

Office suite StarOffice 6.0

StarOffice, which was recently acquired by Sun Microsystems, has long been seen as the best open source office suite for those using platforms such as Linux and Windows users looking for cheaper alternatives to Microsoft. With the release of version 6.0, Sun has taken advantage of changes to Microsoft's licensing policy to target large organisations that may deploy thousands of copies of Office and could face a huge annual licence for upgrades.

StarOffice will be available as a free but hefty download, but most users are more likely to end up paying a small price for the program. For educational use, this is just the cost of a CD-ROM and shipping; enterprise customers will pay £20-£40; and a boxed copy with basic instructions is £52.99. But even so, Sun can't really do any wrong – this boxed set is half the price of the cheapest version (educational licence only) of Microsoft Office.

Working together

Previous versions of StarOffice sought integration with a vengeance, and ended up taking over the entire desktop. Thankfully, this is not the case with 6.0, though it still incorporates elements from different applications extremely smoothly so that, for example, you can start work on a spreadsheet within a text document without having to switch from Calc to Writer.

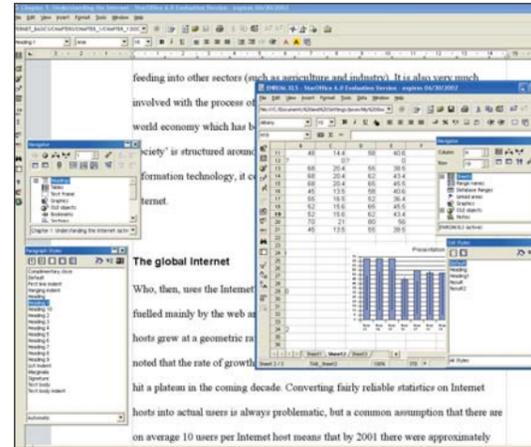
Of the applications themselves, the program that most people will begin with is

Writer, StarOffice's equivalent to Word. This application offers most of the features that you would expect to find in a professional word processor, such as AutoText and AutoCorrect facilities, templates and styles, as well as good resources for document management and printing. One valuable feature that is missing, however, is grammar checking.

Generally, support for Word documents is good: we encountered problems only with a complex file using lots of text and image frames, but even here StarOffice performed better than some of the competition (such as WordPerfect 9.0). Transferring files for use with Word is not much of a problem, as documents can be saved in formats compatible with all versions up to XP, but Microsoft does not, unsurprisingly, reciprocate with Writer's native format.

Making up the numbers

StarOffice's other major application is Calc, a spreadsheet that compares less favourably to Excel than Writer to Word. Basic functions are dealt with well, and beginners or occasional users may find it easier to use than Microsoft's offering. For power users, however, the omission of



↑ The latest edition of StarOffice does not take over your desktop like previous versions, but still offers highly integrated applications

Visual Basic for Applications, fewer number-crunching options and limited chart features makes it hard to recommend. If you only use spreadsheets for uncomplicated tasks then Calc is solid – much better than the spreadsheet applications included in comparably priced packages such as Works.

Impress, StarOffice's bundled presentation package, is PowerPoint-compatible and can create sophisticated slideshows complete with animation and sound. This application falls behind the competition in many ways (particularly as PowerPoint XP has caught up and overtaken other competitors such as Corel Presentations), but again it will fulfil the requirements of the vast majority of users. In addition, Impress presentations



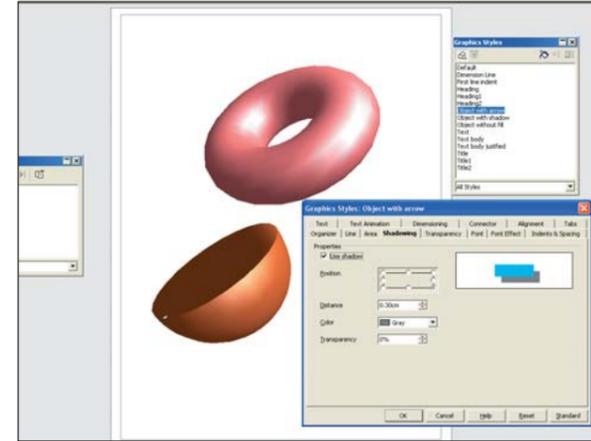
← Impress, the bundled presentation software, is a couple of generations behind PowerPoint but will fulfil most users' requirements

StarOffice 6.0

System requirements: Pentium-compatible processor; Windows 9x/Me/NT/2000/XP; 64MB RAM (128MB RAM with Solaris); 250MB hard disk space; Linux kernel 2.2.13/Solaris 7.0.

