Google's Changing Corporate Culture

Anil Dash wrote an interesting post about Google's public perception and the changes that are slowly turning Google into a regular big corporation.

"This is the point when the difference between their internal conception of the company starts to diverge just a bit too far from the public perception of the company, and even starts to diverge from reality. At this inflection point, the reasons for doing new things at Google start to change."

Anil gives some examples of recent announcements: many Google applications are built for Android, even if i Phone has more users; Google has two overlapping operating systems: Android and Chrome OS; Google uses TV ads to promote its services.

I'm not sure if these examples are revelatory: Google released important mobile applications for i Phone before they were available for Android and many people wondered why Google doesn't build applications for its own operating system.

Android and Chrome OS seem to be different products: "Android was designed from the beginning to work across a variety of devices from phones to set-top boxes to Net books. Google Chrome OS is being created for people who spend most of their time on the Web, and is being designed to power computers ranging from small Net books to full-size desktop systems." Kevin Fox, a former Google employee, adds: "The two OSes are created for different styles of interaction, so at the end of the day you-the-consumer are looking for a product to meet your portable, ancillary support, quick-use fingertip device, of you're looking for a focused-attention computing platform in as small a form-factor as is usable. To say that there should only be one Google OS merely because there exists an overlap in the desired form factors for two distinct OSes is as silly as the idea of an i Phone running Mac OS or a Mac with the UI of an i Phone."

While TV ads don't have too much in common with Google's culture, it's likely that Google didn't use TV ads to promote the search engine or G mail because they spread by word of mouth. It's more difficult to convince people to change their browsers and their mobile phones.

"Google is entering the moment where it has to be over-careful not to offend, and extremely attentive to whether they are treading lightly. Is Google evil? It doesn't matter. They've reached the point of corporate ambition and changing corporate culture that means they're going to be perceived as if they are," concludes Anil.

Google is no longer a start-up and each announcement, each mistake and each decision is amplified and exaggerated. If G mail is down for an hour or Google's search engine has a bug in the ranking algorithm, the mistakes affect millions of people and the complaints propagate instantly.

An interesting explanation for launching products that seemed unlikely a couple of years ago can be found at the bottom of this page:

"When we first wrote these "10 things" four years ago, we included the phrase "Google does not do horoscopes, financial advice or chat." Over time we've expanded our view of the range of services we can offer –- web search, for instance, isn't the only way for people to access or use information -– and products that then seemed unlikely are now key aspects of our portfolio. This doesn't mean we've

changed our core mission; just that the farther we travel toward achieving it, the more those blurry objects on the horizon come into sharper focus (to be replaced, of course, by more blurry objects)."

Picasa Web Albums Lets You Block Users

Picasa Web Albums added some new features for managing your favorites and your fans. As you probably know, you can add any Picasa Web user as a favorite to get notified when he uploads new pictures. When you add him as a favorite user, you'll be included in his list of fans and he'll receive an email notification.

Until now, you couldn't remove users from the list of fans, but Google changed this: if the list of fans includes spammers, you can block them. Users "will be blocked from commenting on your photos and adding you as favorite. Blocking someone cannot be undone," mentions a warning. You can also block users who post offensive comments.

Picasa Web Albums added a list of "suggested favorites", which includes all your contacts that use Google's photo sharing service. It's a good opportunity to find interesting photos uploaded by your contacts and to add them to your favorites.

But if you can add users to a list of favorites, why is there no option to favorite images? Picasa Web added a link below each photo: "I like this" and the number of likes, but you can't keep track of the photos you like.

Report Offensive Google Images Results

Google Image Search, recently re branded as Google Images, made it easier to change the Safe Search filter by including a drop-down below the search box. The default option is "moderate", which excludes explicit images, but you can also disable Safe Search or select the "strict" filter, which takes into account your keywords and the text from web pages.

