

Chapter 1

A Day in Your Google Voice Life

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Google Voice is a marvelous mashup — all the power and control we associate with computers at their best, combined with the warmth, spontaneity, and flexibility of talking to other people. Although you need to spend some time figuring out how to get the most out of Google Voice, the service can ultimately simplify your life.

Google Voice is not only powerful and capable in its own right, but it works alongside other Google services. You can get a lot out of it for personal use, and take it even further in a business context.

Google Voice is not to be confused with Google's Voice Search, which allows you to search the Internet by speaking words out loud; nor with Google Talk, a service for using a computer directly for text messaging and computer-to-computer voice conversations. Both of these are valuable services, but they don't overlap with Google Voice, which allows you to fuse all your telephone lines into one central, Web-accessible hub.

Google Voice helps you manage real live phones, with all the voice quality and convenience that only a telephone has, along with voicemail for all of them. Unlike Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) services, Google Voice lets you add the convenience of the Web while preserving the voice quality and convenience that only a telephone can offer.

And Google Voice saves you time, money, and hassle. Anyone can improve their life with Google Voice — while businesses can do even more, by cutting costs and adding services in a way that can not only reduce expenses, but really move the needle on what a business can offer customers.

Discovering Google Voice

Google Voice reduces the cost of calls, making national calls free and international ones much cheaper — perhaps a tenth the cost of a direct-dialed cell phone call. And Google Voice notifies you of voicemail messages and allows you to record phone calls, so that you can manage conversations as well as the phones themselves.

Here's how it works: Google Voice gives you a single, virtual phone number, from almost any area code in the U.S. that you'd like. That number, in turn, can ring any or all of your other phone lines — your work phone, cell phone, and so on, meaning that you can be reached with just one number.

Google Voice also changes the way you can handle calls. Like any phone service, it records voicemail messages. And it sends you notification that a voicemail message is waiting.

You can also screen callers and listen in on voicemail messages before deciding whether to pick up the call, just like an old-fashioned answering machine. And it lets you block callers, send certain numbers straight to voicemail, and set up custom mailbox greetings for discrete callers. You can record calls on the fly, send and receive SMS text messages, and keep your entire call history online.

All of these capabilities were part of GrandCentral, the service that Google bought in 2007 and made the foundation for Google Voice. Google Voice adds several new capabilities.

One is support for text messaging, or SMS, from your GrandCentral phone number. This feature was missing in GrandCentral but is added in Google Voice, making the service much more seamless to use. Figure 1-1 shows the SMS interface, new with Google Voice.

A wonderful bonus, though, is very inexpensive international calls — a few cents a minute to most countries, instead of ten or more cents, or even the better part of a dollar, per minute from different land line and cell phone plans.

But it also allows you to access your voicemail messages and listen to them online. You can forward a message to a friend or embed it in a Web site. Most amazingly, Google Voice transcribes your voicemail messages instantly — not perfectly, but surprisingly well, in most cases — so that you can read them on-screen, in your e-mail inbox, or as a text message. So if you're staying in touch by e-mail, as more and more people do these days, you don't have to leave *text mode* to stay in touch with, manage, and respond to your voice messages.

Google Voice also supports conference calls and call merging, so you can easily (and cheaply) plan a conference call. You can also spontaneously expand a typical two-person call to include more people. This is a major improvement for all of us who have not been able to make a conference call

happen when we badly needed one. Google Voice also lets you switch an incoming call from one phone to another without hanging up and redialing and to record part or all of an incoming call.



Figure 1-1:
Google
Voice keeps
you from
making an
SMS of
things.

Google Voice is potentially useful for anyone, but it offers an additional level of ease and utility when used with a smartphone. Google Voice-specific applications are also already available for iPhone and Google Android.

There's much more, as we describe throughout this book. But you can already see that Google Voice can make a big difference in how — and how effectively — you can use your phones.

Waking Up with Google Voice

Let's begin with a typical workday as it might unfold for you using Google Voice. Google Voice makes you more capable and accessible with regard to work, yet at the same time better able to protect your personal life and personal time.

