Business productivity suite
Microsoft Office 2003

With words such as XML and Rights Management, Office 2003 might sound like an update aimed at larger companies, but if you use Outlook, this edition is well worth a look. For a start, Outlook can now thread messages into conversations properly, so you can follow a discussion back through several posts.

If your inbox fills up with mail you've left unread, you can flag them up for action. This feature has been in Outlook Express for years, however Search folders are brand new and extremely useful. Instead of losing your list of results when you open a different folder, you can save a search (with several criteria) as a virtual folder. This is a really flexible way to organise your messages; but if you prefer message rules and folders, the rules Wizard is easier to use now.

We like the new layout too, with a combined Outlook bar and folder list – two lines for messages in the inbox and a preview pane on the right. Now you can see more mail in the inbox, while shorter lines in the narrower preview pane make it easier to read. You can group the inbox by flags or with common-sense options like

yesterday and last week: as messages get older the details change from the time of arrival, to the day and finally the date.

The new spam filter isn't as effective as it might be but you're well protected against mail worms: if a program tries to use your address book you'll see a warning. HTML mail can be a menace, with spammers using links to images on the web that track whether you're reading. Now Outlook won't download images from the web until you ask it to.

Outlook's mix of email, calendar and contacts make it useful for business and if you're keeping track of customers, the new Business Contact Manager tool lets you put multiple contacts at the same company on the same page, link emails, documents, notes and other information to the customer and manage mailing campaigns.

This is a very simple tool compared to standard customer management software and it's really only suitable for companies with one
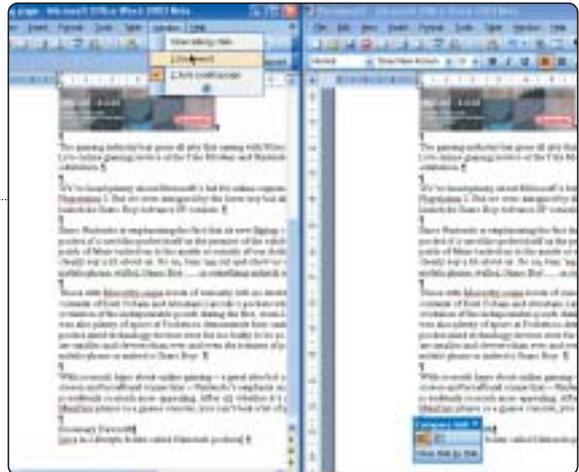
↑ Word's Side by Side layout (shown here) and Outlook's Preview pane aim to make reading easier, allowing you to look at different sections of your document at the same time

OneNote

Most Office applications are designed for producing perfect, finished documents with rich formatting, but none of them is particularly good for jotting down ideas, taking notes and collecting information for a project. OneNote has been designed from scratch to make it easy to collect and keep track of information whether you're typing it in, jotting down notes on a tablet PC, copying from web pages or recording a meeting or lecture.

Organising your thoughts
Instead of separate documents you have one large notebook divided into sections (tabs across the top of the page) containing pages. A page can have sub-pages to avoid scrolling, and you can nest sections inside folders. Because you don't have documents, you don't need to worry about saving files or giving them memorable names. Mostly this is simple to navigate, but the tabs only show the current level of folders so you have to navigate back up via a drop-down menu.
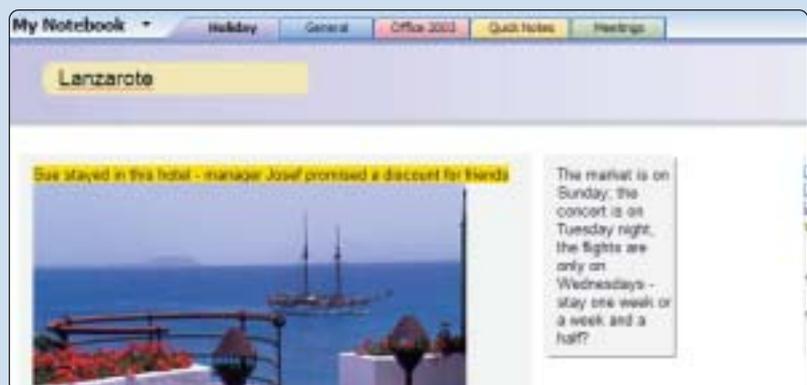
Think of note flags like the asterisks many people draw on paper notes to emphasise an important point. You can give the flags titles like Important, To Do and Question and pick an icon, text or highlighting colour to make flagged text stand out. This makes it easy to pick points out of your notes. You get all the usual formatting tools for text as well, plus the pages are as flexible as paper but much more powerful.

