



James is the founder of Birmingham-based Google business specialist Kimbley IT. A serial entrepreneur, James owns a property company, and used to run a web design company. He's also been a consultant for TV programme The Gadget Show. In this interview, we talked about the latest Google developments.

RT: You've recently visited Google Cloud Next 17 at the London Excel Centre, is that right?

JK: Yes. Google have an exhibition called Next 17 and it travels around the world. I wanted to see what they were showing, so I went along to learn more.

RT: So, what did you find out? I know there are other exhibition dates coming up, and Google have made some of the live streams available online too.

JK: The keynotes are normally recorded, and they did seem to video the breakout sessions too, but they haven't been uploaded yet.

RT: Let's get your expert opinion and find out what's happening in the Google world. The first thing that struck me was this announcement they made about the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Their Cloud platform is going to be ready by May 2018?

JK: The GDPR comes into force in May 2018, so Google are planning to have their platform ready by then, making them slightly behind Amazon and Microsoft. I think Microsoft are already prepared for GDPR.

RT: That means that Google Apps are compliant. Or should I say G-Suite?

JK: It's actually Google Cloud Platform, and G-Suite is an element of that, along with everything else they offer, which is all in the cloud.

RT: There are three levels to it now, I think? I use Google Apps Basic for my business.

JK: There's G-Suite Basic, G-Suite Business and G-Suite enterprise, and previously there was an old legacy version, which is no longer available, along with G-Suite and G-Suite Unlimited, which they've renamed.

A lot of the stuff they're working on is to refine their offerings so it works better for big enterprises. It's great for small and mid-size businesses, but the larger companies weren't signing up.

Of course, Virgin Atlantic and ITV were customers, but it didn't have all of the functionality required, especially on the data storage side. It's now enterprise-ready and works really well.

RT: All of your clients you work with on a day to day basis are G-Suite users, aren't they, and you've built your whole IT business around that. Tell us a bit more about Kimbley IT?

JK: We work with fun, young and growing companies, and we're very specific about who we have as clients. Any MSP who partners with us will use the Google Cloud Platform, so they stop using Microsoft or Amazon platforms and everything is moved across.

We offer support for their devices too, but the nice thing is that we have standardisation across our platform for all our clients, so everything functions the same and we can support them quickly. We also have access to Google's support department of thousands of people if we need them, which gives consistency throughout and helps the business run nicely.

RT: Let's talk about what's coming next for G-Suite? What was mentioned at the Next 17 event?

JK: They had a slide showing all the new developments, and there were too many for them to talk about during the day! There were a few that stood out for me, including one that's already launched, called Team Drive. This is a new area of Google Drive which makes it very easy to share files, folders and documents with your team and within the company.

Previously, you'd have an area called 'My Drive' which was where anyone who uploaded the data was the owner of it, rather than the business, which caused issues with sharing.

For example: you could create a master folder and someone else could create a subfolder which they own. If you add a file to it and they then delete the folder, where does your file live?

Team Drive means that everything is in the same place, and we'd recommend creating a Team Drive for every client you have, and then use the built-in mailing list in G-Suite so that when someone comes onboard they have instant access to the drives they need, rather than having to go to request access.

There are also some extra controls over the files within the Drive too, so there's an admin with full access who can do whatever they like with the Team Drive. There's a function called 'edit only' which allows your team members to upload files, create folders and edit documents, but they can't delete or move anything they don't have permission to touch.

It gives you more control who has access to things, including sharing certain files with external people, and ensures that business-sensitive documents aren't inadvertently shared with clients or others who shouldn't see them.

RT: This is obviously something that Google were aware was a problem?

JK: This is the solution for enterprises, because they didn't like the lack of control and ownership in Google Drive before, so Team Drive gives them that control. The admins can create whatever they need, and add and remove members, so it gives the big companies the functionality they're after. And it's a bonus for the SMEs, because it gives them greater control over their data at no extra charge.

RT: There's a feature that I'm quite excited about, which is Drive File Stream?

JK: It is a game-changer for Google Drive! File Stream works on PC and Mac by setting up a 'G Drive' on the hardware, if the original G drive hasn't been used by something else. It maps itself to the drive, and rather than downloading all the data that's on G-Drive, it downloads thumbnails and shortcuts to the files within it.

