

First Impressions of Google Workspace Flows (Closed Alpha): A Power User's Perspective

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As someone accustomed to building custom automations for Google Workspace daily, primarily utilising the robust Zenphi no-code solution, I approached the Google Workspace Flows (Closed Alpha) with great interest and a seasoned eye. My initial experience, while promising in concept, reveals some significant limitations that I believe are crucial for its evolution into a truly powerful automation tool.

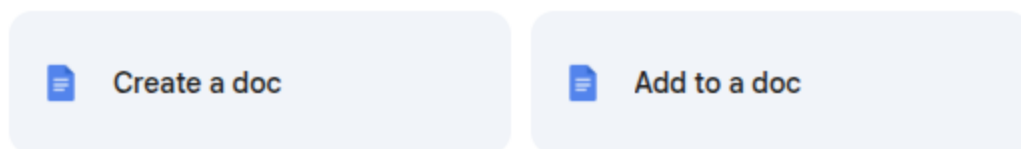
Disclaimer: My evaluation of Google Workspace Flows is grounded in my extensive experience with Zenphi, which serves as my benchmark for no-code automation within the Google Workspace ecosystem.

The Alpha's Current State: A Foundation with Room to Grow

The current Closed Alpha of Google Workspace Flows feels very, very limited. While the suggested templates showcase some interesting possibilities, venturing beyond them to create custom automations quickly exposes inherent restrictions. It's akin to having a well-designed blueprint for a few specific structures, but lacking the fundamental building blocks and tools to construct anything truly bespoke.



















Docs actions in Flows

Docs



Tasks

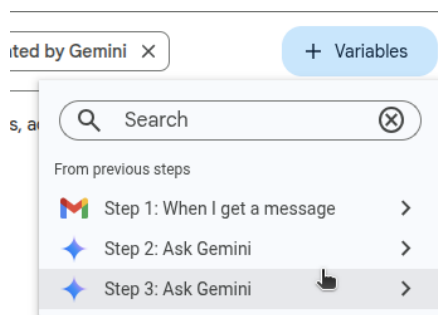
Docs actions in a tool like Zenphi

| | | |
|---|---|---|
|  |  | Convert to Google Docs Converts Microsoft Word, OpenDocument Text, HTML, RTF, plain text, JPEG, PNG, GIF, BMP, and PDF files to Google Docs format. |
|  |  | Create Document Creates a new Google Docs document. |
|  |  | Create Document from Template Creates a new document or PDF file using the specified template in Google Docs. |
|  |  | Export Document Exports a Google Docs document to another file format. |
|  |  | Insert Content into Document Inserts HTML or text content into a Google Docs document. |
|  |  | Insert Table from Sheets into Document Adds a table range from a Google Sheets file to a specific place in a Google Docs document. |
|  |  | Merge Documents Inserts the content of one Google Docs document into another document. |
|  |  | Replace Placeholders in Document Updates a Google Docs document by replacing one or more placeholder tokens with the specified text. |
|  |  | Translate Google Docs Document Translates a Google Docs document into another language using AI. |

Key Missing Functionalities: The Immediate Roadblocks

Here's what I immediately found myself missing, which are fundamental to building effective and manageable workflows:

1. **Renaming Steps for Clarity and Reference:** The inability to rename steps to something unique and descriptive is a significant hindrance. In multi-step automation, clear labeling is paramount for understanding the flow's logic, debugging, and referencing specific actions without confusion. This is a basic quality-of-life feature that transforms a simple sequence into a truly manageable process.



Example: When adding the output from your Ask Gemini step, you do not know what each of them do by looking at its label, since they

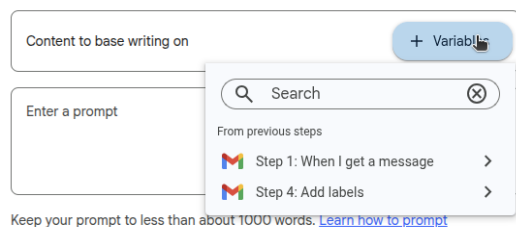
are all named the same.

2. **Lack of "Run Now" Implementation:** Currently, any Flows I create are only active for new emails. This means there's no way to retroactively apply a flow to existing emails or to manually test a flow on a specific email without sending a new one. This severely limits testing capabilities and the ability to process historical data.

Deeper Limitations: Hampering Dynamic Automation with Gemini

The integration with Gemini, while powerful in concept, is currently limited by its inaccessibility from other steps in a truly dynamic way. For example, I cannot ask Gemini to extract a specific date from an email subject and then use that extracted date in an email filter further down the flow. This significantly hampers the possibility of creating truly dynamic and intelligent flows that adapt to content.

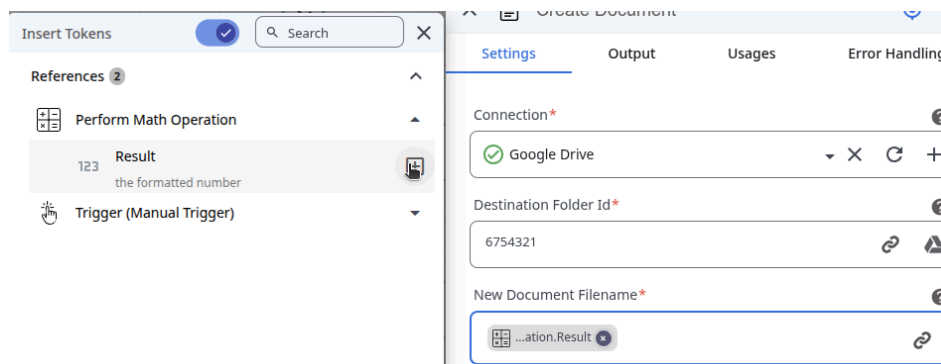
Availability of variables in Flows to set field to its value



Only a few actions will show up in the variables list, even if I earlier asked Gemini to extract the Doc ID or similar for use here.