Even if you don't work, much of the following applies to attending school, volunteering, keeping up with friends — anything that you do in groups. (And all things that you have more time for if you're not working.)

It's 6:20 a.m., and 10 minutes before your alarm goes off, your cell phone rings. Normally you would have no choice but to answer — what if it's important?

But with Google Voice in place, you know that the person must be important if the phone is even ringing, because you've sent all nonessential callers straight to voicemail for the night. Still, you let the call ring through to voicemail. It gets picked up by Google Voice, and you listen in to the message as it is being left. You hear that it's a message from a work colleague about the commute being crowded — something you need to know, but not a call you absolutely have to answer.

You're in control. In this case, you pick up the call as the message is finishing up so that you can thank your friend. But you could have just let it go if you wanted. You have the information you needed, and your blood pressure stayed low throughout.

You get up and get ready for work quickly. As you shower and eat your breakfast, you turn off the ringer on your cell phone, but both e-mail and voicemail messages show up onscreen in your e-mail inbox. (Figure 1-2 shows a transcribed voicemail message in Google Voice.) So you can glance at any messages shortly after they come in and respond to anything urgent.

You've planned a quick call to an overseas colleague before you leave for work, catching them at the end of their workday. In the past, you might have had to get to the office extra early to place the call, because it would be cheaper to make and appear on your employer's bill, not yours. But with Google Voice, the call is so cheap that you can make a quick call without worrying about the cost.

What were they thinking?

The Google Voice story starts with a company called Dialpad. Dialpad was a voice-over-IP (VOIP) pioneer, offering free phone calls over PCs. After crashing in the dot-com bust in 2001, Dialpad got new management — including Craig Walker and Vincent Paquet, later the co-founders of GrandCentral. The new management team made the company profitable and helped sell it off to Yahoo!, who used it as the core of their Yahoo! Voice offering, launched in 2005.

The key inspiration behind GrandCentral was the realization that the same technology that could help in making cheap calls could be used for call services as well. The key technical innovation in Google Voice is a *soft switch* — a telephone

call switch, like an old-fashioned switchboard but built in software. The services offered first by GrandCentral, and now by Google Voice, are largely applications running on the soft switch.

Yet the “secret sauce” of GrandCentral, and now of Google Voice, is only partly capability. The other part is simplicity. As first implemented by the GrandCentral team, and cleaned up and improved with help from Google, Google Voice has one of the cleanest, simplest, most attractive, and easiest to use interfaces one could imagine for such powerful software. It took considerable self-discipline on the part of the development teams to make Google Voice so easy to use.



Figure 1-2:
Google
Voice takes
a message
for you.

You call into Google Voice from your home phone instead of your cell phone, because the cellular connection can get a bit weak where you live. Then you dial through to your colleagues, at just a few cents a minute, and get through your business. But the call goes a bit long and you switch it to your cell phone, without interruption, to say your goodbyes as you grab your coat and head out the door toward work.

At Work with Google Voice

On the drive to work, you dutifully wear your hands-free headset and listen as a couple of calls come in, but you don't answer; you just listen to the messages being left, knowing you can cut in if you have to, but otherwise deferring most of your responses until you get to the office. You're less tense than usual, because the ringing of the phone doesn't compel an immediate response on your part.

You get to the office on time. At work, you open the two e-mailed voice message transcriptions from Google Voice and send e-mails in response. Before a meeting, you open up Google Voice on your computer and block your personal contacts, sending their calls to voicemail (supported, of course, by e-mail transcriptions, so you can respond if anything urgent comes up).

At work, you receive an important call on your Google Voice number and then use Google Voice to record part of it. Google Voice automatically

notifies the other party with a verbal message. You're able to concentrate fully on the call, with no need to take notes as a record. At the end of the call, you easily conference in your boss, despite that she is on the road, to add a few final words.

After the call is over, you forward the recording to the other party by e-mail (a practice that takes any possible tinge of rudeness out of recording someone on the phone). You then embed the recording in a blog post in your company's internal blog, so others can listen to and learn from it.