Now you can also report offensive images that aren't filtered by Safe Search. "Many users prefer not to have adult sites included in search results (especially if kids use the same computer). Google's Safe Search screens for sites that contain explicit sexual content and deletes them from your search results. No filter is 100 percent accurate, but Safe Search should eliminate most inappropriate material," explains Google.

The word "offensive" is pretty vague and Google doesn't define its scope, but you shouldn't use the new option for reporting irrelevant images or Spam results.

Google Translates Documents

Google Translate added the option to upload the documents you want to translate. Until now, you could

copy the text in Google Translate or publish the document on line and paste its address.

Unfortunately, Google converts your documents to HTML and then it translates the HTML file, so the translation doesn't preserve the layout or the embedded images. You can upload Word documents, Power Point presentations, PDF files, HTML and text files.

Simultaneous Searches in Google Maps

Sometimes you want to see the results for multiple searches in Google Maps or you want to quickly switch to a recent query. Now it's possible: Google Maps displays at the bottom of the page a list of recent searches and each layer of search results can be enabled independently. Google Maps uses different colors for the markers so you can differentiate the results.

Usage Rights Options in Google Image Search

Last month, I mentioned that Google Image Search is about to add some options that let you filter images licensed using Creative Commons. The options have been added to the advanced search page, where you can choose between images that you are allowed to reuse, images that can be modified or used commercially.

Google Image Search is the first important image search engine that has this feature, since Yahoo Image Search only supports Flickr images. If you want to illustrate your web pages or your documents with images from the web, choose one of the four filters from the advanced search page, find the licensing terms and try to respect them.

Google Chrome Operating System

Google Chrome has always been a little more than a browser: it's optimized for running web applications, each tab runs as a separate process, the interface is minimalistic and there's even a task manager. "We realized that the web had evolved from mainly simple text pages to rich, interactive applications and that we needed to completely rethink the browser. What we really needed was not just a browser, but also **a modern platform for web pages and applications**, and that's what we set out to build," said Google in September 2008.

Google's blog announces a natural extension of the Chrome project: an operating system for netbooks. "Google Chrome OS is an open source, lightweight operating system that will initially be targeted at net books. Later this year we will open-source its code, and net books running Google Chrome OS will be available for consumers in the second half of 2010. (...) Google Chrome OS will run on both x86 as well as ARM chips and we are working with multiple O Ems to bring a number of net books to market next year. The software architecture is simple — Google Chrome running within a new windowing system on top of a Linux kernel."

As people use more and more web applications, the operating system becomes less important and it

makes no sense to pay for it. The desktop mail client could be replaced by G mail, the calendaring application could be replaced by Google Calendar, the office suite has lightweight alternatives: Google Docs and Zoho, it makes more sense to use an on line feed reader like Google Reader, your scientific calculator is less powerful than Wolfram Alpha and you'll rarely need a video player when you have You Tube, Hulu and other video sites.

This idea is not new and there are already operating systems optimized for the browser. For example, Good OS announced last year [Cloud](#), an operating system that "integrates a web browser with a compressed Linux operating system kernel for immediate access to Internet, integration of browser and rich client applications, and full control of the computer from inside the browser". If Google manages to create a great user interface, the new operating system could be very successful.

{ Image from [Google Chrome's comic book](#), licensed as [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](#). }

Labels: [Google Chrome](#)

[Google Chrome Operating System](#) by Alex Chitu | [132 comments](#)

Google's PDF Viewer for Search Results

Google's PDF viewer is now integrated with Google's search results, replacing the "view as HTML" option. Google converts PDF files into PNG images, but the files are still search able and you can copy some of their content.

Not all [the PDF files](#) from Google's search results include the new option, so it's likely that Google doesn't perform the conversion on the fly and not all the files have been converted.

Google changed the meaning of "beta software" by launching applications in early stages and forgetting to remove the word "beta" even after years of testing. G mail has been launched in April 2004 and it's still in beta after more than [7 years of development](#).

