

Cheaper alternatives to Microsoft Office



By Rob Davis

Conventional wisdom holds that a substantial investment in software systems is necessary for efficiency and that efficiency is a prerequisite for profitability. At least, this is a line commonly pushed by IT consultants and computer salespersons, who have a vested interest in encouraging their clients to invest heavily in their services and products. But this 'best is better' and 'you pay for what you get' view is not always correct.

A classic example of over-investment in software systems is the lawyer who can barely type using a full version of Microsoft Office merely to open email enclosures and to proof documents.

Microsoft Office is an excellent package that justifiably deserves its position as the 900kg gorilla of office suites. But it is also a very bloated, hungry, expensive gorilla that contains many features that even experienced users will never use.

The truth is that Microsoft Office can be overkill for people who are not experienced typists, have no training in spreadsheet use and programming, rarely give PowerPoint presentations and are not familiar with database design and manipulation.

Microsoft Office has such market penetration in the PC world, however, that many users think it is the only game in town. Fortunately, this is no longer the case. In fact, there are several good (and very cheap) alternatives to Microsoft Office. These deserve greater attention from firms that may be looking for ways to control their runaway IT budgets.

Indeed, there is a growing trend for large corporations to eschew Microsoft Office, and even Windows itself, for cheaper solutions. While this trend is not yet noticeable in the legal industry, declining profits are causing many firms to review expense budgets, and it is only a matter of time before lawyers begin to question the wisdom of investing in technology that exceeds their needs.

With this in mind, it is timely to examine some of the alternatives to Microsoft Office currently on the market.

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THINKFREE OFFICE

One of these is Thinkfree Office. This is a cheap (at US\$49.95) and small (about 20MB when installed) application that replicates most of the regularly used functionality of the Microsoft Office for a fraction of the cost.

Where Microsoft Office provides Word, Excel and Powerpoint, Thinkfree's comparable applications are called Write, Calc and Show. While Thinkfree does not include any database application (other than its spreadsheet, which has limited database functionality) it does include a file manager that will centrally store and manage its files, even if they are stored on external media, on another workstation on a local area network, or even on another computer accessible via the internet.

Users of Thinkfree may subscribe to a 'Cyberdrive' service for online storage of documents. The basic subscription

The screenshot shows the ThinkFree Office website's 'Store' page. The 'Retail Edition' is selected, showing two software boxes: 'ThinkFree Office for Mac OS' and 'ThinkFree Office for Windows'. Below the boxes, there are links to 'Where to buy Mac version' and 'Where to buy Windows version'. A paragraph describes the convenience of the CD-ROM installation and the inclusion of a printed guide and registration serial number. At the bottom, there are navigation links for Home, FAQ, News, Company, Contact Us, Support, and Site, along with a copyright notice for 2004.

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(US\$29.95 for 12 months) is for 40MB of storage; however, additional storage may be purchased, up to 1GB. Access to online storage is useful for some users who wish to work on documents from both work and home but do not have dial-up access to their office network.

Thinkfree also offers businesses the option of branding Thinkfree with their own corporate name for use by customers as part of a loyalty program. In these circumstances, Thinkfree will host the application from its own servers but make it available to users via the Internet. This is a novel approach that may prove useful to businesses catering for students, backpackers or others who could access the application from borrowed computers and Internet cafés.

While Thinkfree lacks the formatting and merging power of Word, it readily opens, creates and saves files in each of Microsoft's Excel, PowerPoint and Word formats. So documents created using Microsoft's products can be used via Thinkfree and vice versa.

As the user interface of Thinkfree is quite similar to that of Microsoft Office, those who are familiar with the Microsoft suite will quickly become comfortable using Thinkfree.

Thinkfree is developed in the Java computer language, so that different versions will run on Mac OS X, Mac Classic, Microsoft Windows® and Linux®. This makes it very flexible in a multi-platform environment, such as often occurs with lawyers who use different operating systems on their laptops or at home, than they use at work.

Thinkfree can be purchased online from the developer at <http://www.thinkfree.com>. Alternatively, boxed CD versions are available at most computer retailers.

