
Does Google+ Add Up for the Enterprise?s

In North America and parts of Europe, July and August are often wind down times. Even those working in London's city or Paris' La Défense often arrive a bit later than usual and eye the weekend as a *faire le pont* opportunity. But not Google.

Google has rolled out a social networking service on a limited beta test, emulating the highly successful Gmail roll out in April 2004. As I write this, Google+ has surged to more than 18 million users almost equally split among male and female "early adopters". Facebook took an interesting rear guard action by allegedly banning certain Google+ advertising on Facebook. Google has targeted Facebook with Google+ and introduced a number of features designed to address perceived weaknesses in Facebook's wildly popular service. Google allows users to segment their friends and contacts. In addition, Google has created a Circles function to help users manage who sees what.

The question that interests me is, "What is the likely effect of Google+ on Google's enterprise products and services?"

One popular US technology enthusiast publication, PCWorld, summed up Google's social service this way: "Google+: The Right Service at the Right Time." In the glowing account of Google's latest winner, a quote from a Google+ user captured the potential of the Facebook "killer":

Google+ is the rapidly growing seed of a Web-wide social backbone, and the catalyst for the ultimate uniting of the social graph. All it will take on Google's part is a step of openness to bring about such a commoditization of the social layer

In my routine telephone conversations and hall talk at conferences in the last 10 days, I have heard hints that Google+ is going to become available for Google's enterprise customers. But specifics of an enterprise version of Google+ are difficult to verify. Interest in Google+ is high. Like the ill-fated Buzz and Wave efforts, Google+ becomes what I call an interaction and communication portal. The word "portal" is not a good one, but the Google+ service allows a user to select or jump to a basket of Google services within the social framework.

The enterprise unit of Google is important to current Google Search Appliance licensees, the tens of thousands of businesses using Google's Web services for email, and organizations which have embraced the full range of Google Apps. A San Francisco newspaper asked, "Where Is Google Apps On Larry Page's Priority List?"

The simple truth is that Google Apps isn't driving much revenue for the company. It counts in the "Other" (non-advertising) category, which accounted for only \$310 million of the company's total \$9.02 billion in revenue last quarter. That's about 3%. Worse, that percentage hasn't changed -- it was about 4% a year ago, and 3% two years ago. This doesn't mean that Google is about to abandon or defund its enterprise business -- just a couple months ago, the company announced a big new push for [Chromebooks in businesses](#), and it's always updating Gmail and the other apps and trumpeting its big wins. But more and more, it looks like Google views enterprise a defensive business meant to keep the heat on a hated rival -- [Microsoft](#) -- more than a big long-term opportunity in itself. (Source: <http://www.businessinsider.com/where-is-google-apps-on-larry-pages-priority-list-2011-7#ixzz1SkX3SzOR>)

Google+ seems to be tailor made for certain business applications. Hangout looks like a promising service for organizations of any size. Google describes the service in this way:

Let friends know you're free for a video hangout, any time, anywhere. Then catch up, watch YouTube, or... just hangout. Use video in Hangouts, Gmail, iGoogle, and Orkut. Look and sound your best with high quality audio and video. Get started easily -- all you need is a webcam.

The most efficient way to get a taste of Hangout is to watch Google's YouTube video at or browse the online Help files at <http://goo.gl/9FSy0>.

I would add that you want a modern computer and a network connection fast enough to make the voice and video operate in an optimal manner. If you are in an Internet café and using an overloaded free WiFi connection, Hangout may be a lonely place for you.

The Google+ Hangout module reminds me of Skype, the go-to service for low-cost voice to voice and videochat communications. Our tests suggested that an organization could use the Hangout service to permit full-scale videoconferencing, complete with document access and rich media. The consumer version is filled with promise, but like other Google beta and trial products, users will want to be in touch with their inner geek. One may cavil about GoToMeeting or Cisco's video conferencing services for the enterprise, but these have been designed to fit into a traditional information technology environment. Google is pushing the boundaries with Hangout's communication functions. Polishing and streamlining for a harried marketing professional might be necessary for some enterprise users.

