

# Using Google and Other Alternative Sources for Traditional Software and Services

If you are just starting your estate planning practice, consider the free (or almost free) offerings of Google and other providers as alternatives to traditional software, products and services. Many of our clients are moving to the cloud, and most lawyers will end up there within the next 10 years. It may be hard for established firms to move away from traditional products and services, since they have so much invested in the status quo. New solo practitioners and small firms have an advantage, since they are not wed to soon-to-be-obsolete systems.

Here are some alternatives to traditional products and services to consider. Links for these products are at the end of the paper. (Old codgers should read no further, since what you are about to read will upset you.)

1. **Google Voice.** [Google Voice](#) is a free service that can replace – or at least postpone the need for – an office phone system. When you sign up, you are assigned a free telephone number in your area code (or in any area code you choose, meaning you can have free phone numbers in satellite locations). Google Voice permits you to use an existing phone number for the service, but using your existing number results in the loss of some of the best features. After signing up, you register the “real” phones of you and your partners and staff (cellphones and/or landlines) in your Google Voice account. Then the fun begins:

- *Voicemail* – Google Voice permits custom announcements and takes messages. You can even enter specific telephone numbers (such as your clients’ numbers), and calls from those numbers get a special announcement. Google Voice transcribes each voicemail message and emails it to you. (The electronic transcriptions are not that great.)
- *Calls ring where you want* – It is easy to specify which “real” phones ring when the Google Voice number is called, and it is easy to change the ringing pattern to match which phone you wish to use.
- *Custom handling of calls from specific numbers* – In addition to special voicemail announcements for calls from specific numbers, you can set up custom ringing and announcement features for calls from specific numbers. In this way, calls from family members, calls from co-workers, calls from clients and calls from bill collectors each can be handled differently.
- *One-click outgoing calls* – If you see a phone number on a web page, you can click it, causing Google Voice to (1) call you on your preferred phone, then (2) connect the call to the number you clicked. (You need a Firefox extension to do this.) This works great if your contact list is in the cloud (like Google Contacts) – just look up the contact, click his or her phone number, and Google Voice connects the call.
- *Free conference calls* – You can add up to four parties to a call with no loss of call quality. Send an email with your Google Voice number in it, telling each participant to call at the

appropriate time. Each caller is announced and can be added by you as moderator. (This is such a great feature that you might want to get a separate Google Voice number just for this service.)

There are limitations, of course. Forwarding calls from one staff member to another is problematic. While the service is completely free, you still must have (and pay for) at least one real phone. Of course, everyone has at least a cell phone, so this requires no additional expense as a practical matter. By using a distinctive ring for Google Voice calls on your cell phone, you can easily know if the incoming call is a business call or just one of your buddies.

2. **Gmail.** [Gmail](#) is Google's free email service. If you are under the age of 27, you probably already use Gmail. It is in the cloud, so it is available from any computer. It can access your existing email accounts, so you don't have to use it with a "gmail.com" address. It is bundled naturally with Google Contacts, which is automatically updated every time you send an email. Google gives you 7.4 gigabytes of storage space in the cloud, so you probably never will have to purge your email again. ~~You can force Gmail to require secure logins (https), but the default settings provide no such security.~~ *Updated: On January 12, 2010, Google announced that secure login (https) will be the default setting on all Gmail accounts.* One drawback: Google scans free email accounts and places ads next to your inbox based on email content. While this is mildly irritating for normal folks, it raises the specter of a breach of client confidentiality for attorneys. In some states ethics rulings have made clear that this does not violate client confidentiality, but I am aware of no such ruling in Texas. Upgrading to a premium Google Apps account eliminates this problem (see below). Since Gmail is in the cloud, it works equally well with the Windows and Apple operating systems.

3. **Google Apps.** If you sign up for the premium [Google Apps](#) service, for \$50 per user per year you can get Gmail-based email handling with your custom domain name, along with a bunch of other Google services, like Calendar, Google Contacts and Google Docs. Google Apps customers can use the Google interface or they can use Microsoft Outlook for email, calendar and contacts. (To use Microsoft Outlook, you have to buy it, of course. This is a way to keep the old guys happy while moving to the cloud.) Google Apps in effect replaces Microsoft Exchange for handling internal and external email. While Google scans the email in free Gmail accounts for ad placement, it does not scan email from premium Google Apps accounts. If you are just starting out, consider skipping Microsoft Outlook and going with Google Apps.