When you click on something, it'll have the file downloaded to your machine within six seconds. It'll cache files that you use often, so using AI (artificial intelligence) in the background it can work out which files you're going to be opening regularly to making them a bit quicker as well as available offline.

The nice thing is that the computer thinks it's connected to a server. For example, we have a client who manufactures curtains, and they use a particular type of software which is quite old. We had stick the data files on a NAS (network attached storage) drive and map all the computers to it, because using the standard drive would cause the programme to stop working.

But because of the mapped drives, we can have this sitting on Google Drive and it works on the computers in the same way as a server connection, so that programme is in the Cloud rather than in servers.

RT: So this will have implications for lots of old applications, and they can all be used in that way?

JK: That's the reason Google have introduced it, yes. The idea is to allow legacy programmes to move over to the Cloud and be run there instead, without affecting the machines.

RT: I'm excited about that, because it means instead of syncing all the data to my local? I'm going to be able to access my Google Drive directly, and access files natively. It's a little more traditional in the approach, but for the G-Suite perspective it's really going to work well.

JK: It will. I believe that DropBox and Microsoft OneDrive are going to bring out similar features too, and that just makes sense to do so.

RT: Let's talk about something that I think is a bit neglected – Google+. It's been around for a long time as a social media platform, and it never really took off in the way it might have done.

It's got its own following, and I've got a lot of value from it over the years, but it's never become a mainstream social media platform. I'm intrigued to see what Google are going to do with it, specifically how they're going to make about it useful to small businesses.

JK: It's a very interesting product, because there's a lot of development taking place on it, and very small things are happening all the time. It's been moved into the core offering of G-Suite, along with Gmail, Calendar and Hangouts, so it's not going to disappear any time soon. This also means that the focus has changed from it being a social network to a platform for businesses to use internally.

The key announcement I saw is that they'll give you the option to turn it into a walled garden for your business. At the moment, the admin can say that they don't want a user to publish a post publicly, but the user can override that if they want.

The walled garden version means there's no possibility of that, and I think it'll become more of a dashboard for your business. When you log into G-Suite for the first time, it'll have all your notifications and what's been shared. It'll have more integration with Google Docs, Drive and Calendar.

RT: Is this a competitor to Slack, or am I off the mark?

JK: I think the new Hangouts will be the competitor to Slack. Google+ is the competitor to Microsoft 365's tool 'Teams'. Google are pitching it as a way to get to know your colleagues, and Google themselves have a community called 'How Google Really Works' and people share tips on various things, such as documents and computers.

You can also do project work on it, so you can build a little community around a client, which is where you share all the content about that client, and any ideas you might have.

RT: Tell us what you're excited about in terms of progression for Google Hangouts. For people who are unfamiliar, what are Google Hangouts and what are the new features that are coming up?

JK: Hangouts is a bit of a mess at the moment! Google's messaging strategy has gone a bit funny in the last year or so, because they missed the boat on the consumer hangout side that WhatsApp has got into. They decided to remove a few of the features of Hangouts and launch an app called Allo for consumer users – it hasn't taken off and has been a complete flop.

They announced that Hangouts that would be for business, as a messenger tool and get rid of the consumer aspect all together. The problem is that they have three different types: Hangouts, which we all know and is instant messaging, video group chats and sharing documents and so on.

Then there's Hangout Chat, which is the new Slack competitor, and then you've got Hangouts Meet, which is just a video hangout. Why these can't all just be in Hangouts doesn't make sense, because that would be easier.

I'm a big fan of Appear.in, which is a very simple messaging programme with no plugins required – you share a URL with somebody and they can join in the conversation. Hangouts Meet is a copy of that, and in the video app you can have up to 25 people attending at the same time (or 30 people if you've got the Enterprise version).

The Enterprise package also gives the option for a dial-in number, so people can call in and listen to the meeting, although that's currently only US-based. It would be nice to have this on the Business package as well as the pay as you go option. Meet doesn't require logins or anything like that, which is good, because when Hangouts started it was integrated with Google+, and that caused problems for attendees from outside the company who didn't have access to Google Apps, which meant people stopped using it.

