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Google Promises To Bring Out Major Apps Enhancements

San Francisco -- Prospects are gaining momentum for an event Google will hold today to announce that its “**Google Docs**” productivity suite will be updated with a number of improvements over the next 12 months.

The morning event, to be held in San Francisco, will boast a CIO roundtable and new product demos, which Google is tight-lipped about but which are designed to boost Apps' appeal among large organizations, according to various sources familiar with the plans.

The event seems like Google is preparing for a huge update, although it is a mystery still as to what they may be holding under their sleeve, but there are a couple of hints that has popped up recently.

The initial hint was in a tweet from Dave Girouard, Google Enterprise unit president, addressing delegates at the Bank of America and Merrill Lynch 2009 US Technology Conference that “in a year the products will be night and day from what they are today”.

He said that they want Google Apps to include every Google service, period. During the event, he also talked about Google's rivalry with Microsoft, and his objection to the term “private cloud”.

Google Apps, initially aimed at small businesses, has many opportunities for improvement in the enterprise area, according to Guy Creese, vice president and research director at industry analysis firm Burton Group.

“I truly hope Google gets its enterprise act together; the competition would be good for the market. However, given that it took them 2-plus years to add [Microsoft Office 2007] OOXML support to Docs, I'm not holding my breath,” Creese said via e-mail.

Girouard admitted that most businesses purchase the Google Docs suite for the email and calendar offerings, and said that the spreadsheet and word processing products had “ways to go”.

“Gmail is really the best email application in the world for consumers or business users, and we can prove that very well. Calendar is also very good, and probably almost at the level of Gmail. But the word processing, spreadsheets and other products are much less mature. They are a couple of years old at the most, and we still have a lot of work to do,” he said.

Google must close the product gap between Microsoft Office and the Docs office productivity software that is part of Apps, Creese said. In addition, Apps needs more IT administration and control attributes, such as role-based management, where IT defines a set of roles, and then adds end-users to those roles accordingly, he said. The Google suite would also benefit from a records management component, which IT managers would welcome.

Google Docs represents the search firm's messaging, calendar and email offerings, as well as collaboration products, such as Docs, Video and Sites.

“I do not view these collaboration products today as a full-fledge replacement for [Microsoft's Office] or [Sun Microsystems'] OpenOffice for that matter,” said Girouard.

He also stated that Google had a great advantage in the market because of its giant consumer side, which allows it to supply on-demand services at a low cost.

“We do not run Google Enterprise on a separate infrastructure [from the rest of the company]. There are not separate datacentres, so the management of users, processes and how jobs are allocated is shared,” he said.

Teju Deshpande, vice president of client services at [Mindcrest](#), a business enterprise catering to offshore legal services, would like to have a database application as part of Apps, as well as better IT administration capabilities.

She would also like to see Google or its partners develop small applications for, say, tracking travel and expenses, as well as better integration between Apps and the Postini communications security and compliance platform Google acquired in 2007.

“If I can avoid leaving my Google Apps domain entirely to get 90 percent of what I need to get done, that would be helpful,” Deshpande said. Mindcrest has almost 700 users of Apps Premier, which costs US\$50 annually per user.

Last week, Girouard assured that Docs will get so much improved in the next 12 months that its word processor, spreadsheet and presentation applications will be “night and day from what they are today”.

Girouard added that Google will keep on enhancing the Gmail and Calendar components with improvements aimed at CIOs and IT managers, including the upcoming Apps Connector for BlackBerry Enterprise Server, he said.

In a related news, Google said that it will open up the code to Page Speed, a tool the company uses internally to improve its web page performance.

Page Speed is a Firefox add-on incorporated with Firebug, and provides users with immediate suggestions on how they can improve the speed of their web pages, according to Google.

“For example, Page Speed automatically optimises images for you, giving you a compressed image that you can use immediately on your web site,” said Page Speed staff Richard Rabbat and Bryan McQuade in the Google Code blog.

Girouard added that Google Docs is at least a quarter of the price of similar offerings from Microsoft.