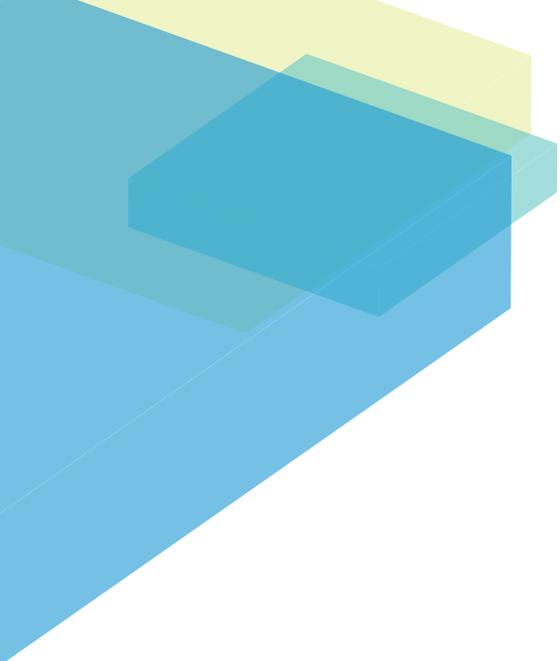


HOW TO ARCHIVE GOOGLE APPS ACCOUNTS

Getting rid of Google Apps users without
losing their data





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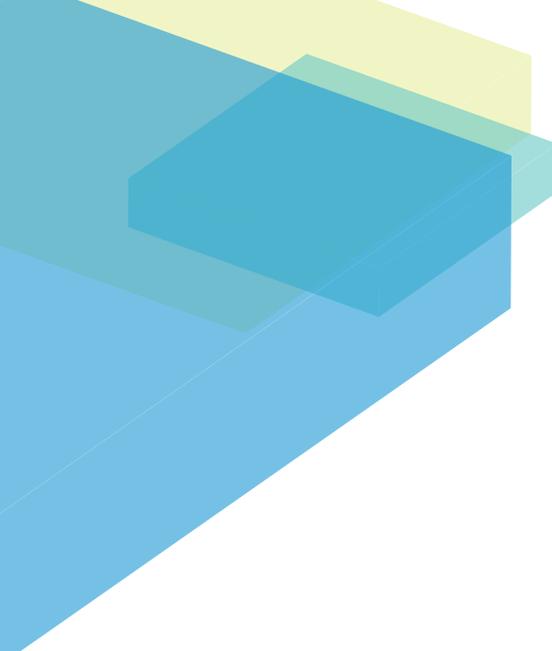
PUT MORE SIMPLY: YOU CAN DELETE A GOOGLE APPS USER ACCOUNT, BUT BEFORE YOU DO, YOU'LL WANT TO (AND MAY BE LEGALLY OBLIGATED TO) ARCHIVE THAT USER'S DATA.

Introduction

In organizations across the world, employees and volunteers resign, retire or are terminated every day. If your company happens to run a Google Apps domain, these departures present your domain administrator with a problem: What to do with the departing users' data. Simply deprovisioning a Google Apps user is more complicated than it seems—there's [an easy way](#) and a [nuanced, security-conscious process](#)—but any competent user-removal checklist should address the disposition of user data.

Put more simply: You can delete a Google Apps user account, but before you do, you'll want to (and may be legally obligated to) archive that user's data.

In this guide, we'll outline the four factors that should influence your user-archiving process, and then present you with four methods for archiving your departing users' Google Apps accounts. By using the former to evaluate the latter, you can find the right Google Apps user-archiving process for you.



EVERY ORGANIZATION WILL WEIGH THESE FACTORS DIFFERENTLY, BUT NO COMPANY SHOULD IGNORE ANY OF THESE ASPECTS OF A GOOGLE APPS ARCHIVING POLICY OR PROCESS.

The Four Cs of Data Retention

There are four main factors to consider when evaluating a Google Apps archiving solution: **C**ost, **C**omplexity, **C**ompliance and **C**ontinuity. Every organization will weigh these factors differently, but no company should ignore any of these aspects of a Google Apps archiving policy or process.

Cost

Cost is a pretty straightforward factor here—what are the actual dollars required to complete an archiving process? However, cost is often underestimated. Archiving data means maintaining it over a prescribed length of time, perhaps indefinitely. Archiving costs should be evaluated as recurring monthly or annual costs, rather than one-time investments.

