

Random Thoughts

from William Blinn Communications

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Open Office 3: Competition for Microsoft?

In olden days (alternate opening: “Once upon a time”) there were word processors, spreadsheets, and database programs. Each was a separate application and users could select the “best of breed”. Then came the suites and, when you bought a word processor, you got a spreadsheet program, maybe a database program, and possibly a presentation program. Microsoft gained dominance even though Wordperfect and Lotus managed to maintain a small market share. The latest version of Open Office may modify the equation.

Open Office doesn't have the advanced features of Office 2007 or Wordperfect Office Suite X4, or even the features of previous versions, but it does have one large advantage, particularly in tough economic times: It's free. Open Office is the free version of Sun's Star Office and Open Office may be all you need if all you need is basic word processing, basic spreadsheet, and basic presentation functionality.

I didn't mention database management. That's because the Open Office database function is severely lacking. If you need a robust data management system, you'll need either Access (a part of the Microsoft Office Suite), Paradox (which comes with the professional version of Corel's Wordperfect Office Suite), or the free open-source MySQL with a free open-source front end. Don't try to perform serious data management functions with Open Office Base.

OO3 Covers the Basics

Writer, Calc, and Impress are the word processor, spreadsheet, and presentation program parts of the suite. Base, Draw, and Math are the weaker parts of the suite that provide limited database management, vector-based drawing, and the ability to create mathematical formulae.

WRITER: The word processor application looks a lot like Microsoft Word 2003, but offers one of Word 2007's important new features: The ability to save a document in PDF format. Writer can also read and write Word 2007 files as well as files in other word processor formats.



CALC: The spreadsheet program can read and write Microsoft Excel (xlsx) documents. In the example shown here, we have a sheet that shows a decimal number in the first column, the equivalent binary, hex, and octal values in the next 3 columns and then the printing character that value creates in the final column.

IMPRESS: As with most of the other components of Open Office, whether Impress will suffice depends on your presentation needs. Those whose needs are basic

and who don't need to create presentations that are fully compatible with Powerpoint will find Impress to be more than adequate. If you need Powerpoint's functions, though, you're going to need Powerpoint.

BASE: Base is the weakest component of the suite, primarily because reporting is so limited. Unlike other database programs that have built-in reporting functions, Base reports are essentially mail-merge functions that employ Writer. Reports are difficult to create and this seriously limits Base's usability: When trapped inside a database, information is essentially useless.

DRAW: Microsoft doesn't provide a vector-art application as part of the office suite, so Draw is essentially an effort to recreate Corel Draw. In this regard, it falls far short of the mark. Still, for basic office graphics, Draw could be sufficient.

MATH: The ability to create math functions is built in to Microsoft Word, but Open Office makes it a separate module. The result is the same: The user specifies codes that are then interpreted and represented as a formula. Whether the function is built in or separate makes little difference.

The Good, the Bad

As with many applications today, Open Office is capable of checking for updates and suggesting that you install them. But crashes that take down multiple components of the suite while leaving processes running can leave a sour aftertaste. β

Good Memories

Does anyone not own a USB thumb drive today? In 2001 I wrote about being introduced to the “Disk on Key” at PC Expo in New York City. The drive stored an astonishing 16MB of data and cost “only” \$70. A smaller 8MB drive was available for \$50. The company that made Disk on Key is no longer in business and PC Expo expired following the Internet commerce meltdown of 2000 and the terrorist attacks of 2001, but today you can buy a 16GB drive for about \$20.



I used to carry 6GB worth of storage in my pocket every day in the form of 3 2GB thumb drives. But when I saw an offer on Woot.com for a name-brand 16GB drive that would cost less than \$25 (shipping included) I had to have one.

To put this in perspective, a 6-page letter to a friend in Russia consumes about 20KB as a Word file on my computer’s hard drive. So that’s about 3.3KB per page. That means my new 16GB thumb drive would easily hold nearly 5 million pages of text.

As one who remembers when a 40MB disk drive was about 2/3ds the size of a washing machine and when 64KB of core memory fit in a compartment that was about 6 inches wide, 18 inches deep, and 24 inches tall, I find the ability to store 16GB of data in a device that could easily be concealed in a sock little short of amazing.

Year	Cost	MB	Cost/MB	
2001	\$50	8	\$6.25000	
2008	\$25	16,000	\$0.00156	99.975%

This is nearly a 100% price drop (99.975%) in just 7 years. You can imagine what would happen if the price of automobiles, electricity, or milk dropped 99.9%!

Fire Sale on Aisle 3

Another recent memory offer would have given me a 2GB secure digital (SD) card for about \$3, slightly more than half the price of shipping the card to me.

These USB devices make it possible for anyone to take large amounts of work home. But if you’re an IT security professional, they probably frighten you.

In less than a minute a disgruntled worker could download the entire company’s list of clients to a thumb drive that could then be taken past security guards who wouldn’t even notice it. **B**

End Approaches for Paper, Ink, Press, and the USPS

Well, maybe not exactly the end. But if you’re selling paper, ink, or presses to newspaper and magazine publishers, you’re in about the same position as the manufacturers of harnesses in the early 1900s. If you were paying attention in 1910, you might have realized that your business had a limited future.

The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR will lead the way among newspapers in dropping its print version. For magazines, the high-profile leader (to nobody’s great surprise) will be PC MAGAZINE. For several years, the magazine has made most of its profits from Web operations and the magazine has been largely an afterthought. The January issue will be the last PC MAGAZINE will print.

Advertising revenue is down. Costs of ink, paper, press operators, and postage are all up. A Web-only version eliminates all of those costs and leaves only the writers and designers. PC MAGAZINE is ahead of the curve because it is already essentially a Web operation. Other magazines still get most of their money from selling physical magazines. The formula will change for other magazines, too; just not as quickly.

Smaller publications have already announced an end to print editions, but PC MAGAZINE is by far the largest and most visible magazine to make the move. Print subscriptions are down. In the late 1990s, circulation hit 1.2 million issues, but now the magazine’s advertising base rate is about half that. As a result, ad rates are down and, exacerbating the problem, the number of advertisers is declining, too.

These kinds of problems parallel the situation being faced by radio and television stations. The new media still aren’t profitable, but the old media are losing money, too. **B**