[New York Times reports](#) that G mail, Google Calendar, Google Docs and Google Talk are coming out of beta today. Google hopes to convince businesses that the applications are good enough to be used in a corporate environment. "For business customers, it is an important sign in terms of the maturity of our product offering and commitment to this business. I've had C.I.O.s tell me that they would not consider a product labeled beta," explained a Google employee.

What's in a name? Apparently, not much, since G mail's perpetual beta only meant that there are still significant features that need to be added. "We have very, very high standards for the product, as we do for all Google products. But we are not ready to come out of beta yet. There are a few things that we're working on, and once we meet a couple more of those criteria, we would love to come out of beta," said G mail's Product Manager Todd Jackson [in March](#).

[Making labels more familiar](#) was probably one of the things that had to be changed before G mail could finally be good enough to drop the "beta" tag. Keith Coleman, G mail Product Director, has [a longer list of features](#) that had to be added: integrated chat, mobile versions, open protocols, better anti-Spam technology, a more flexible architecture.

"Some people think we should wait until we launch < one of ongoing secret projects >. Others say that, over the last five years, a beta culture has grown around web apps, such that the very meaning of "beta" is debatable. And rather than the packaged, stagnant software of decades past, we're moving to a world of rapid developmental cycles where products like G mail continue to change indefinitely."

Update: If you think there's something missing from G mail's logo, enable the "Back to Beta" feature from G mail Labs to bring back the familiar logo. It's that easy to pretend that nothing happened.

Google Apps Premier Demo Accounts

If you're considering trying the paid version of Google Apps, you can create a demo account that has most of the features from Google Apps Premier. The account expires after 14 days, you don't need a domain and you can add 10 user accounts.

A small number of features can't be used in the demo account: Postini email services, domain aliasing and phone support, but all the other options should be available. You can test the APIs, the migration tool, Google Apps Sync for Outlook, the video sharing service and other business-oriented features.

When you sign up for Google Apps Premier Edition, the service is free for the first month, but you need to have a domain and you have to configure some advanced settings. The demo account is much easier to use, even if you only have two weeks to explore the myriad of features included in Google Apps.

If you only want to use Google Apps for personal use or for a small group, you should try the free edition, which is still available, despite Google's efforts to make it more difficult to find*. TechCrunch claims that "the free version of Google Apps is history", but that's not true and I'm certain that Google will always offer a free version.

* How to find the link to Google Apps Standard Edition? Go to Google Apps' homepage, click on "G mail and Google Calendar", then click on "See details and sign up" and then select "Not a business? Explore Standard Edition". Only three links from the homepage.

Creating a Gmail Account Requires SMS Verification

Some people report that G mail started to **require SMS verification when you create an account**, a practice used in the US and other countries when G mail wasn't publicly available worldwide.

"If you'd like to sign up for a G mail address, you need to have a mobile phone that has text-messaging capabilities. If you don't have a phone, you may want to ask a friend if you can use his or her number to receive a code. Also, if you know someone who already has a G mail address, you can ask them to email an invitation to you. One of the reasons we're offering this new way to sign up for G mail is to help protect our users and combat abuse. **Spam and abuse protection** are two things we take very

seriously, and our users have been very happy with the small amount of Spam they've received in G mail," explains Google.

I created a new G mail account and Google didn't ask my phone number, so the new requirement could be limited to some regions or it's just an experiment. Google says that is stores your phone number to make sure that you use it for "a limited number of accounts", but it's not clear how many accounts you can create using a phone number. Another problem is that not all the countries and the carriers are supported.

In other news, the SMS feature from G mail Labs is still disabled and the option that lets you reset the password of a Google Account by SMS is available everywhere.

More White Space and a Smaller Google Logo

In May, Google started to change the logos used by its services to make them look more consistent. Tony Ruscoe compiled a list of the new logos and it's clear that the service names are more visible.

The updated Google logo is now displayed on Google's search results pages and you'll notice that it's smaller and there's more space at the left of the page. Another change is that the SearchWiki buttons are placed next to the "cached" and "similar" links.