Complexity

How complicated is your archiving solution, and therefore, how likely is it to fail or create problems for your system or organization down the line? Cheap solutions often have hidden complexities that cost you time or opportunities, rather than cash. The complexity of a Google Apps archiving solution can be evaluated with a single sentence: *How likely is it that the average administrator will complete this process without error every time?*

Compliance

Regulatory and underwriting organizations often have explicit rules about what data you can and cannot purge when a user departs your company. These same entities may also dictate how long data must be maintained and, in some cases, when you are obligated to purge certain information from your records. The compliance aspect of a Google Apps archiving solution can be evaluated on how well it allows you to control what data is preserved, accessed, and purged, and how quickly those tasks can be executed.

Continuity

Any Google Apps user of value creates data of value. Even if you have no regulatory or liability motive for keeping data around past a user's time with your company, the information stored in a departing user's Google Apps account will be of use—if not outright necessity—for some future job function. The continuity aspect of a Google Apps archiving solution should be evaluated based on how well it maintains data over time, and how easily you can access that data for future use.

The Four Major Options for Archiving Google Apps

Below, we outline the four major approaches to preserving Google Apps user data after the user leaves your organization. We grade each option based on the “Four Cs” listed above, using a standard A-F academic scale, then present a composite grade for each solution.

Do Nothing

Believe it or not, doing nothing is an option when a Google Apps user leaves your organization, which is to say it is a perfectly viable strategy to simply keep the original Google Apps account in place and fully functional for future reference. (Of course, you should still lock the actual user out of the account by [changing the password](#) and [wiping any existing login cookies](#). You’re keeping the account, not the actual user.)

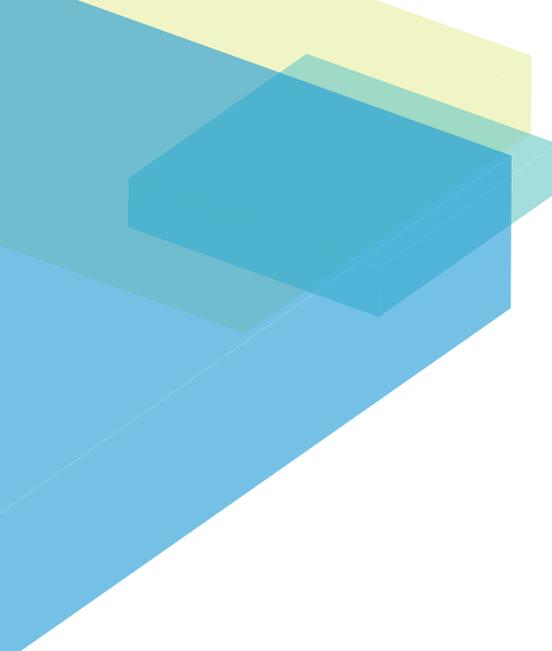
Cost Grade: F

Doing nothing is the most expensive option available. You continue to pay the full annual license for the Google Apps account and, if you aren’t using Google Apps Unlimited, you’re also paying for the Google Vault add-on license to maintain audit compliance. This cost becomes even more onerous if your organization operates in an industry with a relatively high rate of employee turnover, as a horde of low-value, high-cost “zombie users” will accumulate quickly.

Complexity Grade: C

Why not an A? After all, how hard can it be to do nothing? The complexity of the do-nothing solution comes not from the initial “setup” which, again, mostly involves a few simple steps to lock out the original user, but in the need to periodically monitor the now disused Google Apps account for illicit activity. As a full-fledged user, the zombie account has all the access and privileges of a conventional account, but without an actual user looking after it every day. That makes a disused account a prime target for hackers, which requires some extra security effort on the part of your domain administrator—exactly the sort of extra effort that tends to be neglected over time.

DOING NOTHING IS THE MOST EXPENSIVE OPTION AVAILABLE. YOU CONTINUE TO PAY THE FULL ANNUAL LICENSE FOR THE GOOGLE APPS ACCOUNT AND, IF YOU AREN’T USING GOOGLE APPS UNLIMITED, YOU’RE ALSO PAYING FOR THE GOOGLE VAULT ADD-ON LICENSE TO MAINTAIN AUDIT COMPLIANCE.



DOING NOTHING IS A STRICTLY ADEQUATE SOLUTION FOR ARCHIVING A GOOGLE APPS USER, BUT ONE THAT'S CERTAIN TO CAUSE SOME HEARTBURN WHEN SETTING YOUR ANNUAL GOOGLE APPS BUDGET.