↑ As well as the full interface with tabs and pages and note flags to organise information, you can open OneNote as a Quick Note for jotting down a quick idea or notes from a phone call

or two users. Being able to share calendars and address books is more useful, especially as you can see them side-by-side on screen.

Information paths

The big changes in the rest of Office are aimed at large companies: excellent XML options in Word, Excel and Access, Information Rights Management to stop people forwarding confidential email and documents, and document workspaces that make it easier to use SharePoint sites to collaborate on documents.

If you need to collect information in a structured way, the new InfoPath software gives you the power of XML, the rich formatting of an Office document and the familiar interface of a form. It's a new way of working and not going to suit everyone, but it's a powerful way for companies to deal with data without overwhelming users.

Updates to the core Office products are less dramatic. Word's reading view makes long documents easier to read, with large text and pages resized to fit on your screen, but without changing the actual document format. You can also lock sections of your document. Excel's main new feature makes it easier to work with lists of information, but the drop-down filters and total it turns on automatically aren't actually new.

Just like paper

You can click anywhere on a page to start typing there. So, for instance, in the margin beside your main text you can jot down a quick shopping list, just like you would on paper. That leaves you with chunks of text on the page that you can move around, join together or divide into more sections.

If you need more space in the middle of the page, click and drag to add it; if you erase chunks of text, you can delete the empty space that's left. OneNote works really well on a tablet PC, but it's also a great way of taking notes on a desktop or laptop.

OneNote is packed with useful ideas: if you're recording and typing occasional notes, it puts a bookmark in the audio track (backdated to a couple of seconds before your typing) so you can hear what you were listening to when you made the note. This is only the first version of the software and there are a few rough edges, but anyone who spends time taking notes is going to like it.

Power pointers

PowerPoint's support for more media formats is useful, especially as it automatically downloads codecs for formats you can't play. The Package to CD tool makes it simpler to take your presentation with you or send it to a colleague because you can set it to autorun when they load the CD, and you burn the CD from inside PowerPoint instead of needing extra CD software.

Publisher and FrontPage aren't in all versions of Office, but they get more advanced updates than the other applications. FrontPage 2003 is packed with features to help you code HTML for designing your site – from the split-screen view of a web page and the code behind it, to interactive Quick Tag view tools which let you edit the tags without being overwhelmed by HTML.

The code it produces is much cleaner than before and you can automatically trim everything from Word's umpteen XML tags to white space as you publish.

The much-improved design tools in Publisher let you can accurately align lines of text across a page with the baseline tools and use more than one master layout page. Some features are ideal for small businesses, like templates for building email newsletters and catalogues, with options in the merge tool to import from a database.

Verdict

The big changes in Office 2003 are certainly aimed at larger companies, but that doesn't mean that no-one else will want it. Outlook, Publisher and FrontPage are all improved upon and well worth switching to; the core programs get more improvements than just a slick new interface, but if your budget's tight they may not convince you to pay up. If you're looking for your first office suite, Office 2003 is a heavyweight with excellent tools in all areas, but probably plenty of features you'll never use as well. ■

Mary Branscombe

↑ Excel's automatic lists are convenient – but it's FrontPage that gets powerful new tools for creating documents

Microsoft Office 2003
☐ Microsoft: 0345 002 000
☐ www.microsoft.com/uk/ and www.microsoft.com/office/preview
☐ Price: TBA

System requirements
133MHz Pentium or higher (Pentium III recommended); Windows 2000 with Service Pack 3 or Windows XP; 64MB RAM (128MB recommended) plus additional 8MB of RAM for each application running simultaneously; 245MB hard disk space; tablet PC for handwriting features

Ease of use

Features

Value for money

Overall rating

Small business accounts
Intuit QuickBooks 2003 Premier

↑ A well-designed interface with plain English options makes QuickBooks easy to use

Aimed at those who run a mile at the mere thought of bookkeeping, QuickBooks is designed to take the pain out of small business accounts. Intuit's package offers help with everything from stock inventories to sales invoices, and claims that no previous accounting experience is necessary.

Available in Regular, Pro and Premier versions, the 2003 edition brings a horde of facilities to keep your finances in check. Top of the list in the Premier version is a questions-based help system. However, you won't need this to get started thanks to well-designed wizards that walk you through the setup procedure.

