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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 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, 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 email 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 email account, only Google account holders will actually be able to work in and edit any Google document.

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 little trouble transferring data between the two.

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