Should You Still Be Using Microsoft's Office Suite?

MICROSOFT HAS VIRTUALLY LOCKED UP THE OFFICE SUITE MARKET, BUT THERE ARE OTHER OPTIONS AND SOME OF THEM ARE FREE. IT'S WORTH CONSIDERING THOSE OPTIONS.

In the 1980s, dozens of word processor programs existed: Electric Pencil, Ami Pro, XyWrite, Star Office Writer, WordStar, Wordperfect, MultiMate, Lotus Script, and many more. There were a lot of spreadsheet programs, too: VisiCalc was first, followed by Lotus 1-2-3, MultiPlan, Quattro Pro, Lotus Symphony, SuperCalc, and others.

There were no suites.

Users found the word processor that best met their needs, the spreadsheet application that they liked, a suitable email program, and a database manager if they needed one. It wasn't uncommon for someone to use XyWrite with Lotus 1-2-3 or MultiMate with Quattro Pro. But the interfaces were different and confusing: The action that would save a document in one application might close another application without saving. There were too many inconsistent applications and not all of them could survive. Eventually the word processor field narrowed to WordStar, Wordperfect, and an upstart from Microsoft called Word.

Kicking Wordperfect to the Curb

BY USING A BIT OF MISDIRECTION (ALSO KNOWN AS OUTRIGHT LIES), MICROSOFT CONVINCED WORDPERFECT TO DEVELOP FOR OS/2 THAT WAS BEING BUILT JOINTLY BY MICROSOFT AND IBM.

So when Microsoft eventually made it clear that Windows would supplant OS/2, Wordperfect was left in a distant second-place position from which it never recovered.

Then came the suites. First, from Microsoft; then the Corel Corporation answered by acquiring the mortally wounded Ventura Publisher, WordStar, Quattro Pro, and the

BEFORE THERE WERE OFFICE SUITES, USERS SELECTED INDIVIDUAL PROGRAMS.

MultiPlan:
aresluna.org (Marcin Wichary)

WordPerfect:
gadgeteer.co.za
(Gadgeteer)

Electric Pencil:
trs-80.org

Quattro Pro:
winworldpc.com

Paradox:
functionx.com

Paradox database manager. Corel shelved WordStar when Wordperfect became available as a component for their new suite.

Today about half a dozen contenders exist in the office suite market: Microsoft (Outlook, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, OneNote, Skype, OneDrive, Publisher, and Access), Corel (Wordperfect, Quattro Pro, and Presentations; Paradox is only in the Professional package), open-source OpenOffice and LibreOffice (Writer, Calc, Base, Math, Draw, and Impress), and cloud-based services such as Google Docs and Zoho Office.

Finding the Right Combination

THE OVERARCHING DECISION IS BETWEEN FREE AND PAID OPTIONS.

There's no question that OpenOffice and LibreOffice are sufficient for most users, but Microsoft includes an email application, task manager, and on-line storage that the open-source applications lack.

Nonetheless, Microsoft should be nervous about these open-source applications and the

company's pricing reflects this concern. For $100 per year, Office 365 users have access to all the applications, both computer-based and cloud-based; they can install the applications on up to 5 computers and mobile devices; and, if they don't have 5 computers or mobile devices, they can share the annual subscription with 4 other users. In other words, $20 per year per computer.

Although at $20 per computer per year, Microsoft's Office Suite isn't exactly free, it's affordable for most people. Even if you're a single user who needs the suite on just one computer, $8.25 per month is about the cost of a fast-food meal and less that the cost of a 6-pack of good beer. But those who need the office suite on just one computer can sign up for Office 365 Personal at $70 per year, so that cuts the cost to less than $6 per month.