Availability of variables (tokens in Zenphi) to set field to its value

In a mature automation environment, you will have variables available in most places, allowing for a very dynamic flow.



Toolbox Constraints: A Focus on Email, Less on Integration

The current toolbox within Workspace Flows has a number of email functions, which is

a good start, but only two for calendar operations. This imbalance was immediately apparent when I attempted to create a flow to share meeting notes from a meeting once the associated email arrived. The following blockers prevented such a flow:

- **OK** 1. **Email:** (Flow Trigger) When email is received from Google Meet...
- **??** 2. **Gemini:** Extract the Doc ID for the meeting notes
- **N/A** 3. **Summary:** Create a summary of the [Gemini Doc ID]
- **??** 4. **Email:** Create a draft email with the summary in body
- **??** 5. **Gemini:** Fetch the participants of the meeting mentioned in the email subject.
- **N/A** 6. **Email:** Add the participants as receivers of the draft email
- **OK** 7. **Chat:** Send me a notification on Chat that the draft is prepared.

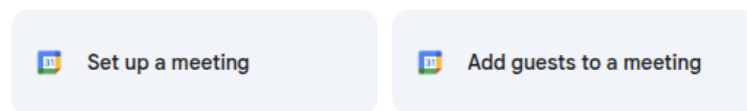
Analysis of Blockers:

- **Steps 2 & 3:** The critical issue here is that I cannot reliably reference the variable output from the Gemini action in the subsequent "Summary" action. This means I have no way of knowing if Gemini successfully extracted the Doc ID, rendering both steps non-functional in practice. This points to a fundamental issue with variable passing between steps.
- **Step 4:** You can only draft a *Reply* email, but not a *new* email with a set main receiver for review in the Draft folder before sending it. This limitation forces workarounds that diminish the automation's efficiency and user experience.
- **Steps 5 & 6:** Crucially, there is no action to look up Calendar events (though you can create them and add guests). Without the ability to fetch meeting details like participants directly from a calendar event linked in an email, this part of the flow is entirely blocked.

These are simple, fundamental functions that *should* be present to make Workspace Flows genuinely useful for everyday automation scenarios.















The calendar actions in Flows

Calendar



Docs

Calendar actions in Zenphi (The personal actions, there are more under admin actions)

| | | |
|---|---|--|
|  |  | Add Attendees Invites one or more new attendees to the specified Google Calendar event. |
|  |  | Create Event Creates a new Google Calendar event. |
|  |  | Delete Attendees Removes one or more new attendees from the specified Google Calendar event. |
|  |  | Find Event Retrieves the details of a Google Calendar event. |
|  |  | List Events Returns events within a Google Calendar based on the provided search criteria. |
|  |  | List Free/Busy Information Returns free/busy information for a set of Google Calendars. |
|  |  | Update Event Updates an event in a Google Calendar. |

The Most Crucial Improvements Needed

For Google Workspace Flows to evolve beyond a "fancy email sorting filter", three key improvements are paramount:

1. **Gemini Output -> Field Variable Access:** The ability to reliably access and utilise variables outputted by Gemini actions across other steps in a flow is, in my opinion, the single most crucial improvement needed. This would unlock immense flexibility and allow for truly inventive and dynamic automations. Imagine extracting key data points, sentiment, or classifications with Gemini and then seamlessly feeding that into subsequent actions like conditional logic or data population.
2. **READ Access to Google Workspace Resources:** Flows needs the capability to *read* information from various Google Workspace resources beyond just the immediate trigger. This includes:
 - **Content:** Reading the content of Google Docs, Sheets, or Slides based on a trigger.
 - **Ownership and Status:** Determining the owner of a file, the status of a calendar event, or permissions on a document.
3. **Testing features:** Functions such as Run Now and the ability to log output and results would be crucial to comfortably being able to develop automations.

Without robust read access, Flows cannot make informed decisions or retrieve necessary context for more sophisticated automations. Without logging and manual

triggers, the lack of control makes this a difficult tool to operate.

Other observations:

There are some GUI integrations that need some work, for example the side panel in Gmail does not update automatically when you have created a new flow, and forces you to refresh the page to see it. A small thing, but contra intuitive to how Google's other Workspace tools integrate and behave.

Looking Forward

While the Google Workspace Flows Closed Alpha is currently limited, the underlying concept of integrating AI-powered automation directly into the Workspace ecosystem is incredibly powerful. I am genuinely looking forward to future updates and the development of these crucial functionalities. With these improvements, Google Workspace Flows has the potential to become an indispensable tool for enhancing productivity and streamlining workflows for millions of Google Workspace users.

**#GoogleWorkspace #WorkspaceFlows #Automation #NoCode #GeminiAI
#Productivity #WorkflowAutomation #AlphaReview**

If you wish to discuss automatons for your environment, you are more than welcome to reach out:

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