Sun Microsystems: 0800 731 0658
Website: www.sun.co.uk
Price: £52.99

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Ease of use								7			
Features								7			
Value for money										9	
Overall										8	



↑ One of the best drawing applications included with any office suite, Draw provides sophisticated tools for basic 3D

can be compiled into an executable file that will run on any PC, even when StarOffice is not installed. The other major component of StarOffice's rivals, a database, is missing as an integrated application, although the free personal version of Adabas is bundled on the CD.

Finally, in terms of components, StarOffice includes Math, a user-unfriendly tool for entering and editing mathematical formulae, and Draw. CorelDraw has nothing to worry about with the latter program, but Draw is a genuinely useful addition to this suite and includes features such as basic 3D primitives.

Gripes and grumbles

Once StarOffice is installed, a couple of other elements appear in the Start menu. The ability to create web documents looks promising until you realise that this is simply a modified toolbar for Writer, which looks and works very much like something we would have seen five years ago. There's also a System Tray icon that launches templates for various documents. It would be easy to gripe about what is missing – there is no speech recognition support and no equivalent of Outlook to organise documents and personal details. However, these omissions aside, StarOffice is extremely competent.

Verdict

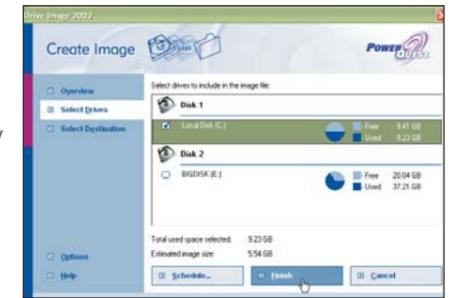
While StarOffice cannot compete with Microsoft Office's features and state-of-the-art interface, it kicks sand in the face of other suites, such as Ability Office or Works, that fall into a similar price bracket. In addition, the XML file format means that companies will be able to customise the application.

If price is taken out of the equation, is it worth upgrading (or side-stepping) to StarOffice? If you have any version of Microsoft Office from 97 onwards already and are not looking for a new office suite, the answer is no. But costs are always important, and here Sun has taken a real step forward with an excellent package. With potential savings in the region of thousands of pounds for many businesses, Office may finally be facing real opposition. ■

Jason Whittaker

Hard drive backup software PowerQuest Drive Image 2002

Drive Image lets you back up part or all of your hard disk in one easy step, including all files and folders, applications and the operating



system itself. The resulting 'image' file may then be restored in full or in part at any time, effectively offering near-foolproof disaster recovery. It's a little like Windows' own System Restore utility but on a grander, more reliable scale.

↑ Comprehensive backup protection in easy steps with Drive Image 2002's fresh new look

In terms of backup, the key consideration is deciding where to keep your image files. The safest option is some form of removable media and Drive Image works with Zip and Jaz drives and most CD-R/RW drives. Or more accurately, most IDE, SCSI and PC Card drives: unfortunately, there is still no support for external FireWire or USB recordable drives, which is something of a drawback for notebook users, or anyone else who has moved over to these more modern interfaces. Alternatively, you can store images on either a secondary hard disk or a separate partition on the primary disk. To help with the latter eventuality, Drive Image includes a simple, but welcome, partitioning utility.

So what's new for 2002? In truth, not a lot. Drive Image sports a revamped interface that simplifies the main tasks and helps the novice get started. It's also now possible to image non-system partitions while Windows is running, although Drive Image inevitably drops to DOS to back up the C drive. Those using Drive Image as a business tool will be more impressed that the new LAN support can save and restore images to and from a network drive.

Elsewhere, the invaluable ImageExplorer utility lets you browse and restore selected files from old image files; there is the option to compress backups to save space, and you can span backups across media. The program activates at regular intervals.

Verdict

Drive Image continues to lead the way in hard disk imagery. However, this 2002 release is not an essential upgrade for existing owners. ■

Kyle MacRae

PowerQuest Drive Image 2002

System requirements: Pentium processor; Windows 9x/2000/XP; 64MB RAM (128MB for XP); 20MB hard disk space.