You can now create a budget based on your data, and there are more customisation and printing options for forms. Multiple company logos and text comments, such as disclaimers, can be included, and there's support for various paper sizes. Data backup options and VAT tracking have also been enhanced, and the package can now help you forecast and prepare a proper business plan.

Payroll options in Premier have been extended to provide for the calculation of advance holiday pay, tax credits and directors' national insurance. However, these services require an additional subscription at £76.55.

Though many of its features are still complex, QuickBooks has a clear, logical interface with descriptions in plain English. Some financial terms and the sheer amount of options may leave novices confused, however, making an understanding of basic business essential.

Verdict

Sporting far too many improvements to list here, QuickBooks 2003 Premier edition is the most comprehensive version yet. At £383 it's not cheap, but used properly it could end up saving you much more. ■

Chris Cain

QuickBooks 2003 Premier
☐ Intuit: 0845 606 2161
☐ www.quickbooks.co.uk
☐ £382.92 ex VAT

System requirements
200MHz Pentium; Windows 98/Me/NT4(SP6a)/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 258MB free hard disk space; Internet Explorer 6.0

Ease of use
Features
Value for money
Overall rating

Antivirus software
Trend Micro PC-cillin 2003

↑ PC-cillin offers firewall protection and site blocking, as well as antivirus features
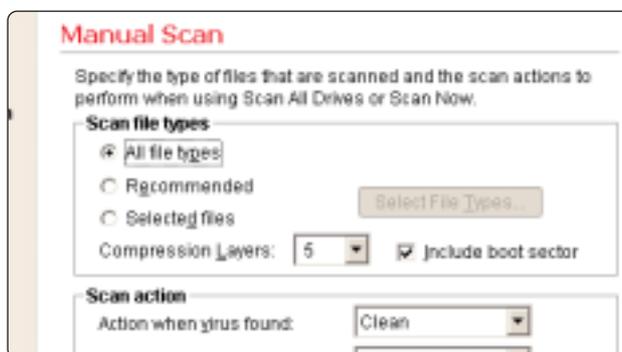
Trend Micro has worked hard to make its latest version of PC-cillin – the 2003 edition – the best possible package in terms of protecting users against various forms of malicious code online.

In addition to antivirus tools, the previous incarnation of PC-cillin, version 2002, introduced a personal firewall. Although not as wide-ranging as products such as NetBarrier, it does provide a useful line of defence for those who don't already have such software.

PC-cillin 2003 now includes protection for Pocket PC and Palm devices (these being among the latest devices to be targeted by virus-writers), as well as protection over a wireless network. What is most important for the majority of users, however, is how effective PC-cillin is in blocking malicious code. It works extremely well with the Eicar antivirus test file, and is also particularly effective in scanning for, and removing Trojans.

WebTrap blocks potentially malicious ActiveX or Java applications across the web. Unlike the firewall, which can be set to block all scripts, WebTrap initially scans them in order to identify damaging code while allowing harmless scripts through. It is a useful feature, as is the site filter that allows certain sites to be set as off-limits.

Once installed, maintenance of the program is effectively painless, with automatic updates taking place in the background. The price includes a year's subscription for further updates.

Verdict

As an antivirus package, PC-cillin is on a par with Symantec's Norton AntiVirus and McAfee's VirusScan. Those who already have a firewall in place – such as NetBarrier or ZoneAlarm Pro – will probably want to opt for a cheaper standalone application but, if you are seeking a complete internet security suite, then PC-cillin is one of the most comprehensive packages available. ■

Jason Whittaker

Trend Micro PC-cillin 2003
☐ Trend Micro: 01628 400 500
☐ www.antivirus.co.uk
☐ £34 ex VAT

System requirements
166MHz Pentium; 32MB RAM (64MB recommended, 128MB Windows XP); Windows 98 SE/Me/NT4/2000/XP; 25MB free disk space

Ease of use
Features
Value for money
Overall rating

Small business software
MyBusiness Complete Manager

There's a vast array of small business accounting packages on the market, but most of them assume a certain level of knowledge about business terminology and procedures. The MyBusiness range of software is designed for those who want to get on with running a firm without having had to study for a degree in accounting first.

The software is available in three versions; the simplest costs just £34 and provides the business package basics of bookkeeping and contact management. The £85 Essentials pack adds stock control and diary and project management functions. We tested the £128 Complete Manager package, which also includes professional mailing capabilities.