Google constantly runs experiments that test different font sizes, background colors, padding values to determine which one is the best. For example, last year Google tested three versions of the search results pages and the one with the least white space was the most popular.

Google Open Source Blog informs that Google Update, the software used by Google Chrome and other applications for automatic updates, no longer runs in the background. "Until now, Google Update would always run in the background, functioning primarily as a reliable scheduler performing update checks at periodic time intervals. With today's release, Google Update now uses the Windows Task Scheduler to only run at periodic intervals."

I've checked the Task Scheduler and I've found that Google Update runs every hour. You can change how often it runs and even disable the task, but I'm not sure if other Google applications change your settings. "If this task is disabled or stopped, your Google software will not be kept up to date, meaning security vulnerabilities that may arise cannot be fixed and features may not work. This task uninstalls itself when there is no Google software using it," explains Google.

Since Google Chrome is regularly updated, it's not a good idea to disable the updater, thinking that you'll install the new versions manually.

The first good news is that you'll no longer see googleupdate.exe in the list of processes when you open the Task Manager. The second good news is that Google Updates team listens to users and constantly

improves the software: Google Update is now [open source](#) and administrators can [disable it](#) using the Local Group Policy Editor.

Gmail's Labels Are More Customizable

[Gmail](#)'s transition to labels-that-look-and-act-like-folders is finished: you can now use drag-and-drop to label messages. Labels no longer live in their own container and they're displayed below the built-in labels: in box, Spam, trash, etc.

To make room for other features, G mail only displays the most frequently used labels and hides the other labels behind a "more" drop down. The list of labels is now customizable: you can hide built-in labels and some of your labels, while changing their order. If you rarely check the "Spam" label or you don't save drafts, you can hide the system labels from the settings page.

"You now have control over which of your labels show. We've done our best to get you started by automatically showing the labels you use most and hiding the rest. Label hiding is my favorite new feature, since it saves me from having to look through labels I rarely use. If I ever need to reach any of my old labels, I just click the "more" link," [says Damian Gajda](#), from Google.

I don't see the new features in my G mail accounts, but Google promises that the changes are rolled out today.

Update: Google wants to make labels more visible. If you didn't create labels, G mail will add four labels for you: Personal, Receipts, Travel and Work. "When I joined the G mail team, I was surprised to learn that only 29% of G mail users had created any labels. We realized that if you didn't know about labels, it would be easy to assume G mail had no way to organize your mail. Not only were "labels" unfamiliar, they were kind of hidden," [explains Michael Leggett](#).

Google Translate can be used to translate many web pages, but you can't use it for pages that require login and for Ajax-powered web applications. You won't be able to translate a G mail message, a Google Docs document or a Face book message without copying the text to Google Translate.

[I've mentioned in March](#) that Google Tool bar tests a translation feature that extracts the text from any web page and translates in real-time. The impressive feature is now available in [Google Toolbar 6 for Internet Explorer](#) and it works extremely well.

By default, Google detects when a page is not in English (or another preferred language) and it offers the option to translate it. Language detection doesn't send text from the current web page to Google's servers, but you'll need to send the text when you translate the page.

"When you visit a web page in a different language than your Tool bar, Tool bar will display the translation bar near the top of your browser window and ask you if you'd like to translate the page. Click Translate to translate the page, or click Translate on your Tool bar. Click Show original or the x icon to close the translation bar and view the original web page. If you change your preferred translation language, Tool bar will remember your language preferences and use them when translating pages in the future," [explains Google](#).

Here's a G mail message written in French:

... and here's how Google Tool bar replaces the French message with the English translation:

If you open another G mail message written in French, Google Tool bar will automatically translate the text.

"The new Translate feature is available in all international versions of Tool bar, including English, and the translation service supports 41 different languages: Albanian, Arabic, Bulgarian, Catalan, Chinese, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Filipino, Finnish, French, Galician, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, Thai, Turkish, Ukrainian and Vietnamese," mentions Google's blog.