PowerQuest: 0118 945 0200
Website: www.powerquest.com
Price: £34

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Ease of use									8		
Features										9	
Value for money										8	
Overall										8	

Ink saving software Strydent Inksaver

Printers may be coming down in price, but the cost of keeping these peripherals stocked up with ink can be expensive. Messy ink refill kits have been on the market for some time, but Strydent has decided to take a different approach.

Inksaver is a software application that reduces the amount of ink used to print a page. It functions after the printer driver, taking the output and modifying it before it is sent to the device. Inksaver analyses the page and decides where to put the ink to achieve the best image for the chosen ink-saving level. When you first install the software it prints out a test page, showing the different levels. Cranking the control up to the maximum produces poor results, but with a 25 percent saving on colour and 35 percent on black the results – although noticeable – are more than satisfactory for everyday use. The saving you opt for depends on what you're printing. For photos and external documents you'd probably want to turn it off completely, but for web pages or internal drafts then up to 50 percent would probably be okay.

To see if Inksaver lived up to its claim, we installed a fresh set of cartridges and printed the *PC Advisor* home page repeatedly both with and without the software installed. On its own, the printer ran to 697 pages. With Strydent Inksaver installed and set to 25 percent colour, 35 percent black it managed a further 359 pages (1,056 in total) giving an actual saving of 52 percent.

Verdict

Inksaver does what it says on the box and, provided you aren't greedy, the results are satisfactory. Generally you wouldn't want to use this application for photos or external documents. However, if you're only printing web pages or internal drafts then it works well. ■

Will Head



↑ Inksaver isn't ideal for high-quality printouts, but it's fine for printing web pages

Optical character recognition software Abbyy FineReader Professional 6.0

With excellent scanners available for under £100, a handy use for such devices is OCR (optical character recognition): the ability to scan in documents and convert them into editable text.

Abbyy's FineReader is a European alternative to packages such as TextBridge and OmniPage. Fundamental to such software is its aptitude to recognise a variety of documents – all such OCR packages work well with test documents, but what about a memo that has been photocopied 30 times before it hits your desk? In this regard, FineReader is no slouch, allowing the user to tinker with a number of presets to adjust the brightness and contrast of images for best results by means of an improved reading engine.

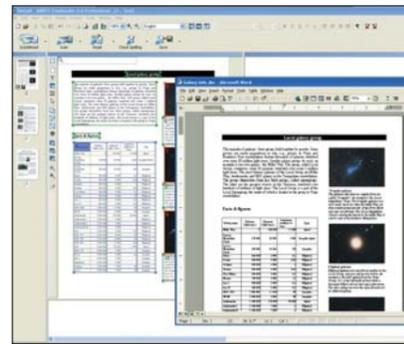
Probably the most intriguing new feature in version 6.0 is the ability to scan PDF (portable document format) files. Initially, we had questioned the value of this but, for users who do not have access to Adobe Acrobat or employ locked PDF files, being able to scan such documents into an editable form is an excellent addition. What's more, reflecting its European origins, FineReader can scan over 170 languages, providing greater accuracy in its results.

The Professional version of FineReader also allows files to be saved in Acrobat format. However, there are none of the document management features found in some competitors. If you wish to locate files using a free-form database, be prepared to spend a little extra.

Verdict

The virtues of this program include the ability to scan PDFs and – a bonus for users who work with records from different countries – support for multiple languages. The interface is simpler to use, but tools for organising files are few. FineReader does its job well, but is not a one-stop application for document management. ■

Jason Whittaker



↑ One of the new features for version 6.0, FineReader Pro can scan PDF files,

Image-editing software FotoSlate 2.0



Many digital camera users who still print 5x7in photos on to A4-sized paper or pine for an easier way to organise pictures on a page will be delighted by the appearance of

ACD System's FotoSlate 2.0. This application – which can also act as a plug-in for sister image management application ACDSee – allows you to author and print multipage photo albums or contact sheets on your desktop printer.

FotoSlate's main layout is divided into two frames, topped by a standard toolbar. On the left, a shelf contains thumbnails of imported images – for which FotoSlate supports more than 40 file types; useful if you're working with photos from a variety of sources. On the right, an editing area displays page layouts, which can incorporate a mix of photos, headlines and captions. The program comes with 450 built-in layout templates, offering a good design mix, but the built-in Template Designer allows you to create your own easily.

Images are added to layouts by dragging their icons to the image areas of the templates. It's a quick and near-seamless process and the program's speed when arranging even complex pages was impressive. Most common page printing sizes are supported and, with large-format printers more affordable than ever, the ability to print up to A3 is welcome.