Throughout the day, you and your colleagues use Google Voice to flexibly manage calling groups for calls to individuals who are away from their desks or to the department as a whole. Many routine calls from vendors are automatically routed to voicemail or to other associates.

With Google Voice, it's much less important to be at your desk. Calls to your Google Voice number can go to both your desk phone and your cell phone, so you can use whichever one is handier. When you are away from your desk, a smartphone interface allows you to make and manage calls easily through the company's Google Voice account, saving you hassle and the company a lot of money while keeping control. Figure 1-3 shows an Android interface for Google Voice of a type that many organizations are likely to be using.

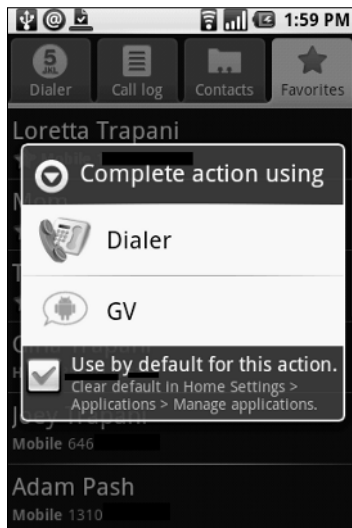


Figure 1-3:
Use Google Voice to put home on the back burner for a while.

Whether at your desk or on the move, using the phone in a conference room or your cell phone, you no longer need to worry over the cost of long calls to faraway colleagues. For international calls, you only pay a few cents per

minute. And you pay the same rates on your cell phone — which is more convenient, but uses minutes from your plan — or from a desk phone. You can even use any handy land line without worrying that you're putting charges on someone else's bill.

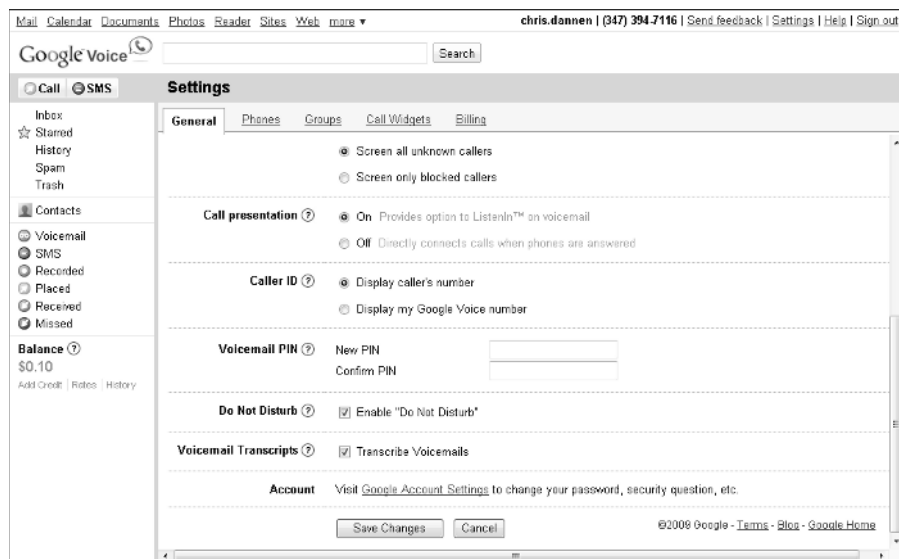
Relaxing at Home with Google Voice

At home, the most exciting thing that Google Voice makes possible is what *doesn't* happen.

You don't get any nasty surprises on your home phone voicemail that you missed a package delivery, or missed a plumber's appointment, or missed your last chance to pay your credit card bill without a penalty. You've received any such voicemail messages during the day, as both e-mail transcripts and as actual voice messages you can pick up from any Web browser or phone. And you've been able to deal with any occasional mini-crisis before it becomes a real one.

You don't get any calls during dinner, whether by yourself or with your family, because you can block all calls and leave a message that you'd be available later that evening. Figure 1-4 shows the Google Voice screen you use to make this happen quickly.

Figure 1-4:
Use Google
Voice to
protect
"home"
from
"phone" for
a while.



