Change management – moving from email to Gmail

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You have not been selected as a leader to simply make change for the sake of making change. You have been placed in your position because the changes you implement have been carefully considered; you have extensive experience in your field; you manage staff and relationships well; you have every confidence in your own decision-making and should things not work out, you are accountable. So when you're met with challenges and resistance, especially from those close to you, it can be very unsettling.

I recently initiated a change at my school, one that would prove to be the biggest challenge I have faced in my professional career. I changed something that every staff member uses throughout every single day. A technological tool which, should it fail, could be detrimental to the success of my organisation.

It's hard to believe that we have become so dependent on it really, but email is integral to our professional and personal lives. It is a space that occupies so much of one's time that even the slightest loss of functionality or adjustment in look and feel, can seemingly ruin the whole day.

After very careful deliberation, and months of trial and review, I transitioned my entire school email from Microsoft Outlook to Google Apps for Education. In this article I will discuss why I did this, outline some of the challenges faced and share how and why you should consider the same strategy for your school.

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

There are a few things that have not changed since the invention of personal computing. First, the qwerty keyboard, it's been there since day one. Many have tried and failed to improve this interface. Even on the most advanced laptops and tablets, the qwerty keyboard appears in its original layout. I wonder if this is simply because some changes are just too big to implement, they are too deeply ingrained into us as human beings (more on this idea later).

Second, email. The appearance and functionality has not been adjusted since the early 1990s. I recall AOL inboxes appearing for the first time with multiple folders and a new list of technical words. Sent Items and Trash Can have become synonymous with email, even the words In Box need no introduction. And Attachments are precious as we share ideas and collaborate. Back and forth these documents flow, being duplicated so many times that 'Inbox full' messages are selectively ignored and dismissed by many as a technical glitch.

25 years on and we face an ever-expanding dependency on our email, despite many of the messages we receive being Spam and the dozens of emails we are made privy to which often don't concern us, the CC-ing, forwarding and group messages… and the dreaded one word response wasting precious moments of our mornings. 'Thanks' or 'OK'. No it's not OK! Now I have to press delete.

Well, I thought, there has got to be a better way. I knew that the answer didn't lie in Outlook no matter how well you master your inbox. The answer, it turns out, didn't lie in Gmail either. What has started to make a profound and positive impact at my school has been the adoption of the entire Google Apps for Education suite.

The review process

There are really just two serious modern contenders for your email needs. Microsoft Office 365 and Google Gmail. I was fortunate enough to work previously at a school that had adopted 365. I used the platform for many months and it worked great. All staff had huge amounts of free storage and sending large attachments was not a problem. Most used the Outlook email client on their computers and to set it up was a snap. The calendar integration was so simple that planning your day, or others in your domain was very simple. The change over was so smooth that the teachers really had no idea they were using a new, updated tool. Users were comfortable in the familiar environment.

Microsoft sells 365 with many added benefits. Each user is entitled to the Microsoft Office suite, incorporating Word and Excel, in the cloud. These cloud services work well but there is no doubt that Microsoft encourages the purchase of the native desktop programs to compliment.

I took a look at Gmail as well. This is an email platform that does not use Microsoft Exchange (a technology that underpins most email solutions). This meant that my colleagues could not use their familiar Outlook email clients, so initially Gmail was shelved. For months change was ruled out, I just could not expect staff to leave behind the comfortable interface to which they have become so accustomed.

At my school we have adopted a model where

Sites
Students can build project sites without writing a single line of code. It's as easy as writing a document. And, to save even more time, you can provide them with hundreds of pre-built templates.

Gmail
Inbox space for everything, and no ads
Google Apps offers up to 30GB of storage per user, powerful spam filtering and a 99.9% uptime SLA. All hosted by Google – there's no cost, and no ads for students, faculty or staff.

Calendar
Easily schedule lessons and meetings
Overlay multiple calendars to see when people are available – a great way to manage staff schedules, for example. Google Calendar sends invitations and manages RSVPs.

Vault
Add archiving and e-discovery to Google Apps for Education
Vault is optional and adds archiving, e-discovery and information governance capabilities

Slides
Create slides with Google's presentation editor, which supports things like embedded videos, animations and dynamic slide transitions.

we look to transform tasks. By that I mean we lever modern technology in a method which may appear different or unnatural for the user, but always results in a more efficient process with a greater productive outcome.