FotoSlate's basic image-editing tools include cropping, rotation, sharpening and despeckle. Photoshop Elements it isn't, but at least FotoSlate's changes leave the original image intact so you can feel free to experiment.

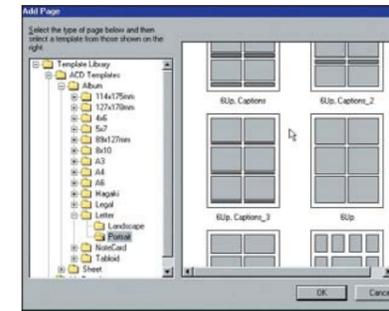
Verdict

FotoSlate 2.0's layout export options are limited and useful

FotoSlate 2.0	
System requirements: Pentium processor; Windows 95/98/Me/NT/2000/XP; 32MB RAM; 10MB hard disk space.	
ACD Systems: +1 866 244 2237	
Website: www.acdsystems.com	
Price: £22	
Ease of use	9
Features	8
Value for money	9
Overall	9

features – such as edge-to-edge printing – depend on your printer's capabilities. However, one thing is certain: this capable tool makes the creation of picture albums a refreshingly simple task. ■

Maggie Williams



↑ FotoSlate ships with a plethora of bundled templates

Video-editing software Video Explosion Deluxe

With home editing still at the forefront of many software developers' priorities, it almost seems as if there's a new application for home movie

makers released every week. Video Explosion Deluxe, like so many titles before it, is aimed directly at first-time editors who have found themselves with hours of home footage desperately in need of a trim.

Taking its lead from other products in the Guildsoft range, Video Explosion relies heavily on its accompanying selection of copyright-free video clips, sound effects, title pages, backgrounds and animations to set it apart from the competition.

These are all of arguable quality and have a distinctly transatlantic bias, although there's no denying that there are lots of them. These supplementary materials can all be combined with your own footage to create 'Hollywood-style' finished productions.

The package boldly guarantees to have you making 'your first movie in 30 minutes', whether you're a first timer or a dab hand. We put this claim to the test and, after half an hour of wrestling with the overwhelmingly busy interface, we ended up with a cinematic flop that certainly won't be winning any Oscars in the near future. While this might be largely due to our ineptness rather than any fatal flaw in the program itself, we would venture that Video Explosion Deluxe perhaps isn't as simple to use as it claims.

A lengthy study of the instruction booklet and plenty of practice will undoubtedly yield some fun-looking results, but video-editing virgins will be much better off with the competition – either Roxio VideoWave or Ulead VideoStudio.

Verdict

There's a lot of material here for first-time video editors, but Video Explosion Deluxe rather over-eggs the pudding and comes off feeling a little like a glorified library of copyright-free video clips. ■

James Bennett



↑ It ain't easy: Video Explosion's over-complicated interface says it all

Video Explosion Deluxe	
System requirements: Pentium II; Windows 98 SE and above; 128MB RAM.	
Guildsoft: 0800 289 041	
Website: www.guildsoft.co.uk	
Price: £60	
Ease of use	6
Features	7
Value for money	7
Overall	7

Mail server software Rockliffe MailSite SE 5.2

The market for internet mail servers, isn't exactly awash with choice.

There are the obvious choices, such as Microsoft Exchange 2000, but for smaller businesses this would be overkill – not only is it expensive but it is fearsomely complex and can be a nightmare to use.

Increasingly, companies have realised that not all of their employees need fully fledged collaborative messaging suites like Exchange or Lotus Domino and are looking to cheaper, lightweight mail packages instead. One such package is the recently released Rockliffe MailSite SE.

Among ISPs the name MailSite has a reputation as a heavy-duty mail server, capable of supporting hundreds of thousands of accounts. In fact, MailSite is a range of email products, designed to serve virtually any site, ranging from a low-end system for small businesses to a high-end solution for large businesses that store their user lists in SQL databases.

It's simple to move from one product to another, making the MailSite family of products one of the most scalable mail server solutions on the market, and therefore a good choice for a small company that is expanding fast. MailSite SE is one of Rockliffe's entry-level products, aimed at small enterprises of up to 50 users.