We also found the Circles function dripping with potential. When I first looked at Circles, I immediately saw a similarity between my different mailing lists and the segmenting feature of Google+. I have, for example, a client mailing list and a friends mailing list. Some people are on both of my email lists. Google+ works in a similar manner.

A Google+ enterprise user can identify individuals as belonging to a specific group. Assume there is an individual who is a contract worker involved in two different projects in the company. This particular contractor can be tagged as a member of a specific circle tailored to each project. If the contractor is active on the company's exercise program, that person can be a member of the physical fitness circle. Within each circle, the members share a connection thread. This type of stratification or grouping has not been a prominent feature of either Orkut (an earlier Google attempt in social networking) or until recently on Facebook, the Goliath of consumer social networking. If the eEnterprise version of Circles operates as does the beta version of Google+, those using circles can set up their own groupings. The information technology department will not have to configure security and membership settings which can change frequently. Disintermediating the systems professionals at an organization may be an interesting consequence of using Google's enterprise services. Will a Google enterprise licensee start to shed expensive technical professionals and let Google handle updates, servers, and security functions? With information technology costs becoming harder and harder to control, Google+ may accelerate a reinvention of the traditional information technology approach in some organizations embracing Google Apps Premier Edition and such specialized services as Google SiteSearch.

Google+ will absorb Google blog content and image services of the Picasa product. Google+ will offer organizations a business page option. In fact, Google suggested that beta testers not create a business persona until the business profile features are made available. A profile page has value. If Google provides a rich development environment for enterprise Google+ licensees, the potential for the social portal rises significantly. One problem some organizations face is creating innovative solutions for customer support needs. Slapping a key word search engine on megabytes of frequently asked questions text is at best a plaster for a six inch wound. A traditional Web page with links to documents or a shopping list of user comments proves effective for a small number of customers with questions. A Google+ customer support circle could make people, content, real time chat, and rich media available in a dataspace. Other applications of the Google+ approach include training, product demonstrations, project coordination, and planning the dress down Friday lunch menu.

For as long as I can remember, Google has not been able to deliver integrated information. The company is blending traditional content with some images. However, in the Google+ environment, a user will be able to communicate and access images and video, initiate and participate in a conversation, and access these "information objects" in real time. I find the idea enervating and somewhat overwhelming. Google+ delivers an opportunity to put a new spin on eEnterprise communications.

Do I have some special considerations tugging at my frontal lobe? Yes. Let me run through the ones that strike me of particular importance to the enterprise.

First, the enterprise unit represents an important but very modest percentage of Google revenue. If the revenue does not flow, I believe that Google will pay lip service to its enterprise products and put the cricket bat behind the consumer products and services like Android.

Second, search is or was the primary occupation of Google. The bonus for Googlers is now tied to the employees' performance in the social network space. Search is paying the bills via Adwords and Adsense, but if search were the future of the company, the incentive plan would put the green laser dot on findability. The target is social and that is a slightly different business from search. Google does search pretty well. The firm's track record in social networking is somewhat less stellar.

Third, Google believes in the cloud as the "new" enterprise technology architecture. I am not sure how many organizations are ready to jettison IBM, Microsoft, and Oracle enterprise products and services. Google has a marketing job to do in the enterprise, and although the company has sufficient cash and brand power, there are entrenched vendors who will work hard to retain their clients and the revenue these clients represent.

Fourth, Google has demonstrated that it can lose interest in projects. The most recent example was the shift in application programming interfaces. Another recent change was the shuttering of the Google Labs. I am not sure what Google Labs contributed to the bottom line, but the unit was a source of delight to me. Google Labs will be missed. Will Google find that the revenue from mobile search and Android are where the action is? I can easily envision a scenario in which Google offers enterprise services, but the technical and marketing investment is second in line behind such initiatives as Android and Google+.

My recommendation is to sign up for a Google+ account. The product and its services are important and point the way to future enterprise applications. What I do not know is if Google+ is the next Windows, DB2, SAP, or Microsoft SharePoint. How many organizations will make the decision that Google+ adds up? I won't hazard a guess.

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