Real business
All data is displayed in a standard web browser window. This makes it relatively intuitive and familiar for most users, but it can also be rather limiting, as the software has no menus or interface items of its own. Sometimes you're forced to use the browser's back and forward buttons, which is disappointing, as all other interaction is within the browser window itself.

Unlike some accounts packages, MyBusiness is a complete business management tool, integrating not just book-keeping but contact management, diaries, stock management and plenty more. The benefit of this approach is that it works the way a real business works. For example, if you click on a particular contact you can bring up a summary of how much that person owes you, when you last spoke to them and if you have any meetings scheduled with them in the future.

Instead of overwhelming users with words like ledgers, journals and double-entry book-keeping, it displays information under headings: Making Money, Spending Money and How's my business doing? While this certainly makes the software easy to understand, it does run the risk of appearing condescending to anyone other than complete novices.

MyBusiness takes all kinds of small business tasks into account and provides simple ways of handling them. For example, the information it displays varies depending on whether you are or are not registered for VAT. If you charge for your time, you can link items in your diary to the invoicing system, and if you work away from home or the office, you can set SMS reminders. If you are an employer, the diary can keep track
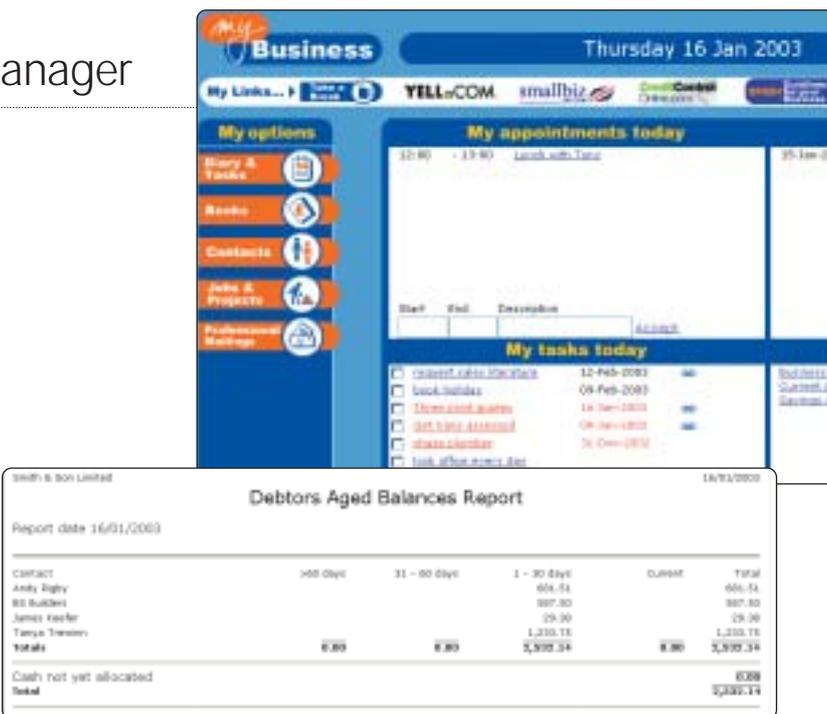
of individual employee activities and if you work on projects, you can set the software to file invoices and activities relating to individual projects separately.

Automatic reporting
Provided you've been meticulous in keeping your records up to date, Complete Manager will automatically create reports for you. These include summary data showing how much you're owed, the money you've made and giving a breakdown of expenditure. It also provides more technical information for your accountant, such as a history of cashbook transactions.

The principal difference between Complete Manager and the Essential package is the presence of the Professional Mailings section. With this, you can automate the creation of stationery, mailshots, email newsletters and so on. The software keeps track of what you've sent to who and when.

While you can create and edit different types of stationery, it's frustrating that you can't use, for example, existing Word templates owing to MyBusiness' limited text-editing capabilities.

Verdict
The MyBusiness range fulfils its goal of bringing business software to the masses, by taking the complication out of book-keeping and nicely integrating it with other business management features. But its browser-based approach and particular modes of usage mean its likely to appeal only to true novices. ■

Alex Katz

↑ Top: the home page shows a summary of all your data such as to-do list items and money to chase, as well as links to all the software's main sections

↑ Bottom: one of MyBusiness' most powerful features is its ability to create detailed financial reports

MyBusiness Complete Manager
- ☐ MyBusiness: 0845 120 3040
- ☐ www.mybiz.co.uk
- ☐ £127.65 ex VAT

System requirements
200MHz Pentium; Windows 95/98/Me/2000/NT; 32MB RAM; 20MB hard disk space

Ease of use

Features

Value for money

Overall rating

Firewall software
Intego NetBarrier 2003

Accounting software
Ritz 2002

NetBarrier will be a new name to most PC users, although this piece of software has been available for the Mac for some time. As well as protecting your computer against hackers who may be scanning unlocked ports or using Trojans to exploit loopholes in your system, NetBarrier includes extensive tools for monitoring activity across a network and protecting your privacy.