Some occupations all but require Microsoft applications. Editors, for example. Although other applications can read and write files in Microsoft Word format, they don't always write a file as the recipient expects it. So if
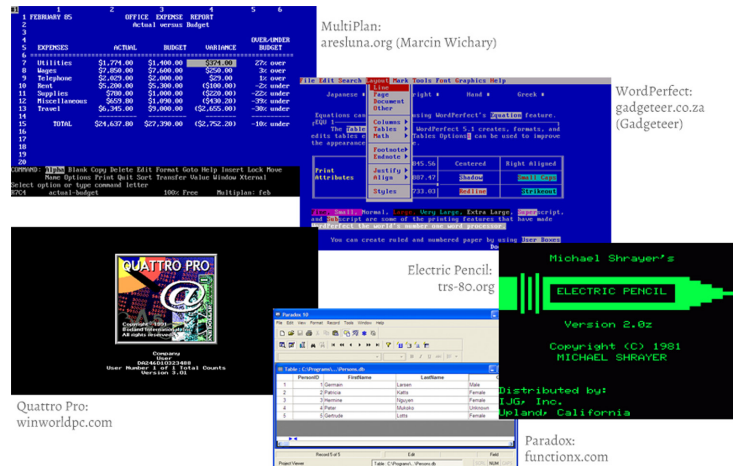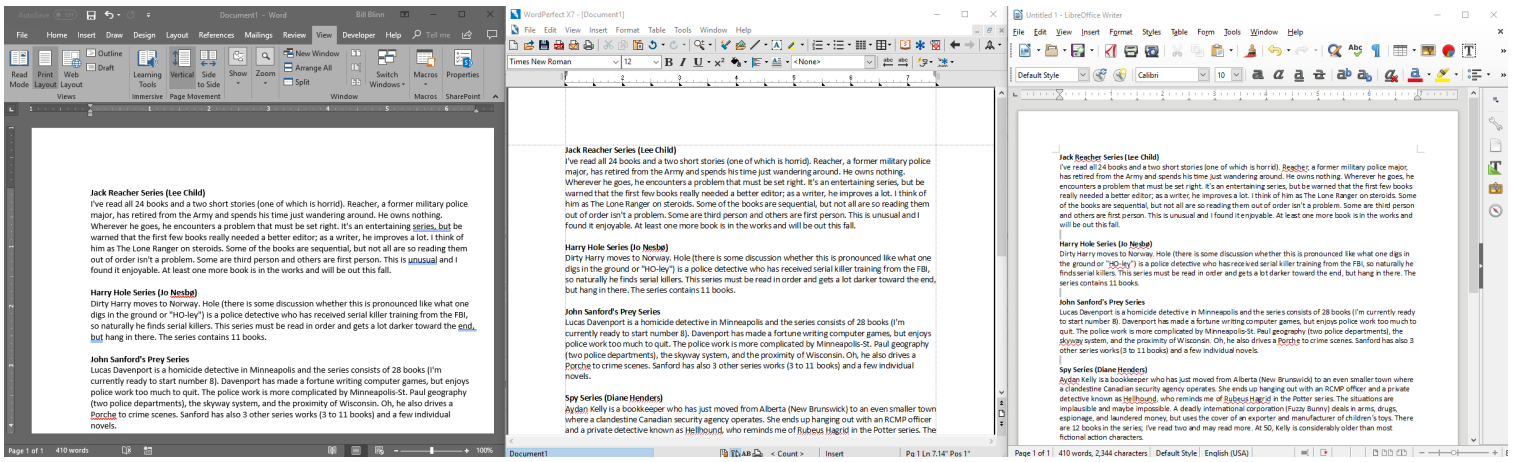
Each of the suites has a different look and feel, but all of the applications are capable of performing similar tasks. These are the word processor applications (left to right) from Microsoft Office, WordPerfect Office, and Libre Office.

you're being paid to work on files that will be used by others, the safe bet is to stick with the Microsoft applications.

There are other reasons to consider Microsoft, though. The Office suite includes features that the others don't: Outlook, OneNote, Publisher, Sway, Lens, and Microsoft To-Do. OpenOffice and LibreOffice have a database manager, but Corel's WordPerfect Office suite includes Paradox only in the pricier Pro version.

What About the Extras?

Assuming the word processor, spreadsheet, and presentation applications all generally get the basics right, and they do, do the extras have any value?

- Microsoft Outlook: Although Thunderbird is a worthwhile email client, it doesn't integrate as well as Outlook does with the other suite applications.

  Outlook also includes contact management, task management, and a calendar. It's an application that a lot of people love to hate, and with good reason, but it plays well with the suite applications and has a consistent look and feel.

  Sometimes that's important!
- Microsoft OneNote: None of the other suites has anything that corresponds to OneNote.

  Evernote is available in free and paid versions and it performs as well as OneNote does if the sole task is capturing data.

Evernote's formatting is primitive and unpredictable, though. Those who care about visual representation may find that Evernote's capabilities are insufficient.

- Microsoft Publisher: Today's main word processors are all roughly capable of performing the design tasks Publisher can. It is, after all, a most basic page layout application.

  Although Publisher can handle simple newsletters and internal documents, those who need more advanced capabilities will want Adobe InDesign.
- Microsoft Sway: This is a "storytelling app" that Microsoft positions as a way to create and share interactive presentations. It's similar to Adobe Spark, which has a free version and a more capable paid version that's part of the Creative Cloud package. Sway has no Mac version.
- Microsoft To-Do: Does a to-do list differ from a task list (already included in Outlook)? The new app from Microsoft integrates with Outlook and has versions for IOS and Android, but not for MacOS.
- Microsoft Lens: Seems like a solution in search of a problem. Adobe Scan is a better choice for those who need to capture business cards and other printed data.

  Scan is included in Creative Cloud, of course, but it's also a free download for Android and IOS devices. That's what makes it better than Lens, which works on Microsoft mobile devices but not Android or IOS. Versions for Android and IOS are planned.

Costs Are Relative

Remember the cost of a gallon of gasoline in 1975. Forty cents! Wouldn't it be great to have those prices today?

The trouble with the implied logic is that average incomes were considerably lower in 1975, too.

In some cases, higher prices today are effectively lower than they were back then. No matter which office suite you choose, the cost is likely to be lower than what you paid 20 or 30 years ago for a series of individual programs.

The equivalent of $100 in 1985 is more than $230 today.

But licenses were perpetual in 1985. Many of today's paid applications use the subscription model, so the Microsoft Office Suite will cost about $1000 over a decade.

In the old days, you could license an application and use it forever. In fact, there are some people who are still using the DOS version of WordPerfect 5.1 on their Windows 10 computers, 27 years after it was released.

Back then, WordPerfect 5.1 for DOS was priced at $295, the equivalent $690 — a one-time payment.

So the annual cost would be $11 per year or $25 per year, depending on whether you use $295 or $690 for the calculation.

Of course running WordPerfect 5.1 today is roughly equivalent to driving a 1991 Plymouth Laser, which (by the way) would have cost $11,000 to $14,000.

Today's office suites, even the free ones, have many more features than what anybody offered or even contemplated in 1991. Ω