Hangout Chat is the interesting one, because that's the competitor to Slack. I've got access to the early version at the moment which is currently very basic, especially compared to what's in Hangouts, but it will have nice features and access to G-Suite. It has an interesting feature where a single chat can be separated into multiple chats, so they're using a lot of AI bots in there.

For instance, we could create a chatroom where we talk about marketing, and it will automatically surface different topics within the room. To explain further: if we started talking about lunch, it would move that to near the top of the chat mid-morning, and as the day went on it would go further down the conversation, and more relevant stuff would reappear.

RT: It's exciting, particularly that Google is using the AI to differentiate itself from Slack. One of the biggest problems I have with Slack, and I'm a huge fan of it, is that in a thriving community with hundreds of users, it becomes unwieldy and unusable.

The idea of using AI to bring the most relevant conversations to the top without any manual intervention could be a game changer, and differentiate this product away from Slack.

JK: When Google renamed Apps to G-Suite, they changed the focus so there's a lot of AI into it and get rid of a lot of the mundane tasks that you have to do.

RT: On the subject of AI, I think it's one of the most important aspects of what Google are doing. Talk about Smart Reply specifically, because I think it'll be a godsend to a lot of people!

JK: We know people struggle with their emails, particularly those using Outlook. Smart Reply is available in Inbox by Gmail, but it will be coming to Gmail soon, and what it does is analyse the emails you've been sent, and automatically write three responses for you to pick from.

If you're on a mobile, it's one tap to select the reply you want, and one mouse click on your laptop or desktop. Choose the response and it'll automatically add to the email, then you just click send and off it goes.

It learns how you normally respond to people, so it uses the same kind of wording as you would, and takes over the mundane stuff – if someone sends you a message to arrange a meeting, for example, it will come back with a choice of 'yes, I can do that' or 'no I can't' and at some point hopefully it will be able to look at your calendar and offer an alternative time or date.

RT: Without going off at a tangent too much, I think it's worth saying that when you and I came to set up this conversation, rather than going backwards and forwards or involving members of our team to get a suitable date, we did something quite interesting.

JK: We did. We used a service called x.ai which specialises just in meetings. My AI is a lady called Amy Ingram, who doesn't exist at all, and she's connected to my Google calendar. When we came to set up the meeting, I cc'd Amy into my reply to you, Richard, to say that I was happy to meet, and she then suggested some possible dates.

You were then able to reply in natural language, as you would to a real person, to say yes or no to the suggestions and propose other dates instead. Amy takes over the bookings for me, and arranged today's interview – all I had to do at the end was to say yes.

RT: We had to rearrange the meeting due to a scheduling conflict on my side, so when I got in touch to change the date, James simply passed me back to Amy. I emailed her to find another date, and she even resent the calendar invite.

We did wonder what would have happened if we'd connected Amy with my real-life PA, Holly, but I think we'll leave that for another day!

JK: I've seen stories on the internet of instances where that's happened and the person hasn't realised they were talking to an AI, so it works well.

RT: If you hadn't told me, I probably wouldn't have guessed it was an AI, and I was using natural language rather than adjusting it because I was talking to a robot.

Let's go back to Google, but staying on the subject of AI. There were a number of Calendar updates, weren't there, which included some interesting features.

JK: The main thing is that Calendar is going to have to have a redesign. The web version looks a bit dated, although it works quite well. If you look at it on your iPad or your Android phone it looks a lot nicer, and it has AI built into it.

For instance, if you wanted to go to the gym every day, the mobile version of Calendar will help you find a slot to fit in 30 minutes of exercise, and it will programme it in for you.

RT: That was known as Google Goals. Is that still the case?

JK: No, it's just built into the Calendar app now. Hopefully the redesign of the desktop version will include some of this AI. Gmail is also getting an update, and it will look quite different. A new feature is coming to Gmail called Addons, which is similar to the ones on Google Chrome, but this is about playing with the CSS and functionality of Gmail to add this to your inbox.

They are an official way for apps to interact with Gmail using an API (application programming interface), so it's got some cool features. Say you're talking to a lead, and you use ProsperWorks (one of the official partners) as your CRM (customer relationship management), Gmail will add a ProsperWorks icon to the email.

If you tap it, it'll load inside of Gmail and you can check the details you hold on this contact, such as when you last spoke to them and what about. On your mobile, it will do this within the app so you don't have to go out and back in again.

