

Your Office Apps in the Cloud

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The financial planner's workplace is an increasingly collaborative environment. As the business grows, financial plans, portfolio reviews, and other client deliverables are created and maintained by an increasing number of people in the organization. Unfortunately, the most common office software programs installed on computer workstations simply don't support multiple people working on the same file simultaneously.

Online office software programs have existed for several years, but recent enhancements coupled with ubiquitous high-speed Internet access allow planners to work on the same documents simultaneously with other colleagues while in or away from the office.

The Battle Between Google and Microsoft

Planners have two leading solutions available for their online office productivity software needs. The first is Google Apps for Business, which includes apps called Docs, Sheets, and Slides for word processing, spreadsheet, and presentation tasks, respectively. In addition,

subscribers receive 25 GB of email storage via Gmail, five GB of file storage in Google Drive, and access to the online Google Calendar product.

Pricing for Google Apps for Business is straightforward; \$5 per user per month, or \$50 per user when purchased annually. An archiving, e-discovery, and information governance feature called Vault can be added for an additional \$5 per user per month. Vault may be a worthwhile tool for FINRA and SEC record-keeping compliance, but describing this feature at length is beyond the scope of this column. Also, additional file storage space from 20 GB to 200 GB is available for \$4 to \$17.50 per month.

The alternate solution is Office 365, launched by Microsoft to the public in June 2011. Office 365 includes both locally installed and online versions of Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Outlook—staples of the office productivity software domain.

In characteristic Microsoft fashion, Office 365 is segmented into several pricing tiers based on the number of user licenses needed as well as desired functionality. Office 365 Small Business accommodates up to 25 users and costs \$6 per user per month, or \$60 per user when purchased annually. The Small Business tier includes online versions of Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Outlook (referred to as Office Web Apps), 25 GB of email

storage, and seven GB of SkyDrive cloud document storage.

Planners who prefer to access desktop versions of Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Outlook in addition to the online ones may upgrade to Office 365 Small Business Premium, priced at \$15 per user per month or \$150 per user purchased annually. Each paid user may install the desktop office software on up to five Windows

“The days of using isolated, locally installed word processing, spreadsheet, and presentation programs may be numbered.”

or Mac computers. Finally, if a firm has more than 25 users, Microsoft requires the purchase of Office 365 Midsize Business for \$15 per user per month with an annual commitment required. Office 365 Midsize Business features are comparable to Office 365 Small Business Premium.

Cloudware

Both Google Apps for Business and Microsoft Office 365 Small Business require nothing to be installed on a desktop computer. Office programs are delivered through an Internet browser, meaning that the programs can be accessed anywhere an Internet connection is available. Because there is no software to install, software patches and updates are never required, because the programs delivered through the browser are always the latest versions.

However, as more work gets completed away from the traditional office, planners need to access office files when an Internet connection isn't present. Google Apps for Business supports offline viewing of Docs, Sheets, and Slides, but only using the Chrome browser or a Chrome OS device. Docs and Slides also may be edited offline, but Sheets cannot.

Documents and files saved in Google Drive also may be synchronized to a desktop computer by installing Google Drive for your Mac or PC. This application allows users to select files and folders they wish to synchronize to a computer, maintaining copies of documents on a computer's hard drive.

Planners using Microsoft's solution will need to subscribe to Office 365 Small Business Premium to edit Office documents offline, as this tier includes desktop versions of the Office programs. Office 365 Small Business users must own existing licenses of Office 2010, Office 2007, Office 2011 for Mac, or Office 2008 for Mac for offline editing.

Like Google Drive, Microsoft SkyDrive also offers a desktop app for Windows and Mac, synchronizing files stored in the cloud service to a hard drive on a desktop computer.

Co-authoring

The most significant advantage of web-based office software is the

ability to simultaneously edit the same document with multiple people, or co-authoring. A humorous illustration of this real-time editing comes from a Google video showing how pop-duo Hall and Oates might collaborate today to compose the hit song "Maneater" (<http://youtu.be/D0hHaQgdypI>).

Google Docs, Sheets, and Slides all excel in co-authoring, displaying character-by-character changes in real time to all users editing the same file. Changes are automatically saved with an extensive revision history available, highlighting additions and deletions between document versions.

However, some users might find character-by-character updates distracting, and prefer to see document updates only *after* another user has saved their changes. This is the way the Microsoft Word Web App manages co-authoring.

Co-authoring in the Word Web App is not as seamless as Google Docs, as only one user is allowed to make edits to a specific paragraph at a given time. Word Web App automatically locks the paragraph being edited and lists the name of the person making changes in the left-hand margin. When the person is finished making changes, she must first save the document before her changes are made available to others viewing or editing the same document. Saving the document then notifies others viewing it that changes are available, and they must save their document to refresh the content and view changes by others.

Co-authoring is not exclusive to the Word Web App, as the feature also is supported in Word 2010, Word 2013, and Microsoft Word for Mac 2011. There are a number of incompatible features among the desktop Word programs and their Web counterparts, so caution must be exercised not to introduce content that is unsupported by the Word Web App. In the event

unsupported content is added to a document, co-authoring is disabled for all Word Web App users. Confusing, I know!

Also worth noting is if two users edit the same cell of a spreadsheet in the Excel Web App, the latest edit supersedes any previous edits made by other users, creating a small chance of data loss.

Cloud Shortcomings

Moving exclusively to web-based office programs isn't without its fair share of drawbacks. Planners using web-based tools are much more dependent on reliable Internet access than their counterparts, but leveraging offline editing options helps mitigate lost productivity when the Internet is unavailable. Also, Google Docs and Word Web App have fewer features than locally installed programs, so while they cover the basics of word processing, they lack some of the more powerful features super-users have come to expect.

Choices for Collaboration

Until now, planners likely wouldn't have even considered relying solely on web-based office programs for their word processing, spreadsheet, and slide deck needs. But new features and increased prevalence of Internet access have reduced the potential for frustration and lost productivity. As the world becomes more connected, financial planners have more resources at their disposal that support a collaborative work environment—online and offline—eliminating the bottlenecks of working on the same documents when using legacy, locally installed desktop programs. ■

Postscript: This column was composed using Microsoft Word for Mac 2011 on a MacBook Air and an iMac, synchronized via Dropbox. Had I needed to collaborate with others, I would have chosen to use Google Docs.

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