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The similarities between Google Spreadsheets and Excel are apparent from a simple glance. Both have an 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