Altium Increases Productivity and Mobility by going google

COMPUTY BACKGROUND

Australian company Altium Limited based in Shanghai, China has been providing cutting-edge holistic design solutions to engineers for the past 20 years. With offices in over 15 global locations, Altium helps their clients take advantage of cutting-edge devices and technologies in order to increase innovation and cost-effectiveness. As Altium continually looks for different ways to leverage technology and grow as an organization, the ability to share and collaborate on key business information is a key to success.

BUSINESS CHALLENGES

With a history of challenging the limitations of technological creativity, and of enabling productivity at a fraction of traditional costs, Altium is an organization that values the power of good IT. For Altium's globally-distributed team, however, internal IT systems weren't keeping pace with the company's standards of quality.

HEADQUARTERS
Shanghai, China

INDUSTRY
Technology

NUMBER OF USERS
400

LEGACY SYSTEMS
Mail Site, Outlook

SERVICES RENDERED
Google Apps for Work
Too frequently, Altium’s email system fell short, leaving employees virtually “stranded,” without access to their key communication tool. At other times, it was bogged down by spam - sometimes being hit by hundreds of spam emails per day.

Even when systems were working, the team felt hindered by the small size of their email storage space, which required them to spend unproductive hours managing email archives. “Some senior employees were spending countless hours cleaning up their inboxes,” recalled Alan Perkins, Altium’s Chief Information Officer (CIO).

Altium was not prepared to have their growth stalled by an ineffective communications approach. The senior management team at Altium recognised that their “email system needed to be fixed” and that the ability to collaborate on documents was coming to a make or break situation.

SOLUTION
After an evaluation that included a cost analysis comparing Google Apps for Work to a more traditional upgrade path, Altium found that Google Apps would offer new functionality at 30 times less the cost. “Google Apps was very different from anything we have seen before and had a different way of thinking about collaboration,” Perkins said. With the aim of simplifying infrastructure, enjoying significant cost savings, and increasing productivity, the Altium team decided to move away from their heavy server-based, traditional solution and implement the Google Apps suite.

To help guide the deployment, Altium called upon Cloud Sherpas. Working closely with the Altium team, Cloud Sherpas facilitated the setup of Google Apps throughout the organization in a fast-paced manner. Leading with Gmail, the team rolled out reliable, easy-to-use email across the entire organization with only minimal training. “We watched videos on the Google site to connect Gmail to our old Outlook service,” Perkins said. “Then we sent a few tips out.” The team responded, exploring the power of Google’s search technology within their inboxes, and finding what they needed in moments.

Gmail, Google Calendar, and Google Docs enabled Altium’s employees to gain anytime, anywhere access to email and documents, offering advantages to every employee but really changing the game for executives and field sales professionals. “Now people easily use their mobile devices to securely access email and documents and also have the ability to access email and more from home,” Perkins added.

RESULTS
The Altium team has been very happy with their conversion to Google Apps. “What we’ve discovered is a complete change over our previous method,” noted Perkins. In terms of their infrastructure, Perkins was able to reduce the number of servers being utilised by 20-30% of their 55 globally deployed servers. The user benefits were also significant.

Gmail’s SPAM filters ensure that unwanted email bypasses the inbox, and the large storage capacity included with Google Apps ensures that each user can keep the email archives that they want. “What’s more, the ability to take advantage of Google’s renowned search technology within our inboxes has made it so convenient to find things,” said Perkins.

“Google Calendar works extremely well,” he continued. “With so many meetings to attend it’s clear to see when everyone is available and easily book meeting rooms.” Now, scheduling team meetings with people in Altium’s distributed offices is simple. Google Calendar, working Google Docs for collaboration, makes meetings more effective and eliminates the need to send attachments back and forth, putting everyone on the same page.
Google Apps made the dream of efficient and effective communication a reality. Employees in widespread geographies are now able to edit, in real time, one shared document, eliminating the need to email multiple versions back and forth. Altium’s management appreciates the collaborative power of Google Docs - in fact, they have made it the standard by which the team works. Perkins mentioned that “any document under collaboration won’t be accepted by management unless it’s a Google Doc.”

Altium also uses Google Docs to populate the ticker-tape that displays real-time information in a stream of text on their internal company dashboard.