Another improvement is that Google Tool bar's word translator is now available in the 41 languages supported by Google Translate.

Labels: Google Toolbar, Google Translate

Google Toolbar's Improved Web Page Translation by Alex Chitu | 9 comments
Monday, June 29, 2009

Google Reader Lite

Google Reader's homepage has been updated and it features a small feed reader with three categories: "news", "sports" and "popular". The i frame points to this page and I think Google Reader should offer a customizable version, so you can embed it in your site.

Google already offers a cool AJAX Feed API that can be used to display the most recent posts from one or more feeds, but Google Reader's interface is more user-friendly and it lets you read the posts without leaving the page.

Labels: Google Reader

Google Reader Lite by Alex Chitu 11 comments

YouTube as a Medium for Community

Michael Wesch, Assistant Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Kansas State University, gave a talk at the Library of Congress about You Tube and its role in the participatory culture. He explains how one of his videos, Web 2.0 ... The Machine is Us/ing Us, became very popular in just a few days and how this popularity took him by surprise. The video was remixed, translated, it was the starting point for a conversation at a global level.

To find how people communicate on YouTube, Professor Wesch and his students studied You Tube and the way anonymity, interactivity, authenticity and popularity define it as a new medium for community.

Gmail Increases Maximum Attachment Size to 25 MB

Now you can send bigger attachments in G mail, as Google increased the maximum attachment size from 20 MB to 25 MB.

"With G mail, you can send and receive messages up to 25 megabytes (MB) in size. Please note that you may not be able to send larger attachments to contacts who use other email services with smaller attachment limits. If your attachment bounces, you should invite them to G mail," suggests Google.

For some reason, G mail's Flash up loader doesn't allow me to upload files that are larger than 10 MB. The error message is "attachment failed" and Google's suggestions aren't very helpful. Switching to the basic up loader in the settings solves the problem, but it's more tedious to upload multiple files.

{ Thanks, Ben. }

Labels: Gmail

Gmail Increases Maximum Attachment Size to 25 MB by Alex Chitu 29 comments
Friday, June 26, 2009

Solving Linear Programming Problems Using Google Spreadsheets

Google Spreadsheets has a new feature that lets you solve linear programming problems. "Informally, linear programming determines the way to achieve the best outcome (such as maximum profit or lowest cost) in a given mathematical model and given some list of requirements represented as linear equations," explains Wikipedia.

Google's help center has an article that details how to use the new feature. You can test it using a template offered by Google, but it's not very intuitive and it didn't work for me. I got an error message when clicking on Tools / Solve: "The goal specified must be a cell containing a valid formula."

Labels: Google Docs

Solving Linear Programming Problems Using Google Spreadsheets by Alex Chitu 10 comments
Thursday, June 25, 2009

Google Voice, Available in the US

Two years after acquiring GrandCentral, Google is about to open an updated version of the service to all US users. Google Voice is a free service that provides one number for all your phones, so you can add some features that help you manage phone calls: blocking calls, recording calls, answering from any of your phones, transcribing voice mail and more.

NBC reports that the service will start to be publicly available today and [Google confirms the news](#): "Invites to people on reservations list starting to go out today." [In March](#), Google Voice was released as an upgrade to the existing Grand Central users and you could [request an invitation](#) using a form from Google's site.

[Network World](#) found that Google reserved one million phone numbers from Level 3, preparing for the public launch of the service. A major hurdle slowing the adoption of Google Voice is getting a new phone number, but [Google tests a feature](#) that allows users to port their existing numbers to the service.

Update: Apparently, Google Voice won't be publicly available, but you'll get an invitation if you've previously requested one. "We are happy to share that Google Voice is beginning to open up beyond former Grand n Central users. If you requested an invitation on the Google Voice site or previously on Grand Central, keep your eye out for an invite email," [says Google's blog](#).