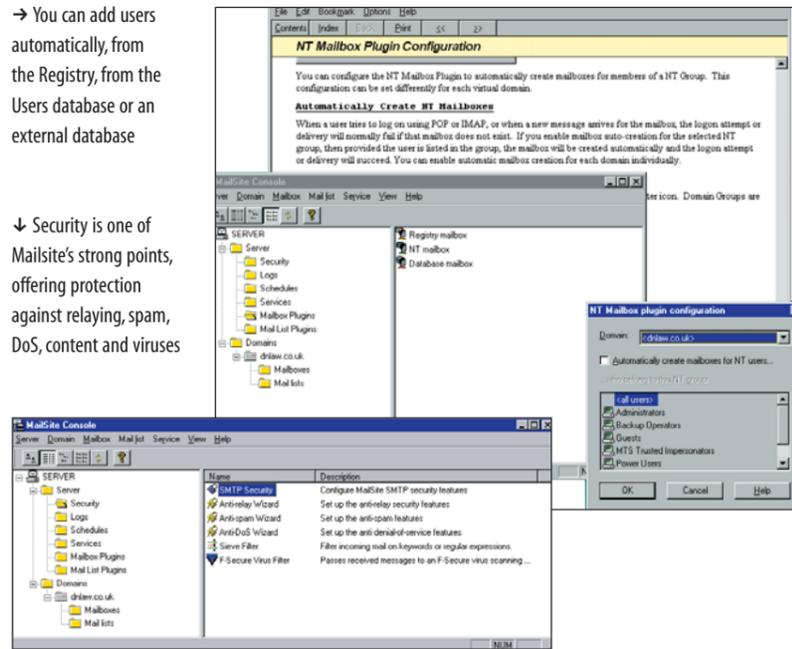
Easy entry

MailSite SE runs under Windows NT Server or 2000 Server. We installed ours under NT Server 4.0 and, apart from requiring the installation IIS (internet information server) 4.0 (5.0 in the case of Windows 2000), which is needed for the webmail, installation took just a few minutes. It supports all the usual POP (post office protocol) email clients such as Outlook or Outlook Express – you'll also find support for Imap (internet message access protocol) and LDAP (lightweight directory access protocol) clients as well.

MailSite is also relatively easy to administer thanks to the console's Explorer-like interface. Setting up user accounts takes just a few clicks as MailSite can automatically create mail accounts based on existing NT/W2K user

→ You can add users automatically, from the Registry, from the Users database or an external database

↓ Security is one of MailSite's strong points, offering protection against relaying, spam, DoS, content and viruses



accounts. It can also pull in user information directly from a database via ODBC (open database connectivity).

Secure box

MailSite's features are pretty much par for the course as Windows mail servers go. There's an integrated list server, which dovetails nicely with its ODBC capabilities. Imap4 support is standard, as are routing mechanisms for getting mail to where you want it and support for multiple domains.

You can identify and filter out possible spam using the Anti-Spam Wizard, while an Anti-Relay Wizard prevents unauthorised use of the server. You can also filter messages with rules defined in a script language of about half a dozen commands.

The latest version of MailSite has a number of valuable new tricks. First, virus scanning: Rockliffe has tightly integrated the F-Secure real-time virus scanner. It can also automatically download updated virus definition files without intervention from the system administrator. Other enhancements include DoS (denial of service) attack protection that lets you limit incoming messages and domain and mailbox-level 'sieve' content filters. There's also MailSite

Express, a fully featured web messaging email client. This includes web-based calendaring, tasks and notes so users can manage their personal data in one place. If that's not enough, Rockliffe also throws in WAP wireless messaging.

Verdict

MailSite has a good feature list, including LDAP support and remote-management, and offers top performance on modest hardware. A 30-day evaluation copy is available on Rockliffe's website. ■

Roger Gann

Rockliffe MailSite SE 5.2	
System requirements: Microsoft Windows 2000 Server or Microsoft Windows NT 4.0 Server; IIS 4/5; 128MB RAM; 40MB hard disk space.	
Rockliffe: 0113 383 0125	
Website: www.rockliffe.com	
Price: £425 for 50 mailboxes, £695 for 100 mailboxes, £1,095 for 500 mailboxes	
	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Ease of use	8
Features	9
Value for money	8
Overall	8

CD authoring software Roxio WinOnCD 5.0 Power Edition

During a shopping spree back in 1999 Roxio picked up Cequadrat, creator of WinOnCD.

Version 5.0 sees the program join the Roxio stable, aimed at the users who want a more advanced and flexible CD authoring application.

