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Google Docs: A Review

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Introduction

Librarians are continually challenged to find new and better ways to collaborate. In today's world, it has become increasingly difficult to get everyone together in the same room, much less at the same time. But there's hope… Google Docs is an application that can help solve this problem. As with other Web 2.0 applications, the hallmarks of Google Docs are sharing, flexibility and simplicity. Users can edit documents simultaneously via the web and can see the changes in real-time, or alternatively work in the more traditional asynchronous manner more common in blogs and wikis and other collaborative tools. Librarians are beginning to take this one step further and have even begun using Google Docs to replace PowerPoint and other "traditional" applications in creating presentations, spreadsheets and other documents.

In just our limited experience, we have used Google Docs as a collaborative word processing tool to write an article, to gather and compile data in a spreadsheet and as a replacement for PowerPoint in creating presentations for professional conferences. In fact, we used Google Docs to write this article. Based on this experience, we will give a brief overview of Google Docs and its functionality and chronicle the uses we have found for this tool. We will also discuss some of the commonalities between Google Docs and other existing applications, and in so doing, detail some of the strengths and weaknesses as compared to these products.

Commonalities

Currently, Google Docs encompasses web-based applications for word processing, spreadsheet work, and presentations. Google has named these three tools simply Documents, Spreadsheets, and Presentations. All three have been developed with a "just in time" philosophy – when users demand more, Google will make more features available. But, for now, Google's Documents, Spreadsheets, and Presentations offer just enough bare bones features to allow users to create, share, and publish basic files.

Already existing files in Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Open Office, .txt., csv, .rtf, and .sxw formats can be imported directly into Google Docs. Moreover, brand new files can be created directly in any of these three tools. Once a file exists, they can be shared not only with any Gmail address but also with institutional, business, or any other type of e-mail account. Completed documents from any of the three Google Docs tools can be exported into any of the aforementioned programs and file types as well as directly into HTML or PDF. In addition, one especially helpful feature is that Google automatically saves the document as users work. Then, in case of power loss or other catastrophic event, users can go back into Google Documents under the Revisions tab and see the history of edits and retrieve the most recently saved document.

Common limitations also exist between all three tools. Like many of the other Web 2.0 tools becoming so popular, Google Documents will not perform with Opera, Safari, and older Netscape web browsers. In addition, as will be discussed further, there are few font choices, only a few presentation templates and many other options taken for granted by users of Microsoft Office applications will not be available. Additionally, while many Microsoft Office Suite files can be uploaded into the Google applications, users will likely quickly discover that Office 2007 is not yet compatible. In addition, while one can share with any e-mail account, only Google account holders will actually be able to work in and edit any Google document.

Users may or may not notice the file size restrictions in Google Docs. Documents, the word processing tool, allow each user a total of 5000 documents; files to be imported can be up to 500 K plus 2 MB per embedded image. Google Spreadsheets allow files up to 1 MB to be imported. Limits include a 1,000 spreadsheet maximum and only being able to open 11 spreadsheets simultaneously. Presentations can import .ppt and .pps files directly from a computer as big as 10 MB. Files imported by e-mailing can be up to 500 K; files imported from the web can be up to 2 MB. Much like the aforementioned Documents, Google Presentations limit users to 5000 presentations.

Spreadsheet

When technology reviewers got a sneak peak at Google Spreadsheets in June of 2006, they wasted no time comparing it to its closest equivalent, Excel. As most pointed out, the free, web-based tool offered considerably fewer features than its commercial counterpart, and while in some respects this continues to be true, the addition of new features to Spreadsheets means that some of its capabilities today actually exceed that of Excel. Determining whether to use Excel or Spreadsheets, then, will depend in large part on the needs of the user. For simple spreadsheets whose creators have no need for advanced data tools, engineering or cubical functions, or collaborative real-time sharing technology, both Excel and Spreadsheets work equally well. Even more importantly, most content creators with a simple design who begin with one and for some reason decide to switch to the other will have little trouble transferring data between the two.

The similarities between Google Spreadsheets and Excel are apparent from a simple glance. Both have a nearly unlimited number of cells that can be manipulated in a variety of ways. Standard features include the ability to change the appearance of fonts, to add colors for emphasis and organization, and possibilities of adding and deleting rows, wrapping text, and inserting formulas. In addition, the Spreadsheet team at Google has added features since the product's debut that have considerably narrowed the gap between it and Excel. Among these are the AutoFill feature, an improved A-Z/Z-A sort bar, and the ability to freeze columns and to create charts (albeit with fewer templates than offered by Excel).