RT: Lots of cool stuff coming for Gmail! One of the other AI features that I think is interesting is the one that is going to be used within the Calendar for meeting room bookings. Did you come across that?

JK: Yes, that's another one-click function. If you want to book a meeting the AI can find a time. It's also a bot inside the Hangouts Chat, so if you're talking to your team and want to quickly get a meeting together, you can say '@Meet, arrange a meeting now' and it'll find a time where everyone on the team is free and add it to their calendars.

RT: Another great use of AI, and this is not futuristic, pie in the sky, it's used to make a difference to what people are doing on a day to day basis, right now.

JK: Yes, and it allows you to get on with what you really want to do, rather than scheduling meetings.

RT: There was another feature that Google mentioned that I just want to touch on, although I don't think it's going to be relevant to the majority of our audience, who are mostly IT companies looking after small and medium-sized businesses. Google Jamboard – what is it and why am I excited about it from a geeky perspective?

JK: From a techy perspective it's a very cool device – it's basically a TV screen that uses a capacitive stylus that doesn't need a battery. It's a whiteboard that links up with Jamboards in other offices across the country or around the world, and allows you to doodle and mind map with another team, so you can all see what's happening in real time.

It saves to Google Drive, so you don't have to stick a message to it to ask people not to wipe the doodles off. You can access it whenever you want and carry straight on. It's very pricy, around \$6,000, and I don't think any small businesses are going to want it.

RT: No, I don't think so, but maybe one to keep an eye on for the future. What else was happening at Google Cloud Next? Is there anything else that I missed?

JK: It was a cool event, with around 4,500 people there. I think there could have been more demos, but they had a lot of partners there, such as G-Suite's approved vendors. This includes RingCentral and Dial Pad, which provide VoIP services, and these will integrate deeply with the new Add-on feature for Gmail.

The breakout sessions were also great, and they went into specifics of certain areas of each product. I went to the G-Suite focused ones, but there were lots of others relating to the cloud and coding.

RT: I went to Google HQ in Dublin and I was blown away by what they've got coming up, and it's an exciting time to be a Google partner. How are your clients finding the difference Google has made to their business? It's all well and good for us techies to get excited about it, but what does it mean in the real world for people?

JK: It's simple stuff such as Smart Reply that people like. One of our clients is an accountancy firm who use Xero, and that plugs in really nicely with G-Suite. They've flipped over to Inbox by Gmail because of the snooze feature, so you can tell emails to go away and come back at another time. Smart Reply also saves them so much time, because they get a lot of 'yes/no' questions from clients.

The AI is what's helpful to people. For example, Google Sheets has the new AI in it, which allows you to use natural language to get it do things for you. Instead of having to know a complex formula, you can type in what you want it to do, such as 'create a profit and loss pie chart'. It will find the data within the sheet and build the chart for you, without you having to manually select the cells.

RT: I think these are some of the features that sound basic on the surface or you assume won't save you much time, but I know from personal experience that once you start using them you can never go back.

I adopted Google Apps six or seven years ago, after being a Microsoft partner in my previous life as an IT business owner, and I said I'd never give up Outlook, yet within 48 hours of using it, I loved it.

People are used to using Microsoft because it comes in the traditional packages, and it's a culture shock when you move across to Google, but once you do you immediately see the benefits and you never go back.

JK: That's completely true. One of the hidden benefits is the fact that your clients waste a lot of money with Microsoft office, because 90% of the features won't be used by their employees.

The way I look at it is that Google focuses on the 10% of features that people actually use and get things spot on with the AI. Who needs 3D WordArt these days?!

RT: Based on everything we've talked about, is there anything that as I'm a Google user, is there something I should be doing which I'm not doing at the moment?

JK: You should be dropping Evernote and moving to Google Keep!

RT: Evernote is my modern Outlook – I can't imagine ever giving it up! Tell me why I should move?

JK: There's AI in Google Keep, and it's become part of G-Suite and Google Docs, so anything you've written in Evernote can be quickly transferred into a proper document. You can load it up in the sidebar in Google Docs too, so you can get to your notes quickly and drag and drop them into your document, along with photos.

RT: I'll give it another look...!