4. **Google Docs.** [Google Docs](#) offers basic word processing, spreadsheets and presentations in the cloud. It probably cannot replace the need for Microsoft Office for everyone in an estate planning law firm, but it may make it possible to buy fewer licenses. Microsoft Word (or Corel WordPerfect) is useful for producing attractive, complex legal documents. Google Docs is missing too many features for really complex documents. However, while you and your legal assistant may want copies of Microsoft Office, others in the office (receptionist, part-time help, office manager) probably don't need it. Google Docs can be used to open documents saved in Word format and it permits you to save documents in Word format. Google Docs is free, but if you subscribe to the premier version of Google Apps, you get more storage space in the cloud. *Updated: On January 12, 2010, Google*

announced new uploading features, including third-party applications that sync your Google Docs storage with your on-site storage. Since Google Docs is in the cloud, it works equally well with the Windows and Apple operating systems.

5. **Microsoft Office 2010 Beta.** The [beta version of Microsoft Office 2010](#) is available for download now. This is a very stable “beta,” or pre-release, version and is free, so you can use the full-featured Office for free. Microsoft has not announced an official release date for Office 2010, but it is expected to be released to paying customers in June of 2010. The beta version will expire some time after that. At that time, you either will have to buy a version of Office 2010 or use an alternative. One alternative may be Microsoft Office Web Apps (see below).

6. **Microsoft Office Web Apps Beta.** Microsoft has announced a new web-based version of Office. The [beta version](#) is available now, and the final version is expected to be available in June of 2010. There will be a free version that is intended to compete directly with the free version of Google Apps. There also will be a fee-based version with more features that is likely to blow Google Docs out of the water. Each version will be able to open and alter documents in Word format. A reasonable strategy for a new law office would be to get the full Microsoft Office 2010 beta now (see above), then decide in June of 2010 whether to buy the full-featured non-cloud version, use the free online version, use the fee-based online version, or stop using Office entirely.

7. **Open Office.** The open-source alternative to Microsoft Office is [Open Office](#). Since it is open-source, it is free. I’ve used Open Office, and I think the Google Docs and Microsoft beta/cloud offerings are going to make Open Office irrelevant. It is romantic to think that an open-source product could unseat mighty Microsoft, but the reality is that Open Office is too clunky and can’t keep up with the level of innovation in the commercial marketplace.

8. **Google Maps/Local Business Center/Google Profile.** [Google Maps](#) is quickly making all other mapping services irrelevant. Google offers free turn-by-turn navigation on Android phones, which is likely to drive Garmin and other GPS manufacturers out of business (adapt or die). [Google’s Local Business Center](#) service offers local businesses the opportunity to place a listing on Google Maps showing their location. This service is free, and it makes it easy to assure that someone searching for you or your firm in Google Maps finds you. You can move the map marker for the location of your business to the precise location you want in case the street address points to the wrong location. It also lets you enter contact information, a web address, and even pictures and videos about your business. This also helps identify your business when someone “Googles” your firm. In addition, by using [Google Profile](#), Google lets you specify what information others see when they “Google” your individual name. These Google services help make a Yellow Pages ad unnecessary.

9. **Google Dashboard.** Since we all are rapidly ceding our lives to our new Google overlords, it is useful to keep tabs on the Google services you are using. [Google Dashboard](#) pulls all of this information together onto one web page.

Here are web links for the products and services mentioned above:

Google Voice – <http://www.google.com/voice>

Gmail – <http://mail.google.com>

Google Apps – <http://www.google.com/apps>

Google Docs – <http://docs.google.com>

Microsoft Office 2010 Beta -- <http://www.microsoft.com/office/2010/en/default.aspx>

Microsoft Office Web Apps Beta -- <http://www.microsoft.com/Office/2010/en/office-web-apps/default.aspx>

Open Office – <http://openoffice.org>

Google Maps – <http://maps.google.com>

Google Local Business Center -- <http://google.com/localbusinesscenter>

Google Profile – <http://www.google.com/profiles>

Google Dashboard – <http://www.google.com/dashboard>

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