

Alternatives to Microsoft Office

“Just because 80 percent of the world uses Office doesn't mean you have to.”

by Pete Choppin

I have a hard time finding anyone—Linux and Windows users alike—who doesn't use Microsoft Office in some way. This product is so widely used, it is almost impossible to share documents without it. According to Forrester Research, as of June 2009, some version of Microsoft Office is used in 80 percent of enterprises, and 64 percent of enterprises use the 2007 Office version. That is near the percentage of Windows operating systems in use on the market.

This is not to say the product is flawless. Aside from having many bugs and numerous security problems, Microsoft Office has one other big drawback—the software costs a small fortune. It may be a surprise to many, but there are viable alternatives to Microsoft Office, and a number of them are totally free.

How did such expensive and bug-ridden software get to be the standard office productivity suite? Microsoft accomplished something that had eluded other software providers: It created a highly integrated suite of products that had a similar look and feel, and it got the job done. The original license terms were attractive for businesses. The license was based on concurrent usage. Companies could install a server copy and they only had to pay for the maximum number of copies of the software that were in use simultaneously. By the time Microsoft eliminated the concurrent licensing, its software was well entrenched in the business mainstream.

The most current version of Microsoft Office is 2010. With the current licensing scheme, you will pay a minimum of \$199 for the Home and Business version of the product. This will license one computer. As an alternative, you can purchase the boxed set for \$279, and this will give you three licenses. If you need the Professional version, this will cost \$349 for the single license and \$499 for the boxed set. The cost of using Microsoft Office has become more than many businesses wish to tolerate. There have been free alternatives to Microsoft Office for some time, but now it's not only home users who have become interested. Here are some of these alternatives.

OpenOffice.org

This is probably one of the better-known free office suites. OpenOffice.org is both the name of the group coordinating the development and the software product that has resulted from their efforts. OpenOffice.org contains everything you'd expect in an office suite: a word processor, spreadsheet application, presentation package, formula editor, drawing program, data charting application, HTML editor and file filters that enable the importing and exporting of various formats.

The latest OpenOffice 3.2 supports all the Office 2007 formats out of the box. That said, the conversion process still isn't completely perfect, especially if you're trying for pixel-perfect document formatting or spreadsheets with complicated equation cells.

The latest version of OpenOffice isn't all about format wars, though, and version 3.2 has made considerable speed boost improvements—especially in startup times.

ThinkFree

I've written about [Web-based office solutions](#) before, and [ThinkFree](#) is one of several Web-based solutions out there. ThinkFree is also Java based—which means it is cross-platform compatible and does not restrict you to having to use Microsoft's products. If you are looking for an alternative to Microsoft Office, but you need to remain compatible, ThinkFree can't be beat.

Similarities to Microsoft Office are downright eerie—the charting wizard in ThinkFree Calc looks just like Excel's and supports all of Excel's chart types. However, ThinkFree isn't completely compatible with Office. For example, you can't create a PivotTable, and conditional formatting—in which the background color of a cell varies by its value using settings you provide—is not supported in Calc. Also, be advised that "template" and "macro" are concepts ThinkFree Write and Calc applications don't understand.

ThinkFree does have many great features. It is fast and responsive. The only downside is, of course, that it is Web based. All your files are hosted on the company's servers. If this is something that does not appeal to you, then ThinkFree may not be the right solution. But for an Office solution that is available wherever you are and compatible with Microsoft, ThinkFree fits the bill.

Other Alternatives

There are a number of other office suites available. Here is a list of these [Free or Low Cost Office Suites](#). Feel free to download any of these and give it a try. All of the downloads are large, so if you have a slow Internet connection, you might want to ask a friend with broadband to do the download for you and burn it to CD. All the products listed provide applications that are powerful enough for most users. You may even find yourself feeling some satisfaction that the Microsoft monopoly no longer owns one little corner of your computing world.

There are many great alternatives to Microsoft Office. And even though more than 80 percent of the world is using Office, it doesn't mean you have to. Take a look and see what works and what doesn't. The good news is that many alternatives are free, so all it will cost you is time.