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August 4, 2014

RESPONSES TO GENERAL INQUIRIES REGARDING
CLOUD STORAGE AND VIRTUAL OFFICE SUITES

Two basic questions asked:
1. First focused on cloud storage
2. Second focused on virtual office software and cloud storage

General Question: Cloud File Sharing & Google Drive

Response Source: Colorado Nonprofit Association member LISTSERV

This may be the best, most comprehensive answer, and it comes from an IT specialist for a larger nonprofit organization:

Our office used Google Drive for a time to replace our in house file server, and while we liked it, there was a consensus among my office mates that they were not willing to switch to Google products such as Docs, Sheets, etc. Of course one of the advantages of Google Drive is that if you are willing to use their native products, those files do not count towards your space. When you don't use their documents, you have to download the item each time, which makes a copy that is no longer shared with other users. We also found that using Google Drive for your desktop, where files are synced automatically to the cloud, was a bit frustrating, as the sync did not always occur immediately after a document was saved.

That said, Google Drive is definitely the least expensive option out there and I think far surpasses Box, SugarSync, and Dropbox. We had a lot of files and had to purchase extra space, but Google storage is incredibly cheap and continues to get cheaper.

We did end up switching to Microsoft Office 365, which works much like Google, but let's us keep our files in MS Office formats. You can do basic editing from your browser or you can opt to open the file in your desktop application. That was a nice feature as most nonprofits can get a cheap copy of MS Office through Tech Soup, but if a computer does not have a copy, they still have the ability to edit files from their browser. In Word, when multiple people are editing the file, you can see the changes occur, just as you can with Google Docs. The storage in Office 365 is a bit more expensive, but it is also a good time to decide what are "necessary" files since we are paying for storage. Each user gets 1TB of space, and files can be shared just like they are in Google Drive. We chose to set up a "team site" on Sharepoint that gives access to all our files in the typical tree structure, plus you can browse the team site via windows explorer, so it very closely resembles our old file server. There is a slight lag, compared to having it on site, but it is minor and of course depends on your connection speed.

Office 365 is donated to qualifying nonprofits, and each user gets 1TB of space. I think you get 100GB free for the Sharepointsite, but I can't remember.

http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/non-profit/compare-office-365-for-nonprofits-plans-FX104081605.aspx

I hope that helps! I can answer more questions about our experience if you like.

Amanda H

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We use Google Drive. It's a great collaborative tool, there is quite a bit of storage space, it's easy to share documents to other people, and it's all free. The one drawback I would say is that some people have trouble accessing Google Drive documents if they work behind a firewall. In particular, some state and local employees have trouble getting into the documents.

Daryl B

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We recently got rid of our server and went with Box.com. Every solution has its own quirks, but I have found this works well for our team and saves us thousands of dollars each year by giving up server maintenance. The thing I liked best about Box is if you have more than one person working on a document, a user can "lock" access to the file temporarily until they are done making their changes. With other platforms, you could theoretically have two people in the document at the same time, unwittingly overwriting each other's changes. We have this situation come up a lot in our office, so having that lock feature was important and one of the criteria that made us select Box as our cloud server.

Sara R.

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Hard to answer as each NPO is different. What I use and highly recommend an NPO to adopt:

PBX – Your telephone system including Fax should be cloud-based.
Offsite backup – Your backup process should include a once-a-day backup with versioning to a computer via the Internet that is not in your immediate vicinity and independent of your local backup to a removable disk.
Business Continuity Storage – If your office were destroyed could you still operate – All written material should be converted to PDF and then they and digital files placed in cheap storage – Amazon Web Services Glacier storage.
In-house file sharing and versioning – SharePoint for company-wide, OneDrive for Business for personal files.
Email – Running email service on your own server in your own office is a thing of the past, and costly. Use the Cloud such as Microsoft Office365 E3 package at $4.50 per user.

