The Enterprise Cloud

Google Apps v. Office 365: Head-to-head comparison of features

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Takeaway: Ian Hardenburgh compares the core features of Microsoft Office 365 and Google Apps to see which one comes out on top and includes a downloadable chart for at-a-glance comparison.

Given the extent of development both Google Apps and Microsoft's Office 365 have gone under recently, or just the sheer volume of features each service now offers, deciding which "office cloud" might be best suited for your small business or enterprise has become an extremely daunting task, abounding with risk. There are a number of factors to consider in order to avoid actually harming an organization's productivity or drowning it in sunk costs and unforeseen expenditures. Furthermore, there are other trade-offs to choosing one service over the other, which go well beyond the basic set of productivity tools each offer — SLAs, application support, and maybe, especially, user culture and adoption.

To help lessen the apprehension with choosing Google Apps over Office 365, or vice versa, I'll be creating a series of posts that will go over virtually every nook and cranny of each service. Additionally, I'll pit the analogous features against one another in order to describe how one might be better suited for enterprises of small, medium and/or large size, or just explain how one might simply outperform the other. I'll do this by way of a downloadable comparison chart (Excel format), which I'll describe briefly below. You can also find an attached template of the chart that you might want to use/fill-in on your own, conducting your own research.

First, we'll look at the most basic office applications, productivity and document management apps.

Productivity applications

The applications that both Google Apps and Office 365 are most known for are their productivity suite apps that include a word processing, presentation, and spreadsheet software. These applications are known as Google Docs under Google Apps, and Office Web Apps under Office 365. Both suites also include some supplementary tools to accompany these core applications that can also be said to have been designed to promote the idea of increased office productivity. For Google Apps, this includes its Form and Drawing applications, while Office 365 offers an online version of its desktop OneNote software.

Seeing to it that probably most enterprise workers spend the majority of their day creating or collaborating upon word processor, presentation, or spreadsheet documents, this is where both Google and Microsoft have placed most of their emphasis in regards to development. For the most part, Google has focused on stripping down what Microsoft has built upon with its Office desktop software for years, by making a simple yet intuitive interface that users of productivity software, like Office, can easily navigate, without much of a learning curve. Microsoft has taken a similar approach, but takes any learning curve completely out of the equation by simply reducing certain parts, or advanced features, of its desktop Office 2010 software.

Microsoft's desktop and cloud versions of its office software are almost a spitting image of each other, somewhat analogous to how one may purchase a car. Choosing Office Web Apps is kind of like opting for a cheaper model of the same car, but minus the leather seats, faster engine, sunroof, and other fancy add-ons.

Both productivity suites will get the job done, meaning that 99 percent of the principal work that the majority of enterprise users do can be accomplished with either set of applications. However, for that remaining 1% of work that needs to get done, Google Apps is left behind, simply because Office Web Apps affords users the option of integrating with the desktop equivalent of Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and even OneNote, just in case more advance tasks, like creating VBA programs, is required.

Document management

There is more to just creating documents with productivity applications (e.g., word processors or spreadsheets) than just the applications themselves. There are a number of obligations one has to undertake in order to properly manage documents, and the data or information within them, effectively. Namely, in respect to what's available on Google Apps/Google Docs and Office 365/Office Web Apps, there's the sharing and collaboration of documents with peers, the ability to edit documents offline just in case an Internet connection is lost or unavailable, synchronization amongst cloud and desktop derived documents, document navigation and search, document importing and exporting, and document revisions/versioning.

Most enterprise users work in teams, and not only need to share their documents with teammates, but also collaborate with them upon those documents in real-time. Both Google Apps and Office 365 have the ability to share, collaborate, or co-author documents in real-time, or in Office 365's case, pseudo real-time. The real difference between the two might be a matter of preference — where Google Docs documents have a more straightforward approach to sharing and collaboration, Office 365 puts in place a number of mechanisms to prevent two authors from editing the same data at the time. Both can be noted as suitable for even the largest of enterprises though, especially when considering that this kind of technology is rather new, and really not available elsewhere, at least on a wide scale.

Offline editing, document syncing, and importing/exporting of documents are three closely related features as they both are enmeshed with the idea that the user demanding this kind of service, whether it be through Google Docs or Office Web Apps, is probably not intending to fully immerse themselves into the cloud. Both Google Apps and Office 365 have ample means for providing all of these features, but all have their reasons for concern when it comes to the large enterprise.

Document navigation and search might be a set of features formerly taken for granted, given that we all once used some kind of OS-based file managing software like Windows Explorer up until recently, when Internet browsers became necessary to access documents online. Although advances have been made in this territory, most will find that both services are lacking a certain "je ne sais quoi" - fluidity.

Document revision could be known as the act of both storing old copies of the same document with the ability to store a revision on the whim, while versioning takes this routine a step further by giving the author the ability to understand the differences between each version, as with CVS (Concurrent Versioning System). Although both Google Docs and Office Web Apps documents each have sufficient methods in place to keep track of a long history of revisions, any versioning feature is completely missing. This might only be necessary for advanced users, such as developers, but is something that can certainly deepen the argument for moving entirely to the cloud. Furthermore, it could be said that all users need to start using CVS.

Using the charts

The downloadable Excel-format chart is organized as follows:

The feature column merely lists the on-demand service or offering in question. This is not to be confused

with actual applications, as they are listed under the columns known as *Google App/Service* and *Office 365*.

- **Google App/Service Column:** Lists any application or general service associated with the listed Google App feature.
- **Office 365 App/Service Column:** Lists any application or general service associated with the listed Office 365 feature.
- **Enterprise Size (Small, Medium and Large) Columns:** GA (Google Apps) or 365 (Office) indicates which is appropriate in each environment. May be one or both, and sometimes "Neither."
- **Comparison Column:** This column enumerates all of the positives and negatives associated with choosing one cloud service feature/application over the other. This might be in respect to how suitable it is for a particular-size enterprise. But perhaps, more importantly, the takeaway might illustrate how the Google Apps or Office 365 either lives up to what it aims to accomplish or even how one service bests the competition.

Also see:

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