

Google Wave - The Next Thing?

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Like most geeks I love technology. I'm always reading about the cutting edge of research. I can become as engrossed in an online white paper about nano-technology as I am in my favorite TV Show - which is a toss up between the gritty AMC Drama **Breaking Bad** and the light hearted and endearing (although occasionally gruesome) **Pushing Daisies** with the irrepresible Kristin Chenoweth as former Jockey-turned-waitress Olive Snook. Who else could make unrequited love seem so appealing and delicious... but I digress. This "forward leaning" interest in technology tends to create a momentum for me and even for my company (**CF Webtools**) that makes me prone to try new things. So when Google announces a ground breaking new paradigm for collaboration my temptation is to say "count me in". In case you missed the hype I'm talking about **Google Wave** which was previewed at Google I/O.

Google Wave aims to combine elements of email, chat, blogging, micro-blogging, collaboration, source control, and social networking into a single interface that claims to draw in all the best features of these tools while eliminating some of the annoying drawbacks. The paradigm for Google Wave moves away from "messages" and toward a "conversation". That might seem too abstract to matter, but such idioms are important because they give us an anchor - a point of reference for understanding something new.

Let me say at the outset that I'm *positively* inclined toward this product (at least, what I've seen of it). I can see how it would benefit my own team in many ways. I'm already thinking of how I might enhance our vast, custom tracking system using the Wave Protocol. One of the best things about Wave is the protocol layer and integration strategy. So I am not against the product - indeed I'm rooting for it. I would love to get rid of our hodgepodge of tools in favor of one elegant way of collaborating. Still, I see some problems for Wave on the horizon. So if you want the contrarian view read on...

Incentive for Change

Tip O'Neil said all politics is local (or it may have been Wilfred Brimley - I can't remember). He meant that people tend to vote in their own self interest on a personal level and have difficulty expanding their concerns beyond their own community. In the same way, all company incentives are local as well. Companies don't do things for the "good of all". They do things for the good of themselves. While I can see my daughter and her facebook friends falling in love with Wave and using it religiously, the big question is, will Wave ever be adopted by business. After all, if you listen to the presentation, adoption by business as a core collaboration tool is the aim of the Google Wave team. They want to facilitate productivity gains by replacing an antiquated paradigm for communication with one that more closely mirrors actual human interaction (whew... I can't believe that came out of me. I think I'm channeling a Joe Biden). So the really big questions are:

- Why do we want to do this?
- Where is the Cost Benefit?
- How much change is involved?
- How long before we see returns?

No religious fervor or grandiose plan for the future of the Internet will be able to overcome these questions. They must be answered. The answer that will come will manage to make a few valid points:

- Better Productivity - replacing "mail" and "messaging" with "conversation".
- Improving Tools - fixing some of the things that are wrong or broken with the current suite of tools we tend to use.
- Merging - Bringing together multiple tools into one unified interface.

Ok, I'm in. Let's take my small company as a starting point. I want to move to Google Wave. I have 13 employees and less than 25 desktops or laptops running on a single Windows Domain. What will it take for me to upgrade? Well, as a small company with an agile business plan and an "all-geek" staff I can shift to Wave and make it work quickly - and even benefit in all of the ways described. My staff (once trained) will love it. They are already bloggers, facebookers, twitterers, emailers and wikiers.

But what about collaboration with customers who are still using outlook and office? Will I need their buy in? What about the lost productivity time moving my staff to Wave? Even a highly skilled technical staff will have a learning curve - and not just knowledge but work habits and the "how to" stuff has to change as well. What about the gigabytes of emails, documents, wikis and project tracking information that I already possess. I will have to continue to support my old systems for some time to come? Or perhaps I will need to create a new project to migrate all that data into Wave (probably doable, but expensive yes?). What about my reluctance to send my information into Google's system? Do I want Google to possess my information? Don't I want to keep it here? In house? Under my watchful eye?

And that's just my little company. For a mid size company with 4 or 5 thousand employees such a move will cost them thousands of hours and millions of dollars. Meanwhile, many of them are still trying to replace old style spreadsheets with web based interfaces - or paper forms with PDFs.

Sometimes I think there is a disconnect between folks like me *working in technology* and how things in most businesses *actually get done*. The majority of people in the world are barely passable when it comes to adopting technology. They aren't young, they aren't hip and they aren't impressed with the "next big thing." Indeed, they are not looking for the next thing because they are preoccupied trying to figure out the last thing. We think drag and drop on a web page is the wonder of the ages while they are still finding out they have a right hand mouse button.

Remember the Jack London Story "To build a Fire". A novice outdoorsman in the arctic circle is caught outside in 30 below zero weather, but he has no point of reference to understand just how cold it is. He lacks the imagination to see his desperate situation. He freezes to death because he can't imagine himself freezing to death. Our typical user is that man. He or she is suffering with tools that could be better, with a paradigm based on old ideas and without an understanding of just how superior these new approaches and tools are compared to the old ones. But our user doesn't know this. When he learns how to use the SUM() function of excel he is thrilled with his technical acumen.

Our user takes a look at Google docs and gives it a "hey, neat" and a quick thumbs up... the same reaction he gave to the new water cooler and the new receptionist. We (techies) see something like Google docs as a ground breaking tool - a weapon in the

fight against vendor lock, great for collaboration and with a "wow" factor because it is somehow completely implemented in HTML (wow!). We are impressed because we understand how difficult it is to build such an application. But many - probably most - run-of-the-mill office folks would give it an "oh-that's-nice" glance and wonder why all the hub-bub among the IT people. Everyone already has Office, right? Do I need a new tool that "can't quite" do all the things office can do? Or one that I have to "re-learn".

Now that opinion that might rankle you or I. But we, dear readers, are fond of arguing how many silicon chips will fit on the head of a pin while the rest of the world is sitting on hold with tech support trying to get their task bar back to the bottom of the desktop because it "mysteriously moved to the side." In today's jargon we are the "early adopters" but maybe we should really be called the "fringe adopters" because we tend to adopt cutting edge technology that may or may not catch on.

As for Wave, here's hoping it is a smashing success and we are all in the same giant "conversation" this time next year. If not, I'll catch up to you on twitter as soon as I figure out how to minimize my browser.