Avoid letting people access your network. To share things, send an attachment, a fax, or just post things on your web site and send them a link via email. I am biased towards a Microsoft product because the costs involved for NPOs are really low.

Bob C

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Nonprofits can get a free Google Apps account for Business. It includes email, calendar sharing, google drive, sites, etc. We love it and it meets our needs most of the time.

Google drive does has its downsides, which is why many people are now using Microsoft Office 365. The spreadsheet application in Google drive is awkward, and formatting is a waste of time because when you export or import an excel file, you lose your formatting. So its great for sharing files, but if you need to do any fancy spreadsheet work or formatting, its not a good option.

We plan on migrating to Office 365 in the near future. You can get a discount (annual subscription) on TechSoup.

Nicole S

Response Source: Rocky Mountain Nonprofit Consultants LISTSERV

I use Google Drive and Dropbox for various projects. Love both!

Emily D

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I love Dropbox and find all things Google, with the exception of their browser, counterintuitive. The only issue I have had is that when we save Xcel documents to Dropbox. the formatting can be wacky. Other than that, it's a great, free resource!

Denise C

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We use Dropbox and love it. Don't like Google docs.

Ann G

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I also use Dropbox and have had big struggles with anything Google – drive, documents, etc. – and people's (including my own) ability to access consistently.

I've also used Box on a client project and it was pretty straightforward, too.

Caryn C

General Question: Virtual Office Solutions (focused primarily on Office 365)

We are in the midst of migrating all of our data to Microsoft Office 365. While staff is in one central office, we do travel a lot, work from home, etc. so it will be easier to access email and documents from the cloud. It will also save IT costs since our main server is close to kaput and replacing it would cost about $4,000. Office 365 is free for nonprofits so it's a win win.

Marie M

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We use hosted Exchange through Intermedia   -- all cloud based MS Office services including Sharepoint, Backup, etc. http://www.intermedia.net/

Also THE source for discounted Microsoft 365 software and lots of other software and hardware needs is TECH SOUP at http://www.techsoup.org/   After registration process, heavily discounted and free to nonprofits. We've never paid full price for any Microsoft software for desktop or servers.

Victoria M

FINAL CHOICE AND RATIONALE:
I chose Google Drive for my client.

Why I like Google Drive for this particular situation...
- First, and importantly, the client does not need office suite software.
- Google Drive (and Docs) is FREE to store a massive amount of data (15 GB...).
- Where it shines is in sharing and synchronizing documents.
- Google Docs (also free) can handle the files if necessary.
- I can setup Google (gmail) accounts for each participant if necessary, transmit the info and then have the user simply change the password to their unique account.

Illustration of how it works:
If you have a giant spreadsheet and several people are adding to the sheet, Google Drive syncs the files with your device and in the cloud. There is a file folder on your computer that is linked to Google Drive. ALL collaborators install the widget on their devices and at all times work on any given file is totally synchronized. You do not need to find the latest version of the file, let others know you are working on it, let others know when you are done... You simply retrieve the spreadsheet (or any file) from the Google Drive folder on your device (or in the cloud), open the file and edit...and save. Everyone sees your updates, because the files on their device sync with the files in the cloud.

If you want to add a new file, it is a super-easy drag-'n'-drop process...or you save it to the Google Drive folder on your device, and Google Drive will sync it to the cloud.

Using the "sharing" rights tools in Google Drive, one can also setup limited access for some users and greater access for other users. For example, the "main office" can see everything, and the "admin" for the Google Drive account can set sharing rights. Then you can parse out access to certain file folders (or individual files) for the board, admin staff, researchers, volunteers and so on. Syncing ensures continuous backup on multiple devices,

and syncing ensures that there's no lag time having to download a file from the cloud before you use it. It's on your drive, and sync takes care of the rest.

Google Drive allows tiered file folder structure...folders and sub-folders...for genuine organizing of content...as in:

- Main folder:
  - o Subfolder