Using Google Apps for Education oozed with transformational opportunities. For example, gathering permission slips from multiple parents can become tedious in an email conversation. Email clients just don't lend themselves well when you need to quiz your students quickly to see who is available for a sports team or an after school event. It is here that you would utilise the power of Google Forms. In minutes you can set up a list of questions, distribute to your class group and gather the responses in a flexible spreadsheet. This is a good example of the underlying task remaining the same but the process and outcome being greatly enhanced.

So, with the benefit of working in a school that encourages a fertile working environment, I broached the subject of Google Apps with my colleagues. I trialled the services with eight staff members, for 12 weeks. As we started the process the outcome seemed inevitable, we had to position ourselves beneath the umbrella of tools provided by Google. I was astounded at the range of services, all for free... completely free.

Google or Microsoft?

But why did you opt for Google I hear you ask. Why not Microsoft 365? Both have collaborative features like forms and Google Docs.

Providing simplicity and clarity for my colleagues and students is important to me. I have always disliked the multitude of passwords and usernames I ask people to remember as we embrace new digital services. 'Sign in with Google' was something I was seeing more of on the internet. Visit KhanAcademy.com and you will see exactly what I mean. By transitioning staff to Google Apps for Education meant that my colleagues were instantly members of dozens of educational suites, including BrainPop, Desmos, CodeAcademy and Educreations to name a few.

Google allows third party developers access to APIs to design completely independent apps available via the Google Chrome browser. Already there are hundreds of these available in the education section and this is growing every month. And thanks to the native apps on mobile devices such as Chrome, Gmail and Drive, Google contributes generously to the iOS and Android mobile device market.

I feel that the clue is in the name 'Office', 365 works beautifully in the loyal office environment where Word documents are still sacred. But in an education setting where students and staff focus on content and creativity (as opposed to appearance and raw data) Google Gmail is a no brainer.

Free cloud computing is the future

Google Apps for Education is a perfect example of this. Emails, documents, and wiki type 'sites' are created, reside on and are accessible entirely on Google servers. Security and 99.9% uptime is guaranteed. Collaboration has never been easier; each user has 30 GB of storage and a single username and password for everything.

Google are very clear about their security and data ownership. I strongly encourage you to visit this link: (http://www.google.com.au/enterprise/apps/education/benefits.html).

The biggest challenge I faced was requesting that staff put faith in Google Chrome, a web browser and our new software of choice. It is entirely possible to synchronise your Google account with Apple Mail or Mozilla Firebird. However I would recommend that if you want to benefit from the full suite of Google Apps for Education you must commit to Chrome. A convenient bar runs across the top of your session constantly reminding you that you are signed in and you are never more then one click away from Drive, Sites, or Calendar.

Google does come with its shortcomings. The email inbox appears upside down to many because mail conversations begin with the oldest messages at the top. You are forced to view long strings of conversation before you reach your destination to reply at the bottom. I'm reassured that "there is good reason for this" but I have yet to discover it. There is also no clear indication if I have replied or forwarded a message. I expect that Google will address these minor irritations, and updates to the interface do come regularly. Google Chrome is Google's flagship product, it fills me with confidence to know that things will continue to improve at a steady speed.

Change and identity

A few weeks ago, I was fortunate enough to hear Dan Gregory speak. Dan is an expert in brand identity, advertising and change management. You may remember him as "The fat one off Gruen Transfer" (his words not mine). Dan spoke of one's need for identity and why people associate so closely with a product which they use every day. "We resist change because it conflicts with our identity." Because identity creates a sense of zeal, actioning change can be met with enormous resistance.

On one single morning about six weeks into our Gmail adoption, three people said the words "I hate it" to me. I realised it was time to double my efforts. I scheduled many more impromptu PD sessions throughout the school day with different departments. These were well received and I am happy to say that 12 weeks and in the big change is being accepted. Not only that, but the community is starting to work smarter. And the future will bring significant cost savings as we utilise the 42 terabytes of free storage provided and maintained by a third party.

Conclusion

My job hasn't just been to research and implement this technical change. My real role has become more about assisting individuals to shift their expectations. To let go of habits formed with ageing technology. As I stated in my first paragraph, this decision was made with conviction. I implemented a forward thinking solution, which is beginning to have a profound effect on learning and teaching at my school. And you should too. ET

Google Drive
Access your files anywhere
Google Drive on your Mac, PC, Android or iOS device gives you a single place for up-to-date versions of your files from anywhere.

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