Best Cloud Service: Google

Google integrates all of its online storage and services.
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It seems everything computer-related these days is tied to a cloud.

Think of a cloud simply as a place that hosts some of your data online, allowing you to retrieve it from anywhere that has Internet access (and providing you with an online backup). Online-based Google is practically the definition of "cloud," and it's our choice for best overall cloud service.

[SEE ALSO: What is "Cloud" File Syncing?]

Why we like it

Google's cloud has a place for your communications like email, contact info and instant messages, media like photos, music and video, and data files like text documents, spreadsheets or databases. Google integrates its services to work with each other and makes them available on nearly any device you own.

Here are the most important cloud features and why we rely on them.

Gmail: With a clean interface and plenty of features, Gmail is available to nearly every Internet-accessible device and even can handle the email for your own "myname.com" personal or business domain.

Contacts: The same lists of friends and colleagues you use in Gmail is available on your phone. You can grant access to documents or videoconferences by the groups of people you have set up in Gmail. You can even set the Google Voice calling service to play different messages for different groups or allow members of a particular group to ring right through to your phone, while others get dumped into voicemail.

Docs: Google provides most of the features of Microsoft Office, such as word processing and spreadsheets, without requiring you to purchase and install software.

Drive: This service does more than store your files and synchronize them among devices such as your computer, smartphone and tablet. With integration between Google Drive and Google Docs, you can edit those files on virtually any device or through a Web browser, something that popular competitors such as DropBox can't match.

Google+: Though most think of Google+ as Google's version of Facebook, it is actually a collection of social tools that are integrated into all of Google's services. These tools make it possible to store and share your photos, watch a YouTube video with a friend, or edit a Google Doc in a Web videoconference.

Takeout: Most cloud services make it easy to get your data in, but getting some items such as contact information or voicemail data out of cloud-based services may not be so easy. Google Takout gives you the ability to download data from many of its services, with the option to move it to other cloud services.

Keep in mind

Though Google offers many great services — and some, such as Gmail, are the best in their category — there are other services that compete well in specific features. For example, for file syncing alone, DropBox, which recently lowered its price, would win, working on nearly every device and linking to many apps and Web services. If working with Microsoft Office files were our main concern, then Microsoft Office 365 online version would win for its compatibility and similarity to the Office suite. However, Google wins overall for offering the most services and integrating them so well.

Bottom line

The Google cloud is ubiquitous. We like that we can use Google's services on a PC or a Mac, on an iPad or an Android device. We can save an attachment from our Gmail to Google Docs and edit it there, share it through Google+ and store it with our other files in Google Drive. Since all of the services are free, with additional space available at or below the cost of competitors, Google's cloud is our choice for not only the best overall features but the best value.

Key specs

Free storage:

- 10 GB in Gmail
- 5 GB in Google Drive (for files from your computer)
- 1 GB in Picasa (for photos)
- Unlimited in Google+

Additional paid storage (per month, shared by all services):

- 25 GB – $2.50
- 100 GB – $5
- 200 GB – $10
- 400 GB – $20
- 1 TB – $50

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