

Google to the Rescue: A Go Tech Virtual Office on a No Tech Budget

by Craig Ball

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Elizabeth just hung out her shingle as a solo practitioner. She has ten clients now, and she's shooting for ten more by year's end. She's wisely keeping a tight rein on overhead by working out of her home and arranging to use a colleague's conference room for meetings and depositions. She has a speedy Internet connection for her VOIP business phone, a Palm Treo 700P and a sleek MacBook Pro laptop.

At the old firm, Elizabeth had an assistant and in-house IT expertise. Someone else handled information management. Now, without the big firm infrastructure, Elizabeth knows she needs to work smarter, so she sought a better way to access her information and calendar from anywhere, anytime. A way that offered tons of electronic storage but would still be quick and easy to search. Something secure that backed itself up all the time. It had to be inexpensive and simple enough for her to manage without tech support.

Thanks to Google, Elizabeth found that better way, and it costs her nothing at all. Here's how:

Elizabeth tracks her schedule using Google Calendar (<http://www.google.com/calendar>). It's simple to use, quick to navigate and allows Elizabeth instant access to her appointments from anywhere. She can grant customized sharing privileges to her part time secretary and, using a free utility called Goosynch (www.goosynch.com), Elizabeth can wirelessly synchronize Google Calendar with her handheld. Google calendar will even automatically send appointment reminders to her cell phone.

Elizabeth needed a reliable e-mail account. Something with plenty of storage, robust search capabilities and customizable contact management. She had to be able to flag messages for follow up and quickly sort them by client or matter. Most of all, she needed a good spam filter to get rid of all that junk clogging her inbox.

Elizabeth manages her e-mail with Gmail, Google's free e-mail service (<http://mail.google.com>). Gmail does everything Elizabeth needs and much more. She can even set up her Gmail account to consolidate messages from several former POP3 e-mail accounts. Each free account includes almost 3 gigabytes (3,000 megabytes) of storage space for messages and attachments. No e-mail client is easier to search, and Google makes sure that the data is always backed up and secure. Unobtrusive text ads are displayed in the far right margin when Elizabeth reads her mail, but after about five minutes as a Gmail user, she didn't even see them anymore. No ads appear in mail she sends.

But wait a minute. Just because Elizabeth is on a budget doesn't mean she wants to appear low rent. Won't a Gmail address seem unprofessional? Actually, a @gmail.com address still carries a tech-savvy cachet, not many know that Google allows Gmail users to swap their own Internet domain for @gmail.com under a no-cost program called Google Apps (<http://www.google.com/a>). So, when Elizabeth registers ElizabethBallLLC.com, her e-mail identity can appear to all as, e.g.,

Elizabeth@ElizabethBallLLC.com, but be discretely hosted by Gmail.

Elizabeth also needs an electronic filing system for case documents. She wants to be as paperless as possible, so powerful search and retrieval is a priority, and she needs to be certain her client files and other critical information are backed up daily, without fail.

Here's where she got creative.

Elizabeth's Gmail account affords her the privilege to share up to 100 more Gmail accounts, and each of those accounts can, in turn, give away 100 accounts. Elizabeth keeps some of these for her own use, assigning each a username that corresponds with a client or matter, e.g., *case1234@gmail.com* or *JohnSmithLawsuit@gmail.com*. Elizabeth then assigns a common or unique password to each and, when she creates a document in the Smith case, she simply e-mails it to *JohnSmithLawsuit@gmail.com*. Each e-mail can carry a gargantuan 20MB attachment, and each new Gmail account adds another 2.8GB of secure online storage. Now, Elizabeth quickly accesses her case files from anywhere at anytime and uses Google's powerful search abilities to instantly find what she's seeking. Plus, she doesn't have to worry about a hard drive crash or a flood, fire or burglary causing her to lose client data. Google handles everything.

When Elizabeth takes on a new case, she simply creates a new Gmail account with a unique username for that matter. In this way, the system grows to meet her needs without additional expense: All she needs is Internet access.

But how does she get work done when she *doesn't* have Internet access? Answer: She uses her laptop to store offline counterparts of her online content. Google supports this, too. Users of Google Desktop (<http://desktop.google.com>) have access to their Gmail messages even when they have no Net connection. Alternatively, Elizabeth can use a POP3 e-mail client (like Apple Mail or Entourage on a Mac or Outlook or Outlook Express on a PC) to archive the contents of all her Gmail accounts to her laptop or to external storage.

Finally, Elizabeth needs a way to keep track of her billable time. For this, she has two options. One way is to e-mail periodic time and expense notations to each case's Gmail address (or to a Gmail account dedicated to timekeeping) using a consistent subject line for each message (e.g., Smith Case). Based on the common subject line, Gmail structures all of these messages as a threaded "conversation," making it easy to prepare bills at the end of the month. A second approach is to use Google's virtual productivity application, Google Docs and Spreadsheets (<http://docs.google.com>). Elizabeth creates an online word processed document or a spreadsheet to enter her billable hours for each case. These can be pre-formatted as bills or shared with an assistant or client as a collaborative document. Elizabeth tags these time sheets within Docs and Spreadsheets for easy search and sorting, but she could simply preface the file name of each with the word "time sheet." Either way, a single click on Docs and Spreadsheets from within her calendar or Gmail account bring her right to her time sheets. The Google application even permits Elizabeth's bills to be saved as Microsoft Word documents or in Adobe PDF format for ready transmittal to her clients.

Google Docs and Spreadsheets supports free online storage of up to 5,000 documents, each up to 500KB in size, and 200 spreadsheets up to 1MB in size. Of course, each Gmail account is entitled to its own Docs and Spreadsheets account, so there's effectively no limit on the number of documents and spreadsheets Elizabeth can store.

To make it all more convenient, Google offers a personalized homepage where Elizabeth sees her calendar, Gmail and documents, plus a host of optional, helpful gadgets and timely content like case alerts and news feeds. It's called iGoogle (<http://www.google.com/ig>), and it's great.

Now, Elizabeth's got solid calendaring, messaging, file storage, search, disaster recovery, timekeeping, document authoring, desktop management and more. She enjoys a powerful, scalable virtual office without spending a dime, and all it took was a little planning, some creative thought...and Google.

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