↑ NetBarrier is one of the simplest firewalls on the market, but also provides comprehensive protection

Users of Windows XP will already be able to employ a basic firewall that blocks the main security holes so that a computer cannot be seen on the internet. ZoneAlarm, from Zone Labs, is a free utility that allows you to configure your security settings much more. While we would recommend this for most users, those looking for control over programs and privacy settings, however, would have to pay $49 (£31) for ZoneAlarm Pro.

But NetBarrier offers a higher level of protection and its Mac origins mean that it is easy to use. Most of the configuration options that you need are found under the antivandal settings, and the privacy settings are also comprehensive.

If there is one complaint it is that some default settings, preventing ping replies for example, are probably a little lax. Changing these to make your system more secure is simple enough, but many users will probably wish to install and forget about this type of application.

Verdict

If your internet security requirements are very specific and relate only to preventing unwanted intrusions, then the free version of Zonealarm is more than sufficient. For a more complete range of tools for protecting security and monitoring activity, however, NetBarrier compares well to applications such as Norton Personal Firewall and McAfee Firewall. ■

Jason Whittaker

Intego Netbarrier 2003
☐ Intego: 01883 745 111
☐ www.intego.com
☐ £31 ex VAT

System requirements
133MHz Pentium; 128MB RAM; Windows 98 SE/Me/NT4/2000/XP; 10MB hard disk space

Ease of use

Features

Value for money

Overall rating
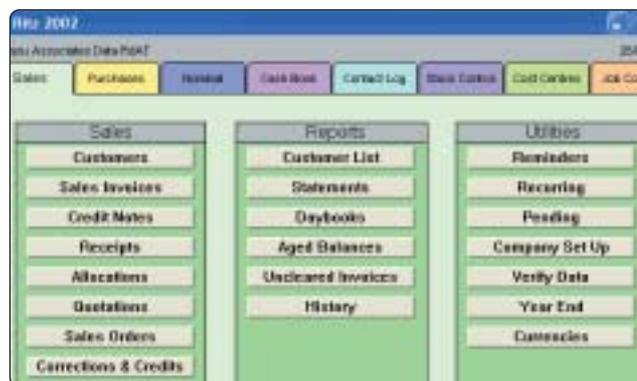
Ritz 2002 is the latest edition of the popular accounting package. Designed to keep your finances flowing it's suitable for both sole-traders and larger companies, and is available for both PCs and Macs – not something you can say about most business packages.

↑ Ritz's simple and uncluttered interface provides quick access to its various modules

Getting started with the package is straightforward enough and online help is available should you need it – but the general feeling with this software is that the user should know what they're doing. That said, the dull but uncluttered interface does make everything, from setting up a company and producing invoices to working with cash books, easier than you think.

The main program is broken down into modules including Sales, Purchase and Nominal Ledgers, Cash book and a Fixed Asset register. There are also facilities which assign cost centres, work with multiple currencies (including dual-currency invoices), and database functions for contacts, customers, and suppliers. Again, the layouts are simple and in most cases it's pretty much clear what goes where.

Interestingly, while many are available for use on start-up, only five core modules are included as standard. After 30 days you'll need to register for which additional modules you want – at £100 a shot.

For more than one-man bands, Ritz provides payroll functions through a sister application, which deals with various pay frequencies and can be updated yearly to match any changes in tax legislation. This costs an additional £295.

Verdict

Ritz 2002 is a no-frills package offering everything you need to keep business accounts. However, it lacks the visual appeal and polish of products like QuickBooks 2003 (see the review on page 62). ■

Chris Cain

Ritz 2002
☐ Ritz: 01689 860 444
☐ www.ritzaccounts.co.uk
☐ £195 – £1195 depending on chosen modules, Payroll 02/03 £295

System requirements
PC capable of running Windows 95; 8MB RAM; 30MB hard disk space

Ease of use

Features

Value for money

Overall rating