Favorite Free Software Tools to Increase Office Efficiency

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This article will share some of my favorite software tools to improve office efficiency – tools that can directly help meeting professionals everywhere. And the good news is that all of them are available on the web and most are totally free.

My first gem is a PDF file converter. Converting your Word or other windows documents to a .PDF format can be very helpful. It reduces the file size for easier emailing, it locks the format so the recipient views the document exactly as it is sent and the software to view these files is on nearly everyone's PC. I personally convert all of my invoices, consulting documents and course notes to PDF before I email them. And now you don't have to fork out $200 or more to Adobe to convert your documents to PDF. PrimoPDF at www.primopdf.com will do it for free. Simply download and install the software from the website. It will convert any Word, excel, PowerPoint or other Windows-based document to PDF. There are a number of these converters out there, but I have found that PrimoPDF works the best.

Speaking of emailing files, are you challenged when you wish to email large documents? Many email systems simply refuse to accept files larger than 5mb. In this case, use YouSendIt (www.yousendit.com) which will allow you to send a file of up to 100MB file at no charge, and minimal charges for even larger files. You upload the file you wish to send to the YouSendIt web site, enter the email address of the recipient and click send. That's all there is to it. The recipient will receive an email with the link to download the file at their convenience and has one week to do so. YouSendIt is a simple solution for this problem

Speaking of files, do you ever have a hard time finding them on your computer? Google Desktop can help. Go to http://desktop.google.com to install this program to provide "Google-like" search functionality to every document, email and cached web page on your computer hard drive – all with excellent filtering capabilities.

A related tool is the Google toolbar at http://toolbar.google.com -- and one that I personally use several times daily. Once installed, it adds an additional tool bar on your Internet Explorer browser providing a wide range of configurable functionality including auto fill functionality for forms, find functions for web pages, and a Google search box allowing you search Google without opening up the Google homepage.

Another helpful free tool is in the area of electronic fax management. I personally detest faxes. Paper is a terrible way to manage and store data. Faxes are so last century! And yet, we still have to deal with them occasionally. Efax (www.efax.com) will provide a unique fax telephone number and deliver up to 20 pages of faxes per month via email all for absolutely free. If you want a customized telephone number to match your area code or to receive more than 20 pages each month, there is a monthly fee. But for the few faxes that come in for me each month, this is perfect. I receive them as an attached file in an email message and file them

accordingly. I can receive and access faxes on the road with my computer and avoiding inefficient paper-based filing systems.

Another free software program I use almost daily is Picasa (www.picasa.com) to manage my digital photos – Picasa is the best photo library manager I have found, regardless of price. A related program is Picasaweb (www.picasaweb.com) will allow you to easily upload, update and share up to 1,000 images with others on the web for free. For example, I have recently uploaded more that 250 photos of my 330 mile Southern rural china bicycle adventure which can be found at http://picasaweb.google.com/CorbinWayneBall/ChinaThailandBikeAdventureFall2007 for those who would like to see this functionality.

Going from still photos to video, YouTube (www.youtube.com) allows anyone to upload and share video clips on the web for free.

Going from video to audio, Audacity (http://audacity.sourceforge.net) provides a very powerful but easy-to-use free software program to record and edit audio files on your computer. I used Audacity to record all of my podcasts.

There are also free web conference and collaboration tools similar to WebEx and Windows Live meetings. Vyew (www.vyew.com) will allow you show PowerPoint slides, annotate them, share any program on your computer with others via the web and much more at a low cost or absolutely free if you are willing to put up with banner advertising on the browser screen.

The final area I would like to share is with Wikis which are online collaborative websites. Google provides a free web-based word processor, spreadsheet and basic presentation software at http://docs.google.com. Once your documents are created, you can invite others to view or edit these documents securely as they are password protected. The Google spreadsheets are particularly helpful with project management (i.e. meetings management). I have used them several times with consulting projects where multiple stakeholders are involved. Everyone is on the same page electronically rather than emailing multiple copies of an excel document. Revision history is kept online and if someone makes a change in a cell, everyone sees it immediately.

Rounding off this free online office suite, is Blist (www.blist.com) provide a free, very easy to use and highly visual online database to manage contacts or other database sets.

And finally, taking it to the next step, Itensil (www.itensil.com) provides a wiki, project management tools, document management tools and more, with most of it for free.

So there you have it. A load of free technology tools to make our lives in the speaking business easier and more productive. I hope you try some of them out and they will work as well for you as they have for me.

And what about you? What are your favorite tools? Please email your suggestions in and I will be happy to share them in future issues of TechTalk.

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