“The ticker-tape is just entries in a Google Doc that is fed into the web-based kiosk application that sources the data from Docs,” Perkins said. “The application reads the data directly from the Google Doc, so if someone wants to add a new ticker-tape item, they just go into the Google Doc and add it, and the new items will immediately display to the staff throughout all of the offices in the world.”

Altium has also developed internal communications portals using Google Sites that provide employees with a centralized forum through which to receive information about internal system changes or participate in internal surveys.

“We’ve been able to use Google Apps to innovate in ways that benefit the organization at large,” Perkins said.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

INNOVATING WITH GOOGLE APPS FOR WORK

Three years later, Altium is still enjoying the ease of Google Apps, and users are finding new and innovative ways to utilize the features in the Google Apps suite.

“The one thing we’ve made quite a bit of use of is Google Docs,” Perkins said.

For example, customer-facing case studies are kept in Google Docs and embedded through Salesforce.com on Altium’s website. Visitors to the site can choose one of six languages in which to display the case study that is populated through Google Docs and Salesforce.com.

“The marketing team can edit the case studies in Google Docs and immediately publish to the web. It’s a lightweight content management system, and it really works well for us,” Perkins said.

REAPING THE BENEFITS OF THE CLOUD

Perkins said that moving to Google Apps has continued to yield benefits, even years later.

“The reliability of the mail system, the reduction of the stress and headache of managing the old mail server and the cost savings have been quite significant,” he said.

Though Perkins said he has never quantified the total cost savings of Going Google, he estimates the savings at approximately $250,000 per year. Though the monetary savings are significant, Perkins said it is the intangible benefits that really add up.
“Going Google is not really about cost mitigation,” Perkins said. “It’s about enabling your organization to do things it would not otherwise be able to do.”

For example, Altium moved its headquarters from Sydney, Australia to Shanghai, China this year in addition to relocating many offices. Though many of Altium’s servers have been virtualised and shut down, some servers still required relocation during the move.

“Land-based servers have proven difficult to transport,” Perkins said. “It’s tantamount to impossible because the servers get stuck in customs. As we’ve been moving servers, we’ve tended to virtualise and put even more of our information in the cloud.”

Despite some server set-backs, most offices were able to keep working as usual during relocation, Perkins said.

“Because much of our information is in the cloud, moving most offices was an absolute non-issue,” he said. “We just told everyone to keep working, which allowed us to focus on other things associated with the move.”

Furthermore, Perkins said that the security and compliance of Google Apps have allowed the company to easily meet rigorous security standards such as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act.

“When migrating the data to the cloud, I discovered that an overwhelmingly high percentage of email was not being preserved because it was not being housed on any of our servers, only in local .pst files,” Perkins said. “Postini guarantees us preservation. There have been two occasions in the past three years that we have needed to gain access to emails and chats that were deleted by staff, and Postini has facilitated this.”

LOOKING BACK

“There was a plethora of ill-will about the old email system,” Perkins said. “I knew we had to go cloud, even in the early days, and I’m so glad we went with Google. The ease of management, the cost savings and the collaboration abilities are huge.”

Dozens of sites and thousands upon thousands of Google Docs have been created since the deployment three years ago, Perkins said. Altium’s CEO has even made it clear that he will generally not be happy to receive a document in Microsoft Word.

“We’ve built Google Apps into our practices,” Perkins said. “It’s such an entrenched part of our organisation now.”

Collaboration tools that allow multiple people to simultaneously edit a document or spreadsheet allow Altium to complete projects in a more narrow time frame that would not have been possible using Microsoft Word documents, Perkins said.

“It didn’t work when three people were working separately on one document,” he said. “We are now able to turn things around faster because we’re all working in the same document.”

Perkins said some of the most valuable benefits of Google Apps are being able to send email from any device, anywhere in the world and the speed and ease of the search facility.
“Being able to find things quickly has really increased employee productivity,” he said. “Google Apps is so convenient.”

When new hires join Altium, Perkins said training is minimal due to the inherent ease-of-use of Google Apps.

“We have a few training documents that we give people,” he said. “But what we've found is that people really didn't need a lot of training. Google Apps is pretty intuitive.”

Looking forward, Perkins said he expects Google Apps to continue to benefit Altium and its employees.

“Google has changed the way we do business for the better,” Perkins said. “Google Apps has enabled us to do things that we would not have otherwise been able to do. Our teams have internationalized and Google has facilitated that task.”

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**CASE STUDY**

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— Alan Perkins  
CIO, Altium Limited

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