

Google Gears Up to Offer Applications Offline, Too

David Mitchell Smith

Google Gears is an open-source technology that will enable developers to create offline Web applications. As Web clients continue to evolve, the applicability of offline capabilities will steadily increase.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 31 May 2007, Google announced several new offerings, including a "mashup" tool, a maplet application programming interface (API) for embedding third-party applications within Google Maps, and Google Gears. The last is an early-stage open-source technology for creating offline Web applications for browsers, including Firefox, Internet Explorer and Opera.

Analysis

Google Gears is Google's foray into what Gartner believes is the next step in the evolution of the Web client, in which an increasing number of applications become "good enough" for wide usage. With Ajax, the browser UI became "good enough." Now, with Google Gears, offline applications have begun to move closer to becoming good enough, as well, as Google continues to push the envelope for browser-based applications.

Google Gears is an open-source and cross-browser, cross-platform system developer solution that is intended to be standardized, potentially via the Web Hypertext Application Technology Working Group (WHATWG; see www.whatwg.org), a community of users focused on the evolution of browser applications. Essentially, Google Gears serves as "plumbing" that enables the caching of Web applications and content to support offline usage, as well as a synchronization engine when a connection is restored. As such, Google Gears is not competitive with Ajax, Flash or Silverlight. In fact, it was designed for Ajax and JavaScript usage, and is compatible with Flash and Silverlight via JavaScript. (There is, however, some potential overlap with the Dojo Offline Toolkit and Mozilla's current Firefox 3.0 efforts.)

The press release on Google Gears includes statements from Mozilla, Adobe Systems and Opera Software endorsing this effort and mentioning planned implementations. Notably absent from the press release is an endorsement by the leading browser provider, Microsoft. This is not unexpected, as Microsoft's prominence on the desktop is vulnerable to continued progress in browser capabilities. Such progress is unlikely to end, however. But adding offline capabilities is not without a downside: the complexity introduced must be minimized so that it does not offer the same level of challenges as other offline implementations. In much the same that it released Internet Explorer 7.0, stemming the rate of defections to the Firefox browser, Microsoft will likely promote alternative ways to establish similar functionality. Microsoft also will likely be more focused on the extension of rich applications to the Web. Chief Software Architect Ray Ozzie has extensive experience dealing with offline and will likely have alternatives for his company's "software + services" strategy.

The vision behind Google Gears is that the usage model for online/offline should be the same (that is, there would be no switch for on/offline and synchronization would be automatic). Google is also making available an offline-capable version of its Reader as a proof of concept. Although this first release is good enough, it falls significantly short of the vision of "no switch." We will be watching for the future availability of Google Apps and Gmail offline.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Web developers:** Download and evaluate Google Gears to become familiar with its capabilities and to monitor how it evolves. You should expect to modify existing applications, some substantially. Some types of applications will not lend themselves to this type of solution (for example, it's unlikely that Web search would benefit from going

offline). Watch for clarification of Google Gears' efforts compared with Dojo and Firefox 3.0 efforts. Organizations should help drive Google and others to standardize these efforts.

- **IT organizations in general:** Be aware that Google Gears is not a simple plug-in that enables Web applications to work offline. Assess your plans for browser-based applications with the understanding that offline capabilities will become a reality over the next few years and their applicability will inevitably increase. Watch for Microsoft's response to Google Gears.

RECOMMENDED READING

- "Google's Expanded Workplace Products Won't Usurp Office Yet" — An acquisition adding presentation features has brought Google closer to being able to compete with Microsoft Office. **By Jeffrey Mann and Tom Austin**
- "Consumerization: The Risk/Reward Equation for Use of Ad-Driven Applications" — As consumerization brings an ad-supported model into the enterprise, organizations must assess the risks and awards associated with it and implement strategies that take into account its effects. **By David Mitchell Smith, David Cearley and Ben Pring**

(You may need to sign in or be a Gartner client to access the documents referenced in this First Take.)

REGIONAL HEADQUARTERS

Corporate Headquarters

56 Top Gallant Road
Stamford, CT 06902-7700
U.S.A.
+1 203 964 0096

European Headquarters

Tamesis
The Glanty
Egham
Surrey, TW20 9AW
UNITED KINGDOM
+44 1784 431611

Asia/Pacific Headquarters

Gartner Australasia Pty. Ltd.
Level 9, 141 Walker Street
North Sydney
New South Wales 2060
AUSTRALIA
+61 2 9459 4600

Japan Headquarters

Gartner Japan Ltd.
Aobadai Hills, 6F
7-7, Aobadai, 4-chome
Meguro-ku, Tokyo 153-0042
JAPAN
+81 3 3481 3670

Latin America Headquarters

Gartner do Brazil
Av. das Nações Unidas, 12551
9º andar—World Trade Center
04578-903—São Paulo SP
BRAZIL
+55 11 3443 1509