

RANDOM

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November 2006

COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

THOUGHTS

Can anything beat Microsoft Office in the office?

Microsoft has a virtual monopoly on standard office applications – Word, Excel, Outlook, Powerpoint, and Access. Neither Open Office nor Corel Wordperfect offers the full line-up. Within the next several months, Microsoft will release Office 2007, the new version of the suite that's been in development since 2003. The user interface will change dramatically and that will perplex some users. There's also the cost of upgrading. Upgrading one or two copies in a small office might not be a big deal, but upgrading tens of thousands of copies in a large corporation will be expensive. Managers may look more closely at Wordperfect's office suite, which is less expensive, or at Open Office, which is free.

Neither offers a unified e-mail/task/calendar application such as Outlook. Wordperfect has an e-mail client, but it doesn't work with an Outlook Exchange server. For a lot of people, that's a critical requirement. Open Office has no e-mail client. Not all companies use an Exchange server, though, and those who need calendar/task management that can be shared can choose from several free on-line services. If their e-mail system runs on IMAP or POP3, nearly any e-mail application will work.

So for some of us, there are options other than the one from Microsoft.

I like the idea of Open Office, but the implementation sometimes is deficient. On a Mac, Open Office once required the X11 X-Window system, an antique with roots in the 1980s. The current protocol was developed in 1987. I'm told, though, that a new version doesn't require X-11, but I haven't seen it in operation. Open Office is an application that runs natively on Windows machines, though, and Windows is what most office workers use.

Not quite Microsoft Office

Each of the applications in Open Office is less robust than the Microsoft equivalent, but maybe you don't need all the robustness that Microsoft provides. And in some cases, the Open Office version is better. For example, I sometimes receive an Excel file that has been created by a database application that runs on Oracle. Excel cannot open these files; it claims that the file has been damaged. Open Office Calc, on the other hand, opens the files without a problem and saves them in Excel format. Then Excel can open the file.

Writer offers features similar to those in Microsoft Word and can both read and write Word files. Writer can save files in Adobe PDF format. Writer makes many functions from Calc (the Open Office equivalent of Excel) available in Writer tables.

The line-up

Calc is the Open Office spreadsheet program. Impress is similar PowerPoint and can export presentations in Adobe Flash format. Impress is probably the weakest application in the suite. Base is the database application. It allows the user to create databases in Access JET format, ODBC, and MySQL/PostgreSQL. Base was added to Open Office in version 2. Draw is a vector graphics editor patterned after Corel Draw. It has no Microsoft Office equivalent. Math is similar to Microsoft's Equation Editor. Formulas created in Math can be embedded in other Open Office documents.

Quickstarter is a useless application that automatically starts with Windows and loads core files and libraries for Open Office. If you use Open Office, turn this off. The Open Office macro recorder can record user actions and replay them. This feature can be compared to Microsoft's Visual Basic for Applications (VBA). It is based on StarOffice Basic.

When you install OpenOffice, the application will ask if you want it to answer for Word documents, Excel spreadsheets, and PowerPoint presentations. Instead of just assuming you want OO to take over for MS Office, the default is to leave things as they are.

Approach with caution

Writer's default format isn't "doc", but it can open Word files without problem. Most of Word's features are available, although Writer may call them something else.

Before deciding to replace Office with Open Office, it's important for you to examine each of the applications to be sure that the features you need are present.

The second most important application in Microsoft Office for most people is Excel. Open Office Calc imports even complicated Excel files with little problem.

Open Office Base can convert a Microsoft Access database to Open Office format. Access tables convert to OOBbase files, but some of the additional components (forms, for example) seem to disappear during the process. I suspect that most people who use OOBbase will use it with MySQL, though.

Open Office Draw may be compared to Corel Draw, but not favorably. You can draw simple things with Open Office Draw, but if you give it to your graphic designer, she'll leave in a huff. (I should point out that a huff looks a lot like a 1949 Plymouth coupe.)