And you don't get any sales calls, ever, because numbers from unknown callers don't ring your home phone anymore. They get sent straight to Google Voice's voicemail-with-e-mail-notification, so you can respond to any calls you actually want within a reasonable time and never have to bother with the rest. (Or, leave your phone open to calls but rely on Google Voice's telemarketer database to screen out the vast majority of sales calls.)

By using Google Voice, you can go to bed early without the phone ringing, watch a movie without interruption, or stay up late making cheap, Google Voice-enabled calls to friends, family members or work colleagues in various time zones around the world.

Grasping the Bottom Line

In the next few chapters, we show you how to get the most out of Google Voice. Managing phones from a computer interface is new to everyone, so there's going to be some cogitation involved, and it may take some practice.

So it's worth reflecting a bit on the benefits that Google Voice brings as inspiration for the effort you need to put in to really master it and make it your friend.

Saving time and reducing stress

With Google Voice, your phones ring less. Until Google Voice, your phones owned you — the very first ring of a phone was something you had to deal with right then and there. But Google Voice gives you so much control: allowing you to block calls, let a call roll through to voicemail — then answer it if needed — and more. Your phone rings less, and you're in control when it does.

Most of the early adopters of Google Voice are likely to be people with lots of phones to worry about. Google Voice cuts down on the relay game you play with friends and family. But its stress-reducing qualities shine through even if you only have a single landline phone plopped in the middle of your living room (or, as more and more people do, a single cell phone always near you).

How does it really save time, though? It's a question of attention. Before, each call and voicemail message commanded the same amount of attention, because you never knew the content of the call in advance. Now you can prioritize calls and voicemails the same way you do other forms of communication, such as e-mail and printed mail, which you can judge by a brief glance. That's why people have switched so much of their communications to e-mail

from the phone; it's easier for our brains to filter by reading than by listening. Google Voice allows the achievement of a happy medium between e-mail-centric and voice-centric communication, each of which has its advantages.

Saving money

Today, overseas calls can cost several dollars even for a few minutes, especially from your cell phone. Even long-distance U.S. calls can add up. You either have to force a call to be shorter than it should be, or grin and bear the cost.

Conference calls are hard to set up, subject to hard and fast trunk line availability and time limits, and often very expensive indeed.

Calls home to loved ones while on a business trip can be very expensive, either burning a hole in your pocket or prompting quizzical questions from your boss — or his or her boss. And juggling time zones against access to cheaper calling opportunities is a nightmare.

Skype, Google Talk, and similar computer-supported calling services have made a dent in phone costs. But they lack the call quality and reliability of landline phones and the flexibility of mobile phones. Privacy is harder as well. (How many intensely private phone calls get made in Internet cafes and other public places to save money?)

Google Voice really gives you the best of the computer and the phone. You can make calls where you want to, when you want to, with exponentially less worry about cost. This aspect of Google Voice will improve many people's lives.

Gaining control

"Power to the people" was a popular theme of the flower children back in the 1960s. Google Voice, like a lot of other Internet-based technology, makes it a reality.

Although getting a grasp on all of the features takes some work, it's also really cool to be able to control what happens with your phones. And, beyond the personal level, it's even cooler to be able to control how groups of phones interact with groups of people. A few years ago, there was a lot of talk about PDAs — Personal Digital Assistants. Google Voice makes not only your own phones, but all the phones around you into little helpers that can accept some calls and push off the rest to another phone or voicemail (with e-mail accompaniment).

It may take years for the practice of phone management through Google Voice to catch up with so much that's new — the possibilities that Google Voice itself, smart phone interfaces, other add-on products and future improvements in all of the above will make possible. Some of Google Voice's capabilities and cost savings are likely to work their way into competing products as well, so the environment will change for everyone, Google Voice users or not. But the end result will be phones that do what people want them to do, rather than phones that make people do unneeded work.

Google Voice is going to change the way you and everyone else uses phones. So you've made a smart choice by adopting Google Voice, and by investing in this book to get the most out of it. You can start getting the benefits right away — you can save hassle, time, and money, while gaining control and getting out in front of a technology that may change all our lives.