At the same time that the Spreadsheet updates have helped bridge the gap between it and Excel, they have also created new differences between the two. While Excel still has the upper hand in some data manipulation areas, including filtering abilities, it is users of the web-based product who can take advantage of 2.0 integrations into their spreadsheets. One of the newest Spreadsheet features is the ability to create and distribute forms for others to complete. The results are automatically time stamped and integrated into the desired spreadsheet. This allows users to collect and input data from others without granting them access to the spreadsheet itself. Another function unique to Google's product is the ability to import data from other web-based sources, such as stock information from Google Finance or your favorite RSS feeds, for example.

For what it does offer, Google Spreadsheets deserves to be counted as a useful tool for both individual users and collaborators alike. The sharing, publishing, and chatting features that make collaborating with Documents useful also apply to Spreadsheets. In addition, users will find that the Spreadsheets design team does take into account user preferences and requests as indicated by several pages on their site. A team blog announces the latest additions and updates. A "Known Issues Page" identifies problems with the product and reports on the status of fixes, and the "Suggest a Feature" page serves as a poll of sorts to help the designers decide what Excel-like features to add next.

Presentations

The Presentations application of Google Docs, the youngest member of the Google Docs family, was released in September 2007. If it is to be compared to Microsoft's PowerPoint, Google Docs Presentations application could be considered bare bones. It allows users to create slides that have photos, links, charts and text. But, it does not contain any of the bells and whistles of PowerPoint. There is no audio, no animation, and the templates and backgrounds are limited. This may be a drawback for some users, especially in the business realm where customization and branded templates are standard. However, for many others, this focus on content as opposed to the tool is refreshing. The power of the presentation application is the ability to collaborate and share your work. Users can be in any location while viewing and editing the presentation. The edits and changes appear instantly. When using Presentations in front of an audience, one can project the slides onto a physical screen to be seen by the audience and others can view the presentation virtually by just following a link. The application is also paired with Google Chat so that discussion of the presentation can take place in a virtual environment. One must have a Google account to participate in the chat. While one can also upload or import slides from PowerPoint into Google Docs, users will lose many of the features of PowerPoint in this uploading process.

Downsides include difficulties backing up the presentation so that it can be used when no Internet connection is available. Currently, the best option is to save as a PDF. However, the resulting PDF document will lose the entire "presentation feel." So, one must be connected to

the Internet to access the presentation. Users can only upload documents smaller than 10Mb to Google Docs. Working with large, graphic heavy files will be difficult.

Word Processing

The word processing application of Google Docs, useful for creating a variety of documents, such as articles and blog posts, to less formal documents, such as meeting and class notes, has several advantages. Users of Google Documents will note the simple and easy to use web interface. Most users only use a few of the hundreds of features available in word processing programs like Microsoft Word. Google Documents offers only those necessary options to meet word processing needs, including basic formatting, options to insert images, links, tables, or special characters, and choices for exporting the file once it is finished. The ability to share a document with others is also helpful. Because Google Documents is web-based, there is no need to save the file repeatedly and send to collaborators as an attachment. With Google Documents, users can create a document and simply send a link to colleagues, "sharing" the document with them. The original creator has control over who has access to the document and can allow others to edit it or to simply have access to view the document. Once the document is shared colleagues can add to the document and see revisions in real-time. This eliminates the need to send files back and forth, creating various editions of the document. The document is available to all contributors at any time from any computer with Internet access because it is stored online. Google Documents also lets users upload documents in a variety of familiar word processing file formats, including Word, Rich Text Format, and Open Office. The document can also be exported easily in a variety of formats, including HTML, RTF, Word, PDF, Open Office, and Text.

While the simplicity of Google Documents can be an advantage, it can also hinder a user who may prefer the bells and whistles of Microsoft Word and other similar software programs, particularly if the project requires a more professional look. Font size and types are still limited, for example. And while Google Documents meets the needs of many users, it is still only in BETA stages, which means it is constantly undergoing upgrades and changes. It is still not able to offer all of the stability of a tested product, such as Microsoft Word.

Conclusion

Google has been very responsive to users since its launch of Google Documents in October 2006. Google Documents, which began as a rework of Writely, a web-based word processing program, has been enhanced based on the feedback of users in its discussion group pages, http://groups.google.com/group/GoogleDocs/topics. Features that have been added include improvements in printing, enhancements to headers and footers, easier integration between other Google products, saving in different file formats, and creating sub-folders.

While not the solution to every problem, Google Docs does offer a flexible and easy to use

platform for those not afraid to try new things. Its simplicity and "bare bones" toolkit is both a strength and a weakness, but it holds promise for a variety of applications and projects. Being accessible via the web and the collaborative ease of creating content both in real-time and 24/7 are perhaps the most alluring features. In a head to head comparison with Microsoft's Office Suite, Google Docs will lose. However, what it does have going for it is the ability to collaborate, the ease of use and its ~~very affordable cost~~ FREE.