

Enhancing Volunteer Effectiveness with Google Apps

Abstract

Today's Extension volunteers provide many services once provided by professional staff. Volunteers need the same communication tools that Extension professionals use. For many land-grant institutions and county Extension offices, this is logistically difficult and cost prohibitive. Google Apps gives all Extension volunteers free access to email, instant messaging, telephone services, voice mail, and file storage and retrieval. These tools will enhance every volunteer's ability to plan, execute, and assess results of any event or activity. Extension professionals should explore the technology needs of volunteers, encourage volunteers to explore Google Apps, and help volunteers use these tools in their volunteer roles.

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Introduction

Volunteers are an important partner in Extension's success, often serving in roles once provided by professional staff (Cassill, Culp, Hettmansperger, Stillwell, & Sublett, 2012). To be effective in their role, volunteers need access to and training with the same communication tools that Extension professionals use on a daily basis. For many land-grant institutions and local county Extension offices, providing these tools is logistically difficult and cost prohibitive.

According to Smith (2011), 83% of adults own a cell phone, and 51% used their phone to access information. Soon, accessing the Internet through a mobile device will be more common than using a home computer (Drill, 2012). People use Google every day to search the Internet for information; however, Google is more than a search engine. Google has created a suite of Web-based applications (Apps) that can provide volunteers with access to communication tools used by Extension professionals. This includes free access to email, instant messaging, telephone services, voice mail, and file storage and retrieval. Additionally, Google provides easy-to-use Web-based tutorials for each of these tools. These tools increase communication, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of volunteers and minimizing the costs to Extension. Volunteers who feel effective are often more satisfied with their volunteer roles.

Google Apps Available

Gmail

Gmail is a free [email](#) service. Volunteers can use it to send email for:

- Volunteer assignments
- Project updates
- Announcements
- Newsletters
- Sending meeting agendas
- Sending documents up to 25 MB
- Storing 15 GB of email messages

Calendar

Google Calendar is a free time-management and planning application. Volunteers can use it for:

- Planning events or activities
- Scheduling due dates for volunteer assignments
- Monitoring the progress of events or activities with event countdowns
- Reminders
- Calendar sharing with other volunteers and Extension professionals
- Integrating with email for planning and implementing events

Talk

Google Talk is an instant messaging service that provides both text and voice communication. Volunteers can:

- Share a quick thought in real time
- Create an audio conference
- Chat with other volunteers
- Instantly transfer documents and files

- Check the status of any volunteer
- Increase social networking

Voice

Google Voice is telephone service that is accessed through a computer. Volunteers can use Google Voice to:

- Establish a user defined telephone number
- Contact other volunteers or Extension professionals by telephone
- Avoid missed calls
- Forward calls to cell phone or other personal number
- Create a conference call
- Establish a telephone number for an event, project, or group like a 4-H Club
- Maintain privacy and security by not providing personal phone numbers

Drive

Google Drive provides volunteers a place to store, share, access, and protect 15 GB of documents, pictures and other information. Volunteers can use Google Drive to:

- Enhance collaboration by sharing documents electronically
- Avoid losing documents due computer failures or misplacement
- Modify and share documents from a mobile device or laptop
- Create security settings for important documents such as websites
- Work from home or wherever Internet access is available

Getting Started with Google Apps

Technology increases the ability of Extension professionals and volunteers to be effective and further the Extension mission (Drill, 2012). Getting started with Google Apps is fairly straightforward.

- Go to www.google.com.
- Select the red signup box.

- Create a Google Account.
- Select the various Apps from the menu provided.
- Access the tutorials for basic instruction and unique ways each App can be used.

Conclusions

Consistent with Culp et al. (2009), volunteers need tools to ensure their success. The increase in development of Internet applications provides a terrific opportunity for Extension volunteers to acquire the tools that will allow them to be successful in their roles. While Google Apps is free, relatively simple to use, and supported with easy-to-use tutorials, the real challenge is making volunteers aware of these tools and motivating volunteers to use them. Extension professionals are encouraged to assess the current technology usage and needs of volunteers. That information should be used to develop appropriate training programs to increase volunteers' awareness and use of communication tools such as Google Apps. Successful volunteers are the foundation on which quality 4-H programs are built.

References

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