WinOnCD's main interface isn't groundbreaking, but should be familiar to those accustomed CD burning programs. You start by specifying the type of CD you want to create, and from then on it's a fairly standard drag-and-drop affair.

In addition to the normal formats you would expect, WinOnCD can also write interactive video CDs, MP3 and video CD music albums, audio CDs direct from MP3, video CD photo albums and overspan CDs, allowing you to store large files across several CDs.

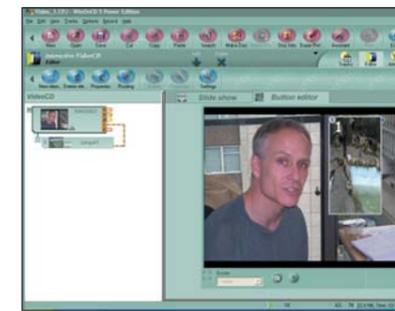
Impressive stuff indeed, but completely let down in our tests. The most important thing a CD authoring package must do, besides authoring CDs, is create error-free discs or at least warn you if errors occurred. On two occasions CDs we created were reported as okay, but when tested they contained errors and the data wasn't recoverable. Hardly a nice surprise if a couple of months down the line, after deleting the source files, you find the CD you burned is nothing better than a coaster.

The overspan feature, although a neat idea, caused problems. When you create an overspan set, an application to stitch the file back together is also written to the CD. Restoring the file starting with the first CD works correctly. If you start with the second disc, however, the application claims to restore the file correctly but when you come to use it you'll find only the second half restored.

Verdict

An impressive feature set, but Roxio should have concentrated more on producing a program that made accurate CDs. If you can't rely on the discs produced being error free, then it's a hard program to recommend. ■

Will Head



↑ WinOnCD lets you create interactive video CDs, playable in most DVD players

Roxio WinOnCD 5.0 Power Edition	
System requirements: 400MHz Pentium processor; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 300MB hard disk space.	
Roxio Europe: +49 2405 4508 70	
Website: www.roxio.com	
Price: £47	
	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Ease of use	7
Features	3
Value for money	4
Overall	4

Document synchronisation software Dataviz Documents to Go

If you're thinking of buying a PDA (personal digital assistant), you obviously want more than simple calendar and contact management.

But while hardware gets faster and more sophisticated next time you sync they will be added to your PDA with every release, the factor that really expands functionality is software. It is here that packages like Documents to Go from Dataviz really show their value.

Documents to Go allows you to view and edit PC documents on your Palm-based PDA. This means rather than lug a less-than-portable notebook with you on the train, you can edit a report or spreadsheet on your PDA instead. Existing users will know that Documents to Go is bundled with many Palm PDAs out of the box. However, only the latest Palm models come with the Professional Edition.

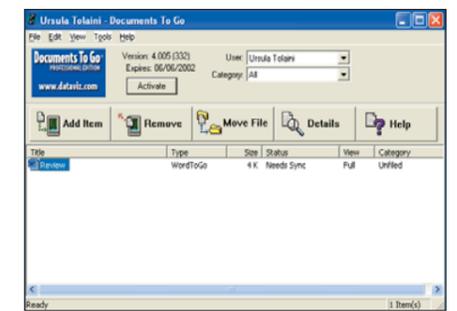
Using the software is simple, you just drag and drop the document you want to work on into the main Documents to Go window, and on the next synchronisation it's transferred to your handheld. The Standard version allows you to view and edit Word and Excel documents, and view PowerPoint presentations. The Professional release adds the ability to view graphics, create and edit charts, view text-based PDF (portable document format) files and provides an email application that synchronises mail and attachments.

One niggle we did have was that Documents to Go doesn't support some commonly used file formats, such as RTF (rich text format). This is a real nuisance, as it means you have to resave your documents as plain DOC files before you can add them to Documents to Go.

Verdict

This software will help you get the most out of your PDA, but you still have to contend with the small screen. That said, the luxury of editing a report on such a tiny device is hard to knock. ■

Ursula Seymour



↑ Drag and drop files into the main window – next time you sync they will be added to your PDA

Dataviz Documents to Go	
System requirements: Palm Desktop 3.0 or above; PC: Windows 95/98/Me/2000/NT 4.0/XP; 32MB RAM; 20MB hard disk space.	
Computers Unlimited: 020 8200 8282	
Website: www.dataviz.com	
Price: £59	
	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Ease of use	8
Features	7
Value for money	7
Overall	7