures like password complexity, password expiration, and Two-Factor Authentication (2FA). Microsoft became aware of these security concerns, and as a result, decoupled guest accounts' authorization from authentication. Authentication will be managed by the external users, which you cannot control, but the authorization can be controlled by your organization.

Given today's landscape, hackers can wreak havoc on weak guest accounts and gain access to unsuspecting end-users. Increasingly, IT departments view guest access as an unmitigated risk to their infrastructure.

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Once the guest accounts are granted, as the MS Teams admin you need to manage them. However, since these users belong to other companies you cannot disable their guest accounts when they leave their organization. This can create additional security and access control headaches.

## External collaboration using Guest Accounts



USER A        USER B                                USER B

**Contoso**                                         **Fabrikam**
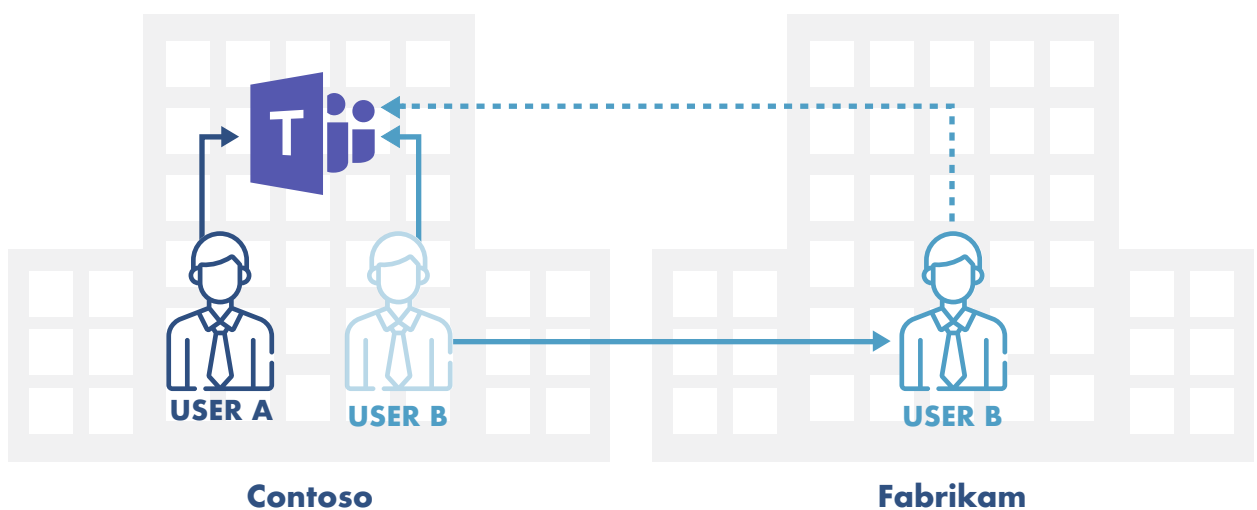
## End-User Support

End-user support could be more complex when using guest accounts. For example, if your partners decide to block domains on the Microsoft O365 service, their end users cannot accept and use guest accounts to collaborate with workers within your company. In such a scenario, troubleshooting why guest accounts aren't working is impossible and will create unnecessary support escalations as your end-users become frustrated when they can't work with their colleagues.

## Licensing Limitations

The number of guest accounts a company can extend is limited. For instance, Microsoft only allows five guest accounts per paid Azure AD license. In other words, a company with 1,000 Microsoft licenses can only send out 5,000 guest account invitations.

Further complicating the issue is that Microsoft guest accounts invites are not limited to MS Teams, but can be sent out for other Microsoft services such as sharing files on One Drive and SharePoint. Moreover, there is no limitation or control on how many guest account invites a user can send, as long as your company stays within its overall limit. So invitations can begin to pile up. If any one user or team goes beyond a company's limit, this prevents everyone from sending out guest account invites.

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## Direct Federation

As an alternative to guest accounts, Microsoft also offers a limited form of Direct Federation. The main difference between guest access and the direct federation is that direct federation only provides presence and one-to-one chat sessions. With guest access, you can grant permissions for external users to participate in channels, share files and access your corporate resources, such as One Drive.

Direct federation is a more secure way for collaboration with external parties. Unlike guest accounts, you can be sure the external user is on a managed UC or collaboration platform and that they don't have access to any of your corporate resources. On the other hand, it offers limited capabilities. Below is a detailed comparison of both options.