Impress will allow you to open an existing PowerPoint presentation, but if that presentation uses advanced features in PowerPoint or if images have transparency, you'll be disappointed by the results. If PowerPoint is a critical part of your regular workflow, do not try to replace Microsoft Office with Open Office.

Overall: If you need the features that Microsoft Office provides, you need Microsoft Office. If not, Open Office is an outstanding bargain. **℞**

Blasted spammers!

One recent Friday morning, I was just minding my own business when – in the space of less than 30 minutes – I received more than 200 bounce messages. One of my addresses was being used by a spammer. Fortunately, the spammer had picked an address that I used rarely in the past and use not at all today. It wasn't a "real" address (one with a POP3 mailbox) but just a forwarding account. I killed the account and the bounce messages stopped immediately. Everything should be this easy.

That isn't always the case, though. What if the spammer creep had managed to use an address I depend on? I've seen this happen. People I know have had their addresses used by spammers and some of them have received **thousands** of bounces per hour. Thousands! For days!

What if you have just one address and a spammer starts using it? Would that be painful? There are known ways to eliminate spam. All that's needed is for organizations such as Microsoft, AOL, and others to get off their collective asses and to decide that they should work for the common good instead of trying to find some commercial advantage. Yeah, that's about as likely as bipartisan cooperation at the federal level.

We're hoping for some assistance from the government. No, not your city's police department. No, not the county sheriff. No, not the state. Because most spam still comes from the US, maybe the US federal government could help. Maybe that's the best possible solution today. But what's going to be needed long term is some sort of multi-national anti-spam force. A United Nations of spam fighters.

Do we need new laws?

No, we don't need any new laws. Right now, today, we have laws against fraud and it appears to me that at least 90% of spam is fraudulent. This week, for example, I've killed at least 500 messages that deal with a pump-and-dump stock scheme.

One of the subject lines was "Significant Message. You should to read" and the significant message I "should to read" told me about a stock: "The increase is up to 70% recently. (MXXR) is the worthwhile deal and those who knows it is making money."

Apparently the message was written by someone with a graduate degree in English. "Up to 70%" can, of course, be 2% or 0%. Or a loss of 100%. "Up to" is a phrase that almost always signals some level of dishonesty.

The message continued, "The drilling results of this highly capable oil partnership exceeded all its expectations." The hundreds of copies of that message arrived with a variety of subject lines:

- Significant message. You need to read.
- Grand message. You require to read.
- Momentous Message. You should to read.
- And on and on and on ...

Criminals (and the Mafia has been shown to be involved) buy stock in small companies through over-the-counter exchanges. The companies are little known. The crooks then use a variety of means to promote the stock.

Spam is just one way to promote (pump) the stock so that unwitting investors buy it and the price rises.

The fraudsters immediately sell their shares and stop pumping the stock.

The price drops and the fools who bought high are left to sell low, if at all, stock that has returned to its true (small) value.

I said "fools" and I think that's a valid description for anyone who would purchase stocks based on the recommendation of a spammer. **℞**

Can you believe that blog?

For some people, the Internet is all knowing. Information found on the Internet must be true because it's written by regular people, not by a bunch of "crooked, biased" journalists. Because some people think that way, fraudsters are having a field day. And now "honest" businesses are getting into the act.

Consumers read blogs and seemingly independent websites for what they believe will be unbiased information. I said "seemingly" because companies are starting to realize that they can set up shells to hype their wares. Sometimes they use paid endorsements on existing blogs and sites; sometimes they publish their own. What's the big deal?

When you see Ed McMahon on TV for Publisher's Clearing House, you know he's being paid. But when you read Fred Foonman's blog about digital cameras, you probably won't be aware that old Fred is on one of the manufacturer's payrolls. Fred isn't going to tell you. The manufacturer isn't going to tell you. You'll believe that his statements are really his instead of those of the manufacturer. In other words, *Good luck!* **℞**

on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

*"A successful manager
has learned the difference
between 'Charge!' and 'Follow me!'"*