

Google rolls out preview of Wave

September 30 2009



Google logo

Google hits a key milestone Wednesday for a product that the search giant hopes will transform how people communicate and collaborate online, and perhaps hook more users on Google's menu of Web-based services.

Google Wave, which combines elements of e-mail, instant messaging and social networking to allow groups of people to collaborate on a task in real time, will be previewed starting Wednesday to more than 100,000 developers and users who have signed up to try Wave and give Google feedback on how well it works.

Developed by a small engineering team led by Lars and Jens Rasmussen, the brothers who engineered Google Maps, the idea behind Wave is to move toward a kind of universal in-box -- where e-mail, video, maps, photos, text messages and even voice conversations can all become data objects to be shared and manipulated in real time by a group connected

to a wave.

Wave is a platform, which is a series of services, on top of which developers can create applications that supplement it. Google has been working hard to engage outside software developers to write applications that will run on Wave, creating services that will lure users and provide a potential source of revenue.

Executives pumped up expectations when Google first revealed Wave at its annual developer conference in the spring, using words like "magical" and "unbelievable" to describe the impact they said Wave could have on Internet communication.

Developers such as Ribbit, a Mountain View, Calif., startup bought last year by BT that bills itself as "Silicon Valley's First Phone Company," already have written applications for Wave that Google featured on its official blog Tuesday.

"If you have an e-mail and an instant message and a voice call, that can all be navigated in the same wave," Ted Griggs, Ribbit's CEO, said in an interview. "It's no longer e-mail is one container -- and SMS (text messaging) is one container -- and all these things are silos. Wave is breaking those silos down."

Wave users running Ribbit's applications could, for example, hold a telephone conference that would connect through any kind of voice communication -- a cell phone, a land line or voice-over-Internet -- and then store a recording of the resulting conversation as an audio file or transcribe the conversation into a text document embedded in the Wave.

Another application Google demonstrated on its blog Tuesday included a group of friends in scattered locations using the online version of the Lonely Planet guides to plan a trip to Australia through Wave, searching

out attractions in Melbourne with Google maps, reading Lonely's Planet's description of those places, messaging their thoughts with the rest of the group, and collectively writing up a day-by-day itinerary, within one wave.

Real-time collaboration on the Web "is a natural evolution" for how people use the Internet, said Rony Zarom, founder and CEO of Watchitoo, a startup that allows people to view video and other Web content simultaneously with their friends, and that plans to soon offer video conferencing and real-time document editing to companies and schools.

"It started as e-mail being the major platform for communication, moved on to instant messaging, and you can see social networking taking those broad approaches as the major communication platform. I think the next trend is basically collaboration," Zarom said. "I think more and more companies see that as the next trend on the Internet."

Zarom doesn't see the more complicated Wave replacing the simplicity and clarity of e-mail, however, and for Google, there's another hitch.

Wave won't run well on Microsoft's Internet Explorer, by far the most widely used Web browser. Because Wave uses the newest HTML standard, which has not yet been incorporated into Microsoft's browser, Internet Explorer users will first have to install a "frame" -- essentially a browser within a browser -- from Google's Chrome browser to use Wave. Google says Wave runs just fine on Apple's Safari 4 browser, Mozilla Foundation's new Firefox 3.5 browser, and of course, on its Chrome browser. The Chrome frame, Google says, will be invisible to Internet Explorer users but will greatly improve the performance of a Microsoft browser. Microsoft, however, is warning users not to install the Chrome frame because of security concerns.

Other critics also are warning of problems.

"The overall effects of Chrome Frame are undesirable. I predict positive results will not be enduring and -- to the extent it is adopted _ Chrome Frame will end in growing fragmentation and loss of control for most of us, including Web developers," Mitchell Baker, chairman of the Mozilla Foundation, wrote on his blog this week.

Others have speculated that because Wave won't run on Internet Explorer, it is a kind of a Trojan horse in Google's browser war with Microsoft -- a backdoor play to switch people to Chrome. (Microsoft declined to comment on that scenario, and a Google spokesman denied it.)

But Ronald Gruia, an analyst who follows emerging telecom trends for Frost & Sullivan, said Google's play is probably much broader than getting people to try its browser.

If Wave helps introduce users to other Google software that resides online -- Google docs competes with Microsoft Office products like Word and Excel, while Google calendar competes with Microsoft's Outlook -- Gruia said it could indirectly bolster the value of Google's advertising, the company's primary source of revenue.

"The better Google can get to know you as a person, the more targeted their advertising can become and the more they can charge for it," Gruia said. "The more Google products you use, the stickier you are for Google, and the more they will also get to know about you."

WHAT IS GOOGLE WAVE?

Google bills its new communication software as one part document and

one part conversation. Friends or colleagues can work simultaneously on a task -- planning a trip, charting a business strategy -- wrapping in multiple facets of the Web, including e-mail, digital maps, video, photos and even voice communication. A demonstration is available at wave.google.com.

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Citation: Google rolls out preview of Wave (2009, September 30) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-09-google-preview.html>

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