OPEN OFFICE

Another alternative to Microsoft Office is Sun Microsystems-sponsored OpenOffice. This product incorporates word processing, spreadsheet, presentation and drawing modules, is advertised as being Microsoft Office compatible and contains tools to access data contained in most databases.

Files are stored in compressed XML which means that, unlike documents stored in proprietary formats, they are

The screenshot shows the OpenOffice.org website. The 'Download' section is active, displaying 'OpenOffice.org 1.1.4' with a 'Download' link and a 'CDROMs' link. There is a search bar and a 'Go' button. A 'Help' section lists links for 'Sitemap', 'FAQ', and 'Get help?'. Below this, there is a section for 'Tsunami Relief Donations' with a paragraph about the world being small and connected, and a link to 'OoRegiCon North America'. At the bottom right, there is a notice about a half-day event, 'the OoRegiCon, at the Desktop Linux Summit in San Diego 9'.

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accessible from any text editor that supports XML.

OpenOffice is available for Microsoft Windows, GNU/Linux ('Linux'), Sun Solaris, Mac OS X (under X11), and FreeBSD operating systems.

While it will run happily in OS X on the Mac under the X11 window (which provides a graphical interface for Unix applications), its look and feel might not currently appeal to most Mac users. Indeed, the Mac download page warns: 'The X11 release is about functionality, not looks.' In short, the Mac version for those who prefer Mac's standard graphical >>

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interface is still a work in progress.

Because it is an open source software project, there is no formal support. But there is an online archive for logging and tracking questions, and community support is available from volunteers who are familiar with the project.

These drawbacks aside, the software is free! So if price is an issue, OpenOffice is worth every penny you pay for it! OpenOffice can be downloaded from <http://www.openoffice.org>.

STAR OFFICE

StarOffice 7 is Sun Microsystems's commercial version of OpenOffice.

It includes a database engine (AdabasD), contains a database client for accessing other third party databases and also permits use of the StarOffice spreadsheet module as a data source (though size limitations exist in this instance).

Needless to say, StarOffice readily opens and save files in Microsoft Office formats. Third-party filters are also available on the Windows and Solaris versions of StarOffice to access documents created in old versions of Word Perfect.

Like its free sibling, Star Office also provides word processing, spreadsheet, presentation and database applications in the one office suite.

Similarly, StarOffice documents are also stored in

© StarOffice

compressed XML format, which makes them accessible from virtually any modern text editor.

But unlike OpenOffice, users of StarOffice have access to full commercial support from the developer. This is something that may appeal to IT managers concerned about support issues.

StarOffice also offers 40MB of online file storage for StarOffice users who become premium members. In many respects this resembles and offers the convenience of the Cyberdrive service offered by Thinkfree.

StarOffice is advertised to run on each of Linux, Sun Solaris, Windows 98 / NT / 2000 / Me / XP. A Mac version does not exist.

More details can be found at <http://www.sun.com> or alternatively at <http://www.staroffice.org>. Full retail versions of StarOffice currently cost US\$59.99 on Amazon.com (which is a \$20 discount on the developer's advertised price). Cheaper versions are available under bulk licensing direct from the developer.

This article has focused on the main alternatives to Microsoft Office that exist for multiple operating systems. There are also many platform-specific applications that provide many of the functions of different components of office productivity suites, such as word processing, spreadsheets, presentations and databases. In some instances, these specialist applications do the job as well, if not better, than some of the components of the Microsoft product.

So if cost is an issue in your practice, take heart. There are some good alternatives to Microsoft Office available for a very reasonable price. All that is needed for you to escape dependence on the Microsoft empire is an internet connection, a modest budget and a spirit of discovery. ■

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Mark is a professional engineer, a qualified ergonomist and has been an Australian Lawyers Alliance member for several years. His consulting group has advised about 2,000 enterprises since 1977 in safety, engineering and ergonomics. He also assists many Australian law firms in their personal injuries matters, and has prepared over 5,000 reports on public and workplace accidents. Mark appears regularly in court in several States, giving independent expert opinion, most commonly on **back and upper limb strains; machinery incidents; slips and falls; RSI; and vehicle accidents.** Fee options for plaintiffs include deferred payment, with special arrangements for regular clients. Details, a brief CV and a searchable list of cases can be found at www.ergonomics.com.au



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