**Table 1** – Feature comparison of Guest and Microsoft Direct Federation (source: Technet)

| Feature | MS Direct Federation | Guest Accounts |
|---|:---:|:---:|
| Chat | ✅ | ✅ |
| Presence | ✅ | ✅ |
| Voice Call | ✅ | ✅ |
| Search for users across external tenants | ✅ | ❌ |
| Share Files | ❌ | ✅ |
| Access to Teams resources | ❌ | ✅ |
| Channels and Group Chat | ❌ | ✅ |
| Meeting | ✅ | ✅ |
| Additional users can be added to a chat with an external user | ❌ | N/A |
| User is identified as an external party | ✅ | ✅ |
|  | ✅ | ✅ |
| Out of office message is shown | ❌ | ✅ |
| Blocking individual users | ❌ | ✅ |
| @mentions are supported | ❌ | ✅ |

While guest accounts seem like the best option to enable B2B communication between enterprises, it is important to remember that once your organization provides guest access to external users, situations could arise where these guest accounts expose your organization to security risks.

Since guest accounts are normally connected to Azure AD accounts (B2B federation), when your users invite someone, you take a security risk as it is unclear that the Azure AD account with which the guest account is connected effectively managed or not.

## ConverseCloud Interoperability and Federation

We believe that inter-company communication should be controlled as much as possible with both organizations in full control of their users. To that end, NextPlane now offers federation capabilities for Microsoft Teams. Organizations on Microsoft Teams can use NextPlane's ConverseCloud service for interoperability and federation with internal or external unified communications domains, as well as other companies using Microsoft Teams.

Unlike other interoperability solutions, ConverseCloud acts as a universal federation and interoperability hub between UC and TC platforms, performing the necessary protocol (SIP and XMPP) translations and API conversions to ensure all chat, presence, group chat, channels, spaces, and file sharing features can be used seamlessly, regardless of the platforms.

We offer the following Interoperability and Federation Services for MS Teams.

## NextPlane MS Teams to Legacy UC Interoperability and Federation Service

NextPlane ConverseCloud interoperability and Federation Service enables IM and Presence connectivity between Microsoft Teams with any legacy UC Platform, such as Cisco Jabber.

Microsoft Teams to Legacy UC Interoperability and Federation Service is a TLS-based server-to-server federation service. To enable the service, MS Teams administrators need to enable the "external access" feature on their Microsoft Teams tenants.

|  | Presence | Chat |
|---|:---:|:---:|
| Cisco Jabber | ✓ | ✓ |
| Cisco Unified Communications Manager IM & Presence Service | ✓ | ✓ |
| Cisco WebEx Messenger | ✓ | ✓ |
| Cisco/BroadSoft UC-One® | ✓ | ✓ |
| IBM Sametime 8.5.x | ✓ | ✓ |
| IBM Sametime 9.x | ✓ | ✓ |
| IBM Sametime 10.0 | ✓ | ✓ |
| Refinitive Eikon Messenger | ✓ | ✓ |
| CME Pivot | ✓ | ✓ |
| Unify Circuit | ✓ | ✓ |
| Avaya Aura | ✓ | ✓ |
| Fuze | ✓ | ✓ |

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## NextPlane MS Teams to Team Collaboration Interoperability and Federation Service

NextPlane ConverseCloud MS Teams Federation Service provides a completely new approach for internal and external federations. It utilizes the Microsoft Team's APIs to provide a richer end-user collaboration experience for both ends of the federation.

As a result, MS Teams users can search and add external contacts (i.e., non-MS Teams contacts), share presence and status, exchange messages, invite external contacts to participate in Microsoft Teams channels, send rich text and emojis, and share files with disparate collaboration platforms inside or outside of the enterprise.

NextPlane ConverseCloud MS Teams Federation Service supports connectivity to major Team Collaboration platforms such as Webex Teams and Slack.

The ConverseCloud MS Teams Federation Service requires creating ConverseCloud Federation Agent bots to act as proxies for external contacts. To generate the Federation Agent bots the MS teams administrator uploads the list of external contacts into ConverseCloud Management Portal, and then links the Federation Agent bots via the Organization App Catalog to the MS Teams instance.

| | Presence | Chat | User Profiles | Channels Spaces | Rich Text/Emojis | File Sharing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cisco WebEx Teams | ✅ | ✅ | ✅ | ✅ | ✅ | ✅ |
| Slack | 🔒 | 🔒 | 🔒 | 🔒 | 🔒 | 🔒 |
| Google G-Suite Hangouts Chat | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 |
| Zoom Meetings & Chat | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 |
| Facebook Workplace | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 |
| Symphony Secure Collaboration | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 | 🕐 |

✅ Generally Available   🔒 Private Preview   🕐 Coming Soon

Both ConverseCloud Federation Services are supported by an **enterprise-class, secure management portal.**

Through the portal, IT can connect different UC and TC platforms being used within the same company, or federate disparate platforms externally with customers, partners or suppliers outside the company. The management portal provides customers with trailing 12 months of charts and graphs depicting the number of unique users, the number of messages exchanged, as well as detailed usage reports by internal and external federated domains and platforms.

## Get More Information

NextPlane can help you with your interoperability and federation needs. Learn how ConverseCloud can help your business by visiting NextPlane.net, requesting a demo, or by connecting with us at sales@nextplane.net.