Compliance Grade: C

Again, why not an A? How can preserving *literally everything* in a Google Apps account fall short of any compliance guideline? The answer is simple: the account lives on after the original, intended user has departed. Any activities undertaken by the account after the user has left your company could be erroneously attributed to the original user. If a domain admin impersonates the user for maintenance or security purposes, there's no simple way to prove that it was the admin (or any other user with the account's credentials) performing those actions and not the original user of the account. The zombie account can be used with impunity by anyone who has the access credentials, making audit attribution difficult if not impossible. If an employee is fired for cause and the evidence of that cause is held within the Google Apps account, it can become a thorny issue to properly document all the post-termination activity in the account as belonging to an authorized admin and not the fired employee—and vice versa.

Continuity Grade: A

This is where the do-nothing solution shines. Nothing is lost from the original account, because the original Google Apps account is still there, wholly intact. All shared documents and recurring events go on as normal.

Composite Grade: C

Doing nothing is a strictly adequate solution for archiving a Google Apps user, but one that's certain to cause some heartburn when setting your annual Google Apps budget.

Download

Tools like [Google Takeout](#) allow you to export all the data in a departing user's account to a local PC, where after you can store this local asset according to any retention policy. You're then free to purge the original Google Apps user account at your leisure.

Cost Grade: B

Google Takeout is free, and the cost of storing the complete contents of a Google Apps account—usually just a few gigabytes—is trivial. Your organization probably already has the fault-tolerant, non-local storage capacity sitting around idle.

TAKEOUT-GENERATED ARCHIVES ARE DELIVERED IN ZIP FILES, WHICH CANNOT BE LARGER THAN 2GB, SO THEY MAY ARRIVE IN A SERIES OF ZIPS, GIVING YOU MULTIPLE FILES TO KEEP TRACK OF (AND HUNT THROUGH TO FIND SPECIFIC DATA).

Complexity Grade: D

Google Takeout is fairly easy to use, but it doesn't get everything, and it doesn't give you everything all at once. For example, a departing user's Google Sites data is not available for download. Moreover, it can take Google anywhere from minutes to days to gather and export all the account's user data, and you won't know it's done until the actual *departing user* receives a notification email. You'll probably want to set up a [mail forward](#) and [Gmail filter](#) so your admin gets the completion notice in her own account, and the notice is flagged as important.

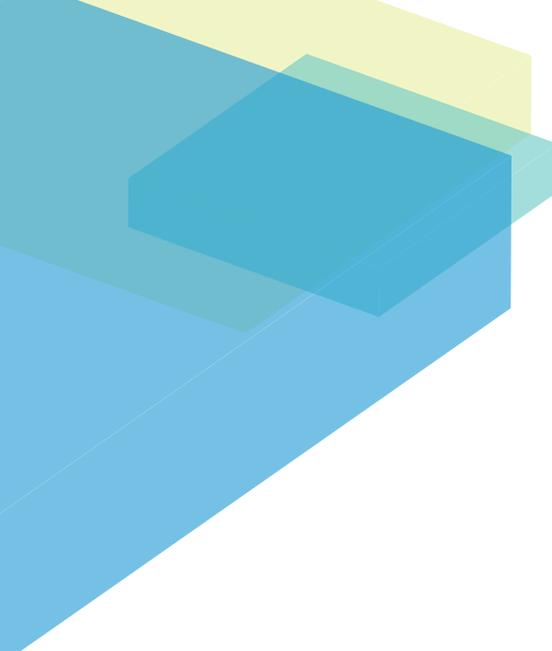
Adding to the complexity, Takeout-generated archives are delivered in ZIP files, which cannot be larger than 2GB, so they may arrive in a series of ZIPs, giving you multiple files to keep track of (and hunt through to find specific data). And all of this data needs to be manually named, sorted and stored in some solution that allows you to apply a compliance policy to it. All that user-directed work is a recipe for introducing user error. There are third-party tools on the market that make this process a little simpler, but they aren't free, so it's a trade-off between price and complexity.

Compliance Grade: D

Google Takeout and similar export tools simply can't drag all the metadata within a user account—particularly the compliance-sensitive revision history and the business-critical sharing settings—into these local archives. Vault history does not come along for the ride, either. Downloaded archives give you a snapshot of an account as it existed at a point in time, but anything that precedes the day you created the archive is all but impossible to reconstruct—unless you pay for a third-party compliance record via another tool, which would eliminate the financial advantages of this archiving approach and add to its complexity.

