

Software review: Google Apps

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Is it time to head for the cloud?

Julie Harris and Mark Walker run the rule over Google's cloud-based office product and explain how it could provide a model for the future.

At present, the cash cows of Outlook, Word, Excel and PowerPoint continue to sell hundreds of millions of copies.

OpenOffice may offer a free, open source alternative, and Apple has its iWorks suite, but in terms of numbers they are relatively small. The latest version of Microsoft Office – version 10 – stores your documents on the internet so that they can be accessed wherever there is a connection. OpenOffice allows you to run a copy of itself, plus all your documents, from a USB drive. Both products, however, are inextricably linked to the traditional PC. A new option is emerging, however. After years of dominance by Microsoft, the way we use computers for everyday tasks is in the midst of a huge transition. As we shift to using applications that are online only, we are entering the age of the cloud. One of the main challengers to Microsoft in this new race is Google Apps.

Google Apps uses Google's huge computing power to offer word processing, spreadsheets, email, calendars, presentations, file sharing and a host of other features through your web browser. So wherever you are in the world, as long as you can get online, you can access your own documents as if you are at your own computer. Your files and the tools you use to work on them are stored online and never need to be downloaded to your own computer.



You can access them on a desktop but they also work on any device that can access the internet – whether that's your phone, a netbook or an iPad – running on virtually any operating system. You can also use Google Gears or the Chrome browser to synchronise documents with a laptop and use them offline.

Google recently revamped its Google Docs editing tool to improve speed and real-time collaboration, an area where Google Apps currently has the edge over Microsoft Office.

Specifications

Google Apps comes in two flavours: a free Standard version and a paid-for Premier version that allows extra users and features.

- The free Standard edition is aimed at replacing Microsoft Office, SharePoint and Exchange. It includes a full email setup (basically Gmail but with your domain name instead of Google's) with a built-in calendar, the Google Talk instant messaging client, Google Docs (presentations, spreadsheet and word processing), and Google Sites (a basic collaboration space akin to Sharepoint MySites). Standard Edition is free but is limited to 50 users per domain, 7GB of mail storage per user and 1GB of document storage per user.
- The Premier edition, on the other hand, has more storage available per user (25GB in total), plus Google Video, Google Groups, supports unlimited user numbers, some additional user management functions, and technical support: this package costs £2 per user per month (at the time of writing). Premier edition also integrates with mail management software like Postini that performs spam checking, policies and filters. There is an extra fee for message archiving of between approximately £8-£22, depending on the duration of archiving needed.

Considerations

Aside from the cost of buying the Premium Edition software, an organisation will also need to register its own domain for use with the suite. This is because each application in the suite is assigned to a subdomain of your Google Apps domain, with your private Gmail available at mail.yourdomain.com, Calendar at calendar.yourdomain.com, and so on for Google Docs and the Google Sites intranet platform. Since all the applications run over the internet, you may also need to increase the speed of your internet connection (or encourage more staff to work from home).

The Google Apps suite generally provides only the most commonly used or fundamental functions. While this makes the product easy to use, we suspect that power users of Powerpoint, Word or Excel might find that it doesn't have the features they need – at least out of the box.

More advanced users can still be served by the product, however, as the Google Apps Marketplace offers all sorts of functionality that you can bolt on to your Google Apps domain. A full range of business software (including ERP and CRM options) is available via a variety of subscription and licensing models. This may mean the costs creep up, however, so it's worth checking this before deciding to switch on the basis of cost alone.

Limitations

While the cloud model has some major advantages in terms of collaboration, mobility, cost and convenience, there are some limitations. If you have to store personally-identifying information about people, for example, it is a requirement (under the Data Protection Act) to ensure that your data is stored within the EU. You can transfer information to companies in the US provided they have signed up for the "Safe Harbor" agreement: fortunately, Google are one such company (more information is available from the website of the Information Commissioners Office).

In a similar vein, many public sector bodies will not be able to share their data with you using the Google (or other online) platform due to compliance restrictions: if your organisation needs to work with the public sector then it is well worth taking some time up front to check with them if your move to Google will undermine your ability to work together.

Of course, compliance issues extend beyond the choice between Google Apps and Exchange. The risks for an organisation are about data security (particularly policy, user training and awareness and technical issues such as encryption) at all levels and are relevant whether they use Exchange server or a cloud-based service such as Google Apps.

Other cloud providers

Google isn't the only company that is offering applications for online use. Simple online word processing software is available from other sources, like Adobe Buzzword, ajaxWrite, ThinkFree or ZohoWriter. While many of these products don't offer the same fully-featured collaboration and slick integration that Google offer, they

are all developing and, if you want to make the transition to an online office suite and have basic needs, are well worth a look.

Perhaps, for most organisations in the civil society sector, a more pressing question is whether they are emotionally ready to store all their documents online. Although data security and confidentiality can be “guaranteed” through contracts, the lack of transparency (where is the data held? Is it safe? Who can access it? Are the employees trustworthy?) is likely to make many trustees nervous – especially if your organisation is processing sensitive data.

Comparisons with MS Office

It is a measure of Microsoft’s success that any kind of office productivity suite will always be compared to its Office software. All new products not only have to offer similar features to Microsoft Office but they also have to interoperate with Microsoft’s file formats on the assumption that everyone else is using them. And so it is with Google Apps. Is Gmail a serious competitor to Exchange? Does Google Docs match up to Word, Excel and Powerpoint?

It seems pretty clear that, at the moment, Google Docs is a serious option only for small groups with limited needs: smaller organisations that share documents created on Google Docs, and use email and shared calendars remotely. The experience of Learning Pool (see case study) shows that, just because the computers doing most of the processing are not on your premises, it doesn’t mean you won’t need technical support, and some aspects of the Google Apps suite have bugs (which Google are working on). But overall there are more advantages than disadvantages.

Google has a strategy (with the recently announced US-only creation of Google Apps for Government) of both scaling up its product for larger organisations and at the same time addressing some of the compliance concerns that the public sector has.

So the current product can cover a lot of small organisations that could move off the desktop and onto the cloud – saving money and working more conveniently – and perhaps more importantly, it might mark the beginning of a new, post-desktop future where running your applications in a browser becomes properly mainstream. It is for this reason, more than any other, that we think organisations might trial online office suites like Google Apps – to get them used to the idea of working in the cloud and make the organisational transition to what we think will be the dominant way of working in the future.

Case study

Learning Pool, a provider of online learning services to the public sector, made the switch to Google Apps in April 2010. It has around 50 staff, and its initial



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motivation was to save money and make for an easier upgrade path from its existing Exchange and Sharepoint infrastructure, but found that there were some additional benefits in terms of mobility and collaboration. It took the organisation about five weeks to move its email and documents to Google Apps and it trialled it first with a small group of staff, doing an impact assessment and cost-benefit analysis to ensure it really would save money.

Learning Pool has done a public service by blogging about its experience of migration and provided some top tips (see tinyurl.com/36c2yrn and tinyurl.com/3a3dj6k), but its overall experience has been very positive. As Learning Pool's Paul McElvaney said at the time,

“I'd recommend Google Apps as a way forward for providing groupware for a small-to-medium-sized enterprise like Learning Pool. We like the idea of software as a service and five weeks into the project, most things work just as well as before and some things work a lot better indeed.”

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