The Enterprise Cloud

Google Apps v. Office 365: Calendar features

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Takeaway: Ian Hardenburgh continues his comparison charts of Google Apps and Office 365 apps and features with this detailed look at the Calendar offerings.

Previously, in my ongoing series comparing Google Apps and Office 365, I've compared several feature groups, beginning with their basic productivity applications, and moving on to e-mail and messaging services. In this segment, I will compare various aspects of each one's calendaring software in as much detail as possible.

Google Apps' and Office 365's (as seen under its Exchange Online based Outlook Web App) calendar applications offer many of the most familiar features available in calendar apps, focusing on the scheduling of appointments/events in order to productively manage one's time, not to mention the time of one's colleagues. Yet, both show a divergence in how they facilitate this underlying need, and to what extent. Like so many of its services, Google has stripped down its Google Calendar to the bare essentials, placing greater importance on navigation or UXD (user experience design), where Microsoft continues to try and improve upon the same functionality it has offered since the inception of Outlook (this isn't intended to sound like a bad thing).

In my analysis of the Google Calendar and Office 365's Exchange Online calendar, I've found that for many users, it comes down simply to a preference for one over the other, and it's very subjective. However, in keeping with the course of this series comparing Google Apps to Office 365 as they might be recognized as acceptable for a particularly sized enterprise, I find that in terms of functionality, the Google Calendar might let many down. The Exchange Online calendar is certainly more ready for large enterprises, mostly due to its capacity to integrate with other aspects of the Exchange Online contact management toolset, as well as both on-premise and on-demand applications external to itself (e.g., SharePoint).

Here are the primary feature areas that I cover in the chart:

- Organization (navigation, views, etc.)
- Appointments
- Invitations
- (Event) Notification
- Tasks
- Sharing
- (Application) Integration
- Mobility

The chart is very detailed, so for those who prefer a version to save to the desktop and manipulate, you can download the Excel chart. If you prefer to view a snapshot version, click the thumbnail below to open to full-size.