Continuity Grade: C

Tools like Google Takeout must convert Google Apps data into generic formats before exporting it for your use. Google Drive documents are converted to Microsoft Office or OpenDocument formats, Contacts become vCard files, Calendar events become iCal files, and Gmail messages become MBOX files. Other app data you may grab along the way may be delivered as anything from a CSV file (easy to work with) to a JSON file (not so easy). All of these file outputs require some other application to open them, and none of them can be converted back to their original Google Apps state (with all the attendant sharing and labeling metadata) without a significant loss of fidelity.



**WHILE MANUALLY
DOWNLOADING AND STORING
GOOGLE APPS DATA IS
EXTREMELY COST-EFFECTIVE,
IT IS WOEFULLY INADEQUATE
FOR MOST COMPLIANCE
PURPOSES. NO APPROACH
MORE LENDS ITSELF TO USER
ERROR THAN A MANUAL,
LOCAL BACKUP OF GOOGLE
APPS DATA.**

Composite Grade: C-

Manually downloading and storing Google Apps data is a serviceable but limited approach to archiving a Google Apps user. While it is extremely cost-effective, it is woefully inadequate for most compliance purposes and is cumbersome at best in its execution. No approach more lends itself to user error than a manual, local backup of Google Apps data.

Migrate

It is possible to [transfer most of the data from the departed user's account](#) to another account on your domain (or on a different Google Apps domain altogether). Simply download all the data you can from the old account, then upload it to the new one. The receiving user now has unfettered access to all the departed user's Google Apps data in his own account.

Cost Grade: A

This is the ultimate low-cost option. The expense of maintaining the old user's data is now borne by the new user's account—which your organization was already planning on paying for anyway. Unless the assumption of the departing user's data puts the receiving user's account above its storage quota—a concern that doesn't exist if you're running Google Apps Unlimited—there's little to no marginal cost for migrating a user.

Complexity Grade: D

The process of migrating data from one account to another is typically straightforward, but it is a laboriously manual, repetitive process rife with opportunities for user error. Each Google App's data must be individually downloaded, converted to a neutral format, then uploaded to the new account. Conversion errors are not uncommon, and it's easy to misplace or misload data. Moreover, the receiving user bears the brunt of this decision, with a Google Drive, Google Calendar, list of Google Contacts and, worst of all, a Gmail inbox loaded down with someone else's data. This makes the departed user's data relatively easy to find—assuming the receiving user knows what to look for—but also makes the receiving user's own information much more difficult to locate.

Compliance Grade: F

The migration approach to Google Apps user archiving is major headache for your compliance auditors. All the data that belonged to one user now belongs to another. Any changes made to any document, message or contact must be cross-checked to determine when the change occurred, and thus which owner—the current or the original—made the alteration. This assumes that the original user's data is maintained in your compliance solution, as the migration tool will effectively “create” the migrated data in the receiving

A FULL-FEATURED GOOGLE APPS BACKUP AND RESTORE SOLUTION CAN CREATE AND MAINTAIN REGULAR, HIGH-FIDELITY COPIES OF ALL GOOGLE APPS DATA FROM ANY SINGLE ACCOUNT OR AN ENTIRE DOMAIN. THESE COPIES CAN BE QUICKLY AND EASILY RELOADED INTO AN ACCOUNT FOR IMMEDIATE USE.

user's account with no previous ownership history. If the departing user's audit history is maintained, that likely comes with an attached cost that would drag down this approach's cost grade. Moreover, this intermingled data means it's almost impossible to purge historical items belonging to a departed user, as separating what belongs to the old and current user is a dubious proposition at best that only becomes more difficult over time.

Continuity Grade: C

Migrating data between two Google Apps accounts is a bit of a continuity quagmire. All the primary data assets—messages, contacts, documents and calendar events—are preserved, but much of the metadata is typically lost. The act of converting data to a neutral format and then reconvert it back to Google Apps can also introduce unexpected corruption, or at least loss of formatting and data fidelity. Google Slides and Microsoft PowerPoint, for example, are particularly bad at cross-converting. Sharing settings and revision history are almost always severely curtailed or outright absent after a migration, which can limit the utility of the transferred data.

