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Google: UMass discontinuing Google Apps service potentially unprecedented

By: Matt Rocheleau | May 11, 2010 | ShareThis

It's not often to hear Google has failed at anything, but according to the Office of Information Technology (OIT), the Google Apps service offered at the beginning of the school year has failed to catch on with students.

University of Massachusetts officials sent a campus-wide e-mail in early April announcing undergraduate students can no longer sign up for Google Apps and that the service will eventually be phased out completely – an exceedingly rare and potentially unprecedented move, according to Google.

The reason for discontinuing Google Apps, according to OIT, is the low adoption and usage rates among undergraduate students since the service was introduced in September 2009. In the eight months since Google Apps became available on campus, around 7 percent of the University's 20,000 undergrads have switched from the traditional University-provided e-mail service, UMail, to Google Apps, and "only a small number" of that 7 percent log in frequently, OIT said in the e-mail.

Google Apps is a customized, advertisement-free version of Google's popular online tools – such as its e-mail, document, calendar and chat interfaces – designed especially for educational institutions. The number of colleges and universities offering the service – free for institutions and individual users alike – is well into the thousands and continuing to grow, said Business Development Manager of Google Apps for Education, Jeff Keltner. Over 7 million students of all ages use the service, according to Google, as it typically offers various advantages to using similar, school-owned services.

"We're certainly disappointed. We have not seen low adoption very often," Keltner said. "It's exceedingly unusual for us; we really haven't seen it very much here at Google."

Keltner declined to speculate on reasons why the service may have failed to catch on at UMass, "but it's certainly a very interesting question," he said. In his three and a half years working in the company's Google Apps for Education division, he said he has never seen a school phase out the service.

Last spring when the University first announced plans to offer Google Apps, it hoped the service would allow not only students to connect with one another more easily, but also allow staff, faculty, and other campus community members to be able to interact through the Google platform, according to campus spokesman Ed Blaguszewski.

However, "legitimate concerns over security" arose as UMass continued to explore the service and shortly before opening Google Apps to undergrads, the University decided not to offer it to faculty or staff as it had originally planned. Because faculty and staff are state employees and at times use e-mail to send confidential information, they must follow state and federal security standards when communicating via electronic or other means, Blaguszewski said.

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He added that Google could not assure UMass that communication transmitted via Google Apps would be sent only within the US or that communication data would only be stored on US-based servers.

However, Google said most schools feel the service's security is at lease adequate, if not excellent, and such security concerns rarely stop institutions from adopting the service.

"[Security] is certainly a topic of discussion with every school we talk to, and rightfully so," Keltner said. "It's been a concern, but one we've been able to address."

He added that Google often offers a more secure online communication solution than most institutions use.

Though Google Apps is free for UMass to use and distribute to students, OIT staff are needed to maintain the system, and the time OIT puts in to upkeep the system currently outweighs the benefit of letting the service stick around, said Blaguszewski.

Keltner countered that though "some degree of administration is needed [for schools to maintain Google Apps], it's usually not substantial," and often requires less attention than similar services created and operated by a school's technology staff, such as UMail.

When asked if OIT should have done more to advertise the launch of Google Apps at UMass, Blaguszewski said, "We did give it a try, but overtime it became apparent that given the limited scope of how we could participate, and the small number of students using it," the University felt it was best to discontinue the service.

When the plan to adopt Google Apps at UMass was announced in May 2009, the University touted the move as a way to save money, resources and space.

As of the fall, students' UMail accounts provided 30 megabytes of e-mail storage, while Gmail allows for up to seven gigabytes, which Google increases for all its users over time. With 1,024 megabytes in one gigabyte, that gives students about 239 times more capacity to save e-mails. (UMail has since been upgraded to around half of one gigabyte.)

Additionally, for those who switched to Google Apps from UMail, their @student.umass.edu address remained the same.

Last spring, OIT anticipated the Google Apps system would allow the IT staff to refocus their time, attention and resources on other projects instead of expanding and maintaining the UMail system, said OIT's Web Communications Manager Kerry Shaw.

"We decided upon Gmail and Google Apps after a study of options for an e-mail system to help us meet our rapidly growing needs and students' expectations," he said in a University statement last May. "Google Apps stood out because it offers cutting-edge technology and a high level of service."

It remains unclear how much longer the Google Apps service will be available to those who signed up prior to the April 7 announcement that the service will be discontinued.

"OIT will continue to monitor usage and discontinue Google Apps when usage is so low that it makes support of this service unmanageable," said the OIT e-mail. "[Current users] can continue to access and use Google Apps. There are, however, steps you can take to transition away from Google Apps before OIT discontinues it.

Those steps can be found here, http://www.oit.umass.edu/google/phaseout/migrate.html.

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Evan Shelhamer says:
May 11, 2010 at 7:25 pm
I believe there's a simple reason for this: UMail is such a mess that almost everyone already

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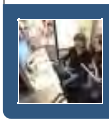

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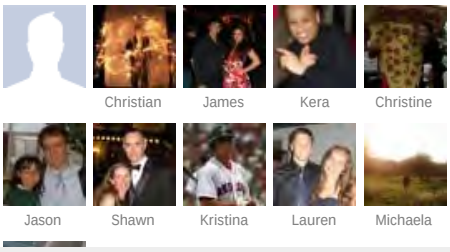

forwards their student address to another personal account like GMail. With forwarding in place, no one has a strong reason to switch service. I would have liked to see UMass migrate everyone over starting with incoming freshman so everyone could take advantage of the whole Google Apps suite.

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