Comparison of Google Apps v. Office 365

Feature			Google Apps App/Service	Office 365 App/Service	Google Apps/Office 365 Suitable Enterprise Size			Comparison
					Small	Med.	Large	
Calendaring	Organization		Google Calendar	Exchange Online's Calendar	GA/365	GA/365	GA/365	Organization refers to the basic navigational and compositional elements that could be considered the bones of each services' calendaring software, and to a certain extent, also deals with overall UXD and performance. And for the most part, each service has the same set of features, but with a different approach. Google makes calendar creation extremely easy, as it uses each calendar as a means for users to discern between various types of events. Contrarily, Microsoft, as they have always done with Outlook, allows users to differentiate amongst events predominately through color-coded labels and categories. Additionally, one can create separate calendars, but is relegated to one calendar at a time, where Google Apps' Calendar allows for (event) overlays. In terms of calendar views, both sport a typical day, week and month type of approach, with some slight variation when it comes to a few additional perspectives. In terms of overall UXD and performance, or what could be obtrusively noted as flow, I'd have to say that Google Apps is clear winner, as Exchange Online is rather clunky and slow. However, in the end, Exchange Online's calendar gets the job done.
	Events	Appointment			GA/365	GA/365	365	Appointments are clearly the most important aspect to any calendaring software. Without appointments, you're really just left with a calendar. Again, both services have a number of similar features, with Exchange Online offering a couple of important bits of functionality. As for where the calendars coalesce, each has the capability to schedule an event date/time range down to the minute, subject and description fields, reminder and event reoccurrence functionality, as well as some level of control as to who can see your event. The Google Calendar also allows you to attach files, but stores any attached file under Google Docs, which I find a bit annoying when I want to simply attach a quick file and not have to worry about managing it, or not trashing it, under Docs. Exchange Online doesn't do this, as one can attach a file acute to the appointment. Additionally, attaching of files in the description, as well as the embedding of other Outlook/Exchange Online objects, is much better (will talk about this in detail under Integration). Lastly, Google Calendar allows for "appointment slots", which are used to allow others to know when you're available for a meeting, but this pales in comparison to the Exchange Online calendar's Scheduling Assistant, where a much more sophisticated set of tools are available to prevent event conflicts and the setting up of meeting requests.
		Invitations			GA/365	GA/365	365	As discussed under Appointments, Exchange Online's calendar makes use of its Scheduling Assistant to help send meeting requests via e-mail. And although I noted Google Calendar's appointment slots feature as rather amateurish, in respect to managing invitations, it offers some nice functions to track RSVPs and auto-accept invitations (if one assigns an appointment slot accordingly). However, Exchange Online has two features called the Resource Booking Attendant and Room Finder (as seen in Outlook 2010) that helps to automate the scheduling of conference rooms. Something many enterprises might find that can't do without once they employ their use.
		Notification			GA/365	GA/365	Neither	Google Calendar has three ways to notify a user of an upcoming event. That being through e-mail, SMS, or by way of an in-app pop-up. And when I say in-app for pop-ups, I really mean in-app, because you literally have to be in the calendar to receive this type of alert. There are other means for receiving pop-ups under ones' desktop, but these are unsupported or don't ship standard with Google Apps. The Exchange Online calendar allows you to setup reminders, but currently does not offer the same type of desktop integrated alerts one is used to with on-premise versions of Outlook.
	Tasks				365	365	365	Google should really be ashamed of themselves when it comes to Task management. Although the have an in-app gadget available through the calendar (same one as seen under Gmail) it is rather pathetic, where one can only assign a due date and fill-out a description. Furthermore, archiving or retention isn't support. I think this might the only feature where I've found Google Apps unsuitable for even small enterprises. On the other hand, Exchange Online offers the same type of task features seen in Outlook, which offers virtually all the type of flexibility in regard to recording information, co-authoring/sharing and integration as seen with appointments.
	Sharing				GA/365	GA/365	GA/365	Google Apps' calendar allows for delegation or the assigning of ownership over a particular calendar. Furthermore, permissions can be modified down to a single event instead of entire calendar. One can also embed calendars publically to a Google Site or a even website external to a Google Apps domain. Publish calendars also allows external users to create appointment in open slots, as dictated by the calendar's author. With Exchange Online, one can share free/busy calendar data with users inside and outside of an organization, so long as both are supporting Exchange Server 2010, through a Microsoft Federated Gateway. Exchange Online also allows users to publish their calendar using the iCal format, across multiple platforms.
	Integration				GA/365	365	365	As alluded to above, Exchange Online integrates much better with its other services/applications. For the most part, one can say integration is better all around under Office 365, in comparison to Google Apps. I think Google has really missed the boat when it comes to, and might have something to do with the fact that it doesn't have P2P approach that Microsoft can offer, as with its Exchange Server and desktop version of Office. As discussed, the extent as to how the Google Calendar integrates with other Google Apps services includes it's Google Docs document attachment to events, e-mail reminders for appointments and the Google Maps integration, as seen under the Where field of an event. Exchange Online on the other hand is seamless integrated with other Exchange Online/Outlook objects like Tasks, Notes, Journals, E-mails - you name it. Even SharePoint integration is available.
	Mobility				GA/365	GA/365	365	Widespread use of of calendaring software probably didn't start to take off until smartphones, namely BlackBerry smartphones, became popular. Exchange Server has a long history with this nullified brand, or its BlackBerry Enterprise Server in particular, but with the extent of browser development seen with the Android, we've moved well beyond client-server type integration to full-fledged use of the Chrome Browser, just as seen with a desktop equivalent. Therefore, one can go as far to say that Google Apps' calendar is just as sufficient as Google Apps is itself. Exchange Online is still supported on Blackberry devices, through its BlackBerry Business Cloud Services (BBCS), with limited functionality, as too with its Microsoft Exchange ActiveSync, supported by a wide range of mobile devices, including Windows Mobile, Windows Phone, Nokia E and N series devices, the Apple iPhone and iPad, and certain Android phones.

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