Composite Grade: C-

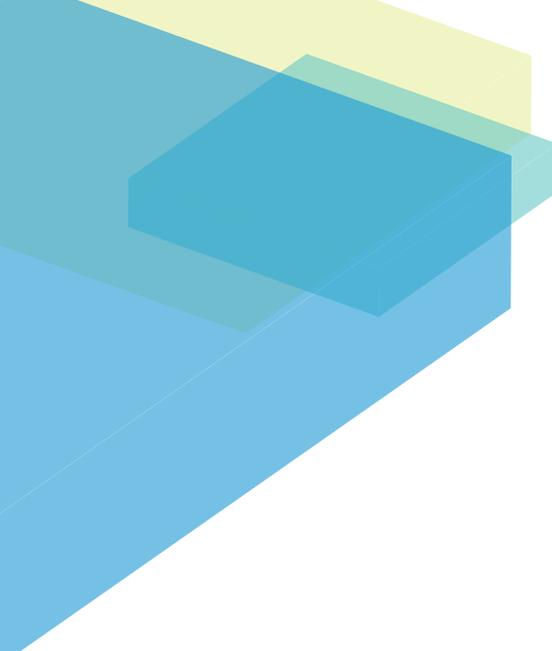
User data migration is a middling solution, at best, for archiving Google Apps users. Its cost savings are often not enough to overtake its severe compliance and complexity drawbacks. There are tools available to automate much of this process to avoid this user error, but they are not without (often significant) cost. What you would gain in simplification, you would lose in cost-effectiveness.

Backup & Restore

A full-featured Google Apps backup and restore solution like [Datto+Backupify for Google Apps](#) can create and maintain regular, high-fidelity copies of all Google Apps data from any single account or an entire domain. These copies can be quickly and easily reloaded into a Google Apps account for immediate use.

Cost Grade: B

The good stuff isn't free, and tools like Backupify have recurring costs not just to continually create and update Google Apps backups, but also to maintain those backups even after the original user account is deprovisioned. These costs are generally reasonable, and always less than the cost of maintaining the original account, especially if you consider the cost of time, but there is a recurring outlay for the entire lifespan of the maintained data.



**SHORT OF NEVER DELETING
A USER ACCOUNT, THERE IS
NO BETTER WAY TO KEEP
PURGED USER DATA ON HAND
AND READY TO USE.**

Complexity Grade: A

The entire purpose of tools like Backupify is to make the creation of archived Google Apps backup simple, easy, and predictably repeatable. Just install [this solution](#) from the Google Apps marketplace, make a few quick configuration choices, and the app does the rest. These archives are maintained even if you suspend or delete a Google Apps account, and you can fire off an on-demand backup of any account before your purge it to ensure the backup has all the latest data.

Compliance Grade: A-

A backup tool is different from a [compliance archive](#), but it's a close second. An enterprise-grade Google Apps backup and recovery solution like Datto+Backupify maintains a revision history within its backups, which can aid in compliance audits. More importantly, Datto+Backupify is searchable and browsable, so specific data can be located with speed and ease. Above all, Datto+Backupify supports specific retention periods for your data, so any information you are obligated to delete is automatically purged without fear of oversight or human error.

Continuity Grade: A-

Browsable archives are commonplace, searchable archives are superior, and Google Apps backup and recovery solutions like Datto+Backupify have both. That makes it easy to find what you're looking for, should you need it after a user has been purged from your domain. Moreover, these solutions are designed for speed and fidelity of recovery, so you can restore the purged user data back to your Google Apps domain with nearly all of its metadata—especially sharing settings—intact. Short of never deleting a user account, there's no better way to keep purged user data on hand and ready for use.

Composite Grade: A-

Google Apps backup and recovery solutions like Datto+Backupify are designed specifically to maintain useful, searchable, easily recovered copies of Google Apps user data that sticks around even if the original information has been corrupted or purged. It's what they do, and they work even if your domain administrator has intentionally and legitimately purged a departed user's account from your Google Apps domain. No solution is perfect, and no system can preserve all the data and metadata exactly as it existed in the original account, but high-end solutions like Datto+Backupify are the next best thing to never having deleted the original user data, but with far more security and compliance safeguards that the risky do-nothing tack.

**BY WEIGHING THE
RESPECTIVE IMPORTANCE
OF THE FOUR C'S - COST,
COMPLEXITY, COMPLIANCE
AND CONTINUITY - YOU CAN
CHOOSE THE RIGHT GOOGLE
APPS ARCHIVING SOLUTION
FOR YOUR SPECIFIC NEEDS.**

Conclusion

Every organization has different needs when it comes to archiving Google Apps user data. Some operate in highly regulated industries that are sensitive to compliance demands, others suffer from high employee turnover, which makes them sensitive to the costs of maintaining an ever-growing collection of purged user data. Some companies have a team of highly experienced Google Apps administrators that can take on complex tasks, while others are one-man It operations looking to keep archiving as simple as possible. It is only by weighing the respective importance of the Four Cs—Cost, Complexity, Compliance and Continuity—that you can choose the right Google Apps archiving solution for your specific needs.

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